

Academic Article

A Simulated Interview with Viktor Frankl: Part 1 - Freedom & Responsibility

By James C. Overholser, Ph.D., ABPP, Case Western Reserve University.



Introduction

Viktor Frankl developed a vision for psychotherapy that embraces broad issues relevant to life and death decisions. Derived from his time spent imprisoned in concentration camps, Frankl developed a vision for helping people adjust to tragedy and loss. Frankl argued against the immutable power of genetics or environmental influences, favoring the power of the mind and the importance of a person's attitude. The present manuscript examines many ideas described throughout Frankl's career, using a simulated interview to

capture these ideas in dialogue form.

Throughout his career, Viktor Frankl has made numerous contributions to the field of psychotherapy, promoting an existential view that confronts the meaning in life. Viktor Frankl was born in Vienna on March 26, 1905, and he died September 2, 1997. He lived most of his life in Vienna, Austria, near the historic homes of Sigmund Freud and Alfred Adler. Frankl studied medicine and earned his MD in 1930, specializing in neurology and psychiatry. After the war, in 1949, he went on to earn a

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Ph.D. in philosophy with a focus on psychology and religion. Before the start of World War II, Frankl began practicing psychiatry in the shadows of Nazi Germany. Being raised Jewish, this was a tense time for Frankl and his family, as well as most people throughout Europe. Nazi soldiers moved into Vienna in 1938, and on September 25, 1942, Frankl was deported to the Nazi concentration camp at Auschwitz. He spent three years in four different concentration camps, and was released in 1945. He went on to publish numerous books and journal articles that explained how these horrific experiences had shaped his personal and professional views.

Even while he was imprisoned in the concentration camps, Frankl continued to develop his ideas. His landmark books "Man's Search for Meaning" and "The Doctor and the Soul" captured the agony experienced by these prisoners on a daily basis, and how these horrific events changed Frankl's views of life forever. Throughout the rest of his career, Frankl campaigned against hate and terrorism, and shared his existential perspective. According to Frankl's view of psychotherapy, an assortment of problems arise from the changes

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that pervade modern society. Frankl encouraged clients to focus on the major aspects of life, death, freedom, and responsibility. He has emphasized the value of searching for each individual's personal meaning in life, and creating a life worth living.

There is a risk that Frankl's original words and ideas may be neglected in graduate training today. The thoughts and words from several other pioneers in psychotherapy have been captured in real interviews with Albert Ellis (Overholser, 2003) and Irvin Yalom (Overholser, 2005) as well as simulated interviews with Carl Rogers (Overholser, 2007) and Alfred Adler (Overholser, 2010; 2013). It remains important to respect the life and career of these experts, valuing the lessons they have learned and shared through their published works. These pioneers represent the legacy of our field. The present manuscript provides a condensed summary of the words and ideas behind Viktor Frankl's existential ideology, presented in the format of a

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simulated interview.

Interview:

An exploration of the existential views of Viktor Emil Frankl (VEF) interviewed by James C. Overholser (JCO).

JCO: I have found your writings to be quite inspirational. Thank you for meeting with me. You have written about your experiences during World War II. Maybe you can share how those experiences shaped your life as well as your career.

VEF: "I am a survivor of four camps, that is, concentration camps" (Frankl, 1965, p. 54). "I spent a total of three years in four camps" (Frankl, 2000, p. 98).

JCO: How did the war affect you and your family?

VEF: "I had to go through the hell of despair over the apparent meaninglessness of life, through total and ultimate nihilism" (Frankl, 1981, p. 77). "My father died in Theresienstadt practically in my arms. My mother died in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. My brother, so I was told, perished in a mine of one of the branch camps of Auschwitz" (Frankl, 2000, p. 100). "I did not know whether my wife was alive, and I had no means of finding out" (Frankl, 1992, p. 50). "I learned that Tilly had died with many others after the liberation of Bergen-Belsen" (Frankl, 2000, p. 91).

JCO: I am sorry to hear about these events. What was your experience like, surviving the concentration camps?

VEF: "We were cold and hungry, and there was not enough room for everyone to squat on the bare ground, let alone lie down. One five-

ounce piece of bread was our only food in four days" (Frankl, 1992, p. 24). "Beatings occurred on the slightest provocation, sometimes for no reason at all" (Frankl, 1992, p. 36).

JCO: What impact did these events have on you?

