

Paula: The Rebirth of the Person

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From an existential point of view, to reach the level of a fulfilled existence involves inner consent. In a psychotherapeutic context the method used for this purpose is „Personal Existential Analysis“. This is a method directed towards helping to find personal resources and an authentic way to express oneself in a defined situation. This paper gives further insight into it by presentation, analysis and discussion of the therapeutic process.

Keywords: *Existence Scale, Fundamental Existential Motivations, Personal Existential Analysis, Self*

Aus einer existenzanalytischen Perspektive beinhaltet ein erfülltes Leben innere Zustimmung. Die Methode, die im Zusammenhang mit Psychotherapie dafür zum Einsatz kommt, ist die Personale Existenzanalyse. Sie hilft, die personalen Ressourcen aufzufinden und sich in authentischer Weise in einer bestimmten Situation auszudrücken. Dieser Beitrag liefert dazu einen tieferen Einblick durch Präsentation, Analyse und Diskussion eines therapeutischen Prozesses.

Schlüsselwörter: *Existenzskala, Grundmotivationen, Personale Existenzanalyse, Selbst*

1. Biographical Background

A 24 year old woman, we will call her Paula, was bothered by feelings of insecurity over her intellectual skills throughout her university career. She was born in a middle-class family. By the time she asked for psychological help she was living with her parents, both of whom were government employees, and an older brother who worked in construction. She had achieved her goals in academia. She was a very good student in primary and high school. She graduated with honors from a pre-grade academy which had opened the way to university. Paula is the first person in her family to attend university and her goal to finish university studies is also shared by her family. Her brother did not want to study but is dedicated to his work.

Paula met Pedro at college and they started a relationship after several months of dating. This new relationship helped her to cope with her difficulty in connecting with people. Pedro was friendly and she enjoyed being with him. Since childhood, Paula has been shy, introverted and reluctant to connect with other children. She is always waiting for her parents to tell her what to do. Meeting Pedro confronted her with new challenges. Her old behavioral patterns were unfashionable and inappropriate for these new challenges; she felt that it was time to make some changes. Modest movements to break with antiquated behavioral patterns were made but with effort. On several occasions her parents were against some of the activities she liked to do with Pedro because they considered them distractions from her duties at college.

Obstacles became more difficult to solve as she advanced at the university. She didn't pass some of her final exams and was losing self-confidence. She became extremely cautious. At times she was so afraid of failing she didn't attend her exams. She quit meeting with her friends. She didn't practice gymnastics any longer and her meetings with Pedro became less frequent. Her whole world was reduced to study. At this

point she decided to discontinue attending classes at college for a year in order to catch up. Her family didn't agree with her decision. This compelled her to feel that she should successfully pass all the subjects she had failed. This situation became a paradox. She focused all her efforts on passing the exams, yet she failed twice. Because she felt anguish and a great deal of stress she decided to ask for psychological help.

2. First sessions

Paula arrived punctually for the first appointment. She was pale and had dark shadows under her eyes. She did look clean and tidy however. She was wearing dark jeans and a black turtle neck sweater. She didn't use make up or jewelry.

When she was asked why she was looking for psychological help she replied: „This year I've decided not to attend classes at college in order to catch up. It has been hard for me to make this decision, but I couldn't go on. My parents didn't understand my choice. They believe that I'm going to quit studying and that I'll leave college... But now I'm not sure I've made the right decision... I would like you to evaluate my intellectual skills because I think there must be a problem with me. Maybe I'm not smart enough to follow a university career and I would like to know it“

She also expressed: „Lately I'm quite sensitive about what others think of me. I feel anxious, I feel insecure about everything ... my body, my thoughts and my skills. I get sick very often. I go to see one physician after another. I got asthma, so I can't breathe well. In these last few months it has been really hard to do anything. I can't do what I've proposed. I've been feeling insecure; I need company to go everywhere... I'm feeling tired, without a will to do anything. Time goes by and I can't do anything“

As the psychological interviews continued Paula began arriving late to appointments. When she arrived she would

apologize and try to explain that she had difficulties getting up early and would subsequently miss the bus and would have to wait for the next one.

