Existential Theory: Helping School Counselors Attend to Youth at Risk for Violence

Recent incidences of extreme school violence have increased focus on school violence (Sprague & Walker, 2000; Vaughan, 1998). As a result, many researchers and practitioners in education, psychology, sociology, and counseling arc working to identify possible causes (Dykeman, Daehlin, Doyle, & Flamer, 1996; Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Vaughan). Behavioral and social indicators are the most frequently identified and discussed issues surrounding school violence. Researchers suggest that aggression in children and adolescents can be associated with hyperactivity, locus of control, impulsivity, lower intelligence, family dynamics, poor social skills, or low socio-economic status (Dykeman, et al.; Straussner & Straussner, 1997; Warner, Weist, & Krulak, 1999) and physical or sexual abuse (Stetzner, 1999; Vaughan). The nature of these factors appear to suggest that violence occurs because there is a lack of something in the perpetrator's life, factors that are often deep-rooted and unchangeable within the scope of school counseling. Therefore, school counselors who try to focus on these issues when working with youth at risk for violent behavior may find themselves frustrated and ineffective. Existentialism allows for the consideration of such abstruse emotional and social factors as being, meaning, freedom, choice,
and anxiety. The purposes of this article are (a) to introduce the existential perspective as a viable theoretical framework for school counselors to utilize when addressing possible violent behavior in youth; and (b) to present a case study that introduces possible school counselor case conceptualization and interventions based in existential principles and designed to address the existential factors that appear to influence youth at risk for violent behavior.

PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS OF EXISTENTIAL THEORY

Existential theory is rooted deeply in philosophy and history. All human experience is part of the larger human condition, particularly when it is vivid and intense enough to touch the experience of other human beings (Bankart, 1997; Heaton, 1997). This part/whole concept of one person's human experience touching that of humanity is often referred to as "figure/ground." Every figure, object, or phenomenon is experienced in relation to some less clearly defined ground (i.e., a total context; Pollio, 1997). The social context of the school experience is one example.

Early philosophical thought containing precepts of existentialism can be traced back to Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche (May & Yalom, 1995). Differences between these early existentialists lie fundamentally in their views of the individual being and the significance of an individual's "being-in-the world" (Wahl, 1949; Warnock, 1970). These existential thinkers do, however, share the fundamental view that because consciousness and the world can not be separated, our existence makes us who we are in relationship to our world (Cohn, 1997). Existentialism recognizes several themes of everyday life as a framework for understanding human existence. According to Pollio (1997), these eight themes include experience of the human body, time in human life, human experience of other people, aloneness, reparation, love and loving, falling apart, and death in the context of life.

EXISTENTIALISM AND ADOLESCENTS

Children and adolescents do experience existential suffering in spite of common assumptions that children lack the advanced cognitive skills and spiritual maturity often associated with existential suffering (Attig, 1996). This is important when considering the existential perspective to explore the world of school violence. Adolescents may manifest existential anxiety in a variety of ways, including choosing isolation, becoming inward, and manifesting hostility (Brown, 1996; Firestone, 1997). Pre-adolescents and adolescents are more likely than children to express their existential anguish through acting out or arbitrary acts of violence (Attig; Brown).

Some existentialists consider violence and aggression as natural and in some cases necessary. Existential thinkers such as May and Sartre have identified violence as an existential component of the self, in that an individual may move towards greater realization of self through such action (Diamond, 1996). This is in no way intended to condone aggression or violence, but merely to recognize that for some, aggression does provide existential reward. Researchers and practitioners that understand this aspect of aggression may develop more effective interventions. Honest exploration of possible affective rewards may aid in identifying a more acceptable behavior with which to replace the violence. According to recent research, the most effective interventions must address underlying symptoms and intervene on
multiple levels (Brown & Parsons, 1998; Dykeman, et al., 1996; Price, 1996; Sprague & Walker, 2000). The following case presentation demonstrates how a school counselor can explore underlying existential issues and intervene on multiple levels.

THE CASE OF JAY

Jay is a 15-year-old student in a suburban high school of approximately 900 students. A counseling session with Jay revealed that he is angry and frustrated with school. His mother spends much of her time in work-related activities, and his father is a "closet alcoholic." Jay says that he feels very much like the "man of the house."

