

Anguish in Kierkegaard in different existential appropriations: Humanist and phenomenological

Angústia em Kierkegaard nas diferentes apropriações existenciais: Humanista e fenomenológica

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L'angoisse chez Kierkegaard dans les différentes appropriations existentielles : Humaniste et phénoménologique

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Abstract

This theoretical study aims to clarify whether two existential perspectives in psychology, humanistic and phenomenological, can be understood in their studies and practices as having the same development and foundation as the topic of anguish. To do so, firstly, we describe the conception of anguish, as developed by Søren A. Kierkegaard, and then we show how the two perspectives appropriate to what the philosopher elaborated. We chose this scholar because we know that anguish, as he understands it, has become paradigmatic in different studies on the human psyche and has been widely discussed in these two perspectives of psychology. The guiding question of this study was to know whether the divergences in how understanding the concept of anguish alone are sufficient for possible clarification of two distinct perspectives. To clarify this issue, we studied in detail the content of the work *The Concept of Anguish* by Søren A. Kierkegaard, and we carried out bibliographical research on the writings of Rollo May, a psychologist with the existential-humanist approach who delved into the studies of this topic from a perspective of psychology and psychotherapy and, finally, we sought, in the studies of Feijoo and Protasio, who delved deeper into the theme of anguish from an existential-phenomenological perspective, how these authors appropriate the conception of anguish developed by the philosopher, also from a perspective in psychology and psychotherapy. In general terms, we saw that anguish, as understood by Rollo May, is divided into regular and pathological; in the understanding of Feijoo and Protasio, anguish points to an original indeterminacy that is the foundation of freedom. We conclude, therefore, that these two perspectives diverge concerning understanding the concept of anguish and, consequently, in their respective clinical actions.

Keywords: anguish, freedom, existential perspectives

Resumo

*Este estudo teórico tem como objetivo esclarecer se duas perspectivas existenciais em psicologia, denominadas humanista e fenomenológica, podem ser compreendidas em seus estudos e práticas como tendo o mesmo desenvolvimento e fundamento com relação ao tema angústia. Para tanto, primeiramente, descrevemos a concepção de angústia, tal como desenvolvida por Søren A. Kierkegaard, para depois mostrarmos o modo como as duas perspectivas se apropriam do que o filósofo elaborou. Elegemos esse estudioso por sabermos que a angústia, tal como ele a compreende, tornou-se paradigmática em diferentes estudos sobre o psiquismo humano e foi amplamente discutida nessas duas perspectivas da psicologia. A questão norteadora desse estudo foi saber se as divergências no modo de compreender o conceito de angústia por si só são suficientes para possível esclarecimento de duas perspectivas distintas. No sentido de buscar esclarecer essa questão, estudamos minuciosamente o conteúdo da obra *O Conceito de Angústia*, de Søren A. Kierkegaard, realizamos uma pesquisa bibliográfica aos escritos de Rollo May, psicólogo da abordagem existencial-humanista que se aprofundou nos estudos desse tema em uma perspectiva da psicologia e da psicoterapia e, por fim, buscamos, nos estudos de Feijoo e Protasio, que se aprofundaram no tema da angústia na perspectiva existencial-fenomenológica, o modo como essas autoras se apropriam da concepção de angústia desenvolvida pelo filósofo, também numa perspectiva em psicologia e psicoterapia. Vimos, em linhas gerais, que a angústia, tal como compreendida por Rollo May, divide-se em normal e patológica; já na compreensão de Feijoo e Protasio, a angústia aponta para uma indeterminação originária que é o fundamento da liberdade. Concluimos, assim, que essas duas perspectivas divergem no que diz respeito à compreensão do conceito de angústia e, conseqüentemente, em suas respectivas ações clínicas.*