3. Diagnostic Approaches

The diagnosis was made through psychological interviews, Existence Scale (Längle, Orgler and Kundi 2000) and Fundamental Existential Motivations Theory (Längle 2000a, 2003a), in order to detect which personality aspects were developed and which presented problems requiring a systematized psychotherapeutic treatment. During the diagnostic interviews and at the end of psychological treatment (thirteen months) Existence Scale (Landaboure 2000) was administered. The Existence Scale is an instrument to evaluate „personal fulfillment in one’s existence“ and consists of a questionnaire of 46 items that are ordered arbitrarily. The Existence Scale is further categorized by the following Sub-scales: „Self-distance“ and „Self-transcendence“ combined to form the „P-factor“, „Freedom“ and „Responsibility“ combined in the „E-factor“ and „Total Score“.

A low score on „Total Score“ could mean the presence of „existential vacuum“, which involves: difficulties in establishing a dialogical interchange with the world, depression, lack of commitment and motivation, a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness. High Scores, by contrast, reveal inner openness, well-being, commitment with the world and oneself.

P-factor describes the personal way of being in the characteristics of openness to the world and perception of one’s self. E-factor describes personal abilities such as making decisions and authentic compromise with the world and life.

Results obtained in Existential Scale (Längle, Orgler, Kundi 2000) (Table in the next column)

At P-Score, during the Diagnostic Phase, Paula obtained a score under the expected rank for her age. She had difficulties connecting with her own feelings and perceiving her environment. She also obtained a low score at E-Score. It was really hard for her to make decisions on her own and to behave responsibly. During the diagnostic phase she got a Total Score of 130 on the Existential Scale. It was a low score. It was difficult for her to focus on her studies and to complete what she proposed. She also felt insecure, fearful and was dependent on others in order to go out. Her interpersonal relationships were poor.

At the beginning of the psychological treatment her frustration with college became an „existential vacuum“. She was losing the possibility of establishing a dialogical interchange with the world and with herself. Moreover, she felt oppressed, breathless and lacking in support. For the first months of treatment Paula seemed to be a spectator in her life, watching life passing by.

In terms of the development of the Fundamental Existential Motivations, a diminishment was observed among the four motivations when psychotherapy started. The most prominent difficulty was at the level of the Third Motivation, the development of her singular being. Throughout her life, Paula had acted according to the expectations of others. This was

	20 to 29 years old	Results obtained during Diagnostic Phase	Results obtained at the end of Psychological Treatment
P-Score	X=107.55	65*	101
	93.71- 121.39		
Self-Distance	X= 35.41	31	31
	29.28-41.54		
Self-Transcendence	X= 72.13	34*	70
	63.11-81.15		
E-Score	X= 107.14	65*	110
	88.73-125.55		
Freedom	X=50.88	30*	53
	41.71-60.05		
Responsability	X= 56.29	35*	57
	45.84-66.74		
Total Score	X= 214.70	130*	211

Table 1: Comparison between scores obtained at Existential Scale during Diagnostic Phase and at the end of Psychological Treatment.

* Under the expected rank for people between 20 to 29 years old.

especially the case with her parents’ desires. However, as she was growing up and had to make her own decisions, she found that she was enormously ignorant about herself. She became more dependent on other people’s opinions and more separated from herself in order to avoid mistakes. Furthermore, the possibility of making mistakes frightened her and so she made great effort to adapt her actions to the wishes and expectations of others. Her reactive level increased instead of becoming more authentic in her personal position in life. Coping reactions such as dissociation, giving over reason to others and distancing were all proliferated, in addition to annoyance and anger.

As a consequence the other Existential Motivations were disturbed. The high dissociation between thoughts and emotions separated her from a free reception of her experiences and what was of value to her. This distance diminished her world and impoverished her quality of life. As a result, she felt that her life was losing value (Second Existential Motivation).

She lost self-confidence and trust in the world. She thought that she was not intelligent enough to carry on with a university career. Her body tried to limit her demands through psychosomatic symptoms like asthma (First Existential Motivation).The project of having a university degree had become so distant from her it was no longer a strong presence in her life.

4. Meeting with herself and the world

The Psychological Treatment was guided according to Personal Existential Analysis (Längle, 2000b, 2003b). The therapeutic goal was centered on training Paula to take personal positions in life. The strategies used to achieve this included: working with impressions contained in her experiences, biographical integration and elaboration of experiences, making decisions and expressing them and

analyzing new impressions.

