

Psychotherapy Guidebook



WILL THERAPY OF OTTO RANK

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Will Therapy of Otto Rank

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DEFINITION

For Otto Rank, Will Therapy meant that man was primarily directed by his own will and he was not the victim of either internal or external forces. Therapy then became the process of freeing the client to assume responsibility for his choices and for the direction that his life was evolving. The goal of therapy was to enable the person to accept himself as a separate, unique individual who could risk his newfound emotional freedom for creative self-expression and fulfillment.

HISTORY

Otto Rank (1884–1939) was a member of the Freudian inner circle for the first twenty-four years of its existence. Then he severed his ties to pursue his own theoretical development of Will Therapy. He became one of the first psychologists to stress the self-directed nature of growth. On this foundation of psychoanalytic theory and practice, in opposition to Freudian theory, was built much of the humanistic, experiential, and existential theory that followed in the decades after his death. It would even be fair to say that Rank,

having come out of such an intimate affiliation with Freud and the most productive era of the Freudian movement, is personally responsible for launching the anti-Freudian swing in the West out of which grew the whole human potential movement. Most of the leaders of this movement, including Carl R. Rogers, Abraham H. Maslow, Clark E. Moustakas, Rollo May, and Herbert Otto, actually participated in his seminars or were greatly influenced by his writings.

Rank should be credited with being the father of humanistic psychology and psychotherapy. This honor passed him by because he founded no school in his name, he asked for no disciples, and his voluminous writings are too difficult to read.

Unfortunately, much of Rank's writing is polemic. His personal conflict with Freud overshadowed his remarkable ideas so that much of what he said could not be integrated into the psychoanalytic movement until it was rediscovered in the 1960s and 1970s.

When Rank left the Freudian inner circle in 1924, he had arrived theoretically at the exact opposite pole from Freud. It could be said that Rank was individualistic, voluntaristic, and humanistic in contrast to Freud's universalistic, mechanistic, and deterministic orientation.

Rank was a brilliant, productive member of the committee who

contributed actively to the basic psychoanalytic concepts. Freud said this when he arrived: “The little society acquired in him a zealous and dependable secretary and I gained in Otto Rank a faithful helper and co-worker.”

Because Rank had a nonmedical education, but rather one of philosophy, history, and religion, he quickly attempted to broaden the view of man beyond the biological basis. This led him beyond psychoanalysis and finally resulted in severing his ties with the Vienna group and going on his own.

TECHNIQUE

The basic orientation of Otto Rank can be stated very explicitly. Rank rejected the key concept of the Oedipal situation as the source of psychopathology and adopted the birth experience as the origin of the essential trauma. He conceptualized that during the intrauterine experience the child experienced total union, which forever continued as the key motivation in a person’s search for total fulfillment. The union man has once known is longed for, even as he experiences partial union in each relationship, and it is longed for in the hoped-for ultimate union after death. The birth experience terminated the original state of bliss and thus became such a traumatic experience that it became the origin of all anxiety due to the fear of separation.

The emphasis that Rank placed on the will is what gives his therapy the title Will Therapy. He called the will “a positive guiding organization and integration of the self, which utilizes creativity as well as inhibits and controls the instinctual drives.” By this he meant that man was not a victim of his id impulses, but rather he was capable of directing these forces, either negatively for his own destruction or else he could organize them positively for creative self-expression and growth.

This leads to Rank’s concept of creativity. For him the essential struggle of man was not to achieve health or normalcy but rather to express himself creatively in an art form most appropriate to oneself so as to discover and express one’s own uniqueness and distinctiveness. The therapeutic task therefore became one of enabling the patient to take responsibility for his own life and use it creatively in his life situation.

For Rank the Neurotic was an *artiste manqué*, a frustrated artist, who has artistic temperament but fails to create. The essential skill in therapy, then, is to help the patient face his own guilt and fear that has resulted in negative will organization, and break loose from this pattern and risk the courage to create.

At this moment in therapy the patient returns to the initial birth trauma, since every act of creativity is a rebirth process, when a person faces his own

longing to be like humanity, but he realizes that he must assert his difference at the possible price of being rejected by others. He must relive the separation experience in every creative act.

The goal of therapy then, according to Rank, means that “he must also believe ... in himself as a self-reliant individual, different and differentiated from others. He has to face in this separation process the guilt which he cannot deny nor pay off, but can only bear and expiate as best he may in actual living.”

One of the most outstanding proclamations of Otto Rank was his absolute belief in the uniqueness of every human being. The most quoted statement of his says it precisely: “Will people ever learn ... that there is no other equality possible than the equal right of every individual to become and to be himself, which actually means to accept his own difference and have it accepted by others.”

The core of Rankian therapeutic technique focused on the dynamic relationship between the patient and therapist, which the patient used to discover his creative self.

APPLICATIONS

Rankian therapy has found its most direct use in “functional” social

work practice, as it was taught at the universities of Pennsylvania and North Carolina schools of social work. The services of agencies were offered in such a way that each client was helped to discover his own will for independent functioning. In asking for and using the therapeutic experience, the client only temporarily yielded to the limits of his predicament until he could reorganize his “will energy” for self-directed living.

In a very limited way therapists practiced Will Therapy following the Rankian model. It was especially useful for crisis intervention and short-term treatment, when a client needed to quickly discover that he could become accountable for his life.

Its most universal application has been the use that the entire human potential movement has made of the major concepts of Rankian theory and now promotes under an infinite number of labels, all of which fall under the general heading of humanistic psychology.