

Chapter 11

May: Existential Psychology

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to accomplish the following objectives:

1. List the common assumptions found among most existential thinkers.
2. Define being-in-the-world and nonbeing.
3. Distinguish between normal and neurotic anxiety.
4. Discuss the interrelationship between care, love, and will.
5. List and give examples of the four forms of love.
6. Describe the relationship between freedom and destiny.
7. Define existential freedom and essential freedom.
8. Discuss May's concept of myth, and explain why the Oedipus myth is important in today's world.
9. Discuss research on terror management theory, and explain how it relates to Rollo May's concept of anxiety.
10. Critique May's psychology based on the six criteria of a useful theory.

Lecture Outline

I. Overview of Existential Psychology

Shortly after World War II, a new psychology—existential psychology—began to spread from Europe to the United States. For nearly 50 years, the foremost spokesperson for existential psychology in the United States was Rollo May. A clinical psychologist by training, May took the view that modern people frequently run away both from making choices and from assuming responsibility. May believed that many people lack the courage to face their destiny, and in the process of fleeing from it, they give up much of their freedom. Having negated their freedom, they likewise run away from their responsibility. Not being willing to make choices, they lose sight of who they are and develop a sense of insignificance and alienation. In contrast, healthy people challenge their destiny, cherish their freedom, and live authentically with other people and with themselves.

II. Biography of Rollo May

Rollo Reese May was born in Ada, Ohio, in 1909, but he spent most of his childhood in Michigan. After graduating from Oberlin College in 1930, he spent 3 years as an itinerant artist roaming throughout eastern and southern Europe. When he returned to the United States, he entered the Union Theological Seminary from which he received a Master of

Divinity degree. He served for 2 years as a pastor, but then he quit in order to pursue a career in psychology. In 1949, at the relatively advanced age of 40, he earned a PhD in clinical psychology from Columbia University. During his career, May was a visiting professor at both Harvard and Princeton and lectured at such institutions as Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Vassar, Oberlin, and the New School for Social Research. In addition, he was an adjunct professor at New York University, chairman for the Council for the Association of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry, president of the New York Psychological Association, and a member of the Board of Trustees of the American Foundation for Mental Health. He conducted private practice as a psychotherapist and wrote a number of popular books on the human condition. May died in 1994 at the age of 85.

III. Background of Existentialism

Modern existential psychology has roots in the writings of Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), Danish philosopher and theologian. Like later existentialists, he emphasized a balance between *freedom* and *responsibility*. People acquire freedom of action through expanding their self-awareness and then by assuming responsibility for their actions. However, this acquisition of freedom and responsibility is achieved only at the expense of anxiety.

A. What Is Existentialism?

The first tenet of existentialism is that *existence* takes precedence over *essence*. Existence is associated with growth and change; essence signifies stagnation and finality. Second, existentialism opposes the split between subject and object. Third, people search for some meaning to their lives. Fourth, existentialists hold that ultimately each of us is responsible for who we are and what we become. Fifth, existentialists are basically antitheoretical. To them, theories further dehumanize people and render them as objects.

B. Basic Concepts

According to existentialists, a basic unity exists between people and their environments. The basic unity of person and environment is expressed in the German word **Dasein**, meaning to exist there. Dasein literally means to exist in the world and is generally written as **being-in-the-world**. The hyphens in this term imply a oneness of subject and object, of person and world. People experience three simultaneous modes in their being-in-the-world: *Umwelt*, or the environment around people; *Mitwelt*, or an individual's relations with other people; and *Eigenwelt*, or one's relationship with oneself. Being-in-the-world necessitates an awareness of self as a living, emerging being. This awareness, in turn, leads to the dread of not being: that is, **nonbeing** or **nothingness**. Death is not the only avenue of nonbeing, but it is the most obvious one.

IV. The Case of Philip

Rollo May helped illustrate his concepts of existential theory and therapy through the case of

Philip, a successful architect. Despite his apparent success, Philip experienced severe anxiety when his relationship with Nicole (a writer in her mid-40s) took a puzzling turn. Nicole had three affairs, but each time she reassured Philip that the affair didn't mean anything to her. On one level, Philip wished to accept Nicole's behavior, but on another, he felt betrayed by her affairs. Yet, he did not seem to be able to leave her and to search for another woman to love. He was paralyzed—unable to change his relationship with Nicole but also unable to break it off. At this point in Philip's life, he sought therapy from Rollo May.

V. Anxiety

People experience **anxiety** when they become aware that their existence or some value identified with it might be destroyed. The acquisition of freedom inevitably leads to anxiety, which can be either pleasurable or painful, constructive or destructive.

