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Alyson Rezendes

Lesley University, alyrezendes@gmail.com

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The Benefits of Existential Art Therapy in the Wake of COVID-19: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Alyson Rezendes

Art Therapy

Denise Malis Ph. D.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light many complex and existentially rooted questions that are often difficult for individuals to process. In utilizing art along with a supportive and authentic therapeutic relationship, it can be possible to process these questions to help people both thrive and survive during these unprecedented times. The contents of this critical literature review will be examining the potential benefits of the utilization of existentially oriented art therapy with adults in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Explored within are the concepts of existential art therapy as well as the themes that can culminate in its application with clients. Some of the themes examined include freedom, boredom, alienation, isolation, death/non-being, meaninglessness, and identity as it is correlated to independence. This review will also serve to analyze how COVID-19 has impacted others from a Western perspective and looks at how ultimately it has brought forward these existential issues. It also serves to add to the body of knowledge relational to our global experience of living through the pandemic through the lens of existential philosophies. By doing this, it aims to affirm the place creativity and art making has in processing larger anxieties and themes that have appeared to be more prevalent since the start of COVID 19.

Keywords: Existential, COVID-19, Art therapy, Pandemic, Liminality

Author Identity Statement: I would like to acknowledge my identity, race, and personal experiences. I am a straight-passing, bisexual, white woman, who was born in New England but raised in Florida.

The Benefits of Existential Art Therapy in the Wake of COVID-19: A Literature Review

Introduction

Since the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019, people around the world have been brought face-to-face with many existential concepts such as death or non-being, isolation, boredom, freedom, independence, and meaninglessness. In coping with the liminal nature of our world in a post-pandemic space, it has forced us into marrying the elements of disorder with order. These opposing concepts of the uncertainty of normalcy have involuntarily pushed many to examine their own core fears relational to the human experience. “The experience of shut down was also a collective experience at some or all levels (the self, other, and the world)” (Gavin, 2021, p. 88). A great deal of these core fears, appear to stem from the existentialist ponderances: ‘What is the meaning to life? What is the meaning of suffering?’ Though these questions are enormous and have been up for constant debate across the lifespan of human thought, existential theorists, and philosophers’ postulate that personal choice and creative expression is what allows a pathway for meaning making and personal authenticity.

Some individuals began to experience deep distress due to our shift in daily living since the start of COVID-19, making it nearly impossible for them to engage creatively as they maybe once did. Others flourished without the pressure of being out in the public eye each day, allowing them to explore themselves more fully and independently in the safety of their homes. Existential art therapy can be used to honor all experiences that people have had throughout these uncertain times. Unfortunately, for those contemplating the many abstract elements of life such a death or boredom, there is no medicine that can cure “the hollowness of existential emptiness” (Moon, 2009). However, through the invitation of collaborative processing, storytelling, and expression, the client and the therapist alike can traverse these bigger questions in search of meaning within

the rubble of chaos caused by the pandemic. The usage of creative exploration within the structure of therapy can allow an individual an opportunity to begin to heal their trauma (or explore their newfound, pandemic-supported identities) associated with living with the unknown. Engaged in collaborative art making within the therapy space also allows willing participants to be witnessed and validated by another who explores the very same questions. This critical literature review serves to explore how current and past research supports the idea that existential art therapy can be beneficial for those coping with life during and post-COVID-19.

Literature Review

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.

— Viktor E. Frankl, 1984, p.66

A Brief Look at the Origins of Existentialist Philosophy

To begin our critical look at the existing literature within the realms of existential psychology and its applications, it is appropriate to take a brief glance at the origins of the philosophy of existentialism, and how the essence of such philosophies trickle down into our modern-day applications. A noted philosopher who in essence can be viewed as one of the first existential truth-seekers, is Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard was known for discarding the status quo and rejecting the pillars of modern life in a fervent attempt to understand the true meaning of existence. In a quote from Kierkegaard’s book *Either/Or: A fragment of life*, first published in 1843, he tells of when he first recognized the absurdity of life in general as he knew it:

When I got older, when I opened my eyes and saw the real world, I began to laugh, and I haven’t stopped since. I saw that the meaning of life was to get a livelihood, that the goal of life was to be a High Court judge, that the bright joy of love was to marry a well-off

girl, that the blessing of friendship was to help each other out of a financial tight spot, that wisdom was what the majority said it was, that passion was to give a speech, that courage was to risk being fined 10 rix-dollars, that cordiality was to say ‘You’re welcome’ after a meal, and that the fear of God was to go to communion once a year.

That’s what I saw. And I laughed (Kierkegaard, 1959, p. 840).

Kierkegaard recognized a certain level of ridiculousness that was surrounding the status quo of life and used these ponderances as a springboard to talk about larger existential concerns.

