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The Eight Tensions Framework: An existential-phenomenological analysis of the tensions of undergraduate life

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Abstract

An existential-phenomenological analysis of eight existential tensions situated in the university context, developed from empirical work, is presented as the 'Eight Tensions Framework'. Originally formulated for students and their tutors, therapists and coaches to use when considering personal growth at university, it can also be adapted for use with a wider client base.

Key Words

Existential tensions, dilemmas, higher education, university, personal growth

Introduction

This paper offers an existential-phenomenological analysis of eight existential tensions, presented as the 'Eight Tensions Framework'. This framework was developed from the first author's doctoral research about the personal growth of undergraduates who volunteered to participate in one-to-one coaching sessions with professional coaches. Fourteen students were recruited from a Russell Group university, across various arts and social science subjects. Fourteen coaches volunteered to give *pro bono* coaching in response to a notice posted on the European Mentoring and Coaching Council website and sent to the first author's professional network. The coaches could use whichever coaching approach they preferred and was appropriate for their student-client.

The study explored the experience of the fourteen undergraduates who had one (six sessions over a year) or two (twelve sessions over two years) years of coaching at the beginning of the 2014-15 academic year. At the end of the first year of coaching, the students were asked whether they wanted to continue having coaching, and could choose to have coaching with a different coach. Five students chose to continue. All participants were interviewed four times over the 2014-15 cycle and the students who continued for a second year of coaching were interviewed at fifth time, after their additional coaching sessions were completed. One-to-one, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were employed and the student's experience of university, coaching and their personal growth were discussed.

Data was analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) which yielded a fine-grained and multi-layered hermeneutic picture of participants' experiences, including an expansive analysis of how students made sense of university life and their personal quandaries to a more focused examination of the coaching experience itself.

During the empirical work, it became apparent that some existential threads emerged repeatedly, such as how students narrowed and expanded their interests, or how they sometimes ploughed ahead or lay fallow. These threads were formulated into the Eight Tensions Framework which this paper elaborates, using examples from the empirical work.

In the Eight Tensions Framework, a holistic view of growth at university is offered, covering a range of domains, which represents a step change compared to the partial view of growth presented in popular models of student development in which growth has been conceptualised as vectors (Chickering, 1969) or stages (Baxter Magdola, 1999; Perry, 1970) that are passed through sequentially. These tensions can be used by therapists, coaching psychologists, coaches, personal tutors and students themselves to overcome challenges, tackling problems that could develop into larger mental health issues.

We also believe these tensions have wider relevance for therapists, counsellors and coaches working from an existential perspective, beyond university students, because from this philosophical perspective we are all students of life. Despite the particularities of individual lives, they "will have a series of common ingredients" (Ortega y Gasset, 1960: 235). We contend that these common ingredients exist at two levels. Firstly, as humans, we all have to deal with the inevitability of life's existential ontological givens, such as death and the fact that we inhabit this world with other people. Secondly, common ingredients are also context-specific, meaning we share some ontic, grounded givens. From the point of view of all of us being students of life, we are always negotiating, for example, opening up to new information and honing it back down again to something more manageable that we can focus on. How we respond to these two levels of shared givens will be particular to each individual. We define growth as becoming better at responding to these givens within our personal context. The outcome of growth is to become a better liver of life, meaning the goal is both fixed and open. Becoming a better liver of life is a specific outcome, but how we do this will be different for different people. This mirrors Gasset's view that:

Whether this name ('my life') is applied in my case, or to any one of you, it is a concept which then involves the individual; hence we have found one of those very rare ideas which is equally 'general' and 'individual'

(ibid: 236)

Thus we see growth as being the same yet different for each of us, meaning its definition is both general and particular.

Existentially, we draw on Deurzen's approach which is "primarily concerned with helping clients face up to the challenges of everyday life" (Cooper, 2003: 9). Life's everyday tensions need to be artfully navigated deliberately (Deurzen, 2015) by us all. The existential approach attends to life's vicissitudes acknowledging our bumpy experience in an unvarnished, realistic way. Furthermore, this approach acknowledges that there are 'trade-offs' for every position taken, meaning we may have ambivalent feelings and emotions about a place on a tension as, inevitably, we give up something when we take a particular position. As Cooper says, "you cannot have it all. Get one thing you want and, by the very nature of existence, you will be losing out on something else you desire" (2015: 121). However, Deurzen (2015) sees these potentially upsetting losses as valuable because by embracing all aspects of life, positive and negative, we can more deeply understand our possibilities and evaluate our choices. The Eight Tensions Framework presents this existential approach tangibly and digestibly.

