

INVITATION TO EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

A Psychology for the Unique Human Being
and Its Applications in Therapy

Bo Jacobsen

Department of Sociology, The University of Copenhagen



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bo Jacobsen is professor at the Centre for Research in Existence and Society at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Sociology. His research specialisation is in Existential Psychology. He holds two doctorate degrees and has been in charge of several research projects on psychological and existential problems, for instance an intensive qualitative study on the psychological problems and existential reflections of cancer patients. He is also a practicing psychologist and an existential psychotherapist and supervisor. He has authored numerous articles and books on psychological and existential issues, all written in an incisive and engaging style. He has lectured on existential psychology and psychotherapy in London and throughout Continental Europe. His mission is to develop the human and existential dimensions of psychology and psychotherapy. In this way he aims to stimulate human beings to develop their openness and reach out for each other.

PREFACE

This book is an invitation to explore the richness and depth of the human being as seen by existential psychology. Psychology is not just for diagnosing psychological illnesses. Psychology also has to show people how it is possible to develop a fuller being, to achieve a more vibrant sense of being alive, to meet adversity, to get closer to states of happiness and love, and to acknowledge what is good and bad in their lives.

Existential psychology emphasises the specifically human dimensions of our life; that is, the ways in which we human beings are different from animals. We certainly have a body and contain a multitude of biological processes. What makes us human, however, is not our biology. We are made human by our gift of being able to *reflect* on our biology, as well as on every other aspect of our lives; to *talk about* these issues with each other; and to *decide* what kind of life we wish to live in consort with our fellow human beings.

One significant trend in recent psychology, psychiatry and therapy is the focus on brain waves, neurotransmitters and the repair of clear-cut diagnostic states. All this has its place. Yet the essence of being human remains that our anxieties, our pain and our disturbances as well as our joy and our potentialities are all woven into one unified structure: our own lives. Our so-called pathologies are intimately entwined with our resources, our plans and goals, the way we find meaning in our lives and the way we respond to life's big questions.

Existential psychology focuses on the existential life questions or life dilemmas that present themselves with greater and greater urgency in our time: How do we live meaningful lives? Is it possible to experience love and happiness in this world? How do we cope with loneliness? Can we trust our fellow human beings? How do we deal with crisis, adversity and losses when they happen? How will we know that we are doing the right thing when we make our basic choices and commitments? And where can we find the confidence, the courage and the determination to persevere throughout life in the way that is right for us?

The book is about the dilemmas and challenges of human life. Each chapter (except Chapter 1) will focus on one of life's crucial dilemmas, present concepts for describing it, theories for understanding it and examples illustrating what the dilemma is about and how we can meet this specific challenge in our own life and – if we are professionals helping other people – in the lives of our

clients or patients. The book also aims to show how these basic dilemmas have different expressions in different societies and cultures, and that different ways of dealing with these dilemmas each have their own value.

The book is an invitation to reflect on your own life, but at the same time it is an attempt at developing a firmer framework for the discipline of existential psychology. In fact, we have three existential disciplines building upon each other in a logical way: existential philosophy, existential psychology and existential therapy.

The philosophical and the therapeutic disciplines are both represented by a number of recognised works that define the discipline in question. The discipline of existential psychology, however, has its concepts, theories and empirical basis scattered in a much more piecemeal manner throughout the extant literature, often delivered with a mix of philosophical and therapeutic principles. Sometimes expositions of existential therapy even jump directly from philosophy to therapy without specifying the psychological concepts and theories that actually underpin the therapeutic thinking and bridge the transition from philosophy to therapy. My ambition with this book is to single out these psychological elements and to present them as a whole, coherently and clearly.

My way of analysing psychological theory was influenced by my former teachers, professors Franz From and Johan Asplund. My initiation into philosophy took place as a Research Fellow at Cambridge University under Professor Paul Hirst, while my training in existential therapy was supervised by John Smidt Thomsen, Emmy van Deurzen and Ernesto Spinelli. I have learned so many important things from each of these eminent scholars and therapists. Thank you so much.

The book would not have come to life without the vigorous and continuous support of my research staff, Hanne Bess Boelsbjerg, Søren la Cour and Lisbeth W. Sørensen, and without the help of my language consultant, Mark Hebsgaard. I am most grateful for your contributions. Above all, I want to thank my wife, Else Østlund Jacobsen for her inspiration and for being the person she is.

Bo Jacobsen
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May 2007

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY?

EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Existential psychology is the branch of psychology that deals with each human being's relationship to the most essential life dilemmas, the so-called big questions of life. Existential psychology also aims to capture the spirit and feeling of life itself rather than subsuming life under a system of logical and systematic categories. Furthermore, existential psychology aims to include basic philosophical reflections in our psychological understanding, at the same time constituting the foundation for existential therapy, counselling and coaching.