Many of Kierkegaard’s writings and postures regarding human existence provoked further existential thinking from philosopher and philologist, Fredrich Nietzsche. Born in 1844 into an audacious life filled with pain and anguish, Nietzsche directly opposed Kierkegaard’s more spiritual beliefs by stating the famous phrase, “God is Dead” (Nietzsche, 1844-1900, p. 351). Nietzsche’s understanding of life was that there are no true facts, only interpretations, and that idiosyncratic experience was the most powerful of all (Hill, 2007). Nietzsche also stated that the real meaning of life is inherently subjective, independent, and expressive. One of Nietzsche’s viewpoints was that with life there is inevitably suffering, but that this suffering should fuel the will to power or in other words, a manifestation of the desire to achieve personal growth (Hill, 2007). This act of constantly pursuing personal growth was also referred to by Nietzsche as self-overcoming, which is meant as both an affirmation, as well as the real meaning of life.

After Nietzsche, there was again another philosopher who became essential to our current understanding of existential thought. John-Paul Sartre became famous for his belief of the true absurdity of the world as well as the inherent *angoisse* or anguish of existence (Sartre, 1963). He postulates, like Nietzsche, that nothing has preordained purpose, and that we as humans are free creatures who can again create meaning amidst the anguish.

So, what is the main commonality amongst these thinkers? The core tenant of existentialism has grown over time to be synonymous with the idea of subjective meaning making in the face of pain and suffering, specifically in relation to how we as humans cope with abstract concepts such as death, freedom etc.

What is Existential Therapy?

Origins and Definitions

The conceptualization of existential therapy is derived from the philosophical theories involving understanding the will to meaning in human existence. One of the important and notable founders that set the stage for our current understanding of the existential therapy movement and helped to spread existential psychology throughout the world was Viktor Frankl. Frankl was a holocaust survivor who had endured great suffering and pain throughout his life (Frankl, 1984). Frankl was able to persevere and survive the horrors of WWII through his belief that “meaning came from a will to take responsibility for oneself and to choose to live a life of dignity with purpose, despite one’s predicament” (Neukrug, 2017, p. 161). Inevitably, emboldened by the philosophies of previous theorists of existential thought (i.e., Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche) Frankl went on to develop a particular type of therapy referred to as logotherapy, which in other words is known as meaning therapy. (Neukrug, 2017, p. 159). Another element of existential therapy, employed as well by Frankl, is the basis of phenomenology, which is a “branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of reality and emphasizes subjective experiences as a way of approaching and understanding truth” (Neukrug, 2017, p. 166). Working with a client through a phenomenological perspective assigns the idea that the individual’s experiences are real and unique to that person. Embodying this method of working with clients requires the therapist to

engage in a non-judgmental fashion, and in turn, encourages them to believe that the client will be able to find answers within themselves (Neukrug, 2017).

Existential therapy should not be viewed as one kind of therapy process, but more of a posture or stance employed by such counselor or therapist. These existential therapists do however trust in a central belief that “all people struggle with basic questions of what it is to be human, such as the fact that we are born alone, will die alone, and except for periods when we encounter another person deeply; we live alone” (Yalom, 2008). The important precedent is that we as individuals are “responsible for giving our own lives meaning through the choices that we make” (Neukrug, 2017, p. 164).

So, What Then is Existential Art Therapy?

Definitions and Understandings

In 2009, Bruce Moon’s seminal book *The Canvas Mirror*, existential art therapy is defined as “a dynamic approach to the use of imagery and creative process which focuses on the ultimate concerns of an individual's existence” (p. xiv). Moon goes on to explain that the “primary thrust of art therapy is engaging the client in a creative struggle” (p. 11). Art, in its production and viewing can help individuals to begin to make sense of abstract emotions and concepts that may not be at the surface of one’s understanding. “Making art is a broad concept that doesn’t require a cache of professional art supplies, formal art training, or a sophisticated sense of composition” (Urist, 2021, p. 36). Through art making, various choices are made either consciously or unconsciously by the artist down to the materials, the application, and of course, even the content.

Art making (whether in visual, movement, or music) consists of creation, observation, reflection, meaning making and insight that may lead to change. It enables internal and

external dialog and communication between oneself and others. The art itself is a language (Lev-Wiesel & Kissos, 2019, p. 385).

The concept of art being a secondary language lends itself to the potential of allowing a voice to the voiceless, or at least creating avenues that were previously untraversable due to fear of bringing topics to light in basic talk therapy spaces.