These tensions cannot be solved once and for all. Rather, the task is to acknowledge the tensions exist. Since we rarely face our challenges head on, the task is really to learn more about to what extent and in what context we can face them (Schneider, 1999) which is equivalent to becoming a better liver of life, our definition of growth. Thus, becoming a better liver of life is not about achieving a middling position or transcending the tension. In fact, attaining a perfect balance is not existentially possible and trying to do this is a "comforting illusion" (Wahl, 2003: 267). Only in death can we be absolutely balanced and still (*ibid.*). Therefore, each tension is necessarily dynamic and engagement with a tension is ongoing. We will always have tensions in our lives and the same ones will reappear in different contexts and times (Cooper, 2015). These tensions may be faced head on by taking an either/or approach, or by being viewed dialectally, so that a synthesis can be achieved, bringing the two opposite sides together (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). It should be noted that this is more likely to be a synthesis in a particular situation at a particular time rather than a general synthesis of the tensions once and for all. It can take time to make sense of the tensions, and, moreover, sitting with unresolvable tensions may energise us (Deurzen, 2009).

Deurzen asserts that "as a bare minimum therapists should have a working knowledge of the predictable difficulties and predicaments that people frequently present in therapy" (*ibid.*: 82). In this spirit, we present the Eight Tensions Framework, a road map of the everyday issues students face at university. Figure 1 is a diagram of the Eight Tensions Framework which serves as this 'map'. The double arrows signify a dynamic equilibrium; a state of balance between continuing processes. This serves to reinforce