Existential psychology is truly a branch of psychology proper; that is, a field of research with concepts and theories about the world that may be validated or refuted empirically. It certainly builds on existential philosophy, which may be defined as our basic thinking about life and the conditions governing life. Using this philosophy as a foundation, existential psychology is the sum total of concepts, theories and empirical knowledge that tells us how human beings interact with the big issues of life and how the basic conditions governing life emerge and are dealt with in everyday life situations. The main application of existential psychology at present lies within therapy. Existential therapy explicitly invites the client or patient to find their feet when confronted with the most important life issues.

So, there are three existential disciplines building upon each other: philosophy, psychology and therapy. Psychology is the body of knowledge that leads you from philosophy to therapy. You do not need to be an 'existentialist', a term used in a wide variety of ways, in order to profit from the fertile insights of existential psychology. You just need an open mind.

THE REAL PERSON AND THE ROLE OF PHENOMENOLOGY

Mainstream psychology imposes a large number of categories on life. These categories constitute the spectacles through which we observe human life.

Thus within the realms of clinical psychology and psychotherapy, we are not primarily trained in observing specific human beings in all their individuality and complexity. Rather, we are taught to observe cases of 'Panic Anxiety', 'Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder', 'Dysthymic Disorder' and 'Somatisation' as outlined in the ICD or DSM diagnostic systems.

Within the psychology of personality, we are urged to look for the so-called 'big five'; that is, five broad dimensions of traits according to which the human personality is said to be organised: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism and Openness to experience (John & Srivastura, 1999, pp. 102ff).

It is often useful to classify, but how can psychologists, psychiatrists and other therapists learn to see unique individuals rather than types? This is where phenomenology comes in. Phenomenology observes or experiences the phenomena as they appear in themselves; that is, it ventures beyond the many ideas, stereotypes and images that we carry with us and impose on the phenomena we meet. Phenomenology is to meet the phenomenon in itself. You try to perceive the other person as they really are, the real person, without taking anything for granted. Look at this example:

A nurse was looking in on an old man in a nursing home shortly before Christmas. 'So, Mr Smith, where are you going to celebrate Christmas this year?' she asked encouragingly while she washed him. 'Here'. Mr Smith's answer was cross and morose as usual. 'Well', she continued supportively, 'then perhaps someone will come and visit you here?'. 'No!' was the answer.

The nurse felt both enraged and astounded. She knew for a fact that the old man had seven brothers and sisters living in neighbouring towns. Many of them could easily have put him up on Christmas Eve. She contacted his GP, who got angry and started phoning the man's family. He finally got hold of a sister: 'Oh, we would so much like to have him and we invited him a long time ago, but he would rather celebrate Christmas on his own in the nursing home. What are we going to do?'

What we observe here is a committed and competent nurse who is convinced that she *knows* what her patient wants: she does not need to ask him. According to phenomenology, however, we never know what another person wants, not even our own spouse or child. We have to ask and listen carefully.

When two people talk to each other, each of them usually makes assumptions about the world-view of the other person: I tend to assume that I look at the world in the same way as the other person. This tendency is particularly strong when the conversation has to do with life's meaning and values. Many misunderstandings arise when people in different life situations or from different cultural backgrounds meet. We also see this pattern in professional conversations.

Phenomenology breaks up this pattern. A phenomenological conversation will – as I show later – usually make a person feel deeply understood and well received. The person will come to life because the authentic, detailed rendering of his or her life experience will lead that person to unfold and become present in the room as he or she really is.

Phenomenology was originally an important philosophical school, founded by Edmund Husserl and further developed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and a number of other prominent philosophers during the first half of the twentieth century. We can understand the world correctly only when we include the observing subject in our thinking. That is one tenet of this philosophical approach. The world is not just there – not without us. We can understand ourselves or another human being only if we acknowledge that we human beings exist solely in our relatedness to the world. We do not exist in isolation (Heidegger, 1926, pp. 58–63; Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 491–492).

The philosophy of phenomenology later gave rise to methods and approaches for the empirical disciplines of sociology, psychology and anthropology; as well as for the applied fields of psychotherapy and counselling.

In psychology, the phenomenological research methods were specifically developed by Amadeo Giorgi and his colleagues at the Duquesne University and Saybrook Graduate School in San Francisco. Giorgi founded the *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology*. In his book *Psychology as a human science* (Giorgi, 1970), Giorgi argues that psychology should belong to the human sciences, not to the natural sciences. He criticises the psychology of his time for its tendency to determine its contents by what can be measured rather than by the significance of the topic, meaning that topics like crying, laughing, friendship and love remain essentially unexamined. He speaks, characteristically, about the human sciences rather than the humanities: His goal is to unite the humanities with rigorous science. The road to this unity lies in phenomenology.