Palavras-chave: angústia, liberdade, perspectivas existenciais

Resumen

*Este estudio tiene como objetivo aclarar si dos perspectivas existenciales en psicología, denominadas humanista y fenomenológica, pueden ser comprendidas en sus estudios y prácticas como teniendo el mismo desarrollo y fundamento con relación al tema angustia. Para tanto, primeramente, describimos la concepción de angustia, tal como desarrollada por Soren A. Kierkegaard, para después demostrar el modo como las dos perspectivas se apropian de lo que el filósofo elaboró. Elegimos este estudioso por saber que la angustia, tal como él la comprende, se hizo paradigmática en diferentes estudios sobre el psiquismo humano y fue ampliamente discutida en estas dos perspectivas de la psicología. La cuestión orientadora de este estudio fue saber si las divergencias en la manera de comprender el concepto de angustia por si solo son suficientes para posible aclaramiento de dos perspectivas distintas. En el sentido de buscar aclarar esta cuestión, estudiamos minuciosamente el contenido de la obra *El Concepto de Angustia*, de Soren A. Kierkegaard, realizamos una investigación bibliográfica a los escritos de Rollo May, psicólogo del enfoque existencial-humanista que se profundizó en los estudios de este tema en una perspectiva de la psicología y de la psicoterapia y, por fin, buscamos, en los estudios de Feijoo y Protasio, que se profundizaron en el tema de la angustia en la perspectiva existencial- fenomenológica, el modo como estas autoras se apropian de la concepción de angustia desarrollada por el filósofo, también en una perspectiva en psicología y psicoterapia. Vimos, en líneas generales, que la angustia, tal como comprendida por Rollo May, se divide en normal y patológica; ya en la comprensión de Feijoo y Protasio, la angustia indica para una indeterminación originaria que es el fundamento de la libertad. Concluimos, así, que estas dos perspectivas divergentes en lo que se refiere a la comprensión del concepto de angustia y, consecuentemente, en sus respectivas acciones clínicas.*

Palabras clave: angustia, libertad, perspectivas existenciales

Résumé

*Cette étude théorique vise à clarifier si deux perspectives existentielles en psychologie, dites humaniste et phénoménologique, peuvent être comprises dans leurs études et pratiques comme ayant le même développement et le même fondement par rapport au thème angoisse. Par conséquent, nous décrivons d'abord le concept d'angoisse, tel que développé par Søren A. Kierkegaard, puis nous montrons comment les deux perspectives s'approprient ce que le philosophe a élaboré. Nous avons choisi ce chercheur parce que nous savons que l'angoisse, telle qu'il la comprend, est devenue paradigmatique dans différentes études sur la psyché humaine et a été largement discutée dans ces deux perspectives de la psychologie. La question directrice de cette étude était de savoir si les divergences dans la façon de comprendre le concept d'angoisse par lui-même suffisent à clarifier deux perspectives différentes. Afin de clarifier cette question, nous avons étudié en profondeur le contenu de l'ouvrage *Le concept d'angoisse*, de Søren A. Kierkegaard. Nous avons également mené une recherche bibliographique sur les écrits de Rollo May, psychologue de l'approche existentielle humaniste, qui a approfondi les études sur ce thème dans une perspective de psychologie et de psychothérapie. Enfin, nous avons examiné les travaux de Feijoo et Protasio, qui ont exploré le thème de l'angoisse dans la perspective existentielle-phénoménologique, pour comprendre comment ces auteures s'approprient la conception de l'angoisse développée par le philosophe, également dans une perspective de psychologie et de psychothérapie. En termes*

généraux, nous constatons que, selon Rollo May, l'angoisse est divisée en normale et pathologique. En revanche, dans la compréhension de Feijoo et Protasio, l'angoisse pointe vers une indétermination originelle qui constitue le fondement de la liberté. Nous concluons donc que ces deux perspectives divergent en ce qui concerne la compréhension du concept d'angoisse et, par conséquent, dans leurs actions cliniques respectives.

Mots-clés : *angoisse, liberté, perspectives existentielles*

The existential perspectives in their humanistic and phenomenological appropriations are commonly confused by laypeople and academics, believing they are identical perspectives that only differ in their titles (Feijoo & Mattar, 2016). In this work, we will analyze the bases that support the understanding of both in relation to (about) the concept of anguish, as developed by the Danish philosopher Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (1813-1855) under the aegis of Vigilius Haufniensis (1844/2016). The way in which each dessas perspective appropriates the conception of anxiety will be analyzed so that we can highlight the differences between them and the repercussions of these differences in clinical action.

The decision to establish Kierkegaard's thought as a reference is due to the relevance of his writings among scholars of the theme of anguish in the field of existential psychology. Researchers and existential psychologists have referenced Kierkegaard in their studies both in the USA, such as Rollo May (1974; 1977) and Irvin Yalom (1980), in Europe, as well as Victor Frankl (1978; 2003), although the appropriations occur from different epistemological perspectives (Feijoo & Protasio, 2021; Karki, 2019; Klempe, 2014; Prosaio & Feijoo, 2021).

We understand that, in order to better achieve the psychological clinic that can be established based on the conception of anguish as presented by Kierkegaard, we need to bring to the table a more detailed analysis of how existential perspectives, whether humanistic or phenomenological, take Kierkegaard as a reference figure to think about anguish. We must initially clarify that anguish is a conception that presents itself as an object of study for several psychology scholars, who are increasingly concerned with "this inexpressible and formless uneasiness that pursues and harasses every step of modern man" (May, 1980, p. 9). However, there are a variety of ways of understanding this atmosphere, both from the existential-humanistic and phenomenological-existential perspectives, as well as from psychoanalysis. As for the latter, we will not go into detail in this study, but we emphasize that it also inspired Rollo May in his analysis of anguish.