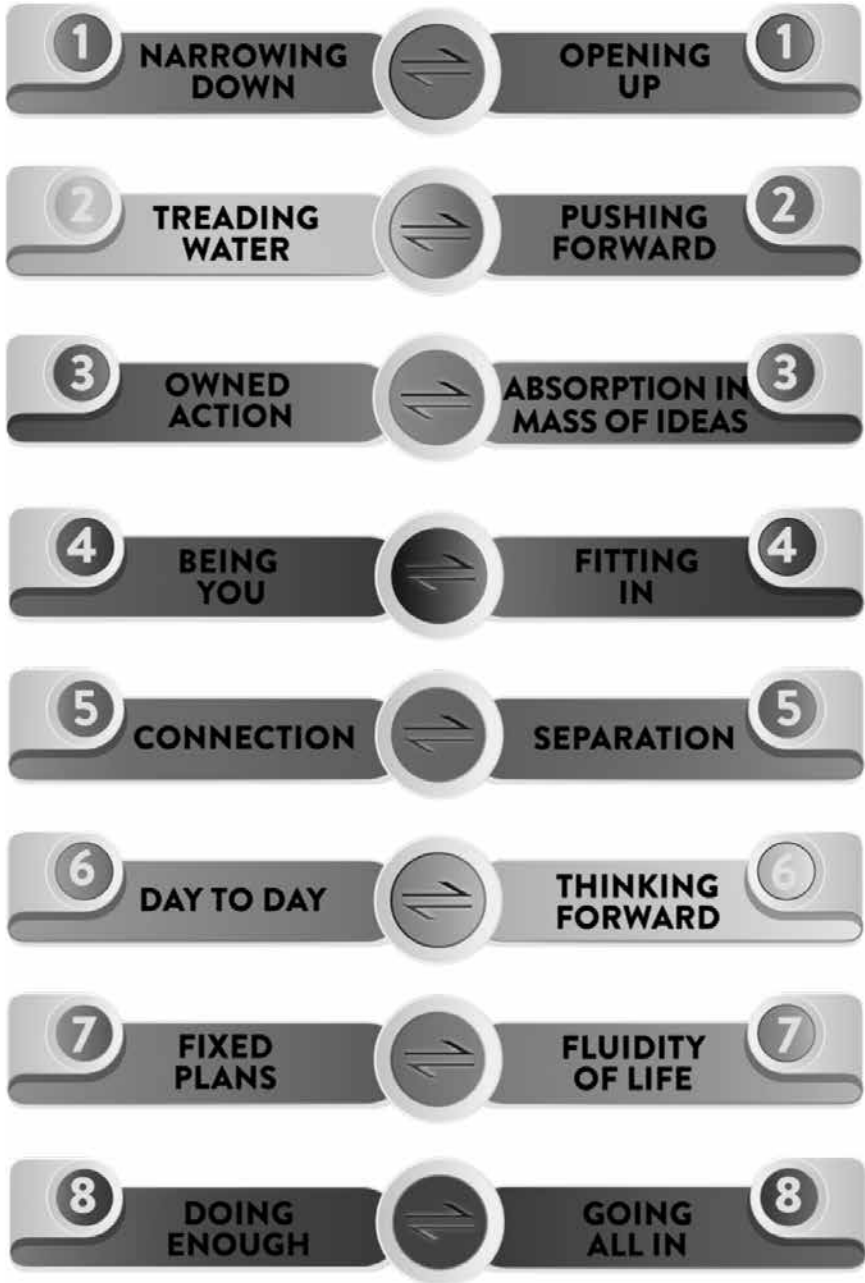


Diagram 1: The Eight Tensions Framework

the idea that these tensions will need to be re-faced at multiple times in our life, and the resolution may well be different in each situation and time, and as we change (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005). Thus the tensions are dynamic. Neither side of the tension is inherently positive or negative. Furthermore, the way the tensions are lived on the ground by each student will be highly individualised. The tensions can be used flexibly and may be added to or changed in light of further research or professional experience. Summarising these challenges as tensions in a framework helps normalise them. This means that the client does not need to expend energy worrying about being in the quandary *per se*, because we are all in these same quandaries at various times in our life. Rather, the client can focus on how to meet these tensions. It is our hope that professionals and their clients will find the tension labels relatable and the diagram and concept to be user-friendly and that they will be adapted for use by professionals as appropriate. We now offer an existential analysis of these eight tensions, using extracts from the participants.

Narrowing Down ⇌ Opening Up

At university, the students' worlds opened up quickly as they were exposed to new ideas and people. They had the freedom to explore, as they all lived away from home and were not subject to household rules. Undertaking too many activities left students feeling dispersed. However, their freedom was not boundless as they, like everyone, were restricted by the finitude of time. The students needed to narrow down their activities so they could spend the time they had on what mattered to them. Having too few interests meant the students were not making the most of university or, arguably, life. New interests could be explored at any point, so the cycle of 'opening up' and 'narrowing down' continued.

On one side of the tension, the students opened up to new ideas which, in the words of one student, were "just going to explode". This wonder at the world is in part due to the realisation that there is more to the world than the students originally thought (May, 2009 [1953]). 'Opening up' ensured that the students were participating in and connected to the world. The students explored what was on offer by exploring different societies, ranging from sports to debating and writing.

However, the students' newfound freedom and range of activities could lead to feeling too dispersed. One student described this as "trying to do a lot of things and I was just...I needed to cut a few because I felt quite thinly spread". Existentially, freedom can feel overwhelming (Deurzen, 2005). Without imposing restrictions, we try to do too much, which results in burning out.

This leads to the other side of the tension, 'narrowing down'. Frankl advocates "we have to choose between what is important and what is not,

what is meaningful and what is not. We have to become selective and discriminating” (2011 [1948]: 120). Our awareness of life’s finitude “shocks us into taking the present seriously” (May, 2009 [1953]: 205) and makes us use our time deliberately. It sharpens our focus which a student described:

I feel like when I first started uni it was kind of like, “Oh, there are so many possibilities” and “This is going to be really, really fun and also really scary” and now I’m like, “There are so many possibilities and so little time!”

This awareness of the finitude of time made ‘narrowing down’ necessary. As Cooper (2015: 118) says, “the finitude of life means that a choice for one thing is a choice against something else, and that means that our choices really are choices”. Thus, the existential question is about how you want to spend your time and energy. We have to ask ourselves which of the “mass of present potentialities...will be condemned to non-being and which will be actualised” (Frankl, 2004 [1959]: 124) as we cannot do everything.

The students were free to experiment, ‘narrowing down’ their activities, as they explored what was on offer and as their interests changed. Narrowing down can also be achieved by default, as various students demonstrated, when they were not selected for committees or failed auditions for plays. Furthermore, possible opportunities change; for example, societies shut down, forcing the students to pursue other options. Thus, we have a situated free choice of what to participate in, based on the realistic situation. We are “the product of chance and opportunity” (Adams, 2014: 42) and must accept that some choices are out of our control. However, we can choose within the choices available. At the extreme end of this tension, being too narrow may result in “a narrow and shrunken world space, [where] growth and development are blocked” (May, 1983/1994: 20).

Overall, Narrowing down ⇔ Opening up is a shifting tension in which students stopped doing some activities and experimented with others. This experimentation led to a clearer idea of how the students wanted to spend their time.

Treading Water ⇔ Pushing Forward

The second tension is about when to take action and challenge yourself and when to consolidate and maintain the status quo. Creating ourselves is a continuous project (Beauvoir, 2015 [1948]). If we do not actively keep moving forward, transcending what we are at any given moment, then we are not in a state of affirmative living but rather in a state of “not dying” (ibid: 89). This rising above our givens and sculpting of our lives requires decision, not only in what to do, but also in deciding to rise above our givens at all (May, 2009 [1953]).