VEF: "No dream, no matter how horrible, could be as bad as the reality that surrounded us" (Frankl, 1984a, p. 48). "We looked like skeletons disguised with skin and rags" (Frankl, 1984a, p. 49). "Life in a concentration camp tore open the human soul and exposed its depths (Frankl, 1984a, p. 108). "The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others" (Frankl, 1992, p. 31).

JCO: These experiences sound horrific. How did you get through years in these horrific conditions?

VEF: "Through the right attitude" (Frankl, 1971a, p. 308). "Even the negative aspects of human existence such as suffering, guilt and death can still be turned into something positive, provided that they are faced with the right attitude" (Frankl, 1965, p. 57). "Through the right attitude unchangeable suffering is transmuted into a heroic and victorious achievement" (Frankl, 1971a, p. 308).

JCO: How did your time spent in the concentration camps influence your vision for psychotherapy?

VEF: "It is necessary to supplement psychotherapy by a

new procedure” (Frankl, 1956b, p. 60). “Logotherapy is that therapy centering on life’s meaning as well as man’s search for this meaning” (Frankl, 1962b, p. 95). “In every case man retains the freedom and the possibility of deciding for or against the influence of his surroundings” (Frankl, 1955a, p. 79). “Every human being has the freedom to change at any instant” (Frankl, 2010, p. 66).

JCO: So you believe that there are options even in extreme conditions when problems appear overwhelming?

VEF: “Of course” (Frankl, 1961b, p. 5). “The first tenet of logotherapy is freedom of will” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 8). “The freedom to take a stand toward conditions” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 8).

JCO: But in some situations, a person has no other option, no way out, nothing they can possibly do to change a bad situation.

VEF: “How can you say such a thing?” (Frankl, 2000, p. 39). “Man’s freedom is a finite freedom, not freedom from conditions; his freedom lies in the potentiality for taking a stand toward whatever conditions might confront him” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 11). “Logotherapy assumes that man’s mind is free to make choices.” (Frankl, 1966, p. 361). “There are always choices to make, every day, every hour” (Frankl, 1968a, p. 7). “Even the negative aspects of human existence such as suffering, guilt, and death can still be turned into something positive, provided that they are faced with the right attitude” (Frankl, 1967, p. 141). “Do you agree?” (Frankl, 1955a, p. 192).

JCO: Okay, I agree. I often tell people that if they can change their

attitude, they can change their life.

VEF: “Exactly!” (Frankl, 1969, p. 34). “If we cannot change a situation that causes our suffering, we still can choose our attitude” (Frankl, 1980, p. 8). “Man always retains the capacity to take a stand toward whatever conditions he may have to face” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 8). “Man’s inner strength may raise him above his outward fate” (Frankl, 1968a, p. 7). “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way (Frankl, 1984a, p. 86). “If we cannot change a situation that causes our suffering, we still can choose our attitude” (Frankl, 1980, p. 8). “Where we can no longer control our fate and reshape it, we must be able to accept it” (Frankl, 1958, p. 32).

JCO: I would expect that life in a concentration camp would drag everyone down to their lowest point.

VEF: “This is not true” (Frankl, 2010, p. 151). “The sort of person the prisoner became was the result of an inner decision, and not the result of camp influences alone” (Frankl, 1968a, p. 6). “We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread” (Frankl, 1968a, pp. 5-6). “Faced with the identical situation, one man became a swine while the other attained almost saintly status” (Frankl, 1955b, p. 24). “Man has both potentialities within himself; which one is actualized, depends on decisions but not on conditions” (Frankl, 1962a, p. 118).

JCO: So you feel that humans have

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potential for both good and for evil?

VEF: “Man is ultimately self-determining. What he becomes he has made out of himself” (Frankl, 1962a, p. 118). “Any man can, even under such circumstances, decide what shall become of him – mentally and spiritually (Frankl, 1984a, p. 87). “Man is free to choose his attitude in any given situation” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 8).

JCO: But don’t you feel that we are all created by some mix of genetics and environment?

VEF: “This is not true” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 8). “Man is by no means a product of inheritance and environment” (Frankl, 1955b, p. 24). “Heredity is no more than the material from which man builds himself. It is no more than the stones that are, or are not, refused and rejected by the builder. But the builder is not built of stones”

Those most apt to survive the camps were those oriented toward the future – toward a task, or a person, waiting for them in the future, toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future

(Frankl, 1971b, p. 26). “In every moment, the human person is steadily molding and forging his own character” (Frankl, 1961a, p. 7). “The conditions do not determine me but I determine whether I yield to them or brave them” (Frankl, 1961a, p. 6). “The son of the drunkard need not become a drunkard himself” (Frankl, 1962a, p. 117).