A. Normal Anxiety

To grow and to change one's values means to experience constructive or normal anxiety. May (1967) defined **normal anxiety** as that “which is proportionate to the threat, does not involve repression, and can be confronted constructively on the conscious level.”

B. Neurotic Anxiety

May (1967) defined **neurotic anxiety** as “a reaction which is disproportionate to the threat, involves repression and other forms of intrapsychic conflict, and is managed by various kinds of blocking-off of activity and awareness.” It is experienced whenever values become transformed into dogma. Neurotic anxiety blocks growth and productive action.

VI. Guilt

Guilt arises when people deny their potentialities, fail to accurately perceive the needs of fellow humans, or remain oblivious to their dependence on the natural world (May, 1958). In this sense, both anxiety and guilt are *ontological*; that is, they refer to the nature of being and not to feelings arising from specific situations or transgressions.

VII. Intentionality

The structure that gives meaning to experience and allows people to make decisions about the future is called **intentionality** (May, 1969b). May used the term “intentionality” to bridge the gap between the subject and the object. Intentionality is “the structure of meaning which makes it possible for us, subjects that we are, to see and understand the outside world, objective that it is. In intentionality, the dichotomy between subject and object is partially overcome” (May, 1969b, p. 225).

VIII. Care, Love, and Will

“Care is a state in which something does matter” (May, 1969b, p. 289). May (1953) defined **love** as a “delight in the presence of the other person and an affirming of [that person’s] value and development as much as one’s own.” Care is also the source of will. May (1969b) called **will** “the capacity to organize one’s self so that movement in a certain direction or toward a certain goal may take place.”

A. Union of Love and Will

Modern society, May (1969b) claimed, is suffering from an unhealthy division of love and will. Love has become associated with sensual love or sex, whereas will has come to mean a dogged determination or willpower. Our task, said May (1969b, 1990b), is to unite love and will. This task is not easy, but it is possible. For the mature person, both love and will mean a reaching out toward another person. Both involve care, both necessitate choice, both imply action, and both require responsibility.

B. Forms of Love

May (1969b) identified four kinds of love in Western tradition—sex, eros, philia, and agape. He believed that Western societies no longer view sex as a natural biological function, but they have become preoccupied with it to the point of trivialization. **Eros** is a psychological desire that seeks an enduring union with a loved one. It may include sex, but it is built on care and tenderness. Eros, the salvation of sex, is built on the foundation of **philia**, that is, an intimate nonsexual friendship between two people. Philia cannot be rushed; it takes time to grow, to develop, and to sink its roots. **Agape** is altruistic love. It is a kind of spiritual love that carries with it the risk of playing God. It does not depend on any behaviors or characteristics of the other person. In this sense, it is undeserved and unconditional.

IX. Freedom and Destiny

Psychologically healthy individuals are able both to assume their *freedom* and to face their *destiny*.

A. Freedom Defined

Freedom comes from an understanding of one’s destiny: an understanding that death is a possibility at any moment, that people are male or female, that people have inherent weaknesses, and that early childhood experiences dispose people toward certain patterns of behavior. Freedom is the possibility of changing, although we may not know what those changes might be.

B. Forms of Freedom

May (1981) recognized two forms of freedom.

- Freedom of doing or freedom of action, which he called **existential freedom**.
- Freedom of being or an inner freedom, which he called **essential freedom**.

C. What Is Destiny?

May (1981) defined destiny as “*the design of the universe speaking through the design of each one of us.*” People’s ultimate destiny is death, but on a lesser scale, their destiny includes other biological properties such as intelligence, gender, size and strength, and genetic predisposition toward certain illnesses. May suggested that freedom and destiny, like love–hate or life–death, are not antithetical but rather a normal paradox of life. “The paradox is that freedom owes its vitality to destiny, and destiny owes its significance to freedom” (May, 1981, p. 17).

D. Philip’s Destiny

After several weeks of psychotherapy, Philip was able to stop blaming his mother for not doing what he thought she should have done. The objective facts of his childhood had not changed, but Philip’s subjective perceptions had. As he came to terms with his destiny, Philip began to be able to express his anger, to feel less trapped in his relationship with Nicole, and to become more aware of his possibilities. In other words, he gained his freedom of being.

X. The Power of Myth

For many years, May was concerned with the powerful effects of **myths** on individuals and cultures—a concern that culminated in his book *The Cry for Myth* (1991). May contended that the people of Western civilization have an urgent need for myths. Lacking myths to believe in, they have turned to religious cults, drug addiction, and popular culture in a vain effort to find meaning in their lives. May (1990a, 1991) believed that the Oedipus story is a powerful myth in our culture because it contains the following elements of existential crises common to everyone:

- birth;
- separation or exile from parents and home;
- sexual union with one parent and hostility toward the other;
- the assertion of independence and the search for identity; and
- death.