Though the reason for these artistic choices may be unknown to the person at the time of conception, it is through the courageous creation of the work that people are able to “transform common events into potent experiences” (Moon, 2009). Creative exploration overall has been shown to improve one’s mental well-being. “Creative activities, specifically music, theater, painting, and writing poetry, are known to contribute to existential well-being and are therefore used for therapeutic purposes in areas such as art and music therapy” (Funch, 2021, p. 6). Even Nietzsche was someone who explored and spoke highly of the importance of creative expression in personal meaning (Hill, 2007). Mindfulness and the ability to choose one’s own meaning are also tenants of existential ideologies when in the face of adversity or pain (Yalom, 2008).

Though many may view the purpose of seeing a therapist as going to someone for the answers to life’s problems, existential art therapists make a point of creating space to allow the client to find answers and new meaning that originates from within themselves. Since both the client and the therapist are jointly living through the same societal challenges (in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic), the art can serve to be an outlet for individuals to externalize their internal processes to witness together. The three main tenants of how existential art therapists can be attentive and impactful towards their clients, are: 1. doing with, 2. being open to, and 3. honoring pain (Moon, 2009). Unfortunately, to the dismay of many, there are no simple answers to life’s many quandaries that can answered by another person. Meaning must be created and or found for

oneself in the face of immense pain and struggle (Frankl, 1984). As both client and therapist walk the path of healing and exploration parallel to one another, clients are given the support to find meaning within their own work (Moon, 2009). One of the main essences overall of the existential art therapist, is the importance of the therapeutic relationship and not just the ability to generate preferred art in a curated space.

COVID-19

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is an infectious disease that was caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that was identified in 2019, and its spread has ignited a global pandemic of respiratory illness and malady (John Hopkins Medicine, 2022). In response to this illness, a variety of mask mandates, social distancing policies, and stay-home orders were put in place to protect the nation from further spread of the virus. Due to these new restrictions, the public was forced to halt their everyday lives and readapt to a new normal consisting of isolation and cautiousness. Though telehealth and video conferencing applications were able to bridge some gaps between students attending class, employees connecting with coworkers, and even therapists and doctors working with their clients, there was a significant loss of direct community connection. The way the effects of the lockdown challenged individuals also varied heavily across different communities and socio-economic statuses. For example, certain companies were able to shift in-office work to video conferencing, therefore allowing for folks to maintain social distancing while still being able to earn a living wage. Others, namely the essential workers, were still expected to attend their jobs daily at the risk of infection. Some of these essential workers were of varying disciplines, including health care workers, police officers, grocery store employees, truck drivers, firefighters, and more. Those that were deemed essential had to bear the burden of being subjected to a different standard of lockdown than much of the nation.

It is not surprising that there has been an increase in mental health issues amongst the American public since the onset of COVID 19. During June of 2020 around the beginning of the pandemic, it was reported that around 40% of U.S. adults were struggling with either mental health concerns or substance abuse issues (Czeisler et al., 2020). Since that time, the effects of the pandemic have also disproportionately affected the mental health conditions of specific populations such as essential workers, unpaid caregivers, young people, as well as Black and Hispanic communities respectively (Czeisler et al., 2020). “As of March 2021, Black people were found to have died from COVID-19 at a rate 1.4 times greater than their White counterparts relative to their proportion in the population” (The Atlantic, 2021).

Sweeping lockdown notices forced many into isolation, where they could not visit or see friends and family at will. For others, being in lockdown was unsafe as it forced them to habituate constantly with their abusers, or it caused individuals to lose their jobs from companies’ inability to seamlessly transition to work-from-home climates. A large portion of the anxieties and concerns that oppressed individuals during the pandemic are existential in nature (i.e., dealing with isolation, lack of ‘freedom’, meaninglessness, and being face to face with death coupled with having to adapt their grieving processes). COVID-19 and its surrounding societal catalysts have proved to be a direct threat to the self-authenticity of individuals. “Self-authenticity is considered the foundation of mental health” and has direct links to an individual’s own healthful ways of functioning (Liu, 2021). COVID-19 has caused a significant pause in the various social roles that we as individuals have come accustomed to, leading to increased stress, possible inauthenticity, and even negative self-views. Since our normal roles (i.e., a student, a parent, an employee) have shifted to mold into the societal needs now during the pandemic (i.e., students are isolated, parents are homeschooling and working simultaneously, and employees are

considered heroes or essential), much has changed about how we view our existence (Liu, 2021). This abrupt and continual disruption of personal life continuity within each of us has posed a shift toward individuals becoming more aware and more susceptible to existential crises than pre-COVID-19.

Since existential concepts can be very broad and maybe intimidating, this critical literature review aims to allow more time for contemplation and reflection with a multi-faceted look at these topics regarding the human experience. While working to understand the effects on mental wellness during our current societal awareness of pandemic life, it is important to collect multiple perspectives regarding the human experience during COVID-19 and reflect on those human experiences. The investigation of certain existential themes can provide context for the themes and topics that are likely to arise in working with client in their navigation of life during the pandemic. The need for therapists able to explore these themes unabashedly and collaboratively is imperative.

