Existentialism focuses on the ultimate question of the meaning of life and was exemplified in the 11th century in Omar Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat*. Existentialism emerged as a major force in Europe in the 20th century due to the chaos created by the World Wars, the disarray in the social and political systems, the emergence of the mass society, and the alienation among people, all created by cultural upheaval and the movement away from an agrarian to an industrial society. Phenomenology and existential thinking in 20th-century psychiatry did not emerge from a single school of thought; there are many different and sometimes opposing views on existential thought. The commonality in these two lines of thinking is the rejection of reductionist thinking, which resulted in 19th-century materialism, and objectivism, which reduced humans to an abstraction.

Existential philosophy focuses on humans, and the focus is on understanding the meaning of “being.” Existential philosophy has influenced the existential-humanistic theories of counseling, specifically the work of Abraham Maslow on human development and Carl R. Rogers’s emphasis on person-centered counseling and psychotherapy, and has led to the emergence of depth psychology as a representation of existential-humanistic and transpersonal psychology. The concept of gender development was not the specific focus in any of these perspectives; the focus was always on the concept of being and the human experience. To consider gender development, this entry focuses on how the humanistic-existential perspective as it has emerged in modern psychology has influenced human development and, consequently, led to the emergence of an emphasis on gender development. First, the core principles of existential thinking are examined to understand its influence on psychology, human development, and gender development.

The Essential Core of Existential Theories

Existential philosophical theories focus on the concept of being and what that means in terms of how humans understand being in a social-cultural-political world. Theoretically, being has always been considered from a generic human perspective. Existential theorists addressed the issue of “being” within a system or a social-cultural world. Understanding being implies also understanding nonbeing, the reason for existential anxiety and the fear of death or nothingness. Existentialist psychologist Rollo May considers anxiety essentially central to the human condition due to the fear of death or nonbeing.

Since existential thinking did not address gender development, to understand the influence of this school of thought, it is important to analyze theoretical, philosophical, and research perspectives in order to make inferences about how this movement influenced theories of gender development. Primarily, the theoretical perspectives of existential theorists, such as Martin Buber, Martin Heidegger, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Michel Foucault, reinforce the idea that in modern times the individual must separate self from the conforming masses. Therefore, the focus is on individualism, and identifying oneself as a separate entity, independent of others, and having the ability to pursue one’s fullest potential.

Simone de Beauvoir, an existential author and philosopher, considers herself the midwife of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential ethics. In her 1949 book *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir provides the distinction between sex and gender by stating that being born a biological female does not mean that one is a woman and it is society that makes a baby into a woman. Theorists have noted that before *The Second Sex*, the sexed/gendered body was not an object of phenomenological investigation. De Beauvoir changed that. Her argument for sexual equality takes two directions. First, it exposes the ways in which masculine ideology exploits the sexual
difference to create systems of inequality. Second, it identifies the ways in which arguments for equality erase the sexual difference to establish the masculine subject as the absolute human type. Her perspective brought to light the social construction of gender. She confronts the norm of masculinity as the standard for humans and belief that the inequality between the genders has created systems of inequality. She insists on gender equality, not by compromising female characteristics—that is, erasing femininity—but by validating and accepting the differences.

The existentialism contained in de Beauvoir’s writing is a reflection of her own experience of self-discovery and what it means to be a woman, and her identification with the experience of being a woman. Existentialism is probably the only school of philosophical thought that allows for an in-depth examination of what it means to be a gendered being. Theorists note that the reason de Beauvoir’s work is highly respected is because she believed that humans must be respected first as living beings, regardless of gender. Some may erroneously see The Second Sex as a “feminist manifesto,” whereas de Beauvoir is simply commenting on being human. Her perceptions tend to be gender blind. Furthermore, theorists contend that de Beauvoir did not mean The Second Sex to provide a rationale for seeking liberation but to help women focus on their own potentiality and what it means, without accepting the definitions imposed on them by society.

