

THE PSYCHOLOGY

OF EXISTENCE

AN INTEGRATIVE, CLINICAL PERSPECTIVE

KIRK J. SCHNEIDER

ROLLO MAY

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EXISTENCE

An Integrative, Clinical
Perspective

Kirk J. Schneider

Center for Existential Therapy

Rollo May

McGraw-Hill, Inc.

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland Bogotá Caracas
Lisbon London Madrid Mexico City Milan Montreal New Delhi
San Juan Singapore Sydney Tokyo Toronto

*This book was set in Times Roman by The Clarinda Company.
The editors were Laura Lynch and David Dunham;
the production supervisor was Diane Ficarra.
The cover was designed by Carla Bauer.
R. R. Donnelley & Sons Company was printer and binder.*

Cover photo: Algimantas Kezys

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Acknowledgments appear on page 323, and on this page by reference.

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0 DOC/DOC 9 9 8 7 6 5

ISBN 0-07-041017-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Schneider, Kirk J.

The psychology of existence: an integrative, clinical perspective

/ Kirk J. Schneider, Rollo May.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-07-041017-8

1. Existential psychology. 2. Existential psychotherapy.

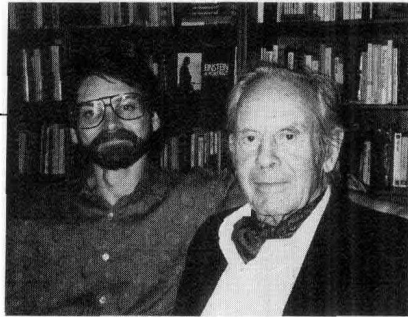
I. May, Rollo. II. Title.

BF204.5.S35 1995

150.19'2—dc20

94-19497

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ROLLO MAY, Ph.D., is an internationally acclaimed psychologist, psychoanalyst, and author. Considered the founder of American existential psychology, he is the author of more than a dozen books. Among them are *Existence* (1958), *Love and Will* (1969), *Freedom and Destiny* (1981), and *A Cry for Myth* (1991). May began his psychotherapeutic career in Vienna where he studied with Alfred Adler. He is a founding member of the Association for Humanistic Psychology and a former training analyst of the William Alanson White Institute of Psychiatry, Psychoanalysis, and Psychology in New York City. Recently, Dr. May received the prestigious Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement from the American Psychological Association, and a research center in his name has been launched at Saybrook Institute to carry on his work.

To the Seekers in Psychology—Past, Present, and Future.

FOREWORD

What forces shape the architecture of our lives? Arrayed on the right side of the dialectic of the human condition are the constructive designers of Apollo and Company. They are always prepared with their rational plans and sensible blueprints to guide progressions of seemingly orderly experiences in the direction of wise decisions. Their clients come to believe that they will always be able to choose the preferred side of the street on which to live by exercising their free will. But competition is mounted by Dionysus and Sons, well known for their insistence on combining the elements of irrationality, change, and occasional chaos in their plans for how, where, and why people live their lives.

While the Apollonians prefer to sanctify their tenants as exemplars in a divine grand plan, Dionysians treat humankind's tenants as the default value of existence. Apollo folk readily turn to their favorite subcontractors, science and religion, to help build traditional structures. "Sometimes they work and sometimes they give false guarantees of salvation and fundamental truths," counter the supporters of Dionysus.

Nearly forty years ago, a youthful architect of the human imagination offered up an alternate design to these extremes of living in righteous lofts or gloomy basements. Rollo May looked to the very structure of human existence for keys to unlock the resources human beings need to confront the recurring crises in their lives. Those keys were fabricated in the mold of phenomenology. Understanding comes through sharing the perspective of the experiencing person, entering into the life space of the tenant, so to speak, rather than identifying with the authoritative analysis of the landlord. Phenomenology created a subjective, descriptive context for beginning to make sense of the vicissitudes of being and becoming. Its tower of understanding stands alongside the traditional social scientists' tower of objectivity and quantifiability, deemed essential for erecting a science of prediction and control.

As psychological science advances models drawn from physics and biology, the phenomenological rush of existentialism is more toward humanities, philosophy, and the arts.

The former probes human nature vertically, the latter explores its horizontal connections to illuminate the breadth of humanity.

Existential-humanist psychology refuses either to reduce the complexity of human beings to ever more refined variables or to glorify them as masters of their destiny. This approach recognizes that we are all vulnerable to powerful yet subtle situational forces that can bend—and sometimes break—the will of the “best and brightest” of us. Interestingly, this view is echoed by social psychologists who contend that social psychology’s major take-home message is that situations exert more powerful influences on our thoughts, feelings, values, and actions than we acknowledge or dare to recognize.

This view does not make us pawns of environmental forces or autumn leaves at the mercy of existential winds. Humans are negotiating continually between realities and illusions, old paths and new destinations, givens and coulds, constraints and freedoms, calibrations and creations.

Rollo May’s vision shifted the focus of this new approach to psychology away from rigid determinism and toward understanding how human experiences are challenged and charged by the perils and the prizes of everyday existence. This view would enrich psychology by embracing literary sources, humanistic values, and the power of myth.

I was privileged to meet and break bread with Rollo May some years ago, in sharing the delights of our new existence in the San Francisco Bay Area—so far removed from our former chaotic lives on the East Coast. He was curious about how it was possible to investigate experimentally issues of choice and dissonance, the power clash of situations and dispositions, as I was doing in my research. And I was equally curious about how seemingly elusive existential concepts could be translated into on-line clinical strategies and tactics, as he was doing in his work. From our dialogues and emerging friendship, I began to realize how this existential perspective was more than a philosophy of knowledge or a literary dramatic stance; it could be a powerful foundation for therapeutic practice. Clinicians can utilize existential principles to empower clients in a wealth of ways: to cope more effectively and respond to life’s demands, to achieve a deeper understanding of the situational forces operating on them, and to gain a sense of how the individual’s interpretation of life creates new possibilities and realities of existence.

