

Beyond Behavior: A New Perspective on Autism through Existential Therapy

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Abstract

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) presents unique challenges in social interaction and communication, often addressed through traditional behaviorist approaches that focus on modifying observable behaviors. However, such methods may overlook the existential needs of individuals with ASD, potentially leading to dehumanizing effects. This article advocates for the integration of existential therapy as a more holistic and human-centered psychotherapeutic intervention, emphasizing principles such as freedom, authenticity, autonomy, and meaning-making.

By providing a therapeutic environment that allows individuals with autism to play freely and express themselves according to their needs and preferences, existential therapy offers a novel perspective on enhancing social interaction and emotional well-being. The key questions guiding this exploration include: How can existential therapy principles be applied to support individuals with autism in social interactions? What role does allowing individuals with autism to make choices and express themselves freely play in fostering meaningful connections and emotional expression? How might therapists adapt existential therapy techniques to meet the unique needs of individuals with autism in social settings?

Drawing upon theoretical concepts from existential therapy, this article proposes that prioritizing freedom and individual autonomy may lead to enhanced social skills, improved emotional regulation, and a greater sense of empowerment for individuals on the autism spectrum. Existing literature suggests that such an approach can result in increased confidence and social engagement, ultimately promoting a more inclusive and person-centered approach to autism care that values individual strengths and choices. By highlighting the importance of freedom and autonomy in social interactions, this article aims to contribute to a paradigm shift in autism care, emphasizing the potential of existential therapy to empower individuals with autism and promote meaningful connections and self-expression.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Behaviorism; Existential Therapy; Person-Centered Interventions; Autonomy; Freedom; Meaning-Making; Emotional Well-being.

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Introduction

The term "Beyond Behavior" refers to moving beyond traditional behavioral approaches in understanding and supporting individuals with autism. This signifies a shift from focusing solely on observable behaviors and

external interventions to exploring deeper psychological, emotional, and existential aspects. This shift invites us to see autism not merely as a set of behavioral puzzles but as an intricate dance between the inner world of cognition and the social realm.

This approach recognizes that autism is not solely defined by observable behaviors but encompasses a complex interplay of cognitive, emotional, and social factors. In other words, the essence of autism extends far beyond what we see on the surface—it's about the profound ways in which individuals experience the world around them. By looking deeper, we can begin to unlock their true humanity, which behavioral techniques often overlook. (Watson, 1930; Chance, 1974)

On the other hand, the term "New Perspective" refers to adopting alternative frameworks such as existential therapy in the context of autism intervention (Yalom, 1980). This perspective is not just about new techniques but about changing how we view individuals with autism. We're not simply trying to control or manage behaviors; we're trying to understand the person behind those behaviors. As Frankl (2006) put it, the human search for meaning is at the core of our existence, and this truth holds just as strongly for individuals with autism.

By combining the concepts of "Beyond Behavior" and "New Perspective," this paper aims to provide a more comprehensive and integrative approach to ASD individuals that values individual experiences, autonomy, and freedom. This approach isn't about abandoning behavioral interventions completely—it's about enhancing them with the richness of human experience.

Critique of Behaviorism in Autism Care

Limits of Behaviorism

The limitations of behaviorism in autism care are becoming increasingly apparent. Behaviorism has been criticized for treating individuals as subjects for training rather than recognizing their unique needs and capabilities. As John Watson pointed out, "Behaviorism, as I tried to develop it in my lectures at Columbia in 1912 and in my earliest writings, was an attempt to do one thing: to apply to the experimental study of man the same kind of procedure and the same language of description that many research men had found useful for so many years in the study of animals lower than man. We believed then, as we do now, that man is an animal different from other animals only in the types of behavior he displays." (Watson, 1930, p. 7)

This quote reveals how behaviorism, from its very inception, drew inspiration from animal training methods. It essentially likened human beings, including

individuals with autism, to animals that could be conditioned. While this worked well in a laboratory, it significantly missed the mark in acknowledging the complexity of human emotions, thoughts, and desires.