**Existential Psychotherapy**

Existential psychotherapy is defined as a dynamic approach that focuses on ontology, intentionality, freedom, choice/responsibility, phenomenology, individuality, and potentiality. Irwin D. Yalom considers existential psychotherapy a dynamic approach that focuses on concerns that are rooted in the individual’s existence. These definitions and perspectives elucidate the essence of existential psychotherapy. The key concepts or themes of existential psychotherapy are as follows:

- **Ontology**, or being or, more specifically, being-in-the-world, emphasizes social relationships.
- **Intentionality** refers to meaning making, a unique human characteristic. Intentionality signifies making meaning of one’s life, that is, the freedom of a person to define the self, in spite of the numerous restrictions imposed by the social-cultural environment. May views freedom as possibility, the ability to have several different options and the freedom to make a decision on the path one will follow.
- **Choice and responsibility** are the core of existential thinking, signified by the fact that humans have many options, making choices and taking responsibility for the outcome of their choices.
- **Phenomenology** refers to the immediacy of the experience to understand the meaning of existence. Existential psychotherapy focuses on the meaning of the experience for the individual; therapists use empathy to understand a client’s experience.
- **Individuality** in existential psychotherapy is concerned with the uniqueness of the individual and the individual’s experiences in the world.
- **Authenticity** refers to living one’s life with an accurate appraisal of one’s humanity and focusing on fulfilling one’s potential. The emphasis is on not accepting societal and cultural expectations and on staying true to oneself. Being authentic also implies not dominating others.
- **Potentiality** is the final theme of existential assumptions, and it implies that all humans have the potential to become authentic and to overcome and transcend their past.
The existential movement in psychotherapy comprises a diverse array of theorists and practitioners; it is considered a movement instead of a theoretical school of thought. Furthermore, due to the amorphous nature of the existential perspective, and its opposition to the empirical approach, it has experienced a decline in research and publications.

Existential psychology has four primary themes: (1) each person has value and is unique, (2) human growth occurs in part due to suffering, (3) growth is facilitated by staying in the moment, and (4) a sense of commitment is a necessary element for personal growth. Considering suffering a necessary component for personal growth sets existential psychology apart from humanistic psychology. Existentialism has contributed significantly to the rise of humanistic psychology, based on the core assumptions of existential theories—that is, the uniqueness of each human and the goal of achieving one’s fullest potential.

**Humanistic Psychology**

Two major theorists have contributed significantly to the existential-humanistic movement in psychotherapy: Maslow and Rogers. Both emphasized maximizing human potential for self-direction, and freedom of choice. Maslow proposed the hierarchy of needs; he believed that all humans have certain basic needs that must be fulfilled before other developmental needs could be addressed. At the bottom of the pyramid of human needs are the physiological and safety needs. Once these are satisfied, he believed, people will focus on their psychological needs for belonging and self-esteem. The need to achieve one’s fullest potential (i.e., self-actualization) is at the top of the hierarchy. A self-actualized person is autonomous and independent, with a clear perception of reality, possessing self-acceptance and accepting of others, and is able to transcend the environment instead of merely coping with it. Furthermore, self-actualized people focus on the problem instead of being self-centered and have sympathy for the conditions that others face. They establish deep meaningful relationships with a few people rather than having superficial relationships with many people; they have a sense of detachment and a need for privacy, and they work to promote the common good. The term *positive psychology* is ascribed to Maslow. This is now a recent branch of psychology; it focuses on strengths and on promoting optimal functioning of humans and communities.

Rogers was interested in studying the capacity of humans to change in therapeutic relationships. He believed that humans had great internal resources for self-understanding and self-directed behavior; he emphasized the dignity and worth of each individual and presented the necessary interpersonal conditions to bring about change (i.e., empathy, warmth, and genuineness) that would facilitate fuller functioning of each individual. Both Maslow and Rogers were leaders in establishing the Society for Humanistic Psychology. Although the third force or humanistic orientation to psychology movement was created by men, several women also worked to make the Society for Humanistic Psychology viable. They included female presidents of the Association of Humanistic Psychology, especially Jean Houston and Virginia Satir.