We define ‘pushing forward’ as growing beyond our current capabilities,

within our givens, by making a decision and taking action. Examples of ‘pushing forward’ include one student making good use of a contact to obtain a busking license in order to raise his band’s profile and money for charity simultaneously. The students put themselves “on the line” (May, 2009 [1953]: 164), risked trying something new and made a choice, disrupting their status quo, which took courage (Tillich, 2000 [1952]).

Taking risks and challenging ourselves is not easy, and is an active decision. By not pushing ourselves we can become stagnant, which is an extreme form of ‘treading water’. One student recounted a meeting with his tutor in which he regretfully realised that he had not participated in anything outside study the previous year. Fear of non-being, or the “ontological guilt” (May, 1994 [1983]: 116) of not realising our possibilities, can be constructive as it can result in “increased creativity in the use of one’s own potentialities”, thus propelling us into taking action and ‘pushing forward’. Transcending our position by challenging ourselves helps us feel alive (Adams, 2013).

However, ‘treading water’ is not effortless and is more than just standing still. A great deal of energy is required to stay where we are (Deurzen, 2013). Developing habits obviates the need to rethink from first principles. Indeed, continuity gives us an identity as we take on a stable role. However, this may “prevent us from seeing our own freedom” (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2005: 166) as roles are not fixed; we can change.

There may be good reasons for ‘treading water’. We cannot forge ahead in all aspects of life, as various choices vie for our limited attention. Some domains may require ‘treading water’ to provide enough energy for forging ahead in others. Furthermore, ‘treading water’ may mean doing the activities you are doing and not taking on any more while you consolidate your position or achieve “lateral growth” (Perry, 1970: 178), building up proficiencies, stamina and stability. Sometimes, ‘treading water’ is synonymous with self-care, to avoid burn out and exhaustion.

Furthermore, in states of relaxation, or at least “the transition between work and relaxation” (May, 1994 [1975]: 62), people can get their most creative ideas. Schneider (1999: 8) attributes additional benefits to pausing, another form of ‘treading water’; “when we pause, much emerges that otherwise gets lost – memory, imagination, possibility”. He suggests that these factors are necessary for us to thrive. Thus ‘treading water’ holds much positive value.

Sometimes the resolution of this tension was not to steadfastly push ahead, but to “learn to bend” (Deurzen, 2009: 119); that is, be more forgiving of our needs as humans. Martin, for example, allowed himself to stop forging ahead, working “24/7” and balance his work with his need of self-care, such as watching television. For most students, navigating this tension

involved finding a balance between ‘treading water’ and ‘pushing forward’. One student exemplified this:

...obviously you've got to have like an introverted side to it [personal growth] where you learn to think things through properly but then you've got to be able to stand up to the things that you thought through and act upon what you've done. Whether it works out or not, like you've got to do it. Yes.

Here ‘treading water’ took on a more reflective and analytical quality, in contrast to ‘pushing forward’, which was action-orientated.

Owned Action ⇔ Absorption in Mass of Ideas

The third tension is about how the students responded to the rich, swirling collection of ideas to which they were exposed at university. ‘Owned action’ signifies how the students made their “own distinctive mark” or “appropriated” (Caputo, 2018: 53) the world in which they were immersed. The words ‘mass’ and ‘absorb’ in ‘absorption in mass of ideas’ have dual meanings. On the one hand, there was a large number of ideas with which to get immersed and excited. On the other hand, existentially, the ‘mass’ or “the ‘they’” (Cooper, 1999: 112) refers to how ‘one’, a generic person but no-one in particular, understands something.

Being absorbed in the mass has an important function; it enables us to be open to what is going on in the world and provides possibilities. However, the ‘they’ lulls us into false security of “ready-made” meanings in a “ready-made” world (Beauvoir, 2015 [1948]: 42). We tend to get ‘absorbed’ by the masses, losing our unique self and unable to make our mark. Thus we need to “take a stand” (Wrathall, 201: 358) on the meanings we find important as articulated by one of the students: “So I can, I can have an opinion which is actually thought through, like it’s not just given to me by someone else and I feel like that is important to me.”

A positive effect of the crowd was illustrated by a student who was encouraged to think about deep issues as he was influenced by his peers going on protest marches. Another student illustrated the more negative side. She felt that her peers held fixed political opinions such as Marxism, without questioning what this meant. There is no personal relevance or meaning in ideas that are absorbed, leading to a lack of unity of self, with their borrowed meaning wrought personally meaningless (May, 1994 [1983]).