Liminality

Due to the unpredictable nature of the coronavirus, it has challenged many people to exist in a liminal space between waiting for the world to go back to the way it was pre-pandemic (i.e., normal), and concurrently dealing with a new way of living (i.e., abnormal). Authors Chad Van De Wiele and Zizi Papacharissi in 2021 aptly described this liminality as “the sensation of acceleration and simultaneous impression that the world is on pause” (p. 1145). “Liminality implies there will be an end to the transitional liminal temporality”, which has proven to be anxiety inducing to some since the end of the pandemic is yet in sight (Gavin, 2021, p. 93). One of the difficult pieces of this temporal reality we have entered in, is that both the client and the therapist cohabitate in this liminal space. Because of this, the importance of co-regulation as self-

regulation becomes more pertinent, and the nature of the relationship between the therapist and the client shifts. In Deborah Green's 2021 article, "Enduring Liminality: Creative Arts Therapy When Nature Disrupts", she states:

My focus as therapist thus shifted from working toward reintegration—(when will there be a new-normal to re-join?)—toward helping clients endure, in generative ways, this liminal flux unleashed by natural disaster (p. 78).

In this context, one can consider COVID-19 to be a worldwide natural disaster, as it has caused great lengths of disruption to many in its wake. Our usual routines and sense of familiarity has dissipated amongst the backdrop of natural order crumbling.

The temporal rhythms that orient our lives have been disrupted; our experience of lived space has broken down; our relationship to our own bodies has been transformed; and the meaning giving projects that give life its purpose and direction are in limbo (Aho, 2020, p. 5).

The rhythm of stability is something that makes sense to humans at a deep level. When thinking of the direct impact the pandemic has had on the very atmosphere of our society, it is not so far off to say our fundamentals of living have shifted.

Existential Themes Explored Through Art

Freedom

One of the things that has been challenged heavily during the pandemic is the concept of individual freedoms. Those struggling with their freedom being infringed upon, either their freedom of physical movement or communication with others, have found themselves in an internal conflict on how to cope. This is especially evident regarding the ability of people to freely leave their home during lockdown. As Kevin Aho states in his 2020 presentation, "staying

at home may actually be contributing to the feeling of not-being-at-home” (p. 16). This powerful sentiment exemplifies that the feelings of being home is significantly tied to our structure and habitual ways of living each day. When not being able to get the choice to have our regular schedules, it can feel as if our freedom is being extinguished.

From an existential point of view, Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that we as humans are not only free, but “condemned to be free,” against our own will because we were not the choosers of our own existence (Karkkainen, 2020, p.104). One of the ways that existential art therapy can be paramount in the conversation around freedom, is the freedom to be creative cannot be stopped. The choice of choosing art materials and the act of creating is something that gives the individual a renewed sense of control. While other elements of their day-to-day life may be restricted or altered, the art making process is something that not only gives people the opportunity to make their own choices unabashedly but can allow them personal power.

Boredom/Meaninglessness

“Boredom, emptiness, absence of meaning...are struggles that afflict people who live without imagination” (Moon, 2009, p. 67). One of the consequences that can stem from boredom is the inability to make art or the stifling of creative energy in general. “Profound boredom is a mood that tunes us to the world as a whole; it is an atmospheric or global feeling where our apathy or lack of interest is not directed at particular things; it is directed at everything” (Aho, 2020, p.13). Observing boredom in more simplistic terms, it has also impacted the way we go about our daily routine. Being forced to work and live at home with minimal connection to the outside world has proven to be the proper ingredients for monotony and therefore making creative thinking more difficult. To pass the time, many have focused their attention to social media platforms to attempt to connect with others online about the experience we are all facing.

Often boredom is the result of a meaningless conceptualization of life as it is known for an individual. “Meaninglessness is experienced as a person's wish for a sense of purpose and value within a world that is structured both randomly and senselessly” (Meredith, 2007, p. 27). Existential art therapy can help focus the process personal meaning making, back towards the client and their own inner desires (Moon, 2009).

Death/Non-Being

Throughout the pandemic, we as a global community have had to bear witness to the fragility of life. The fear of infection increased as the death rates increased. Along with the fear of uncertainty that comes with death, the instinct of the human grieving process which normally would help to soothe, has been uprooted. Families were forced to bury loved ones without being able to hold communal grieving ceremonies; the ability to come to terms with the harshness of life's suffering has been made tremendously difficult when forced to do so in isolation. With the ever-evolving nature of the virus, folks are constantly living in fear of death since the illness presents itself so different amongst individuals. Coping with this uncertainty is not only a daunting task, but it is one that is often too painful for words. Through the utilization of existential art therapy, one can candidly address the concerns of death and non-being alongside the act of creation and birth (the ‘birth’ of an art piece) (Janson, 1971).