Moreover, Watson (1930) added, "The raw fact that you as a psychologist if you are to remain scientific must describe the behavior of man in no other terms than those you would use in describing the behavior of the ox you slaughter." (p.7) His comparison of humans to livestock might sound startling today, but it illustrates the narrowness of behaviorism's lens—treating human behavior as merely mechanistic, ignoring the inner world that fuels our actions.

Lovaas (1974) controversially described autistic individuals in a particularly dehumanizing way in his interview with the behaviorist Paul Chance, stating, "Yes. They have tantrums and believe me they are monsters—little monsters." (Chance, 1974) Statements like this exemplify a much larger problem—how viewing individuals through the lens of behaviors alone strips them of their dignity. If all we focus on is controlling tantrums, we risk losing sight of the reasons behind them and the emotional depth they represent.

Critics argue that behaviorism's emphasis on forcing behavioral change may overlook principles of freedom and individual autonomy, neglecting the complex cognitive, emotional, and social factors contributing to autism, which can lead to dehumanization. This concern is particularly relevant in Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI) methods for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). Lovaas himself noted, "You see, you start pretty much from scratch when you work with an autistic child. You have a person in the physical sense – they have hair, a nose and a mouth – but they are not people in the psychological sense. One way to look at the job of helping autistic kids is to see it as a matter of constructing a person. You have the raw materials, but you have to build the person" (Chance, 1974). This perspective has been criticized for its potential to dehumanize individuals with ASD, as it frames them as incomplete until shaped by behavioral interventions, downplaying their inherent cognitive and emotional complexity.

By describing autistic children as raw materials in need of "construction," this view reduces them to incomplete beings, emphasizing a deficit model of autism. Critics argue that such language risks stripping individuals with ASD of their inherent dignity and complexity,

reinforcing a mechanistic approach to treatment that may overlook their emotional and cognitive capacities. This approach can perpetuate the idea that individuals with autism are less "whole" until molded by behavioral interventions, thus contributing to the broader debate about dehumanization in behavioral methods like EIBI.

Lovaas' methods also raised significant ethical concerns. In the same interview, he responded to a question about reducing behaviors like biting by saying: "Spank them and spank them good. They bite you, and you just turn them over your knee and give them one good whack on the rear, and that pretty well does it" (Chance, 1974). The casualness with which physical punishment was endorsed is a chilling reminder of how easily we can slip into coercive tactics when we forget that we're working with human beings, not animals to be tamed.

He further added, "We used electric shock and spanking as punishment. The procedure was simple—we just set up a contingent punishment for self-mutilative behavior" (Chance, 1974). It's worth asking: is the goal of therapy to control behaviors or to foster genuine human growth? Using fear and pain might stop a behavior, but at what cost to the individual's sense of safety, trust, and self-worth?

The Need for Person-Centered and Existential Interventions

In contrast to behaviorism, person-centered approaches such as existential therapy offer a more individualized and humanistic framework. These methods prioritize autonomy, self-expression, and meaning-making over mere behavior control (Rogers, 1951; Yalom, 1980). Rather than viewing the person as a collection of problematic behaviors, person-centered approaches seek to understand the individual's internal experience. As May (1983) puts it, this type of therapy allows individuals with ASD to explore their existence and express their unique selves.

By shifting towards person-centered and existential interventions, we can address the limitations of behaviorism and offer more meaningful support for social interaction and emotional well-being in individuals with autism. When we see individuals not as problems to be solved but as complex beings with rich inner lives, the entire therapeutic process changes. It becomes less about control and more about connection, compassion, and understanding.

A New Perspective: Existential Therapy

Existential Therapy Principles for ASD

Existential therapy, as defined by Yalom (1980), is "a dynamic approach to therapy that focuses on concerns rooted in the individual's existence." (p.5) It's a philosophical and humanistic method that helps individuals explore their personal search for meaning, freedom, and authenticity in life. For individuals with ASD, this can be profoundly empowering. Autism is often about navigating a world that feels foreign, and existential therapy offers a way to find meaning and purpose in that journey.