Simply regurgitating received and current understandings amounts to an “inauthentic repetition” (Caputo, 2018: 52) in which no distinctive mark has been made. Caputo gives an example of an ‘authentic repetition’:

Great pianists start out by being taught to play the classics without making any mistakes until, eventually, at a crucial point,

the playing becomes their own; they achieve their own style, their own unique interpretation”

(ibid: 31)

When we are authentic, our possibilities are not limited to the current way things are done. We can “deviate” or “creatively reinterpret” (Käufer & Chemero, 2015: 65) how ‘the they’ understand the idea at hand. This is illustrated by a student who talked about his non-conventional perspective on Freshers’ week, which involved chatting with friends and making scones rather than going to nightclubs. Thus, he eschewed the crowd and owned his actions. Another student epitomised Caputo’s notion of ‘authentic repetition’ and therefore the ‘owned action’ side of this tension. She drew ideas and personal meaning from an inherited world, in this case their course, and made its generic knowledge their own. Having learned about intensive farming on her course, she decided could not subscribe to the farming industry’s ethics and became a vegetarian.

Owning ideas takes courage, creativity and risk (May, 2009 [1953]), as by putting your own stamp on an idea and making a decision about it, you put your neck on the line. However, all decisions can be re-evaluated and the actions we want to ‘own’ change. Furthermore, it may take time for ideas to be fully owned.

In sum, without being open to what the crowd is thinking and doing, the pool of new ideas would be dried up. However, these ideas need to be creatively reinterpreted to ensure they are a genuine fit for the student rather than an inauthentic regurgitation.

Being You ⇔ Fitting In

The fourth tension is about how much to “take a stand” (Wrathall, 2015: 358) as a ‘self’ (‘being you’) versus how much of yourself to mould to others, including individuals, groups or institutions (‘fitting in’). We need to find a way of living with others which we can endure which may be different in different situations. One student illustrated the ‘being you’ side of the tension:

I’m a bit more sort of like ‘Here’s my personality – deal with it!’ sort of thing [...] it’s fine because in the same way there are people going away, there are people coming and being sort of closer to me which is nice.

The student decided to unashamedly express his personality and found that some people liked that while others were put off. He was willing to accept this trade-off.

Another student illustrated ‘fitting in’: when she was living in halls in

her first year, she put up a façade for her peers, although she was more comfortable the following year when she felt she did not do this. However, ‘fitting in’ sometimes made for easier relationships. One student conformed to the group by sharing his ideas about essays with his friends, rather than being a “wallflower”. Although he liked observing others, he felt that it was better for his relationships to contribute more.

An extreme example of ‘fitting in’ comes from another student. She was told by her tutors and classmates that she was too “brutal” and “honest” in what she said, which resulted in her not contributing to class, despite wanting to. “Being honest to other people” was at the core of her “way of taking a stand on existence” (Wrathall, 2015: 358). Her peers’ suggestion that she should act inauthentically put her in existential disarray. Thus, she was living the tension of the need to belong, in this case, with others who did not share her core value and the need to be her ownmost self (Adams, 2013). In the event, she adopted a behaviour that felt unaligned with how she wanted to behave in order to have better relationships. This illustrates a trade-off as the student felt it was more important to have easier relationships, as she had felt “isolated” and “lonely” in her first year, than to behave authentically. This is in line with May’s (1994 [1983]: 21) observation that “the real threat is not to be accepted, to be thrown out the group, to be left solitary and alone”. Thus she reined in her straight-forwardness to fit in with what other people wanted her to be, sacrificing her own anchoring value of honesty which mattered and was meaningful to her.

Some students managed to achieve a synthesis of this tension. One student found being with others helped her understand more about herself: “...you meet people and you relate to them or you don’t relate to them and it makes you more aware or less aware of things in yourself.” Thus we can grow in our awareness of ourselves through social exchanges (Finlay, 2011).

Another student illustrated a synthesis of ‘being you’ and ‘fitting in’ in which she could be herself and have friends:

I don’t have to be a certain person to have friends or be accepted by people. I can just be me. I’m still trying to figure out who that is, but I’m not being something I’m not anymore.

This also illustrates that finding out who ‘you’ are is not clear cut and can take a long time.

Thus, despite how the tension may first appear, ‘being you’ is not always easy or straightforward. There are positive and negative ramifications of ‘being you’. Furthermore, there may be advantages to fitting in, especially as it may positively influence the way you behave.

Connection ⇔ Separation

The fifth tension is about actively making connections between different aspects of life, including forming connections with others and purposefully separating other aspects, such as dividing work up or severing ties with others. A particular student exemplified making connections in his work. Once he connected his work with being creative, with the aid of his coach, he enjoyed essays more, putting more of ‘himself’ into them. Separation in work involved the breaking up of big assignments into separate chunks to make it more manageable, a technique which many students learned in their coaching sessions.