Women who undertook leadership positions in the Society for Humanistic Psychology were significant in providing a voice for the female perspective in humanistic psychology. Within humanistic psychology, male and female perspectives varied. The female psychologists emphasized experiential, applied, and relational dimensions, and the male psychologists emphasized abstract, theoretical, analytical, and verbal dimensions. However, both genders in humanistic psychology focused on a strong somatic component and the mind-body connection.
As noted previously, no mention of gender identity development exists in the existential-humanistic perspective; therefore, it can be viewed as gender neutral. A theory that claims to be gender neutral, in essence, privileges males over females, genderqueer or gender ambiguous, intersex, and transgender. Humanistic psychology fails to note the obstacles faced by other genders, thereby colluding in the oppression of all nonmale genders. Theorists argue that a perspective that maintains gender neutrality fails to consider the impact of -isms on the person, such as, sexism, racism, ableism, classism, and islamophobia. The gender neutrality exhibited by humanistic theories essentially exhibits male hegemony and privileges male experience and rights at the expense of other genders.

Although, the humanistic perspective emphasizes the commonality of human beings, and focuses on human needs as the common ground for understanding all humans regardless of race, culture, gender, or ability, humanists tend to overlook the influence of social-cultural conditions and the effect these have on self-actualization, the ultimate goal of human development. Both Rogers and Maslow prioritized self-actualization for the isolated, privileged, middle-class, mid-20th-century American individual, with no consideration of power dynamics and oppression. Social environments can help or hinder self-actualization as perceived by humanists.

Theorists note that to achieve self-actualization, one must possess qualities that include a democratic perspective with a spiritual (not necessarily religious) dimension, a concern for and commitment to the well-being of others, an interest in the arts, an ability to defer gratification, and respect for others and acceptance of divergent perspectives, while maintaining a personal sense of integrity. These characteristics do not take into account power, privilege, and social positioning and are in essence meaningless for understanding social-cultural development and self-actualization in any system.

However, women as humanistic psychologists in emphasizing the centrality of personal experience and the holistic and tacit ways of knowing have much in common with feminist theorists of intersubjectivity, the importance of one’s voice. Humanistic psychology has been challenged by feminist theorists, who consider the assumptions inherent in humanistic psychology as privileging the sole, self-evolving individual on a solitary and heroic journey of self-discovery. Carol Gustafson-Wolter offers a meaningful perspective, noting the influence of Rogers’s theory, which activated research and theory on gender development specifically for women, transgender, and intersex individuals. The concept of self-actualization, and understanding the lived experience of being human, ignited the liberation of overlooked, gendered beings. She considers Rogers a visionary and notes that his revolutionary perspective, which included the core conditions of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence necessary for psychotherapy, led to the creation and development of an integrative, postpatriarchal, postdualistic paradigm for human development and related areas of study and research.

Other theorists influenced by existential humanistic perspectives, such as Carol Gilligan, focused on understanding the lived experience of girls and women, with the rationale that it would expand understanding of human development by emphasizing the experience of a group that was left out in the construction of the theory of human development. This perspective became the basis for generating new theories to explain human and, eventually, gender development. The core and essential conditions of existential-humanistic thinking
have led to accepting the lived experience of humans as essential to understanding identity and gender development, and respecting the unique voice of gendered beings to decipher and identify their developmental processes.

See also Gilligan’s Moral Development Theory; Hegemonic Masculinity; Humanistic Approaches and Gender; Humanistic Theories of Gender Development

- women
- sex work
- sex trafficking
- transsexualism
- sexism
- sexual harassment
- women against violence against women

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Further Readings