Personal Existential Analysis (PEA) was used to help Paula discover personal resources that would have a leading role in her life. The application of Personal Existential Analysis is reviewed by reexamining situations in which Paula would act in accordance with the expectations of others without attending to what she was capable of, what she wanted, what she allowed herself, and what was meaningful for her.

The PEA starts with a description of the situation, trying to figure out precedents and discovering the facts.

T: About studying, which steps do you usually follow to learn a subject?

P: First, I search the subject's program, texts and copies. Then, I usually read all the lessons and I underline the most important ideas. Next, I sum up the main ideas of each topic. Finally, I read the summaries and repeat concepts until I can remember them without reading.

T: In which step are you now?

P: I'm studying the subject I failed twice. I have summarized principal ideas so now I'm repeating main concepts. I don't study another topic until I'm able to repeat concepts exactly the same the authors write them. I spend a lot of time doing that. Lately, it has been really hard for me to study. I don't want to study. It is hard to wake up early in the morning. I get up at ten o'clock and I try to study till noon, then I have lunch and take a nap. In the afternoon I study two or three hours. I feel that I can't learn, I repeat concepts once and again, but I can't remember them. I feel insecure, I can't use synonymous.

T: Can you understand the concepts you are studying?

P: Yes, usually I can understand them.

T: Could you explain main concepts with your own words?

P: ... I don't know... I believe I could ... but I'm sure that I'm going to forget something, that's why I prefer to repeat them textually.

T: Could you describe the last time you took an exam?

P: Last time...I had the chance to choose two topics. At first I did well, but then the professor asked me specific questions about other topics, in order to connect them. I couldn't go on... I understood the questions but I couldn't think. I didn't know which words I should use. I was speechless.

T: In other situations could you express your opinions?

P: Actually, I've always been shy since I was a little girl. Lately, it has been really hard for me to express what I think. I believe that if I say what I think other people are going to think that I'm ignorant, so I prefer to keep silent.

T: Which situations are hard for you to express your opinions?

P: Lately, I don't say anything, at college, at home, at Pedro's home... My boyfriend's family loves to gather the family for dinner time. His father cooks and then they like to watch a movie. I've never offered an opinion about which one we should rent because if is not a good one I would be a fool. Sometimes I feel sick for all I have eaten because Pedro's father offers me more food and I'm afraid to say no and make him feel bad.

Up to this point in therapy, Paula described situations that were difficult for her to express her position in life. During psychotherapy these situations were treated through a

phenomenological analysis of her feelings and emotions, followed with the steps of PEA. In the next illustration we see advances in Paula's integration of her emotionality in a specific situation.

T: How do you feel when this situation happens?

P: I don't know... at that moment I don't realize what's going on... but after I feel sick.

T: How do you feel when you remember it?

P: Pretty bad... I'm angry... It bothers me when I don't set limits and I eat till I feel sick.

T: What really bothers you?

P: I don't know... maybe not doing what I feel.

Going through the step of taking an interior position...

T: What do you think about this?

P: I can't say no when he offers me more food because they eat very well and they might think I don't like his food and this might make him feel bad.

T: Why do you think Pedro's father wants you to eat more food?

P: Because all the family eats a lot and if you like the food you want to eat more.

T: Can you understand his behavior?

P: Yes, I think it is a custom for him. It seems to me he doesn't think about it. It's just the way it is.

T: Can you understand why you accept to eat more than you want?

P: Yes, because I get used to following what people say and to do what I think they want me to do.

T: What would you like to do?

P: I would like to say I'm full. I don't want to eat more... but... I'm not sure about their reaction. I don't want to hurt their feelings or their opinion of me. I like to get on well with them.

T: What might happen if you eat until you are full?

P: I don't know... it would be good for me. I don't know if it is going to be ok for them.

Trying to give a shape to Paula's will...

T: How could you do it?

P: ... I could say I like his food very much and when he offers me more I could tell him I'm full.

In the following weeks Paula decided to eat until she felt satisfied. She felt surprised when Pedro's family didn't feel offended. At the beginning, they were surprised because they thought that it was natural for her to eat more, but they respected her decision of eating less. Later, she could express her opinion when her boyfriend and his family rented a movie. She could now understand that nothing bad would happen if they did not like the movie. Little by little she felt enough confidence to express her ideas in social meetings.