One student illustrated actively seeking connections with others. He was able to connect with people at parties and could forge new friendships by finding points of connection with people, such as enjoying similar television shows, films and music. University field trips facilitated connection as the people on them were inherently linked by doing the same subject.

The students experienced different levels of connection in relationships, which can be explained existentially by Buber’s (2000 [1958]) ‘I-Thou’ and ‘I-It’ primary relationships. ‘I-It’ constitutes the majority of our relationships. It is the relationship we have with things and people that allows us to “experience” the world and “use” items in it including people (ibid: 48). It is characterised by separation as it occurs when people divide up others, such as analysing their hair colour or style of speech (ibid). We, as a subject, take the other person as an ‘It’, an object, rather than as a whole being in their totality, setting up a barrier between them and us (ibid) meaning the person “ceases to be Thou” (ibid: 24). In contrast, when we meet the other subject to subject, in their totality, something is created which means we are no longer “bounded” but are in “relation” with each other (ibid: 20). We are connected, albeit fleetingly. We do not think about the qualities of the other, but are absorbed by them, in an ‘I-Thou’ experience.

An international student used to think about social encounters as a problem, something to be worked on, and so as ‘I-It’ encounters. A barrier had been created, such that she was the subject and the others the object. This backfired as she was not able to enjoy social opportunities as whole beings. However, when she behaved ‘naturally’ and authentically, she had better interactions and was able to talk to others as mutual subjects and could thus experience authentic connection. Similarly, when one student regarded his flatmate as “just” someone he lived with rather than a best friend, he took him as an ‘It’. However, they eventually made up and were back to being best friends. This example illustrates the dynamism of the Connection ⇔ Separation tension.

Friendships were subjected to connection and separation because, as a student said, “all of these bonds aren’t solidified yet and easy to break and

easy to make at the same time”. Some students were open to making many friendships while exploring their new situation, forging many connections. However, these were not all deep and sometimes involved putting up a “front”. One student went on to adopt the other end of the tension, separating herself from many of those connections, and focusing on those who she wanted “to spend quality time with”, which alludes to the possibility of I-Thou experiences. This separation from certain friendships is necessary as time and energy are finite, meaning we cannot have deep friendships with everyone (Rawlins, 2006: 104).

Separation was, at times, actively pursued: one student broke up with her boyfriend so she could concentrate on her work and another felt that his first year friends no longer shared his interests and values. As we and others change, which we always do as we are always “becoming” and “not yet” (Deurzen, 2015: 194-195), our friendships may no longer fit us, so we may make an active choice to end them.

Thus both sides of this tension could be adopted in different domains of university life. Positions of connection and separation could be applied to different relationships and could change within a relationship.

Day-to-Day ⇌ Thinking Forward

The sixth tension is about how we live in “psychological time” (May, 2009 [1953]: 195), which differs from chronological time as it based on the meaning of experiences. For May (2009 [1953]), the meaning things have for us affects our experiences of time. For example, being bored is “unendurable only when it has not been freely chosen or affirmed by one’s self as necessary for the attainment of some greater goal” (ibid: 197). Thus the day-to-day, humdrum tasks that are necessary to achieve a greater goal become bearable as they have meaning. We therefore must straddle the present and future at the same time, as our life is given meaning by our goals.

Focus on the day-to-day was important for keeping up with university work. Many students were able to get into a routine with university work to help them achieve their goal of passing the degree. One student had to make changes to her routine to ensure it was productive for her, such as taking breaks every two hours by going for a walk. These seemingly small everyday decisions, which build up to achieving a goal, take courage in themselves (May, 2009 [1953]). This student chose to enhance her study routines to “help myself, like, get in the best position for after uni”, showing how future commitments manifest in the present. She illustrates how the present is the time to take action:

...I've learnt that if I want to achieve something, instead of stressing out, I need...I need to work out what I can do to help myself and then proactively do that rather than stress out about it.

Thus day to day pragmatism helped actualise possibilities.

However, being overly focused on the day-to-day was not optimal as it meant that the students could get too bogged down with tasks without checking they were relevant for their goals. Thus, time could be wasted. One student was originally on the ‘day-to-day’ end of the tension, and exemplified wanting to connect both ends of the tension so that her day-to-day tasks meshed with her future goals:

Because at the moment my life is very fluid so things that I have to do that become urgent happen so fast and need to be done so fast that I do them almost straight away, and then things that are important are very long-term. [...] I really need to translate my long-term goals into short and mid-term goals so that I can see very clearly why what I am doing now is important. And if I can't see that I am not going to do it.