Among the diversities in the understanding of anguish in Kierkegaard, we find important contributions that sometimes consider anguish as a constitutive element of the individual's way of being, revealing the individual's own character of freedom (Feijoo et al., 2015; Grøn, 2008), now state that anguish can present itself as a negative and pathological element, calling it "neurotic anguish" in contrast to "normal anguish" (May, 1980; Ponte, 2013, p. 61). There are also those who consider anguish in Kierkegaard as a religious element in the sense of "(...) an ultimate contribution of the individuality's contact with Providence" (Salles, 2019) and psychotherapy as a facilitator of this contact through anguish.

Given these divergences, present in different understandings, the following question arises: do the divergences in the way existential psychotherapies understand the concept of anguish already indicate that they are distinct perspectives? To reach the answer to our question, we will first follow Kierkegaard's (1844/2016) thinking on anguish so that we can later understand how the humanist-based perspective, represented here by Rollo May, and the phenomenological perspective, as developed by Feijoo and Protasio, appropriated this concept, thus highlighting that they are two distinct perspectives. We believe that clarifying the different dessas interpretations of anguish in Kierkegaard is important to the extent that they directly impact the foundation of clinical action. For example, while the humanist perspective intends to cure anguish, the phenomenological perspective takes it as a condition for other possibilities to occur in existence and, therefore, as an element to be sustained and from which we cannot get rid.

The circumscription of the work around these authors (May and Feijoo & Protasio) is due to the difficulty of finding works in psychology that debate the meaning of anguish put forward by Kierkegaard, under the pseudonym Vigilius Haufniensis. Among humanist-based psychologies, for example, Rollo May (1980) discusses the topic, having dedicated a book to it entitled "*The Meaning of Anxiety*". Irvin Yalom (1980) also considers the theme of anxiety in his classic book "*Existential Psychotherapy*", but there, the topic is thought of as an experience in the face of death and the fear of annihilation, without delving into the totality that is questioned by Kierkegaard.

From a phenomenological perspective, Salles (2019), for example, is a psychologist who wanted to think about the concept of anguish in relation to psychology, but his research is interested in the requirement of a relationship with providence present in the ambiguity of anguish. Cristine Mattar (2016) reflects on psychology in dialogue with Kierkegaard and Foucault around the question of the self and despair and does not dedicate herself to the theme of anguish. Silva and Barreto (2020) focus on the theme of anguish, however, they use Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Boss as references, without configuring a deepening of Kierkegaard's thinking on the issue.

Thus, the choice to dialogue with the works of Feijoo and Protasio proved to be a natural decision, since the authors have many works on anxiety and its repercussions on clinical action (Feijoo, 2000; Feijoo et al., 2013; Feijoo et al., 2015; Feijoo & Protasio, 2014; Protasio, 2014). Rollo May, an American psychologist and founder of the existential-humanist perspective in psychology, in addition to having Kierkegaard in high regard in his works, produced a book to discuss, specifically, the theme of anguish (May, 1980).

In order to meet the purposes of the article, we will now carry out a detailed analysis of anguish, as conceived by Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), with the aim of clarifying the way in which the author explains this concept.

Anguish and awakening of freedom in Kierkegaard

Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) states that his task is to treat the concept of anxiety from a psychological point of view, in order to consider the dogma of hereditary sin and, in this sense, also the concept of sin (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016). Before proceeding, however, we need to clarify what the philosopher means by sin. What is the relationship between this dogma and anxiety? The pseudonym states that sin has no place in any science. The place of sin is no place, and this “is precisely its determination” (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 16). The act of sinning, therefore, must be understood in an environment that does not take it in such a way as to want to unravel it, but only to follow what precedes and follows its act. In the present study, we do not consider sin from any place other than that of the event itself. Sinning is an act, movement, decision, life, existence.

For Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), psychology tends to look at sin in an atmosphere of observant tenacity, with a “curiosity that dislikes” (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 17), that is, an atmosphere that has an interest in investigating it, wanting to see everything as a state that can be classified and named. The author says that the atmosphere of psychology should not be this, but rather that of the “intrepid resistance of seriousness” (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 18). A resistance that has its “originality preserved in the responsibility of freedom” (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 161), by returning, each time, to what shows itself in existence, without being carried away by the elucubrations of logic, moving away to define and classify, but in a repetition¹ that maintains originality in that which shows itself as new in the same and, in patience, awaits the showing itself proper to experience.