Jay feels that none of the adults in school understand his inability to complete academic work and that they just "push his buttons." He asserts that all the teachers expect students to fit into their "ideal little box" and are totally "out of touch" with who he is. In addition, Jay sees most of his peers as "over-privileged geeks" who do not understand what life is really about. In essence, Jay has come to believe that life is about fighting to get ahead, and he is unconvinced that his peers can understand his day-to-day struggles in light of what he believes their day-to-day lives are like. As a result of strained relations with the teachers and students in his predominantly white, middle-class high school, Jay has begun to take the city transit to a nearby urban neighborhood where he has made some relatively strong connections with some of the local adolescents. These new friendships appear to be characteristic of gang relationships and have provided Jay with the opportunity to prove his "coolness" through various petty crimes.

Jay has come to see his school counselor because of a recent increase in the harassment and taunting by his peers, lay states that he feels more accepted by his urban peer group, but there is still a part of him that wishes he could fit in at his current high school. Recently, he has felt "on the edge" and is afraid that he is "going to blow." Jay assures his counselor that at this time he has no plans or means to harm himself or others but is afraid that if this goes on much longer, things may get "ugly." The remaining sections outline the central existential concepts relevant to Jay's case and introduce approaches that can be used by school counselors in working with students like Jay.

BEING AND MEANING

Victor Frankl and R.D. Laing asserted that connecting with one's true self leads to a fuller and more meaningful existence (Bankart, 1997). According to Frankl (1984), the only way to stay alive and rise above circumstances and fate is to find meaning in one's own existence. Jay is essentially searching for who he really is and how he fits into the world. This struggle likely has its foundation in Jay's family structure, where there seems to be little clarity of roles that separate adults from children. Existentialism proposes that certain qualities of existence influence how a person functions and lives. The first two basic qualities, being in the world and being in the world with others, provide the foundation for existential thought (Cooper, 1990). Existentialism addresses the environmental, intrapsychic, and interpersonal aspects that impact human experience (Bauman & Waldo, 1998; Boelen, 1968). To truly understand Jay's suffering, his school counselor must understand the environment defined by daily life with his family, the
interpersonal pressures he feels as a result of interactions with both peer groups, and the intrapsychic struggles that Jay experiences as he tries to make sense of his life.

**Being in the World**

According to the basic principles of major existential thought, there is no inherent meaning to one's existence (Bauman & Waldo, 1998; May, 1979; Wahl, 1949). Boelen (1968) stated, "Meaning is constituted by an encounter between a datum and an intentional act, and arises as a dialectical mode of our being-in-the-world" (p. 94). The development of meaning, constructed by the individual, must be authentic and should serve to aid in the understanding of life experience (Frankl, 1984; Krueger & Hanna, 1997). It is likely that the reason Lay came into the counseling office is because he is struggling with this issue of authenticity. Central to this issue for Jay appears to be his struggle with feeling forced into being "the man of the house." In addition, his discomfort with the feeling of uncontrolled anger as expressed through his concern about "going to blow" indicates a core dialectic struggle between good and evil. If his school counselor can help Jay to experience his nonviolent and law-abiding self as authentic, tragedy may be averted. Although there are numerous possible interventions to be used here, Jay's counselor may utilize an activity that this author has used as a school counselor.

If instituting the aforementioned activity, Jay would first be asked to draw a self-representation. It is important that the representation have a clear boundary and an area that clearly reflects internal aspects of Jay (stick figures do not work for this activity). Next, one would ask Jay to record all of the feelings and personality traits that he keeps hidden from others on the inside of his self representation. All externally expressed emotions and personality traits should then be recorded outside of the boundary. Next, the school counselor would engage Jay in a discussion of which listed characteristics he feels represent who he truly is. As Jay and his school counselor dialogue about how his behavior relates to these characteristics and Jay's desire to either hide or expose them, Jay will essentially be exploring and expressing his "authentic self." In essence, Jay should be able to recognize how social pressure is impacting his decisions regarding behavior.

**Being in the World With Others**

Being in the world with others seems to be where Jay is currently struggling most. Because of the blurred boundaries in a family where alcoholism and work-holism are present, Jay is struggling to establish relationships with others. He seems to have found some acceptance in the semi-structured social order provided by his urban peer group but expresses growing isolation and harassment from the peer group at his school.