The purpose of facing death for existentialists is to experience life more deeply and fully. To face death is to motivate oneself to drink with great enthusiasm from the cup of life. Obviously, this is not a call for morbid preoccupation about life's end, but instead a call to shed external trappings and roles and to live in the now as an individual self with freedom of choice. (Becker, 1973, p. 147)

In existential art therapy, the therapist, and the client instead of shying away from approaching the often tough to process concept of death and dying, embrace the questions and emotions that come from the conversation and utilize art to better come to terms with it.

It is also worth noting that throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, many people have also been grieving many non-death losses because of such a drastic shift in daily routines and ways of viewing the world. An example of a non-death loss is the loss of exchanging handshakes or hugs with people you encounter. Another example would be the loss of the ability to go mask-less indoors and in some cases outdoors. Though on a smaller scale, these losses can accumulate and generate a very specific kind of grief that can affect an individual's perception of their quality of life.

Alienation/Isolation

The concepts of alienation and isolation are critical components of the COVID-19 pandemic experience that have confronted the masses. Being forced into individual isolation to protect oneself from illness elicited an eruption of separated feelings from many people. This also effected how we were able to contact and connect with loved ones. For example, those in assisted living communities were shut out from visitors for fear of infecting their vulnerable population. However, this isolation at times worsened cognitive decline in older populations who were kept from being with family members directly.

Alienation can be felt by those who contracted the COVID-19 virus. The definition of alienation in this context is, "widespread state of disconnection, mystification, and a general state of disempowerment that affects broad segments of the general population" (Burston, 2014, p. 283). Those who were not yet infected would distance themselves as far as possible from those who are sick. Alienation also is felt by communities in relation to vaccination status. Those who

were vaccinated shamed those who were not and those who weren't shamed those who were, creating a cycle of distrust. Overall, there has been a large decline in the way we observe togetherness in our communities as we have been primed to see contact with each other as an ever-present danger.

Identity/Independence

“The tasks of creating one's identity and establishing meaningful relationships to others takes courage and steadfast independence” (Meredith, 2007, p. 25). “As I am largely isolated in my house, the outside world that was once so familiar and home-like to me has become Frightening” (Aho, 2020, p. 11). The concept of self-actualization is something that was put at risk in the wake of COVID-19 due to the limitation of personal independence. Though more of a westernized perspective, “self-actualization is often synonymous with attaining status” (Kenrick, 2017). Due to the inability for certain people to attend their jobs and act in ways synonymous with self-actualization, many folks experienced the stagnancy of a plateau in personal progression. This has direct consequences for identity development as Western society holds one's professional successes synonymous with individual identity and worth.

Being indoors with oneself for extended periods of time, for some allowed an opportunity to focus on their identity. Many people who started the pandemic with a certain belief or even way of presenting themselves, shifted due to having this newfound time and space to reflect inward. This process looked different for many. For example, some people may have used the pandemic as an opportunity to focus on regaining their health through exercising and learning better personal grooming habits. Others, without the structure of the expectations of being exposed to the outside world, loosened up their rigid habits or perhaps took risks in their appearances and ways of daily life to soften their personal burdens at home.

Collaborative Artmaking and Trauma Processing

An important experience that existential art therapy can provide is an ability to create an open space for communal art making to be witnessed (Moon, 2009). The act of creating art together is something that reinforces the therapeutic relationship and can help bridge gaps of feelings of awkwardness that come from creating if it's something that is outside of a client's comfort zone. In the times of COVID-19, the concept of communal artmaking looks a bit different when therapists and client's alike are expected to maintain social distancing procedures. However, art therapists can work to create a communal art making space via video conferencing platforms that share elements that are present in the physical space. For example, those participating can share their artwork by pointing their camera towards their art as they create, as well as leaving their microphone on to allow for the sound of art making to filter through their computers. The way we go about sharing our work with others has needed adaptation while we all are processing the distress of the pandemic.

It is worth noting that the transition to the digital space has not been completely without error or trial. Many clinicians have struggled with the issues that can arise from utilizing zoom with clients (internet issues, technology malfunctions, etc.). Some clinicians were limited based on their location and their place of employment if they were unable to seamlessly transition to telehealth services with their clients. This can have a direct impact on the collaborative process that art making and could make things difficult for proper processing with clients artistically.