Haufniensis states that psychology must have as its object “something stable, which remains in a stillness in movement” (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 22). The stable element is where possibility constantly arises. Movement occurs in a calm manner (calmly), precisely because it is open to possibility, indeterminacy. Nesse At this point, we come to the concept of anguish, which, according to Haufniensis, is the object of psychology. But, what does the author understand by anguish? To answer this question, we will follow the path taken by Haufniensis, highlighting the very experience of anguish in Adam and Eve, presented throughout the first chapter of the work “*The Concept of Anguish*”.

Adam and Eve lived in innocence, in paradise. Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) says that they were asleep. Adam lived as he should have lived, without being aware of what was happening in his existence and to the existence that he himself was. At the moment when the prohibition occurs, Adam does not understand the words, but is taken by the atmosphere of anguish, an atmosphere that reveals freedom and, along with it, indeterminacy (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 49). This atmosphere begins to permeate all his ways of dealing with the world. Seeing himself *different*, Adam jumps, he can no longer return to innocence.

Adam, at the moment of the leap, does not yet know what decision he will make, but anguish takes hold of him as if he already had no way out and had to position himself in existence. At that moment, the infinite possibility of *being-capable-of is shown* and, along with that, the possibility (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016). Innocence, then, is taken to the extreme, it finds itself anguished before the possibility of freedom and the consequence of the possibility and finds no way out: Adam has already positioned himself and, at that moment, Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) says that Adam can speak to himself, he has awakened to himself.

Dialogue with oneself is only possible at the moment when the individual’s character of freedom as a possibility appears to him. The human being then sees himself, a formless seeing, sees his indefiniteness and lack of determination. An openness that returns to man what he is: nothing. There is no way to escape this openness that reveals itself in a leap. The vertigo of openness comes and, at the same time that the openness seduces, it repels. Entangled in the relationship with this openness, the individual sees himself as he most often does not see himself: as nothing. Nothing that, at the same time, is all that is. It is as openness, abyss, freedom that one is, and that one is being, each time.

Anguish is this open space that reveals itself in the moment of the leap. An indefinite open space that shows freedom as a possibility. The abyss that opens reveals what is hidden, what is concealed from the individual in his innocence and ignorance of himself, revealing his character of indeterminacy. Anguish reveals the most abysmal within us: our nothingness and the impossibility of encompassing what is unencompassable, what is always slippery, that is, existence.

¹ Kierkegaard (1843/2009), under the pseudonym Constantin Constantius, wrote the work entitled “*Repetition*” (1843), in which he works on the concept of repetition from two perspectives: repetition as the resumption of the new and repetition as the resumption of the same.

The atmosphere of anguish takes us away from the tranquility of innocence or the solid ground on which we think we live, from the security and certainty that surrounds our way of dealing with things, people and the world.

But, at the same time, it is precisely for this reason that anguish places us on another solid ground: ourselves, the ground of possibility. Paradoxically, what is most solid and concrete in our existence is precisely the nothingness that we are. This firmness that, at the same time that it is firm, is also shifting, malleable and fluid. The openness that constitutes us is firm and stable, because it is always there, it is what constitutes our way of being, but, at the same time, it is fluid and shifting, in a calm movement.

Anguish, according to Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), manifests itself when there is contact with the reality of this very character of freedom. The moment we realize that we are fundamentally freedom as a possibility for possibility, we awaken to our most proper character and, once awakened, there is no turning back, we discover that we are always a position, a way of being, in the existence that is ours. Contact with freedom as a possibility reveals and changes our perspective on everything, but only if we are open to what anguish has to tell us.

We can think of this encounter with freedom in an idealized way, as something beautiful, since freedom tends to be something we seek to achieve in our lives. This happens when we think of this freedom as if it were an experience of having no limits. But what is most firm and fundamental in us is also the most difficult, precisely because we are freedom, because we are always at stake in existence, at every moment. For this reason, Kierkegaard (1847/2018) associates freedom with tribulation, with being in the tension that is inherent to life. According to the author, walking the path of tribulation can be the most difficult of all paths, because it requires our involvement at all times, in fear and trembling.

Being-*capable-of* freedom does not refer to voluntarism, contrary to what is often understood in common sense. It does not refer to a human will that is above everything and everyone, and that it is enough to want to fulfill it. Being-*capable-of*-that does not refer to positioning oneself in the face of this or that possibility, but rather to always being positioned and, at the same time, fundamentally open to the possibility. With this expression, Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) wants to emphasize the most characteristic character of man of always being a *becoming in the* face of the possibilities that show themselves in the openness that he himself is. We are always in a relationship between the openness, the possibility that we are, in tension with the conditions that determine and limit the possibility that can be realized. Freedom does not refer to the will but is characterized by an entanglement that gives the measure of what is possible at each time.

Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), to explain the *being-capable-of*, uses the Latin word *potentia* — Aristotelian power. What Aristotle states from *de anima* is that every movement is already the realization of a movement of the thing itself that moves. A stone only rolls because it is capable of rolling; being a stone already implies rolling; rolling is something that constitutes being a stone. Man, like a stone, cannot place himself. Man is placed by something of the order of mystery and, at the moment he comes into existence, various conditions of the historical context of meaning coexist with him, at the same time that his creation is not closed, ready. Once placed in the world, he is given over to the creature that he is and to the task of continually realizing himself. Thus, one can exist in various ways, but, even so, one must live in some way and deal with existence. Human beings cannot place themselves in the world, but, instead, they are placed in certain conditions and must fulfill themselves within them. What man can do is decide to accept or reject the self that has been given to him (Kierkegaard, 1849/1974; Protatio, 2015). This rejection, at the same time, cannot be definitive, because no matter how much we wish, it is not possible to escape the self that we are.

The character of *being-capable-of* appears at the moment when anguish is announced. However, how does this atmosphere arise? How does the moment occur when the individual awakens to freedom and to himself? Regarding the passage of Adam and Eve, we can think that God's prohibition was the cause of the awakening of Adam's freedom. However, according to Haufniensis, this "is to change the circle of the leap into a straight line" (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 116), that is, it is to make the leap, the awakening, something that has an origin and an end, something that precedes it and, therefore, explains it. To think of awakening as a circle is to see it without a beginning and an end, but as something that arises when it arises, that exists only by itself. Anguish simply happened to Adam, and he woke up. According to the author of "*The Concept of Anxiety*" (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), the moment of awakening, of the leap, cannot be understood logically, just as it cannot be predicted or calculated. No science can explain *how* awakening occurs, but psychology, in particular, can understand the phase prior to (before) awakening, the atmosphere of anxiety, the possibilities that present themselves and the subsequent state of the same (Cruz, 2010). In the words of Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016, p. 42): "The science that has to do with explanation is psychology, which, however, is only capable of explaining the direction of the explanation and above all must take care not to give the appearance of wanting to explain what no science explains".

A person who lives a planned life may be overcome by anguish when an unforeseen event occurs. A person faced with the uncertainty of his or her death may be overcome by anguish. A person who observes the trees along his or her path may be overcome by anguish. Any situation can trigger anguish, because anguish concerns that which is always there: freedom as the reality of possibility, the mere *being-capable-of-that* shows itself as an opening for. Anguish arises not as a straight line, but as a circle, which maintains its constant movement, without an end. Anguish arises from nothingness, from the nothingness that we are given this, any event can reveal what is most constitutive in us, our character of freedom in the

face of the field of possibilities that is always at stake in existence. It is in the atmosphere of anguish that the individual can relate to himself or herself and come closer to his or her most unique character. The awakening of freedom in anguish is the very bursting of something, so that the leap, the bursting, is already a transformation.

We conclude that the awakening, pointed out by Haufniensis, refers to the moment in which everything is revealed in a different way, the moment in which the character of freedom, which opens the vast field of possibility, shows itself. At this moment, the suddenness occurs and the atmosphere of anguish imposes itself on the existing. Nothing concrete changes from an external perspective, life apparently continues the same, however, everything shows itself in a different way in existence, in a different way before the irruption of the leap. And, precisely, this moment can be the most concrete thing in life. The leap, which occurs in the instant, does not change things themselves, but it changes the way we look at the thing, the way we deal with the thing. The leap makes us awaken to the indeterminate opening that we are, our nothingness.

Anxiety and Self-Consciousness: Considerations from Rollo May for Psychology

Rollo May, in 1977, wrote the work entitled *The Meaning of Anxiety²: The Causes of Personality Integration and Disintegration*, in search of finding answers for psychology in relation to anxiety. In this book, the author takes on the task of finding a unifying guide for the meaning of anxiety in contemporary times, having as objectives

(...) to bring together in a single volume the theories of anxiety offered by modern researchers in different areas of our culture, to discover the common elements in all these theories and to formulate these concepts in such a way that we can have a common basis for new investigations. (May, 1980, p. 9)

May (2000) reveals that, in the year he worked on his thesis, he was bedridden in a hospital for tuberculosis patients and, immersed in the atmosphere of anguish, he decided to approach what had been written on this subject. In his search, he only found two works dedicated to the subject, written by two scholars: Freud and Kierkegaard. However, it was the way in which (how) Kierkegaard worked on anguish that impacted him the most. He could see the anguish described by the Danish philosopher in his experience and that of his colleagues hospitalized in a clear and devastating way. An experience that he called a “crisis of life against death” (May, 2000, p. 16).