In psychotherapy and counselling, the application of phenomenology has been demonstrated by Ernesto Spinelli in a series of case stories (Spinelli, 1997). Spinelli points out three special rules of the phenomenological method when used in psychology and therapy:

1. Put your expectations and preconceptions as a psychologist or therapist in parenthesis and openly embrace the specific world presented by the client. This rule is called *the rule of parenthesis* or the *epoché* rule.
2. Describe, do not explain; do away with all explanations and all causal thinking and describe, describe, describe as concretely, down-to-earth and in as much detail as at all possible. This is *the rule of description*. For instance, ask the client to describe in detail the situation in which they live or how

they feel today or right now, but do not ask them to conjure up causal factors for their present misery.

3. When your description includes several elements, you should avoid emphasising any one element for as long as possible. Do not highlight any of the elements as particularly important. Let all elements be equally significant for as long as possible, lest you prematurely impose a pattern on the material. What is important will emerge when the time is ripe. This rule is called *the rule of horizontalisation* or the rule of equivalisation (Spinelli, 2005, pp. 19ff).

Throughout this book, I will present a number of illustrations that demonstrate how the phenomenological approach can be fruitful in understanding essential psychological phenomena such as happiness, love and loneliness. Phenomenology is also an important way of accepting and respecting cultural differences. Our basic life questions and life dilemmas, as described by existential psychology, have different cultural expressions that all deserve a precise description.

CAN PSYCHOLOGY BE ABOUT LIFE ITSELF?

Many psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists and counsellors enter their chosen field because they are attracted by the pulsating and varied nature of human life. They are fascinated by sensing the many unique ways in which human beings can unfold their lives. They love to relate to others and to help them unravel from their misery and redirect their lives in a more constructive direction.

These professionals need a body of psychological knowledge and understanding that respects their interest in specific human lives without reducing these lives to abstract categories, cause-and-effect relationships and statistical averages.

Amadeo Giorgi proposes the term *life world* as the crux of such a psychology. The relationships between living persons and the worlds in which they live should be the central focus; hence, all phenomena that we study must be understood as involving both the individual and the surrounding world (Giorgi, 1970, pp. 17ff). Earlier in the history of psychology, a similar intellectual project was carried out by the outstanding psychologist Kurt Lewin. In his so-called field theory, Lewin wanted to conceptualise 'the life space, containing the person and his psychological environment' (Lewin, 1938, p. 2).

Whether we talk about life worlds or life space, our language makes it quite difficult to convey the person–world connection of human beings, because

our language disunites the totality into a subject and an object. It is almost impossible to write about 'unfolding your life' or 'realising your potentialities' without presenting the image of an isolated and delimited individual. The description conjures up an image of an individual that occasionally connects with other things and persons, but who is fundamentally alone. The very idea of a person who makes choices, lives through crises, relates to death and finds meaning in life is difficult to describe without at the same time evoking the notion of a person with a delimited body and a delimited psyche.

This is not how the life-world totality of a human being is in fact made up. Human beings are always in relationships – we live in them and through them. We are nurtured by them and produce through them; everything that a human being gives and receives, from birth until death, evolves through relationships. Probably we are nothing other than the combined sum of our relationships, and, once we have entered into them, our relationships cannot be done away with. Even if we decide never again to see someone who was once close to us, we will carry the relationship with us in our future life.

Medard Boss suggests abolishing the term 'psyche' to signify the seat of our mental faculties (Boss, 1994, Ch 8). Instead, he speaks of the person's *being-in-the-world*. The notion of the other person as a being-in-the-world sums up the crucial person–world connection, but it quickly becomes linguistically clumsy. When you read the following pages, please keep in mind that our language forces the author to focus on the person and the life process as such, making it difficult to account for the contexts in which our lives are continuously unfolding. The text presents the basic life concepts as if they resided within the individual. Please remember, however, that life feeling, life courage and life energy always develop in continuous interaction with the world.

THREE BASIC LIFE CONCEPTS: LIFE FEELING, LIFE COURAGE AND LIFE ENERGY

Life Feeling

Sometimes you are flooded with a poignant sensation of really being alive. At other times you feel tired, heavy, bored or dead. Most people have a strong preference for the sense of being alive, so it should be interesting to explore what characterises such life-world situations. In an interview study conducted by the author, a number of people were asked this question:

Sometimes one feels full of energy or particularly alive. Can you describe a situation in which you have felt particularly alive?