Method

The search criteria for this literature review involved delving into the specific components of existential art therapy. The search engines that were utilized were both through Google Scholar, as well as EBSCO through the Lesley University online Library database. Some

of the specific search terms used were existentialism, COVID-19, Art Therapy, Existential Art Therapy, and liminality. Peer-reviewed research articles as well as personal documentation of effects and instances experienced during the pandemic were used as preliminary supports in this paper. Research about the detailed information about COVID-19 was gathered from the Johns Hopkins Website as well as The Atlantic. Specific consideration was taken to focus on articles that were directly related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the experiences of those in western society. Some exclusion criteria were placed on the experiences of children during the pandemic mainly because the topic of this paper is meant to explore the benefits of existential art therapy with adults specifically. The experience of COVID-19 is new, there were a limited number of articles talking about the inherent connection between the pandemic as well as art making.

Arts-Based Research

Arts-based research (ABR) can be used to further explore topics and engage in deeper reflection while utilizing artistic expression to enhance the methodological approach of researching themes. To further explore the existential themes focused on in this literature review that have been prevalent in the wake of COVID-19, I have chosen to engage in my own ABR to further explore the importance of the existential themes in art therapy that have arisen since the rise of COVID-19. Specifically, I engaged in an *el duende* artistic reflection to process the different layers of existential themes and considerations. *El duende* is a term coined by the Spanish poet, Federico Garcia Lorca, meant to signify a mysterious power that resembles qualities of the wind, that can be felt by everyone and anyone, yet is not always visible or explainable to the naked eye (Lorca, 1998). By catching these moments of creativity throughout the literature review process of existential themes, I have decided to utilize painting and assemblage to document my processing of each theme on one 24 in x 36 in canvas. “Evolution

through layering is a powerful metaphor” (Miller, 2012, p. 169). Through each evolution or cycle of the painting, there is a brief pause and reflection period that is documented through photography to observe the gradual transformation between expressions. For my personal el duende process, each evolution is tied more directly to the exploration of one of the existential themes that can be processed through existential art therapy (freedom, boredom/meaninglessness, death/non-being, alienation/isolation, independence/identity) to serve as an example of the process. It is to be noted that my exploration is different than the traditional existential art therapy process, as my artwork was completed independently and without a therapeutic alliance as would be essential in its application or usage with therapy clients.

El Duende (Arts Based Research)

To explore the elements of existential art therapy, I challenged myself to engage in an el duende art process to understand better the different themes. Each phase of my el duende art process was observed in pauses where I would contemplate a specific existential theme and then create. Before moving onto a separate theme, I chose to photograph the stage that the canvas was in to witness the overall process. By doing this type of artistic reflection, my intention was to allow unconscious and conscious feelings surrounding each existential theme to flow spontaneously on the canvas. Observing over time the multiple layers of transition in the artwork also signifies a significance on process when engaging in existential artistic exploration. The first pause was a deep focus on the concept of freedom in Table 1.

Table 1.

El Duende Pauses (ABR)

Artistic Pause Photographs	Reflection of Pause
<p data-bbox="378 562 620 594">Pause 1 - Freedom</p> 	<p data-bbox="824 583 1458 1041">In exploring the concept of freedom in the age of COVID-19, I was drawn to a very limited color palette and the act of creating wispy marks on the canvas. Blues and reds and white, perhaps meant to represent the American flag, swirl around one another to make use of the space provided to us in life. The choice to creating a whirlwind of flowing lines with the brush to me evoked a sense of sovereignty and fluidity. The canvas was then outlined with deep black to act as a containment factor. COVID-19 has condensed our personal freedoms to fit within the parameters of what is deemed safe by our nation's mandates and legal policies. Despite this, much like Jean-Paul Sartre believed there is a pervasive concept of freedom that exists internally, as we are to some extent "condemned to be free" (Karkkainen, 2020, p.104).</p>
<p data-bbox="363 1213 636 1283">Pause 2 - Boredom and Meaninglessness</p> 	<p data-bbox="824 1171 1458 1843">In the second pause of the el duende process, I began to explore the concept of boredom and meaninglessness. In this process, the black paint is covering the original wispy nature of the first painting. Much like boredom encroaches on our lives and leaves our perspective devoid of color and interest, boredom evokes a sense of the void or nothingness. Covering the entire canvas in dark black paint except for one small portion helped to reinforce the sensation of being overwhelmed with monotony. Meaninglessness, similarly, to boredom, invades on feelings of freedom as it begins to cover up the purpose behind choices we make in our day to day. Reflecting at the exploration of boredom and meaninglessness as important concepts to process in existential art therapy, I am brought back to the quote by Bruce Moon that states: "Boredom, emptiness, absence of meaning...are struggles that afflict people who live without imagination" (Moon, 2009, p. 67). This lack of imagination that has struck many during the pandemic, has made the act of creating so much more difficult for some. I began to grapple with this lack of imagination when reflecting on my personal boredom in enduring the pandemic.</p>