Even though he claims that only anxiety, as developed by Kierkegaard, made him awaken to his own anxiety, May (2000, p.16) defends the way Freud constructs the concept, highlighting his formulation on the “psychic mechanisms by which anxiety manifests itself”. Based on this observation, the North American psychologist claims that the difference between the two authors is that Freud knew about anxiety and Kierkegaard knew it, highlighting how important it is to have a more “technical” view of anguish and a more “existential” view (May, 2000, p.16).

It is interesting to think that, as much as May considers the two ways of dealing with anguish without dichotomizing them, the very way of explaining it already says something about how he understands anguish. We consider that, to the extent that we try to describe anguish in a technical way and interpret it as a psychic mechanism, we lose what Kierkegaard (1844/2016), in the voice of Haufniensis, defines as the most characteristic of anguish, which is the constitutive character of the individual’s way of being, the atmosphere that reveals what is most characteristic, and not an intrapsychic element that shows itself as a mechanism. In other words, as something posterior to the individual in its totality, a mechanism that starts from a previous psychic source.

The work “*The Meaning of Anxiety*” (May, 1980), in which Rollo May details the concept of anguish, presents an explanation of this atmosphere based on different understandings: philosophical, physiological, biological and psychoanalytic, with the aim of finding something that unites them into a whole.

May (1980) begins the second chapter with an epigraph from Kierkegaard, stating that the problem of anxiety, before psychologists took up this theme, was situated in philosophy, where anxiety was related to the crises and existential conflicts of human beings. Due to the lack of naturalistic concreteness of the concept of anxiety, that is, because anxiety does not have a specific cause, does not correspond to the scientific dictates of the natural sciences and is not part of the rational field, this atmosphere remained unstudied for a long time in the 19th century. This rational field was considered by many scholars as a field that held control over emotions, considered irrational.

According to May (1980), Kierkegaard goes against the grain of the supposed uselessness of studying anxiety, emphasizing the importance of his contribution to the construction of a “new basis for the unity of personality” (May, 1980, p. 50). In his description of the concept of anxiety, as defined by Kierkegaard, May points out that, although the philosopher was talking about the individual, the way he defined it was fluid and could only be defined in a development that occurred in

² According to Gregory Beabout (2009), May’s choice (and others, such as Jaspers and Tillich) to translate *angest* – which is a common word in Denmark but unusual in English – as anxiety is justified for at least two reasons: *anguish*, in English, would be a transliteration and not a translation; and because keeping *anguish* in English might give the impression that Kierkegaard is using a technical term, when he is using a common term, a common word. (The author makes a detailed study of the decisions in translating *angest* into English.)

the relationship with other people. In this way, anxiety also shows itself to be something fluid, undetermined and static. According to the author, anxiety is closely oriented towards freedom and freedom, in turn, is oriented towards possibility.

Anguish, according to May (2000, p. 120), is not just an emotion or a mental effect; it is “a characteristic of man’s being, rooted in his existence”. Anguish is considered by the scholar to be an *ontological aspect* of the human being because it affects the core of the self, emerging as a threat to the foundations of man’s being. The threat to the being causes anguish to be named by the author as the “experience of non-being” (May, 2000, p.120).

For May (2000), anguish is an experience of awareness on the part of the individual that his existence, as a potentiality, may become nothing, and that he may lose everything he considered as belonging to himself in the world. Non-being is the nothingness evidenced by anguish, understood by May as the threat of the dissolution of that which we have identified throughout life as defining ourselves. Anguish is the moment in which non-being is evidenced. May (1980) refers to a normal anguish, which is intended to protect the individual from the dangers that threaten existence, values and identities that sustain it. In this way, one cannot escape anguish, since it constitutes the human awareness that “each of us is a being who faces non-being” (May, 1980, p. 335). And to neurotic anxiety, which constitutes a disproportionate reaction to objective threats, and the way in which the individual controls it through inhibitions, developing symptoms and defense mechanisms to possible threats.

If anguish is an experience of non-being, what does being means to May? The psychologist (May, 2000) defines being as the set of potentialities inherent to the individual that, depending on self-awareness, comes to be realized or not. This potentiality also includes being aware of oneself and responsible for who one is. To clarify, the author presents an example:

Being is the potentiality by which the seed becomes a tree or each of us becomes what we really are. When used in the particular sense, such as in a human being, it always has the dynamic connotation of a process, of the person being something. (...) It is only possible to understand another human being when we see the direction he or she is taking, what he or she is becoming, and we can only know ourselves when we “project our *potentia* into action”. (May, 1980, p. 106)

We therefore always exist with the potential to become something, but this becoming depends on an element that is “intrinsic and inseparable from the human being, which is self-awareness” (May, 2000, p. 106). Freedom, according to the North American scholar, is “man’s capacity to assume his development. It is our capacity to shape ourselves” (May, 1993, p. 64). The individual only truly becomes who he is in a process, being aware of himself and acting responsibly in the face of the positions he takes in his existence. The capacity to be, therefore, is the capacity to know oneself in the world, in an experience of self-awareness. Without self-awareness, we are led by instinct and by what the world says we should do, and in this way, we do not develop the potentialities that are unique and ours.

