Louis Hoffman and the Art of International Dialogue

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Abstract
Louis Hoffman’s contributions to the science of psychology are too numerous to list. In addition to his recent election to the office of APA Division 32 president, his growing international renown as an existential psychologist and dozens of publications, many early-career psychologists count Hoffman as a mentor and a profound influence. This paper describes some of his most significant contributions to the science of psychology, to people in general, and to the authors of this paper specifically.

Key Words: existential psychology, international psychology, Louis Hoffman, mentoring

Introduction
Louis Hoffman, executive faculty at Saybrook University, is the author of numerous articles and books, mostly focused on existential psychology but also with a strong interest in the psychology of religion and spiritual issues, and international applications. He serves as the chair of the Continuing Education task force in APA Division 32 and is the Division 32 President-Elect, in addition to serving on the editorial boards of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology and PsychCritiques.

Dr. Hoffman has achieved many successes and accolades in his pursuit to further the field of psychology and the international collaboration in the psychological community, but he has extended himself beyond the self and contributed to future growth through mentoring students to continue these pursuits. His willingness to give of himself has facilitated personal and professional change in those that work beside him.
Contributions to Science:
International Dialogue

Perhaps his most significant professional success to date has been as co-chair of the International Conference on Existential Psychology. Over the course of four years, he has built strong relationships both in Hong Kong and in mainland China, where he has been an accretion point for a community of existentially-minded psychologists.

This endeavor began as a meeting of minds. Louis was approached by a friend from graduate school, Mark Yang, about collaborating on some conferences in China. Initially, this resulted in his participation in some supervision and a few psychology of religion conferences. This grew to a series of conferences and presentations through China and Singapore, and culminated in the establishment of the International Conference on Existential Psychology, which takes place biennially in China.

More recently, he has co-founded the Zhi-Mian International Institute for Existential-Humanistic Psychology, along with colleagues Mark Yang, Wang Xuefu, Trent Claypool, Michael Moats, and Jason Dias. The purpose of this institute is to help provide psychotherapeutic-skills training to Chinese students for whom access to such training is quite limited.

A substantial part of the practice of existential psychotherapy is increasing comfort with ambiguity, and students of existential psychology begin to grapple with this from the very outset. May and Schneider (1995) write:

While substantial numbers of psychology members are intrigued (and sometimes profoundly moved) by isolated existential themes, they are perplexed by the approach as a whole and bedeviled by its implications for practice. Comments such as the following are not infrequent: “The readings in existential psychology are fascinating, but how do you apply them?” or “I feel like the material touches something very deep in me and the lives of my clients; I just don’t know how or why (p. 1).”

Hoffman (2009) agrees and believes this lack of a rigid structure promotes fluidity and creates an adaptive approach to utilizing existential therapy. The permeability is what allows for the integration of other therapies, as demonstrated by Schneider (2008). Hoffman emphasizes the importance that psychotherapy in general needs to have a continual reassessment because our culture and society is continuously changing. The concept that existential therapists should never become stagnant and should continue to develop and expand is the basic belief of Hoffman’s mission. In person, he frequently credits Nietzsche (2000) with the opinion that the student repays his master, but poorly by remaining always a student. It is this belief that his students have something to contribute to an expanding and developing science of existential psychology that has driven the development of the authors of this paper - Hoffman’s students and former students.

Hoffman has left an indelible imprint not only on the study of psychology but also on the practice of responsible dialogue. This begins with an internet presence - provided at no cost - that serves as a resource to those wishing to explore the subject. It continues with a series of publications undertaken with no mind for profit; the proceeds from his books have gone mostly towards financing the trips to China that have opened such a fruitful dialogue. And it is here that the greatest contribution has been made.

In approaching the idea of an international dialogue with China, it was important to look at the state of that dialogue at the outset. The response to the 2009 earthquake in Szechuan, for example, was a disastrous example of how not to import practice models into foreign countries. The international response brought missions seeking to provide comfort at the cost of conversion; scientist-practitioners are using people as data without their informed consent, and psychological missionaries selling their way of helping while producing a net cost to the people actually in a position to help (Zhengjia, 2009). Furthermore, large psychiatric hospitals modeled after American practices offer treatment in a non-culture specific manner, which at best is insensitive and potentially disruptive of more effective ways of providing treatment and at worst is offensive and harmful. As Moats (2010) says:
The lack of awareness about cultural perceptions and needs left the survivors with well-intended but ill-equipped professionals that would add to the trauma by continuing the trauma of loss with short-term stays and sometimes ethical principles that limited their usefulness in a context that had different definitions for doing no harm (p. 36).

In introducing existential psychology to China, it was first important to consider these disruptive forerunners. In addition, it was clear from even a cursory reading of Chinese philosophy that importing existentialism to China would be akin to introducing water to the ocean. This set the stage for a heavily dialogue-oriented approach, in which the aim is to learn as much from one another as possible rather than to simply instruct Chinese practitioners on Western models.

This met with initial resistance, as Chinese culture prefers a hierarchical instruction model; thus the first conference largely involved Hoffman talking and attendees listening. Once the initial contact was made, however, with trust and influence gained, it was possible to create the sort of dialogue that was initially sought. The First International Conference on Existential Psychology brought together Western and Eastern scholars in roughly equal numbers, with substantive contributions from both sides. According to Moats (2010), “Although the awareness for the need to increase diverse research and understanding of different cultures, there is a greater need for dialogue and collaboration across cultures to minimize the existing bias in our current, but changing, paradigm of Western research (p. 30).” Hoffman’s work is very much in this direction.