The results were summarised like this:

Some people feel particularly alive in connection with *practical and other physical tasks*. A man who has recently moved into a new house together with his wife says: 'Now I really feel like keeping things neat and tidy (...) once in a while, I do the window sills and clean the windows. And just the other day, I cleaned the bathroom (...) With our new house, I really feel like doing something.'

Sports activities make some people feel particularly alive. A former carpenter used to bike race as a young man. His motto was: 'I can, I must and I will ... and then I won,' he says. 'The longer the race was, the harder it was, the better it was for me (...) I wasn't afraid to use my strength. And my body! It just felt so good doing it.'

Others feel particularly alive when they are in *social relationships*, among family and friends. A grandmother of three says: 'I always feel particularly alive when my grandchildren come to visit, especially when the little one comes (...) when Laura is here, you just have to be particularly alive because she's doing so many crazy things.' Another woman emphasises the feeling that other people need her; that she has something to give. Then she feels alive: 'It gives me an enormous kick, you can feel that you are bloody well alive (...) there is someone who actually needs you.'

Still others feel alive when focused on their *own inner being*. They may experience their own inner processes both bodily and mentally. A man has begun to practice Tai Chi. When he is doing this, he feels particularly alive: 'The first time I was in the Tai Chi-room, I felt that I was bubbling with life (...) I felt a lot of energy (...) I actually felt a tingling from the soles of my feet and all the way up ... and I thought, "My God, how wonderful it is to be alive." I really felt that.' A woman describes how, after she fell ill, she has developed a special inner feeling of being alive. 'Even if I won a million dollars I wouldn't feel as alive as I did on Easter morning when I went for a walk alone (...) I feel all bubbly inside. And really feel at one with life.'

Finally, some people feel alive *outdoors*. A woman says: 'When I'm in contact with nature or when I'm out at sea, then I feel particularly alive. Especially now, during the summer holidays. We stayed in a summer cottage by the sea, and that made me feel very much alive (...) My thoughts seem extremely clear. I feel good. I think it's the water and the vast expanse.'

Someone else says: 'I simply got new energy from being at the seaside. To lie down on the beach and to have the wild wind blow warm sand on my body, and then to throw myself into the waves. To sit and watch the sunset every evening. That was new energy for me. Life energy means that I can get up in the morning and feel joy over my existence. Just knowing that I'm here.'

Other respondents talk about living intensely when they are involved in their work projects, or when they are reading, travelling, doing voluntary social work, being with their beloved, fishing, gardening and a multitude of other activities. Perhaps each human being has their special world of activity and unfolding, their special space for intense living. We all have situations in which we feel alive with particular intensity. At the other end of the scale, people

may even feel that they do not live at all. They feel dead inside. They may even feel that life has come to a complete standstill and will not commence until they do something else or go live with someone else.

However, whether we feel more or less alive at any given moment, as human beings we all have an idea about what *it means* for us – in our own lives – to be more or less alive.

So what is at the core of feeling alive? Rollo May describes what he calls the '*I-am'-experience* (May, 1983, pp. 99ff). It is the spontaneous experience of just being here. Simply because I am here, I also have the right to be here, the right to exist. I experience my own being and develop life feeling. If a person can spontaneously experience that they live, they will thereby get to know their own basic values. Opinions about good and bad, right and wrong are not just taken over from parents and society: They grow organically out of our selves.

Ronald D Laing has also described an aspect of our life feeling. He has coined the term 'ontological security' and the antonym 'ontological insecurity' (Laing, 1965, pp. 39ff). A person can have a sense of their being in the world as a real, alive and whole person who lives in temporal continuity. This person can step forward and meet others with clarity. Laing calls such a person ontologically secure. They, says Laing, will meet the trials of life on the basis of a firm feeling of their own and other people's identity and reality.

In psychotic states we see the opposite: a lack of existential foundation. In these states we find individuals who feel fundamentally unreal, not alive, not whole and with unclear boundaries.

Also Jon Kabat-Zinn in his work on stress and meditation captures the phenomenon of life feeling. He teaches his patients 'to taste their own wholeness as they are, right now (...) to accept ourselves right now, as we are, symptoms or no symptoms, pain or no pain, fear or no fear' (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, pp. 279–280).

The above examples of feeling alive are expressions of life feeling in its purest form. In some of them, other elements such as the need to perform or the need to be loved are admixed with the quintessential life feeling. But in all of them, the life feeling is lucid; reading the examples, you sense the nurturing and healing nature of these experiences.

Life Courage

Life feeling is an important component in life courage. But the courage to live encompasses more than life feeling, pure and simple. According to Paul Tillich, existential theologian and philosopher, life courage, that is the courage to be, is a phenomenon comprising both a natural component (something that is part of living in itself) and a moral component (something that one strives for). The courage to live is a conscious attitude in which one affirms one's