May (1983) emphasized the importance of self-awareness, personal responsibility, and the exploration of existential themes like death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. For individuals with ASD, these existential concerns can be deeply felt but often remain unaddressed in traditional therapy. Existential therapy provides the space for these concerns to surface, enabling individuals to confront and make sense of them in a way that aligns with their personal experience.

Application of Existential Therapy to ASD Individuals

When working with individuals with ASD, existential therapy must be tailored to their unique challenges. Techniques such as structured choice-making, creative expression, and narrative therapy can be invaluable in fostering autonomy, emotional regulation, and social skills development. In this sense, existential therapy is not a rigid set of rules—it's a flexible approach that meets the individual where they are.

As Frankl (2006) noted, existential therapy is built on the principle of freedom and responsibility. Even individuals with ASD, who often feel confined by societal expectations or their own struggles, have the freedom to make meaningful choices. It's about fostering their autonomy and allowing them to experience the world in ways that feel authentic to them.

Take, for example, role-playing scenarios that allow children to practice social interactions. These scenarios give them choices and show them that they can shape their social experiences. Similarly, strengths-based activities empower them to explore their interests and express themselves in ways that feel natural and fulfilling.

Clinical Illustrations

Clinical Illustration 1

Tessa Watkins, an autistic individual, expressed her disapproval of Lovaas's methods, describing them as unethical: "The practices that Ole Ivar Løvaas developed were highly unethical and focused too much on how people thought autistics should behave rather than the autistic people themselves" (Watkins, 2021). This perspective is a powerful reminder that therapy should be about understanding the person's inner world, not forcing them to conform to an external standard.

Clinical Illustration 2

Dan L. Edmunds (2013) highlights the transformative power of relational and existential approaches in supporting autistic individuals. In one example, he describes interacting with a non-verbal, 5-year-old autistic boy who was initially engaged in repetitive behavior by banging his hands on a keyboard. Instead of suppressing the behavior, Edmunds allowed the child to continue and introduced a playful, emotionally connected interaction by tossing him into a ball pit. This moment of shared experience led to the boy speaking the words, "do it again," a breakthrough in communication. Edmunds reflects, "Relationship was at the key of this interaction and an emotional connection was forged. I entered into his world, and he reciprocated and entered mine" (Edmunds, 2013, para.3). This example demonstrates the importance of existential, person-centered intervention, where understanding and connecting with the individual's experience fosters emotional trust and opens pathways for communication. Rather than focusing on controlling behaviors, this approach emphasizes relationship-building and mutual engagement, allowing the individual to feel seen, understood, and valued as a person.

Dan L. Edmunds (2013) also contrasts behaviorism with an existential approach, emphasizing that while behaviorism seeks to modify behavior, the existential approach aims to understand the individual. He argues that behaviors exhibited by autistic individuals, such as flapping their arms, are often misinterpreted as strange and in need of suppression. However, these behaviors should be viewed as a form of communication, perhaps the only way the individual can express their emotions, be it joy, sorrow, or distress. Edmunds states, "If we look inwardly and explore the meaning behind this action, we

may find it is telling us of something, it is indicative of how that person feels" (Edmunds, 2013, para.2). This perspective highlights the importance of existential, person-centered intervention, where behaviors are not merely problems to be corrected, but valuable insights into the individual's inner world. By seeking to understand rather than control, this approach fosters deeper empathy and connection, allowing practitioners to better support the emotional and psychological well-being of autistic individuals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the limitations of behaviorism in autism care highlight the pressing need for a paradigm shift towards a more human-centered and existential approach. By acknowledging the unique experiences, preferences, and existential needs of individuals with autism, we can pave the way for a more compassionate and effective form of intervention.

Existential therapy offers a profound alternative to the deterministic and dehumanizing aspects of behaviorism. Central to existential principles are concepts of freedom, authenticity, and individual choice. Instead of viewing individuals with ASD as mere subjects for behavior modification, existential therapy recognizes them as complex human beings deserving of dignity and respect.

By embracing existential principles, we can empower ASD individuals to express themselves authentically, make meaningful choices, and cultivate a sense of agency over their lives. This approach doesn't just teach them how to behave—it teaches them how to be.

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