While the contents of the discussions were of course fruitful, spawning numerous scholarly collaborations and many fruitful relationships, the most valuable contribution to the science of psychology is in the process of the dialogue. This represents a potentially new way of talking about international psychology, with profits and exports less a consideration than culturally sensitive engagement.

**Mentorship**

The authors of this paper have each been greatly affected by contact with Hoffman. His mentorship has been invaluable. His commitment to his students is demonstrated by his actions. Many of his publications are done with students, who he mentors in the art of academic writing. All of the authors of this article have experienced his benevolence with regard to writing, with plenty of encouragement that we present at conferences, write for journals, help with publications for others, or simply bring their level of writing to its highest level. Following will be individual reflections on their experiences with Hoffman from each of the authors.

Each author has been privileged to take part in the conferences in China. The lasting impact of this is difficult to overstate. Below is an overview of each author’s reflections.

Moats writes: Another road we traveled was the road of cultural awareness. Through exploring privilege to traveling internationally and being immersed in cultural exchanges and authentic encounters the world seemed to open up and yet get smaller. Hoffman not only speaks of his passions but he lives them. He found ways to assist us with covering expenses to create dialogue, exposure, awareness, and resulting relationships that are treasured.

More than this, Hoffman takes the time to include everyone in the dialogue, including students. The first time students were included in Hoffman’s travels, for example, they were given the chance to help with exercises and to present in minor roles. The second year, these roles expanded to full presentations, in one case resulting in a separate tour that split off for a week. This experience was extremely formative for the burgeoning professionals who undertook it, and very representative of the sort of mentorship Hoffman provides.

Claypool (2010) writes in his dissertation which explored developmental aspects of contemporary leaders in existential psychology:

*Mentorship is crucial. All participants reported having valuable experiences with mentors. Not only did the participants develop a sharp*
psychological acumen from these relationships, but they were also very moving and genuine. The excerpts clearly indicate this. Existential psychology has a deep focus on the therapeutic relationship. It seems important that the relationship cultivated with mentors is so similar to that of the existential psychotherapist and the client (p. 122).

The authors of this paper all report similar experiences with Hoffman. In supervision, for example, he focused less on overt examination of clinical skills and more on the relationship with the supervisee as a valuable tool for development. Through this relationship, it was possible to examine the processes going on between the supervisee and the therapy-goer in a way that would be impossible through a narrow, skills-based or even process-based focus.

The authors also report spending significant time with Hoffman, for example on long plane rides to and within China. Here Louis confided to one student that he was just as afraid of presenting as she was, and this act of genuineness touched her deeply. Each author relates similar experiences of encountering Hoffman’s humanity rather than merely his expertise. He became a mentor to so many not by trying to be a mentor, but by being the human that he is.

Claypool (2010) summarizes:

The data indicates very heavily that these experiences with mentors were very crucial to the development of these contemporary leaders in existential psychology. The above excerpts highlight both a reflective quality and belief of the importance of the mentor, and also a richness of experience that has stayed with the participants (p. 94).

Each of the authors of this paper has reflected seriously on their experiences with Hoffman as a mentor. Claypool writes:

Louis has been very invested in us, not only as students, but also for the people we are and are becoming. He continues to be invested in us professionally, even after graduating, by offering us opportunities for professional development (most of my presentations and publications were in some way influenced by him). He is also invested in us as the people we are. He has truly become one of our best friends as we have found ourselves being a part of a larger community of professional and personal support that extends internationally. These are relationships that I cherish. These are relationships that inspire one to reach for the heights of one’s spirit and the depths of one’s soul. We can be ourselves, and be valued for being exactly that.

Hoxie writes:

Hoffman has personally provided me with opportunities that have opened my academic world to new horizons and broaden my perspective on existential psychology. I have learned to become more comfortable with the mysteries in life and recognize limits in understanding. There is value in the questions but also in exercising my abilities to open my thinking to novel concepts.

Moats writes:

Hoffman has caused me to be uncomfortable in numerous domains: academically, therapeutically, culturally, and personally. Early in my academic endeavors he questioned whether I had considered presenting. It was very nonchalant and unimposing. Interested, I inquired and the realization that it would be at a national conference peaked my anxiety. He exhibited a presence (which he also taught us about) that allowed me to safely hold the anxiety yet continue to move forward. He created a space in which I was able to step into and see things from a new perspective. This new perspective, this new confidence, was another step in a journey of self-exploration and self-challenge. Hoffman continued to foster this journey in whatever direction I chose to take but with the ability to point out different markers and questioning if any of them seemed interesting. Journal articles, book reviews, book chapters, and editorial work were all horizons that I would soon reach out and touch.

Dias (2010) suggests, “The more powerful one is, the more capacity one has to alter the environment (and the people in it). The Taoist idea of wuwei –or, take no action–speaks to the dilemma of what to do with great power: to become more and more studiedly inactive... The only responsible use of power is to teach others to come into their own power (118).” In the above examples of Hoffman’s influence, it is clear he is a very
powerful force in the development of these students. It may be equally clear that he uses this influence sparingly, offering suggestions, gentle questions, and overall a supportive presence rather than charting each person’s course for them, demanding progress, or requiring participation.

To perhaps inadequately sum up May’s (1969) Love and Will, to love another person well is to love also their intentions rather than to saddle them with your own. Taking this definition of love, Hoffman’s mentees have all been well loved.

References