Thinking about the future was therefore important to ensure the purposiveness of the day to day tasks.

Strategising about the future is important so we can have a purpose and something to aim for, giving meaning to our day-to-day lives and tasks. Indeed, Heidegger maintained that our primary orientation is future-facing (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). Many students thought about their future career which gave them something to work towards and motivation to get their work done. Frankl (2004 [1959]: 110) identifies this “gap between what one is and what one should become” as a fruitful tension, as it motivates us to take action in the present in order to fulfil something that has meaning for us.

However, by focusing too much on the future, our aspirations will remain “pipe dreams” (Arnett, 2015: 187). Arnett compares those who are “pouring their hearts into every day” to those who “enjoy imagining a glorious future but doing little to make it happen”. Thus it is important to keep a handle on both the present and the future, meshing both sides of the tension together.

In sum, we make goals for ourselves and so are forward-looking, but it is important to stay grounded and attend to the day to day tasks which will help us attain our goals. The tension arises as it is difficult to keep both day to day activities and future possibilities in sight, and ensure they fit together.

Fixed Plans ⇔ Fluidity of Life

The seventh tension is about how we make concrete plans in an uncertain and unknown world. Even with a goal in mind, the path to get there is rarely linear; our projects and plans meander. Furthermore, our goals change and circumstances outside our control may change our plans. However, without a plan, we are aimless.

Our world is unpredictable, but we can pro-actively make contingency plans. One of student illustrated this: losing her mobile phone prompted her to consider how she could pre-empt such setbacks. She backed up her work, which was helpful, as she subsequently lost her laptop. Accepting that life is unpredictable can help us take action and embrace uncertainty head-on.

Moreover, we are not fixed. We may try to stabilise ourselves through habits and roles that feel solid. However, we are “filled with nothingness” (Deurzen, 2015: 195) and pretend we are substantive. Furthermore, our world can ‘break down’ by no longer being viable for our way of living; our passion may fall away or we may die. Thus, our possibilities can disappear, meaning we are not synonymous with a particular role, and no role is securely ours. It is our human lot to engage in a fixed plan knowing it is not fixed at all (Käufer & Chemero, 2015). When we accept this, we can make plans with “contingent commitment” (ibid: 75) which refers to making a commitment so that we can identify with something, whilst realising that this commitment cannot be absolute (ibid). Making a commitment or ‘fixed plan’ gives us the ground from which to catapult ourselves into exploring the world in a positive meandering. One student had an initial plan to be either a lawyer or a teacher. He then decided to be an academic, illustrating that these initial ‘commitments’ are not fixed. Thus his contingent commitment worked positively for him as he could change direction.

Our future possibilities are restricted by reality. One student wanted to work in the publishing industry. His coach encouraged him to pick four publishing internships to apply for, thereby actualising a possibility and taking concrete action. However, as with any position taken, there is always a trade-off. By taking concrete steps, he had to leave the security of merely thinking about a potential job and instead apply for it and risk rejection, potentially therefore destroying his dream. In the event, his applications were unsuccessful. Existentially, we must take action knowing there is uncertainty. As May (2009 [1953]: 189) says, “to seek the truth is always to run the risk of discovering what one would hate to see”. We do not live in a vacuum and not everything is in our control. Thus, we are always “thrown back” (Lewis & Staehler, 2013: 89) into the realities of our factual world. However, we still have a say in how we react to our situation, meaning the student could pick himself up from the rejections and apply for something else.

Some actions are better without a fixed plan. One student found that taking an organic, rather than planned, approach to social situations to be more conducive to social development, although work benefited from a day-to-day plan. Therefore, some life domains do not seem to be amenable to being moulded into fixed plans. We cannot always shape our future and there are times when actively taking a ‘fluid’ approach is beneficial (Deurzen, 2009).

Not committing to anything at all can give us a “debilitating sense of

drift” (Damon, 2008: 103). Conversely, having commitments that are too rigid, such as unfounded beliefs about the difficulty of entering a particular industry, can also be debilitating as it may mean that possibilities are closed down without trying them out first.

Doing Enough ⇔ Going All In

The eighth tension is about students feeling they were not using 100 percent of their talent and energy, ‘doing enough’, versus feeling 100 percent invested, with energy and commitment, ‘going all in’. The feeling of ‘going all in’ equates to Deurzen’s (2009: 149) “intensity of contact with reality” which we seek so that we feel fully alive. This intensity was expressed by several students, who found their courses meaningful and were able to ‘go all in’. When going ‘all in’ to something which aligns with us, we can be in ‘flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), which gives rise to positive feelings and a sense of meaning.