As the therapeutic process went on, progress was observed at the Four Fundamental Existential Motivations. She could trust in the world and her self-confidence increased. Her feelings of anguish disappeared and she could focus on different activities. Her psychosomatic disorders vanished. She arrived punctually for psychotherapy appointments (First Existential Motivation).

Her relationship with her parents and friends improved. When the psychotherapy process began, her parents used to tell her what to do. By the end of the treatment, Paula was able to decide for herself when to study, when to take an

exam and how to study. She could hold her decisions even when her parents disagreed. Over time her parents showed more respect and appreciation for her personal decisions.

Paula's self-acceptance and self-value increased during therapy (Third Existential Motivation). She was able to have authentic meetings with Pedro. She was able to share with him personal aspects of herself that she had never shown. Moreover, she made new friends at college.

Everyday, Paula had satisfactory experiences that increased her „appreciation for life“ (Second Existential Motivation). She planned her schedule trying to live step by step and do something pleasant every day. She took gymnastic classes, for example. Once, her friends invited her to spend a weekend in the mountains. At first she was not sure about accepting the invitation, but she did. She had a lovely time and this added to the growing quality of her life. In general she felt happy and she had the will to enjoy life. Furthermore, her feelings matured and she could feel values. She dressed in light colors and she used make up.

Paula discovered the meaning of ending a university career. She would now like to graduate and start working as „Analista de Sistema“ and she has the feeling that she could also grow up with her job. She has also started thinking about how she would like to work when she graduates. She has been able to do some simple jobs related to her career (Forth Existential Motivation). Five months after her last exam, she wrote it again and passed. She later took another exam but unfortunately failed. Instead of blaming her lack of intelligence, however, she was able to admit to the reasons why she failed: failing to read the topics and tiredness.

P: The teacher asked me why I didn't go to class. I didn't say a word and then I told him I couldn't make it.

T: You couldn't?

P: I didn't want to. I don't like to go by myself. What if he asks me something I don't know or I don't remember?

T: What might happen then?

P: It would seem I am an ignorant person.

T: What would be the worst thing to happen if the teacher asks you something you don't know?

P: The worst thing would be to say „I don't know the answer“ and look dumb.

T: What do you think is the main objective of taking those classes?

P: It's a chance to question your doubts, but I feel the teacher is evaluating me all the time.

T: Do you really think he is evaluating you?

P: Yes, sort of. The teacher knows if you study or not, but in that situation you can't fail because it's not a „real“ exam.

T: Do you find something positive about going to class and asking the teacher about the topics you don't understand?

P: I'm ashamed to go, but it would be a good opportunity to understand some topics for the finals.

T: Do you think you can go next time and talk to the teacher before the exam?

P: It's going to be very hard. I think it's important for me to do it, though. Yes, I think I can go next time.

Before the next exam, she was able to speak with her professor about her doubts. She followed a plan of study

which included time for enjoyable activities. In the end she passed the exam successfully.

She recovered her self-confidence at college and obtained better results in her exams. By the following year, she was able to come back to university. She felt much better about herself and her environment and was able to end the therapeutic process. She agreed to complete the Existence Scale once again and compare the results with her therapist. (See Table 1)

By the end of the psychological treatment, Paula obtained scores in the expected rank for her age, i.e., satisfaction with her life and a balance between her personal resources and existential conditions.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

Personal Existential Analysis (PEA) allowed Paula to find and express her feelings, accept her own emotions and integrate them with her biographical background thereby reducing the distance she had experienced with herself. She was able to better understand herself and her environment. Furthermore, she was able to take personal positions while avoiding reactive behaviors. She could express her decisions through responsible commitment to herself and the world.

By doing so, she found a way to be more authentic. Moreover, she quit being a spectator and was able to take an active role in the development of her life.

What seems to be of special interest is the application of Personal Existential Analysis method to the psychological treatment of Paula. Also illustrated was the benefit of this application by guiding the patient towards a fulfilled existence. The method is efficient in showing the patient a means to finding personal resources such as contact with self impressions, making personal decisions and then expressing them.

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