

Existential theory and careers

Existential theory asserts (in a very simplified description) that human beings have to struggle to extract “meaning” for their lives from the meaningless chaos that is existence. This is particularly true in periods of change, such as career transitions, when people often question their purpose in life.

Important issues

- **Freedom and responsibility:** Unless an individual believes in fate, destiny or divine will, the realisation that there is no automatic structure or inherent plan for their lives can cause anxiety. We are each responsible for creating our own destiny. Success or failure, action or inaction — it’s all down to us; we have to accept the responsibility before we can move on. The anxiety caused by this responsibility may drive people to try and avoid it, perhaps by trying to shift the responsibility to someone else.
- **Search for meaning and authenticity:** It is an essential human characteristic that we seek to impose a meaning on our lives and give ourselves a sense of purpose. Our work is one way we in which we find such a sense of purpose. In order for a career to be fulfilling we must feel that we can be true to ourselves and fulfil our potential in it. Career choice is not about the question “What can I do?” it’s about the question “Who am I and who can I be?”
- **Meaning triangle:** Three sources of meaning are: *Creativity* (giving something to the world through self-expression), *Experiencing* (receiving from the world: through nature, culture, relationships, etc.), *Attitude* (changing our attitude to circumstances we cannot change: self-transcendence).
- **Impulsivity and compulsivity:** When faced with the difficulty of such complex decisions, people may leap impulsively into the first option they discover that is slightly more meaningful than their current role without thoroughly considering their needs and options. Alternatively, they may compulsively adopt the purpose and meaning of other people, trying to transplant them onto their own lives.
- **Existential vacuum:** If people fail to find sufficient meaning in what they do, they experience an existential vacuum, characterised by feelings of frustration, emptiness, boredom, depression and apathy. One can often seek to fill this vacuum with other things, perhaps engaging in overwork or lots of activities to take one’s mind off the hollowness, perhaps even over-eating, drink or drugs.
- **Existential guilt:** If we fail to live up to our authentic potential, we may experience guilt for the life we have not lived. This guilt can be experienced as strong emotions such as despair, resentment

against others or negative self-attitudes. It can also be positive in providing a driving force for change. It is worth bearing in mind that existential guilt is more likely to be assuaged by changes in attitude than changes in behaviour or circumstances.

Implications for practice

- Discuss options with regard to their potential for providing meaning to the client.
- Discuss values, attitudes and beliefs not just skills and interests.
- Think about career from a life-long perspective (“How do you think you might feel at the end of this career?” “What do you want to have achieved by the end of your life?”)
- Look out for signs of responsibility avoidance, impulsivity and compulsivity.
- Look out for signs of people trying to fill an existential vacuum with other things.
- Use the “meaning triangle” to help clients explore possible sources of meaning in their current situations and in future options.
- Beware of projecting your own interpretation of meaning (or your own existential guilt) onto clients.

Interesting questions

- How do you feel about making decisions that have a big impact your future path?
- To what extent do you think that what you have been doing is really *you*?
- Can you see a point or a purpose to what you are doing at the moment?
- What purpose do you want to fulfil in your future career or life in general?
- Can you identify anything that is missing from your life at the moment?
- Do you blame yourself for bad decisions you made in the past?

Reading

- Cohen, B.N. (2003) Applying existential theory and intervention to career decision-making. *Journal of Career Development*, **29**(3) 195–209.
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- Maglio, A.-S.T., Butterfield, L.D. & Borgen, W.A. (2005) Existential considerations for contemporary career counseling. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, **42**(2) 75–92.