JCO: But there is such an emphasis today on biological factors and genetics research.

VEF: “Do you see what is at stake here?” (Frankl, 1984b, p. 6). “We only have to remember how the conception of man as ‘nothing but’ the product of heredity and environment ... pushed us all into historical disasters” (Frankl, 1958, p. 35). “The gas chambers of Auschwitz, that was the ultimate consequence of the theory that man is nothing but a product of inheritance and environment” (Frankl, 1955b, p. 26).

JCO: Thankfully, the concentration camps have been closed for many years. What advice would you share with someone who is struggling to endure extremely harsh negative life events?

VEF: “There is ... the possibility of finding meaning even in an inescapable, hopeless situation. By the very stand we take toward such a predicament, we may rise above it, transform it into an achievement. In this way, the tragic aspects of life may be turned into something positive” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 11).

JCO: How do we accomplish this goal?

VEF: “Those most apt to survive the camps were those oriented toward the future – toward a task,

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or a person, waiting for them in the future, toward a meaning to be fulfilled by them in the future” (Frankl, 1978, p. 37).

JCO: They must have been uplifting to others.

VEF: “Some men lost all hope, but it was the incorrigible optimists who were the most irritating companions” (Frankl, 1984a, p. 53-54).

JCO: So naïve optimism is bad, but realistic hopefulness is helpful. Would you say that your approach to therapy is similar to Rational-Emotive Behavior Therapy?

VEF: “What do you mean by this?” (Frankl, 1963, p. 34).

JCO: Does logotherapy help clients to become more logical by reducing a client’s irrational beliefs?

VEF: “It would be a grave mistake ... to think that in logotherapy the therapist applies “logic” to the patient – as though he tried ‘to talk a patient out’ of ideas” (Frankl, 1953, p. 10). “Logotherapy is as far removed from being a process of logical reasoning as from being merely moral exhortation” (Frankl, 1961b, p. 5).

JCO: You call your approach to therapy ‘Logotherapy’. What do you mean by that?

VEF: “What do I mean by that?” (Frankl, 1966/2016, p. 10). “For didactic purposes one could

define logotherapy by the literal translation as healing through meaning” (Frankl, 1967, p. 140). “‘Logos’ of course is ‘meaning’, more specifically, one’s personal life task” (Frankl, 1968b, p. 8). “A literal translation of the term ‘logotherapy’ is ‘therapy through meaning’ (Frankl, 1978, p. 19).

JCO: So logotherapy helps clients to focus on the important things in life?

VEF: “Yes” (Frankl, 1969, p. 38). “I see the meaning of logotherapy in helping others to see meaning in life (Frankl, 1997, p. 136). “Logotherapy insists that man’s main concern is not to seek pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to find a meaning in his life” (Frankl, 1963, p. 31).

JCO: How much do you feel the therapist should focus on problematic behavior or understanding people?


VEF: “Man not only behaves according to what he is, but also becomes what he is according to how he behaves” (Frankl, 1963, p. 40). “Man is not only responsible for what he does but also for what he is” (Frankl, 1961a, p. 6).

JCO: That is an enigmatic statement. What do you mean by being responsible for what a person is?

VEF: “What do I mean by that?” (Frankl, 2010, p. 152). “A man only could actualize himself by reaching out for a meaning to fulfill or by reaching out for a fellow human being to love” (Frankl, 1969, p. 38). “True human wholeness must include the spiritual as an essential element” (Frankl, 1961c, p. 2).

JCO: Okay. Let’s take short break

and we can continue our discussion shortly.

VEF: “Of course” (Frankl, 1961b, p. 5). 

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James C. Overholser

James C. Overholser, Ph.D., ABPP is a Licensed Psychologist and Professor of Psychology at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A. He serves as a researcher at the local Veteran's hospital, and he provides outpatient psychotherapy through a local charity clinic. As a practicing clinical psychotherapist, he relies on evidence-based practice with a cognitive-behavioral orientation. However, while teaching courses on psychotherapy, he developed an interest in Existential Analysis and Viktor Frankl's views on Logotherapy, an area that seems to be neglected in this age of manualized treatments.

Jim can be contacted at overholser@case.edu