Conscious choice, for May (1980), is the process of individuation, that is, the development of the individual as a person. A process that develops through a movement of self-awareness, in which consciousness turns to itself and decides on something, in a confrontation with anguish.

Anguish, then, plays a decisive role in the process of self-awareness and individuation. According to the author, “individuality depends on each person’s ability to face anxiety and progress despite it” (May, 1980, p. 55). In this way, May defines anguish as something to be faced and overcome, emphasizing that this aspect is fundamental in the individual’s existence. Depending on how anguish is faced, the process of becoming a self-aware individual may be impaired. May states that it is the individual’s self-awareness, in facing anguish, that enables man to “shape and, to a certain extent, transform his present historical development” (May, 1980, p. 56).

May (1980), inspired by Kierkegaard’s reflections, specifically in Kierkegaard’s phrase that “truth only exists if the individual actively produces it” (quoted by May, 1980, p. 182), tells us that surrendering oneself to the process of psychotherapy and self-knowledge is fundamental for the patient to reach the truth of being who he is, to *insight* and, consequently, to self-awareness. Surrender refers to a sudden decision, not a decision to do this or that, but rather a decisive attitude towards existence. Insight *and* knowledge about oneself can only happen after this surrender.

Surrender, however, is not a completely voluntary or conscious attitude. The challenge for existential-humanistic psychotherapy lies in this point. The psychotherapist can help the patient “in the development of an orientation toward surrender” (May, 1980, p. 184), and when surrender occurs in a situation of anguish, it is up to the psychotherapist to help the patient absorb the impact of the experiences and help him/her to dialogue with himself/herself, avoiding chatter or hermeticism.

May (1980) says that the psychotherapist should not intensify the patient’s anguish or try to incite it, as this will lead the patient to regress, encouraging him to be in the sphere of possibilities, depriving him of his concrete existence and his potentialities. At the same time, May says that he does not consider anguish as something that can be cured, as it is inherent to life. At another point, May (1980) states that anguish can be overcome, as long as we find its origin, that is, the underlying conflict, and exterminate it by bringing it to consciousness. The psychologist’s objective, which is inspired by the existential-humanist perspective, is to be able to reduce the destructive power of the *self-generated* by anguish and transform it into a constructive power in the development of self-awareness and achievements.

Anguish in a phenomenological-existential appropriation in psychology

In her book *“Listening and Speaking: A Phenomenological-Existential Proposal”*, Feijoo (2000) brought to the table the implications that Kierkegaard’s thinking could bring to the development of a psychological clinic with existential bases. On this occasion, the author discussed three concepts dear to Kierkegaard: despair, anguish, and the method addressed by the philosopher so that man could free himself from his illusions. Feijoo (2000) justifies the dialogue established with Kierkegaard (1844/2016), since the entire purpose of the text in *“The Concept of Anxiety”* is aimed at treating psychologically the existence in anguish. The author then highlights the notion of openness to possibilities and to the different ways in which man deals with his condition of freedom.

In another work, Feijoo et al. (2015) insist on showing how Kierkegaard’s approach to the subject, in the work *The Concept of Anxiety* (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), allows us to think about clinical psychology inspired by the works of this philosopher from the phenomenological-existential perspective. Based on this hypothesis, we ask ourselves: how does the work inspire the practice of clinical psychology from this perspective?

Feijoo (2000) points out a path of thought by understanding that man’s illusion is completely in tune with what the philosopher calls psychological positions of non-freedom. However, we defend the thesis that we need to dwell even more on the issue of the importance of the theme of anguish in conjunction with clinical psychology. To this end, we chose two researchers and psychologists as the main references for the study of phenomenological-existential clinical psychology inspired by the theme of anguish in psychology: Ana Maria de Feijoo (2000) and Myriam M. Protasio (2014). This choice is justified due to the pioneering and relevant contribution of both researchers to the understanding of this perspective for psychology, whose know-how of the authors aligns with the reflections elaborated by Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms.

Based on Kierkegaardian work *“The Concept of Anxiety”* (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), Protasio (2014) says that Kierkegaard, under the voice of Vigilius Haufniensis presents anguish as the most appropriate place for psychological science, a space in which the constitutive character of freedom appears as a possibility for possibility, openness to the indeterminacy inherent to human being. He also understands anguish as the “space where man can see himself and judge himself” (Protasio, 2014, p. 202). In the moment of anguish, which occurs suddenly, the individual can see existence as a possibility and, in this view, life can appear different.