XI. Psychopathology

According to May, apathy and emptiness—not anxiety and guilt—are the malaise of modern times. Many people in modern Western societies feel alienated from the world (*Umwelt*),

from others (*Mitwelt*), and especially from themselves (*Eigenwelt*). May saw psychopathology as lack of communication—the inability to know others and to share oneself with them.

XII. Psychotherapy

The goal of May's psychotherapy was not to cure patients of any specific disorder, but rather to make them more human. May said that the purpose of psychotherapy is to set people free, which is to allow them to make choices and to assume responsibility for those choices.

XIII. Related Research

Rollo May's existential theory has been moderately influential as a method of psychotherapy, but it has sparked almost no direct empirical research. This state of affairs is no doubt related to the critical stance that May adopted toward objective and quantitative measurement. May argued that modern science is too rationalistic, too objective, and that a new science is needed in order to grasp the total, living person.

One existential topic to receive some empirical attention has been existential anxiety. An existential approach to the study of terror and death has carried over into "terror management," a modern experimental offshoot of existential psychology. A conceptual bridge between existential psychology and terror management theory (TMT) was provided by American psychiatrist Ernest Becker, who was inspired by Kierkegaard and Otto Rank.

A. Threats in the *Umwelt*: Mortality Salience and Denial of Our Animal Nature

Jamie Goldenberg and her colleagues have conducted an impressive body of studies illustrating how the physical body and its functions undermine our psychic defenses by reinforcing our inescapable mortality. Also, Jamie Goldenberg and colleagues found that cultural worldviews (religion, politics, and social norms) and self-esteem function to defend people against thoughts of death, so that when death becomes salient through disasters, death of a loved one, or images of death, people respond by clinging more closely to cultural worldviews and bolstering their self-esteem. They predicted that mortality salience would increase feelings of disgust, and their experiment found this prediction to be true. Goldenberg and colleagues found that their results supported the basic terror management assumption that people distance themselves from animals because animals remind them of their own physical mortality.

The research based on terror management theory and disgust sensitivity has developed into an impressive body of work that points to the general conclusion that human disgust, particularly disgust related to human features that remind people of their animal nature (such as breastfeeding), serves the function of defending against the existential threat posed by their inevitable death.

B. Finding Meaning in the *Mitwelt*: Attachment and Close Relationships

A great deal of empirical research has demonstrated that people's attachments to others in close relationships serve a terror management function (e.g., Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). In other words, one way people manage their awareness of mortality is by investing in May's *Mitwelt*: in loving relationships.

Cathy Cox and Jamie Arndt (2012) sought to explore the question of *why* people are motivated to form and nurture close relationships when they are reminded of their mortality. Their hypothesis, supported by several studies, was grounded in the Rogerian construct of positive regard. They tested whether it is individuals' perceptions of close others' positive regard for them that explains why relationships and closeness buffer against death anxiety.

Cox and Arndt (2012) conclude that "by understanding some of the ways in which people experience esteem-enhancing support from relationship figures, it may be possible to help people confront core existential concerns with greater resilience."

C. Growth in the *Eigenwelt*: There Is an Upside to Mortality Awareness

The research to date on terror management theory, like that cited above, has focused almost exclusively on what May would call the "neurotic anxiety" engendered by mortality awareness, the uglier side of individuals' defenses against the dread of nonbeing.

Kenneth Vail and colleagues (2012) conducted a review of the literature on the impact of both conscious and unconscious thoughts of death and found evidence for positive growth-oriented outcomes of each. In addition to the health and fitness motivations engendered by proximal mortality awareness, other studies have shown that conscious thoughts of death may help human beings reprioritize their life goals.

Further studies have shown that individuals' most direct encounters with others' death are especially prone to lead them toward pro-social and personal growth goals.

XIV. Critique of May

Existentialism in general and May's psychology in particular have been criticized as being anti-intellectual and antitheoretical. May held that a new scientific psychology must recognize such human characteristics as uniqueness, personal freedom, destiny, phenomenological experiences, and especially our capacity to relate to ourselves as both object and subject. However, according to the criteria of present science, researchers give it a very low rating on its ability to generate research, to guide action, and on internal consistency (because it lacks operationally defined terms), average on parsimony, and high on its organizational powers, due to its consideration of a broad scope of the human condition.

XV. Concept of Humanity

May viewed people as complex beings, capable of both tremendous good and immense evil. As people become more alienated from other people and from themselves, they surrender portions of their consciousness. On the dimensions of a concept of humanity, May rates high on *free choice*, *teleology*, *social influences*, and *uniqueness*. On the issue of *conscious* or *unconscious* forces, May assumed a moderate stance.