Pause 3 - Death and Nonbeing



In exploration of the concepts of death and non-being in the third pause, I decided to continue with the covering of the canvas completely in black (Figure 3). This emphasizes the nature of humanity and the choice of succumbing to the void of the unknown that is death or non-being. On the layered and blacked-out canvas, images and textures were an assemblage that connected to the greater concepts of traditional grieving and death. There are images of skulls, solemn music notes, Lace doilies, and depictions of church windows alongside black and white photographs. In this case, I felt that the materials and individual choices were significant in understanding and processing the context of death. I witnessed my own shift in personal relevance as I felt a deeper sense of personal connection and relatability to this stage of the painting process.

Pause 4 - Alienation and Isolation



In the fourth pause of the el duende process, concepts of isolation and alienation were examined through the implementation of boxes and cages. I was challenged and had to force alterations from any engagement after the third pause. In the el duende process, avoidance of and the want to settle for one iteration can be a typical experience; I found I had to push myself to continue with the art making, which is essential to the el duende way of processing (Lorca, 1988). The concept of isolation in Figure 4 brought up feelings of the physical realm being controlled and locked up. Unlike Figure 3, there is a reintroduction of the red and yellow colors onto this layer as isolation for me does not always equate to depressive and sad states. The yellow and the red colors seem to challenge that assumption. However, in thinking about the harshness of alienation, one can observe the dripping lines of paint in each of the human boxes. With this drip, the expectations of the outside world are affecting even the internal world of the isolated.

Pause 5 - Identity and Independence



The final pause in this el duende process explored the concepts of identity and independence within the context of COVID-19 (Figure 5). For this last pause, I felt an explosion of energy culminating from my wish to experience what identity looks like and feels like. The entire surface was completely covered in yellow paint. At the center of the painting is a paper silhouette of a woman figure suspended in space. When reflecting on the personal experience of transcending these previous themes and finishing with identity, I felt a sense of human togetherness and vulnerability. The braveness of the figure to exist on top of these rugged textures and shapes behind it sets a tone of independence and surprisingly enough, is reminiscent again of that initial freedom.

Overall, the el duende process served to mirror how the existential art therapy process can be used to process these larger concepts. Coupled with the facilitation and supportive relationship of an existentially mannered therapist, the exploration of these themes using various materials can serve to help the client or individual make sense of these larger topics and break them down. In this processing, one can witness and understand their personal struggles and victories associated with each matter.

Discussion

Existential AT can help both the client and therapist alike process the complexity of these existential themes through collaborative artmaking and through building a compassionate therapeutic relationship. One of the ways that art making can help with processing existential concepts that have arisen during the pandemic, is the act of art making itself inherently gives the artist control. “As artists freely choose how to work on a particular piece, their decisions place limits on the chaos of possibilities” (Moon, 2009, p. 112). For those who are contemplating and battling a loss of freedom during the pandemic, art making allows folks the opportunity to regain

autonomy in decision making and choice. For example, in my own ABR, utilizing the canvas as a space to collect the kinetic energy that I felt was so deeply connected to the concept of freedom in Western society, the brush strokes on the canvas helped to identify the invigorating sensation of American freedom as shown in Table 1, Pause 1. Reds, white, and blues were present in my piece, echoing my personal understanding of what freedom looks like and how it is depicted in the United States. COVID interrupted this American sense of freedom by putting folks in lockdown to protect against spreading the virus (John Hopkins Medicine, 2022).

In processing the meaninglessness of life and working with a client on how they can make sense of it without defaulting to defensive intellectualization, art can help to fill the hole where meaning may be missing. COVID has brought with it a refined urge to understand and give meaning to our daily lives. This is where the importance of the therapeutic relationship comes into play. There is also a relationship that the client can create between the art piece itself and their own inner thoughts and feelings. When constructing personal significance in a life that inherently is meaningless based on existential beliefs, the ability to control one's own perceptions and one's own creative expression is powerful (Moon, 2009). Also, the art can be used to help come to terms with the overwhelming feelings associated with understanding meaninglessness. Color choice and usage of space on canvas can often reflect the sense of loss that can be associated with the lack of meaning as seen in Table 1, Pause 2.