Along with Chris Rogers (former psychology editor at McGraw-Hill), I encouraged Rollo May to bring together in one book the many sources of practical wisdom that characterized existential-clinical psychology. Our hope was that he would write a text for the legions of fans of his earlier best-sellers, but also one of value to professional psychologists and students.

Fortunately, Kirk Schneider joined this enterprise at a critical moment when Rollo May’s health problems were slowing down his initial progress. Kirk Schneider eagerly shouldered the complex burden of synthesizing diverse sets of source materials, while also integrating general existential perspectives and principles into guidelines of clinical practice. What has emerged from this fortuitous alliance is a unique book presenting the core concepts of Rollo May’s existential approach to understanding the psychology of the person, amplified, deepened, and extended by the craftsmanship and theoretical clarity of Kirk Schneider.

I am certain that readers will delight in discovering the interplay and interpretation of existentialism’s literary, philosophical, and psychological root concepts in Part One of

this work. In addition to excerpts of vital writings by May and Schneider, the opening chapters present the reader with key elements of existential thought from some of the greatest thinkers of our modern era—Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus, William James, and Maslow, to mention a few.

From these broad roots, the text moves to describing the development of existential-integrative psychology and its future directions. Part Three illustrates clearly the ways and means of applying the core concepts of an existential-integrative psychology in therapeutic settings. These clinical guidelines are embellished with a wonderfully diverse collection of case studies by more than a dozen practitioners of clinical existential-integrative therapy. These cases are so rich with insights into subtle dimensions of human nature that they will delight nonclinical readers as well as professionals and students.

In the end, the reader discovers a goal of this approach that is deeper than merely enabling clients to deal effectively with the issues of their existence. Existential-integrative clinical psychology aspires to guide clients toward personal liberation, an inner sense of freedom, one that absorbs and transforms experiential challenges. Rather than retreat from the onslaught of traumatic experiences or exploit them for personal gain, the client, and all of us, can live most fully, be optimally functional, by developing the mental flexibility to be in the moment, meaningfully rooted in the past, with viable options for the future. This whole person is architect and developer, tenant and landlord, Apollo and Dionysus in the House of Human Nature.

Philip G. Zimbardo
Rome, Italy
February 28, 1994

PREFACE

When Rollo May and I began this textbook, we had four goals in mind: to introduce existential psychology to a new generation; to bring life, passion, and the riches of the humanities back into the psychology curriculum; to render existential psychology accessible—particularly for the training clinician; and to address the integrative implications of existential psychology—in light of our diversifying profession.

We spent many hours planning, envisioning, and detailing this undertaking—and many hours reflecting upon our respective contributions. Suddenly, however—in the winter of 1992—Rollo became ill and had to withdraw from a portion of his involvement. He then—generously—requested that I oversee our project and carry it through to completion.*

The result, I believe, has been salutary—for all concerned. Through a vibrant “chorus of voices,” and a rich tapestry of subjects, Rollo’s vision has been affirmed on these pages and extended to a new generation.

We have attempted a delicate balance in this book—between organizing the human experience and acknowledging its inherent disorder; clarifying issues while conceding their ultimate obscurity. Yet the task we have set is imperative, we believe, on several counts: meeting the hunger for existential psychology among baffled students and researchers; meeting the challenges of the growing integrationist movements in psychology; and optimally dealing with the health care reality in our society, which is radically curtailing our options.

The timeliness of existential psychology cannot be overstated today; for today so many are perplexed. The blows to traditional worldviews (first religion, then science) in our century have been mind-boggling and have exceeded the human capacity to adapt. After World War II, it is no longer possible in many quarters to expect salvation, purity,

*Note: When a perspective is essentially my own in this text, I employ the pronoun “I.” When it is essentially shared between Rollo and me, I employ the pronoun “we.”

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EXISTENTIAL- INTEGRATIVE PSYCHOLOGY: A BEGINNING

In his landmark work, *Existence*, Rollo May outlined one of the boldest psychological agendas in this century. Existential psychology, he wrote,

does not purport to found a new school as over against other schools or to give a new technique of therapy as over against other techniques. It seeks rather, to analyze the structure of human existence—an enterprise which, if successful, should yield an understanding of the reality underlying all situations of human beings in crisis. (May, 1958, p. 7)

Believe what one will about the ambitiousness of May's proposal, it is both relevant and prophetic. Contemporary existential psychology, for example, is neither a school nor a systematic doctrine; yet it has had a steady and enduring impact on a variety of psychological practices. Indeed, existential psychology is in the ironic position of being one of the most widely influential yet least officially embraced psychological constructs on the professional scene (see Norcross, 1987; Yalom, 1980). This is especially true in the field of psychotherapy, where, as leading researcher John Norcross (1987) put it, "the existential orientation frequently underlies clinical practice without explicit recognition or awareness" (p. 42).

The ambivalent reception of existential psychology among professionals is echoed by an equally mixed reaction among many students. While substantial numbers of psychology majors are intrigued (and sometimes profoundly moved) by isolated existential themes, they are perplexed by the approach as a whole and bedeviled by its implications for practice. Comments such as the following are not infrequent: "The readings in existential psychology are fascinating, but how do you *apply* them?" or "I feel like the material touches something very deep in me and the lives of my clients; I just don't know how or why."

How can we account for these wildly divergent attitudes among scholars? How is it that one of the most potent sources for the comprehension of psychological phe-