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## Heideggerian existentialism and social work practice with death and survivor bereavement

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### Abstract

Heideggerian existentialism has not been applied on a widespread basis to the Generalist Social Work Practice Model. This paper explores the relationship between social work practice with bereavement issues and Heideggerian existentialism. Applications of Heideggerian existentialism in the social work profession with clients and families experiencing bereavement are examined. Conceptual applications also address future utilization of Heideggerian existentialism.

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Social workers often work with individuals who are dealing with unresolved bereavement issues, including the death of a loved one, terminal illness and chronic illness. Terminal illness and the death of a loved one are particularly difficult to resolve due to the enormity of the finality. This discussion focuses on Heideggerian existentialism as it is applied to bereavement and death issues in clinical social work practice. In order to fully see the usefulness of Heideggerian existentialism in the resolution of grief and loss, social work theoretical approaches are compared and contrasted with Heideggerian existentialism. Through this process, social workers may implement an understanding that transcends the stages of grief often used in clinical social work practice. Two Heideggerian concepts, totality and remembering, are discussed through the presentation of clinical social work examples relating to client bereavement and death issues.

Despite the prospective significance of Heideggerian existentialism in the field of social work, existentialism has not yet found a secure position in the theory and application of social work. The existential philosophy was applied after World War II in response to issues related to death and the purpose of one's existence in the world. Existential psychotherapy saw an increase in popularity in the 1960s and was incorporated primarily in psychological or psychiatric

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treatment. Much of the literature regarding existential theory and its application to working with individuals has been seen primarily in fields other than social work, such as psychology. There is little in the social work literature specifically exploring the theoretical application of Heideggerian existential concepts. Practical applications of existential theory have been successful in a variety of social work settings, including medical social work practice focusing on the rehabilitation of stroke victims (Nilsson, Jansson, & Norberg, 1999), clinical social work practice (Klugman, 1997), practice with adolescents (Chessick, 1996; Hacker, 1994), social work practice with older adults (Brown & Romanchuk, 1994), family treatment (Boylin & Briggie, 1987; Haldane & McCluskey, 1982; Kaye, 1986; Lantz, 1987; Lantz & Kondrat, 1997), practice with married couples (Lantz, 1999), child abuse (Brown, 1980), social work supervision (Walsh, 1999), substance abuse treatment (Ford, 1996), social work practice with Vietnam veterans (Lantz & Greenlee, 1990), and social work education (Dean & Fenby, 1989; Peebles & Suval, 1983).

Misinterpretation regarding existentialism has occurred in the social work profession. Social work is considered to be a profession committed to working toward the well-being of others and the improvement of social conditions. Individuals within the social work profession have perceived existentialism as a philosophy of life that is primarily pessimistic in totality. In a profession such as social work, founded upon supporting the poor and the oppressed in overcoming their limitations and fulfilling their potential, existentialism has not been seen as a theory that would assist social workers in realizing their mission. Existentialism has, at times, been equated with a hopeless condition of humanity. Heidegger has dismissed a nihilistic interpretation regarding an individual's existence (Wild, 1979). Also affecting the social work profession's utilization of Heideggerian existentialism is Heidegger's connection to the Nazi party (Sluga, 1993). It is helpful for social workers to gain an understanding of Heideggerian existentialism through understanding his philosophical constructs, and to attempt to separate the philosopher from the political profile. Existentialism encourages viewing one's own world and how that perspective affects social work practice (Sim, 1994). This can be invaluable in the profession's continual conceptualization of social work theories that may be applied to social work practice, particularly in the area of bereavement and grief resolution.

Many individuals in fields other than social work have viewed existential thought through the work of such existentialists as Jean Paul Sartre, whose vision of existentialism can be distinguished from that of Heidegger's. In Sartre's conceptualization of existentialism, each person is viewed as an independent self. Heidegger instead views each individual as part of, and a product of, their environment. This fits well with the concerns of social work.

The concepts discussed by Heidegger establish a rationale or explanation of a person's environment and how that environment influences that person. As Heidegger theorized, every person is affected by his or her culture. Since one cannot have direct control over one's social environment, one then becomes a part of that environment and learns behaviors from the culture of the social environment. The social environment into which an individual is thrown becomes that individual's world. Heideggerian existentialism encourages clients to perceive what their place is in the environment instead of how the environment exists for them. This allows clients to place events in perspective and more clearly see their role in dealing with issues of grief and bereavement. The application of these concepts allows the clinical social worker to explore

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