Existential anguish and subsequently violence can come from a variety of sources including alienation, loneliness, and isolation (Baker, 1998; Diamond, 1996; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Sandhu, 2000; Sapphire, 1999). Isolation and fundamental loneliness provide a sense of emptiness and disconnectedness that causes some individuals to become so concerned with fitting into the "community of humanity" that they begin to live inauthentic lives, in essence embarking upon a journey of self-estrangement (Cooper, 1990). Perhaps this is what Jay is expressing when he shares that...
there is still a part of him that wishes to fit in with peers at his current high school. Jay appears uncomfortable with his recent illegal activity, and it appears that these activities are a direct result of Jay’s desire to fit in. A school counselor working with Jay should engage him in dialogue and personal exploration that will lead Jay to recognize these behaviors as not "who he authentically is" but rather as a "means to acceptance by the urban peer group."

Invisibility and harassment both tend to be more prevalent in larger schools and have been empirically linked to greater feelings of isolation (Raywid & Oshiyama, 2000; Warner et al., 1999). Social, financial, intellectual, and physical threats by both peers and school personnel may be misperceived by the student (Brown & Parsons, 1998; DeBaryshe & Fryxell, 1998) and may lead to violent acting out (Hyman & Perone, 1998; Raywid & Oshiyama). The increased harassment that Jay is currently reporting should be addressed both through school policy and personal strategies for diffusion that Jay can be taught during counseling. The need for bully prevention programs and policy is becoming increasingly apparent as the connection between victimization and subsequent psychological and social outcomes, including school violence, is established (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hazier & Carney, 2000). Many widely published and utilized personal diffusion strategies exist in the field, including trigger recognition, cognitive restructuring (including self-talk), and replacing aggressive behavior with positive physical activity such as exercise. The school counselor may utilize any or all of these strategies within the existential framework.

**FREEDOM AND CHOICE**

Freedom, essentially an ability to choose action, is often sought by individuals but can also be a source of anxiety (Cooper, 1990; Hayim, 1980; May, 1979; Wahl, 1949; Yalom, 1980). When there is an imbalance of freedom, either too much or too little, an individual will strive to reach balance. Consideration of Jay’s case seems to indicate too much freedom and responsibility at home and too little in school. Jay does appear to be seeking structure and adventure, a common response to imbalances in freedom and/or responsibility.

**Seeking Structure**

Since freedom of choice is not always comfortable or easy, structure and foundation from outside are sometimes sought to ease the burden (Bauman & Waldo, 1998). Considering the emotional stress that Jay expresses concerning expectations at home, it is highly possible that he does find comfort in the social structure of his urban peer group. According to Jay, the group has some norms regarding inclusion and acceptance. This appears to be the one place where Jay seems to know what exactly is expected of him and how he fits into the group. Regardless of how society as a whole may feel about these "gang-type peer groups" they do seem to provide for young people a place of clear expectations and inclusion for anyone willing to meet the expectations. Empirical evidence has indicated that:

Boys involved in school violence were over four times more likely than boys engaged in community violence to be gang members with a high proportion of deviant peers rather than gang members with a low proportion of deviant peers. The boys who were violent at school were also less involved in positive activities and had lower network boundary density between adults and peers than did boys displaying...
community violence but not school violence (Minden, Henry, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 2000, p. 102).

It appears, therefore, that Jay’s involvement in the gang-related activity is an imperative issue for his school counselor to address.

**Seeking Adventure**

Jay has expressed that he sees the teachers in his school creating an environment with arbitrary and meaningless boundaries that leave him feeling invisible and undervalued. For Jay, school has become just another place where he is present but unengaged and bored. Diamond (1996) introduced the precept that the mundane may be perceived as an existential threat by certain individuals, and engaging in violence can be felt as ecstasy for them. This sense of the mundane may be heightened for some students in predictable, repetitive (Baker, 1998), and overly restrictive school environments (Gorski & Pilotto, 1993). It appears that Jay needs a school counselor who is willing to recognize the existential threat he may feel from the school environment and who can gently and skillfully help him choose positive ways to cope with or respectfully change the environment. School counselors who desire to address such issues will find literature on invitational education and counseling to be extremely valuable (Juhnke & Purkey, 1995; Purkey, 1999; Purkey & Schmidt, 1990; Schmidt, 1999).

**ANGER AND EXISTENTIAL ANXIETY**

Jay has expressed a great deal of anger towards his family, teachers, and peers. Anger and existential anxiety are closely related (Diamond, 1996). Healthy and appropriate expression of anger is necessary for reducing violence in our schools and society (DeBaryshe & Fryxell, 1998). According to Diamond, one who never experiences anger never encounters the existential givens of life such as that, frustration, confusion, love, and jealousy.