Some students moved from ‘doing enough’ to going ‘all in’ and using their full potential. One student felt she had not lived up to her potential in her studies the previous year. She realised she did not want to waste her potential or time and was excited to get her teeth into her studies.

It is possible to help yourself ‘go all in’ by taking some kind of action. One particular student had felt that while he was with his tutees, he was seventy percent focused on them and thirty percent worrying about his work, and vice versa; he was never able to give 100 percent to what he was doing. However, when he scheduled his time effectively, he was able to focus on the activity at hand and ‘go all in’.

Another student did not enjoy his degree at all. He could not switch course for funding reasons, however, he did want to attain a degree. His response to the limitations imposed on him was to ‘do enough’ to get by and to think of the degree as “another thing” and a “safety net”. This marked a change from ‘going all in’ to ‘doing enough’. Existentially, when his course became “just another thing”, the meaning he had attributed to it, even in a diminished form, broke down; it became a ‘no thing’. There are many different parts of life to feel invested in, and the student accepted that, for him, the degree was not one of them. However, he was able to ‘go all in’ with his music, demonstrating that it is possible to ‘go all in’ with one aspect of life and not another. We cannot ‘go all in’ in all aspects of life due to time and energy limitations.

Another student illustrates moving from ‘going all in’ to ‘doing enough’. She wanted to ‘go all in’ by looking at non-compulsory but useful mathematics as it applied to her degree, and the workings of a relevant computer program, but this cost her time. By ‘going all in’ on one aspect, she neglected the rest of her coursework, and so did not attain her desired grade. She resolved

to rein in her interest in mathematics until after she had passed the degree. This left her frustrated as she was being introduced to interesting ideas which she felt the course infrastructure did not allow her the time to explore.

Thus sometimes you want to ‘go all in’ with something but constraints mean you have to settle for ‘doing enough’. Existentially, this about how we choose to respond to the opportunities available to us (Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018). The student was forced to prioritise, as time is finite and limiting situations are imposed by others. This underscores not only that we are inextricably linked to a context but also that we are ‘subject to’ (Lowenthal, 2017) various limits within it. We are not free-floating atomistic agents but are in a web of other people and institutions with their own rules; our desires are limited by reality.

Thus, both sides of the tension will be occupied over time and in different domains. As with all existential tensions, neither side is better than the other. They just ‘are’ and one side may become preferable in a given situation.

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on an existential perspective to offer an alternative, more holistic understanding of growth – to become a better liver of life. Underpinning the Eight Tensions Framework with this existential approach, privileges attending to clients’ choices in how to live and the need to keep re-examining decisions since we and our circumstances change. Therefore, clients are guided to “take charge of the possibilities” (Deurzen, 2005: 7) of their lives, thus becoming better livers of life.

The form of tensions, in which neither end has a value judgement, more realistically depicts how we experience life *in situ*, retaining the complexity of the experience, rather than simplifying the situation down to whether someone has lost or gained a specific ability or characteristic. For example, increased confidence which may facily seem positive and one dimensional, may entail the trade-off of losing friends.

One of the benefits of depicting tensions rather than linear stages of growth is that we can reframe what may seem pejorative or deficient observations such as this:

Pizzolato (2004) found that students with a number of risk factors for attrition entered college with some ability to self-author, but many regressed to a stage of following (or seeking) external formulas once they arrived; some members of this group regained their self-authoring positions as they learned to cope with their new surroundings.

(Renn & Reason, 2013: 215).

Self-authorship (Baxter Magdola, 2001) is about working out your own

position rather than following others' formulae which is akin to the tension in the Eight Tensions Framework Being you ⇔ Fitting in. This itself demonstrates how a popular model of student development (Baxter Magdola, 2001) offers a partial view compared to the more holistic Eight Tensions Framework; that is, it is equivalent to only one of eight dimensions. When viewing self-authorship as a tension, we reach a more nuanced understanding of what is described above. Moving to following external formulas is not necessarily a regression, but a sliding to the other side of the scale during a 'bedding down' phase. By framing the experience as going down a level, it seems that the students have lost some cognitive function or ability. This is not the case as the students in Pizzolato's study (2004) regained their self-authorship. The students' apparent decline in self-authorship was to do with their situation and may have been a result of preserving "psychological energy" which was necessary for fitting into their new surroundings.

Beyond the university context, the Eight Tensions Framework is potentially useful and relevant to professionals who view their clients as students of life. As Levinson (1978: 244) says, "as long as life continues, no period marks the end of the opportunities and the burdens of further development" and thus we always have the potential to learn more and become better lovers of life. We encourage readers, who may be therapists, counsellors, psychologists or coaches, to reflect on whether the Eight Tensions Framework holds for their contexts.

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