As postulated by Moon, "meaning cannot be found within the individual in isolation" (Moon, 2009, p. 113). There is a great importance for those who have experienced the negative effects of isolation due to the pandemic, in receiving therapy. It is paramount to the processing and understanding of personal meaning, even if this connection is built in the virtual sphere. It is to be said as well that the richness of the therapeutic relationship is made evermore significant by

the fact that both the client and the therapist are engaging in a parallel process since COVID-19 affects us all. Within this therapeutic relationship, there is a witnessing of the process together, allowing for collaboration. This parallel processing can be observed through the individual's artwork as well. If the therapist and the client both use art to process their interactions with one another, the art itself can act as its own entity in the therapy space (a visual dialogue), where expression and personal understanding may be witnessed tangibly. The concept of isolation and alienation for people during the COVID pandemic has heightened feelings of depression, anxiety, and has made those feel inhibited (Czeisler, 2020). In the el duende process, the canvas was in a state of individualization with the usage of various images as shown in Table 1, Pause 3. To further that separation when thinking about isolation, cages were drawn around the largest figure to represent the feeling of entrapment in Table 1, Pause 4. This transition felt like an attachment on the already existing emotions surrounding grief.

Since the managing of death and non-being is different for many people, the processing of the concerns surrounding it can be explored by using personal artistic reflection. As feelings of grief and loss have been abundant during the pandemic, art can serve as a point of transference for people to express their emotions during the complex lifecycle of grieving. Not only that, but clients can use the canvas (or whichever medium is preferred) to explore death in ways that words sometimes cannot. Traditional images that have surrounded the westernized perception of death were used in my own processing, to serve as an example of the many concepts and ideas that death can illicit from people, shown in Table 1, Pause 3.

Artistic production helps to make our own emotions tangible so that they can be seen and felt. Once observed, the client can begin to regulate themselves through reflecting on their experience engaging with the materials. "Engagement with the arts might help to regulate our

emotions in three different ways: approach, avoidance, and self-development” (Drake et al., 2022, p. 2). The existential therapy space can allow for collaborative art making in a group setting in which each participant bears witness to multiple artistic processes, and therefore serves as a catalyst for their individual processing. By enabling clients to behold their own often times unconscious feelings towards certain existential topics through their art, it challenges the client to approach their fears directly. It also serves to strengthen our own individual understanding of identity and self. Through expression, and individual perception, one can begin to build upon their own personal values and ways of living. One of the critical elements of existential therapy is the importance of authenticity in accepting ourselves as we are (Neukrug, 2017). Through creative reflection, the canvas can serve as a mirror that helps us to witness sometimes unconscious thoughts and feelings toward self. This act can help us approach self-actualization (Liu, 2021). Through my *el duende* process, it was almost rightfully so that my final pause focused on independence and identity, as it served to represent a culmination of the previous themes, as they collided together to create a figure that stands out on its own in life (as I experience it), highlighted by a bright yellow light, seen in Table 1, Pause 5.

The creation of art in its various forms can help individuals become more secure in their identity. As the pandemic has taken away a portion of our independence, the act of creating allows both the client and therapist to explore themselves in a safe and supported space that allows for artful handling as well as intentional contemplation. It gives room for clients to observe and recognize what has come up for them in their own experiences of living through the pandemic and to allow the materials to serve to dissect their own perception of self. Existential AT aims to encourage individuals to become aligned with their authentic selves through the process of creating and exploring big questions about the complexity of life as we know it.

Multicultural Considerations

It is important to reiterate that the viewpoint of this literature review has primarily focused on the westernized perspective of existential art therapy practices and the experiences of American individuals living through the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, the perspective of this paper is primarily located within a white middle class perspective based within the United States. Though the entirety of the globe is dealing with the complexity and concerns of the pandemic, there is bound to be differences in coping and navigation. It is worthy of noting the application that existential art therapy may have across various cultures and languages may not be as beneficial or may even come in direct negation of religious and spiritual beliefs depending on how sessions are facilitated. Even within the structure of Western society, the pandemic resulted in various experiences across the nation to cope with this virus. This literature review also does not directly consider the influences that spirituality and religion can have on an individual's creativity, ability to explore larger existential themes, and their processing of the pandemic.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a great shift in not only how we function in our society daily but has forced many to consider the fragility and often ambiguous nature of our human existence. Existential art therapy proposes a heightened focus on the therapeutic relationship as well as honors the client's unique ability to create meaning in life for themselves. With that, art making in its most basic form allows for personal expression, external, and internal processing, and can serve as a healthy coping mechanism for dealing with stress and other complex matters in life. Since mental health concerns have been on the rise in America ever since the start of the pandemic, it is safe to say that there will be a need for therapists with an

existential background to be able to process larger contextual issues that have been unearthed in the past few years. The benefits of utilizing existential art therapy with clients can allow for external processing, witnessing their feelings, repairing the rupture of the challenges experienced during the pandemic, and it can help them others become less intimidated by these larger concepts of human existence. Navigating this liminal space we currently find ourselves in is easier when art is used as the map to guide us through.

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