Paradoxes of Time in Existential Therapy: Can a Time-Limited Existential Approach Work?

**Short-term existential intervention in clinical practice**

By Jim Lantz and Joseph Walsh


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For many, the title of this book will be the first of many stumbling blocks encountered when sifting through *Short-Term Existential Intervention in Clinical Practice*. It is not the first attempt to develop a brief approach to existential or depth psychology. James Bugental (1994) and Strasser and Strasser (1997) attempted sketches on brief approaches to existential therapy; Levenson (1997) and Binder (2004) developed brief psychodynamic therapies; Ecker and Hully (1996) discuss an integrative brief depth psychology that incorporates psychodynamic, humanistic, and existential theory. Yet, the idea of a brief depth therapy remains largely paradoxical and unconvincing.

It is not that length should be equated with depth, nor that it is impossible for depth psychotherapy to be brief. Rather, the challenge is that most attempts to translate depth psychotherapy into a brief format sacrifice too much or create internal inconsistencies through their attempts to become brief or fit with the current zeitgeist of the field. If this is the cost, it is not worth it.

Walsh and Lantz fall into the category of sacrificing depth and internal consistency. For most psychologists, this book may serve better to introduce them to some aspects of social work instead of deepening their understanding of existential therapy. It was a mistake to claim a broad readership when this book is better suited for a narrowly defined audience of social workers and closely related fields. Even within a more constrained audience, the book spends a good deal of time providing a basic overview of general therapy topics, such as the process of change and diversity issues, instead of getting into the issues. Furthermore, the book does not explore in-depth any of the data or research material that may have helped the authors assumptions in many areas.
A number of topics discussed, such as play therapy, dream work, and re-collection, were developed outside of existential therapy. Lantz and Walsh incorporate these into their approach referring to them as “short-term existential interventions;” however, the references are either solely to Lantz’s previous work or to theories outside of existential theory. No explanation as to what makes these existential is given. Although no one has cornered the market on how “existential” should be used, merely referring to an intervention as existential does not make it an existential intervention. Furthermore, many significant works which more explicitly approach these topics existentially are ignored. For example, the discussion of dream interpretation refers to Freud, Jung, and Adler, but does not mention Moustakas’s (1994) *Existential Psychotherapy and the Interpretation of Dreams*.

A notable exception to this criticism is chapter 10, “Life Stage Crisis Intervention,” which was the strongest chapter in the book and included one of the best case illustrations. Although the concepts still needed expansion, they illustrated an attempt to bring a uniquely existential perspective to developmental issues.

An aspect of the book which represents both a strength and weakness is the utilization of case illustrations. This important trend in recent psychotherapy books returns to the emphasis on case conceptualizations as an important style of research. However, the usage of the case illustrations again lacked depth. Most were only a couple of paragraphs long focusing primarily on setting the context. The illustrations were spaced throughout the book, usually after a discussion of a technique or aspect of therapy. Generally, they simply referred to the usage of the technique or principle stating that it worked effectively; however, there was little or no illustration of the application. Two case illustrations on dream work did a better job of illustrating the process through including dialogue between the therapist and client about the
dream. However, both of these were problematic. In the first, the therapist strongly led the client in the interpretation that is not consistent with existential, psychodynamic, or Jungian approaches to dream interpretation. In the second example, the dream was not discussed in the dialogue, but rather a tangent the dream led to.

Diversity was another concern in the case illustrations. Although we appreciated that the authors included a chapter on diversity, it only covered a very general understanding of diversity without bringing a unique existential perspective to it. The several references that one author worked in a highly diverse setting did not provide a convincing argument for understanding diversity issues. Two case examples illustrate this. One example discussed a Korean couple referred to as the Lee family. There was no consideration given to how the Korean culture impacts her role as a wife and why the couple would be willing to listen to the expert practitioner. Given the fairly direct and leading style illustrated in much of the book, this is a concern, especially given most existential practitioners tend to be opposed to leading the client too much. Second, in the case of the Takahashi family from Japan, there is no reference to how the Japanese culture impacts their interaction, or that suicide may not have the same stigma as in the United States. Mentioning the heritage or race in the case illustrations implies significance to the reader, but the authors fall short of delving into the relevance of race and why or how it may affect the outcome.

The biggest concern about this book is its apparent lack of familiarity with contemporary existential literature. The majority of the references to existential literature are to Viktor Frankl and James Lantz, one of the authors of this book. The few others mentioned are cited sparsely and not in depth. In general, the authors do not demonstrate a very good understanding of existential thought and literature. There does not appear to be any awareness of the variations in
existential theory, such as differences between the approach of Frankl and other existentialists; there is no mention of the other individuals who previously attempted to develop brief existential approaches; and many of the most influential historic and contemporary existential thinkers are not even mentioned. It would be more honest to call this book a tribute to the contributions of Lantz given that over ten percent of the references are Lantz’s work.

It is especially disappointing that the authors did not discuss the complications in adapting existential therapy to a brief approach. Bugental (1994), in his brief initial sketch on short-term existential therapy, went into much greater depth discussing the challenges and limitations of this adaptation. For Bugental, the short-term approach is part of a longer term process which is adapted due to financial pressures and managed care limitations. It is not ideal, but used to work within client, systematic, and structural limitations. Bugental imagines the client having several short-term existential therapy experiences over several years. Similarly, Strasser and Strasser (1997) demonstrate recognition that their time-limited approach is not consistent with prior thinking of existential therapy. Their use of “time-limitation” instead of “brief” is significant. They intentionally use these pre-imposed limitations of time as a way to as a way to tap into the existential issues of personal limitation, death, and existential conceptions of time. This is a much more sophisticated attempt at developing an existential brief therapy, but one the authors ignore.

Frankl (1984), who serves as a primary influence of the authors, also provides challenges to the brief, solution-focused approach. For Frankl, explicit goals, particularly about happiness, are not directly achieved. Instead, they are by-products of a life lived well. This complex understanding of psychological health and happiness seems at odds with much of what Lantz and Walsh discuss.
**Conclusion**

There are few contemporary books written on existential theory. For existential therapists, it is very exciting to see a new title which directly appeals to the existential approach. Unfortunately, this book will be disappointing to many who read it expecting an in-depth perspective on existential therapy. In the end, the authors were not convincing in their attempt to match complex disorders with complex treatment theories and, in particular, with short-term existential intervention.
References


Ecker, B. (1996). *Depth oriented brief therapy: How to be brief when you were trained to be deep – and vice versa*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.


In clinical practice, formulations are used to communicate a hypothesis and provide framework for developing the most suitable treatment approach. The quality of specific clinical formulations, and the quality of the general theoretical models used in those formulations, can be evaluated with criteria such as: and formulations can be modified if an intervention is not as effective as hoped.