Anger is a diamonic emotion, much like love, which has the ability at the extreme to push an individual into violently destructive behavior (Diamond, 1996). Pre-adolescent anger has been empirically linked to lack of parental support, family stability, academic achievement, and social skills (Fryxell & Smith, 2000). Fortunately, not everyone is destined to violence even if anger is repressed for a long time. Fear of consequence (Diamond) and individual will (Frankl, 1984) both can work to prevent an individual from acting out violently even if there is a great deal of repressed anger. Socially sanctioned self-repression, the social values that help regulate appropriate social behavior, can also create stress and anxiety (Diamond). Jay has demonstrated his ability to control his anger to this point but has also expressed fear that he is approaching a point where he will no longer be able to repress it. This fear of explosive anger is creating anxiety for Jay. As an existentialist, a counselor could work with Jay to help him choose healthy and appropriate outlets for his anger that will allow him to be true to his authentic self.

**ENGAGING JAY IN MOVEMENT THROUGH PERSONAL CHOICE**

The life experience is essentially a series of personal choices, and engagement through personal choice provides the canvas for the meaning that one ascribes to one's life (May & Yalom, 1995). Up until this point, Jay has drawn his meaning from an overarching perspective of external locus of control. Living in a home filled with emotional unavailability, seeking acceptance from a peer group that is alienating and
aggressive, and experiencing detached teachers has led Jay to believe that he has little control over his own life. Essentially, where he is now has little to do with personal choices he has made. The ultimate long-term goal with Jay is to help him recognize the power of personal choice and his internal strength to ascribe positive meaning to his life experience.

One place for the school counselor to start is to affirm Jay of the personal strength it took for him to make the decision to come in and talk about his life. Jay's presence with the school counselor is a testament to the fact that Jay is already engaged with his life experience in a strong way. Jay recognizes and articulates his current understanding of his life situation and his fear of uncontrolled anger. Identification of these characteristics as strengths will help to engage Jay in a positive counseling relationship and will help him to realize that he is capable of making personal choices regarding his own experience. This strategy is also paramount to establishing trust with Jay. As Sandhu (2000) indicates, a trusting and therapeutic relationship is often difficult to establish with alienated, angry students. From a foundation of trust, the school counselor can engage Jay in a dialogue concerning the choices he has regarding his relationships, his illegal activities, his feelings of anger, and subsequently his future.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELORS**

Existentialism appears to provide a base for understanding and intervening with youth at risk for violent behavior. The school counselor may better understand students through the existential issues of meaninglessness, isolation, freedom, and anxiety. Research shows that removing behavioral symptoms is not enough; school counselors must also understand the context and underpinnings of student behavior so that underlying factors do not manifest differently in the future (Cohn, 1997). Because violent acts are so much a part of how perpetrators express struggles with existential issues, it is imperative that the school counselor aspires to understand the student's "full" experience. School counselors who work from an existential framework, as a function of their theoretical view, strive to discover the fuller meaning of any phenomenon (Cohn).

Although there are benefits to using an existential approach, challenges do exist for school counselors desiring to use this perspective in working with youth at risk for violent behavior. One challenge is that there are no set techniques or agendas. Because of their very nature, existential factors cannot be compartmentalized, detached from a student, or easily explained. Working through an existential perspective can be a slow and arduous task. This is especially problematic in a setting such as a school where school counselors have a large number of students to serve and often do not have the luxury of time.

**CONCLUSION**

School violence continues to be studied by educators, psychologists, sociologists, and counselors. The perpetration of a violent act may be framed existentially as a desire for meaning and belonging, or as a reaction to the fear and anxiety caused by repressed anger or free choice. School violence is a complex and emotionally charged phenomenon. Existentialism as a humanistic psychology seems an appropriate choice for addressing such phenomenon as it embraces the notion that there are limits to the purely
scientific understanding of human behavior (Harcum, 1996).

Existential perspective offers a possible foundation for the understanding of school violence. Harcum (1996) asserts that "The survival of our society requires mutual caring and sharing that can come only from the humanistic concepts of value, voluntary choice, and personal responsibility" (p. 182). The concepts presented by Harcum are best addressed through a perspective that is broad enough and deep enough to adequately explore them. Existential theory appears to provide such a perspective for helping school counselors attend to youth at risk for violence.

References


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