

Psychotherapy Guidebook

EXPERIENTIAL ANALYSIS

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Table of Contents

[DEFINITION](#)

[HISTORY & TECHNIQUE](#)

[APPLICATIONS](#)

Experiential Analysis

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DEFINITION

Experiential Analysis belongs to the third force movement in psychology that concerns itself with the manner in which we experience our inner and outer worlds and focuses upon understanding psychological adjustment and growth in the normal person rather than being limited to the psychopathology of maladjustment (Tiffany, 1967). Experiential Analysis portrays experience as a gestalt of person-environment relationships. It provides a model for understanding man in society and for identifying both the sources of control and the contexts that act as primary determinants in psychological growth and adjustment.

HISTORY AND TECHNIQUE

Theory of experienced control. The theory of Experienced Control pertains to the psychological forces that actuate, regulate, facilitate, or inhibit a person's psychological functioning in its broadest aspects (Tiffany, et al., 1969; Tiffany, et al., 1970; Tiffany and Tiffany, 1973). The experienced control model shown below is a schematic representation of the individual's

experiential space. Inside the small circle, the space denoted FI (internal states within the organism) represents controlling forces experienced within oneself. OI is the symbol used to indicate control experienced over the self. During the process of socialization, the locus of control shifts from the condition of being controlled by organismic forces to control over these impulses.

A conceptual model of four kinds of control: Forces from the environment, shown as FE in the outer zone of the model, may be exerted by other individuals or groups, or by situations or physical factors. OE factors represent perceived control over the environment. They arise from within the individual and the manner in which the individual responds depends on his or her technical, physical, or interpersonal skills. While FI and OI have an internal reference, i.e., the experience of internal forces and the ability to control these forces, OE and FE have an external reference and consist both of experiencing forces over and from the environment.

Structural properties of experienced control. Two major structural properties of experienced control are 1) that FI and FE are significant experiences in life that the individual does not initiate and as such are non-self-determining factors and 2) OE and OI represent the self-determining activities that characterize the cognitive aspects of man and constitute response patterns. Thus, a dynamic interplay exists between FE and OE and

between FI and OI as well as between the specific processes, internal and external. The ratio OI/FI and OE/FE for the two loci averages around 1.30 to 1.80 for different groups and for different situations. For psychiatric patients it is always less than 1.0. However, for individuals with adjustment problems that do not reach psychiatric proportions, the ratios may be low only in certain situations.

Dynamic properties of experienced control. The basic dynamic property of experienced control is that forces from internal FI and over external OE act in concert against the environment. Impulses of FI, for example, the raw unreasoned quality of rage, joy, sexual excitement, or whatever FI is present, may be channeled through a selected OE to act on the environment. Both forces act outward from the individual and are the means by which the person can have maximal impact on the environment. The individual is capable of manipulating circumstances to bring about a desired FI, which, in collaboration with the proper OE, may result in a powerful environmental impact. If these collaborative efforts are carried out in a particular social system, such as the government, military, or other large social structure, they can represent an enormous amount of focused power.

The reverse of the above is also possible. Forces from the environment FE and over internal OI act toward or upon the person to such a degree that he becomes almost totally inhibited. It is then almost impossible to employ

the spontaneous or creative processes at FI or the skills at OE to produce the cognitive effects necessary. Not infrequently one must escape to a “safe” environment to realize one’s creative potential.

Veridicality of experience. Experienced control theory is based on subjective events of experience at any moment in time rather than upon “reality” as it can be described in physical or objective terms. Allport refers to veridicality, when there is “agreement between a percept description and the related physicalistic experience of the object” (Allport, 1955). This phenomenal interpretation of experience is used in experienced control.

Balance between self-direction and non-self-direction at both loci. As experiential data is being used, a change of balance at either loci can take place without affecting the environment. Each person develops styles for particular situations and when any of the four components is changed for that situation there will be adjustments within the remaining components to achieve a state of dynamic equilibrium.

Focal and contextual characteristics of components. For each of the four components there are focal and contextual experiences that interact to provide the total experience. We are daily involved in delineating focal from contextual determinants. The contextual experiences exist at many different levels. At the first level is the focal determinant itself, then a primary

contextual level, a secondary contextual level, and so on. The control experienced at any of the levels depends upon the perceived meaning of the focal determinant. What lends a determinant meaning is largely its interaction with its context. The interaction of focal to contextual determinants parallels the concept of figure-ground in Gestalt psychology.

APPLICATIONS

The greater the consciousness of self, the greater the number of OEs and OIs that are available to the person for problem solving and coping behavior. Thus, as one increases his consciousness, he simultaneously has greater control over life. Sometimes it becomes necessary that a particular focal determinant be altered. This is done by fractioning the determinant in such a way that awareness includes only those aspects that are positive (e.g., “look at his good side”). In this condition of consciousness, part of the experience becomes nonveridical. The more conscious we are of ourselves and our environment, the more decisions we can make to fractionate determinants (components). Greater awareness also enables us to juxtapose components properly. Where improper alignment of the components takes place, it does so because one of the components may be in a nonconscious zone. This misalignment is observed frequently in psychiatric patients in that they are unable to evoke the appropriate OE to cope with a particularly stressful FE. For example, a profile of maladjustment would include degrees of the

following: an absence of focalizing, focal/contextual reversals, extreme nonveridical perception, and improper juxtapositioning of components.