Protasio (2014) says that it is from the place of affirmation of the character of indeterminacy of the individual, raised by Kierkegaard, under the voice of Haufniensis, that it becomes impossible to categorize existence into concrete and abstract limits, only being possible to see life in its own singularity, and it is up to the individual to find his own task and justification in existence. The need to be, the need to position oneself, is a characteristic of the human way of being, although we are often asleep to this condition of ours by considering ourselves as already determined, placing the blame on others or on the world for what it says about our existence and what is most unique about it (Feijoo et al., 2013). By considering ourselves as a multitude, as everyone, we take away the responsibility that falls to us and place it on the number, on everyone who, at the same time, is no one. Anguish, the abyss that awakens freedom as a possibility for the individual, occurs as the atmosphere of “ambiguity that precedes every choice, every possibility” (Feijoo et al., 2013, p. 34), in a movement that brings the individual closer to himself.

For phenomenological-existential psychology, which follows Kierkegaard, human beings can freely choose good and evil (Protasio, 2008). This choice, however, comes after the individual’s constitutive character of freedom. Freedom as a possibility does not consist in choosing this or that, or indecision in the face of a decision, but rather in the beginning of the existing that is freedom. Before this or that, there is the freedom that opens up the world, opens up possibilities. It is on this shifting ground of possibility, in which there is no prior determination of human life, that phenomenological-existential psychology walks with the other in its clinic.

Anguish, therefore, occurs as the space in which freedom reveals itself and can judge itself (Protasio, 2014). In this self-judgment, something can emerge, and the possibility can show itself. In this way, the atmosphere of anguish “reflects freedom as a real situation of human existence” (Protasio, 2014, p. 213). This situation occurs both in the universal sphere, in which every individual is, and in the singular sphere, as it concerns the task of each person in the existence that is theirs. The universal character “speaks of the impossibility of man being able to create himself and to create the conditions of his own existence” (Protasio, 2014, p. 213); on the other hand, man has the daily task of being who he is, continually being in relation to himself as an existent.

Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) presents several strategies that the individual can use to escape from himself and his character of possibility, closing himself off before the announcement of freedom, believing that he does not choose, but that it is the circumstances of an external or internal order that choose for him (Feijoo, 2000). The situations described by the pseudonym are very similar to those that present themselves in the psychological clinic, therefore helping us to reflect on the individual’s dealing with himself who comes to the psychological clinic.

One of the possibilities of dealing with the manifestation of freedom to the individual described by Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) is hermeticism. In this situation, the individual finds himself in a state of non-communication

with others and with himself, hiding from freedom (Feijoo et al., 2013). In this situation, according to Feijoo et al. (2013, p. 38), “the resumption of freedom is, for the hermetic, linked to revelation”, because the freedom that seems so atrocious to man does not reveal itself even to himself, becoming obscured by the hermetic.

Another approach that presents itself as an escape from oneself is manifested by bodily complaints, irritation, and impatience, which Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) calls *the somato-psychic loss of freedom*. According to Feijoo (2000), freedom, in this situation, can be regained through greater awareness and approximation to one’s concrete situation in existence, in contrast to a approach of fear and escape from what appears to be real in one’s existence. In these complaints, the individual places the blame on the world, on the biological and on others. By returning him to his concrete situation, this individual may see himself and the issues that torment him as something that concerns him.

Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) also refers to the pneumatic loss of freedom. “*Pne*” means breath in Greek, and “*pneuma*” maintains a relationship with the *psyche* (Feijoo, 2000). How the individual sees himself in this loss of freedom is with an absence of the breath of life, of that which moves his existence and gives reason to continue walking. In this dealing with himself, man places the blame and determination of his existence on something extrinsic to himself, justifying his decisions and choices in something divine, as if he had no responsibility to himself, but rather to this something greater that dictates his life. Feijoo et al. (2013, p. 39) state that “In this case, there is communication without, however, consciousness and appropriation of himself, which means that this man understands himself as a victim of circumstances, allowing himself to be thrown from one side to another, according to the situations”. Understanding oneself as a victim of circumstances can occur in all spheres, including intellectual ones. In all situations, the individual believes himself to be determined and condemned by elements considered external to himself, failing to position himself with responsibility and seriousness in the existence that is possibility, indetermination.

Anguish is, as we have seen, the atmosphere that reveals to us our own character of freedom as a possibility for possibility, in the blink of an eye. When we see this, in an instant, we are touched by life. Life that shows itself in a completely different way. The same life, the same person, but everything is different. The reason for this difference to show itself is anguish. The moment this reality awakens to the individual, he approaches himself as the existent that he is. In this sighting, he, the others and life are revealed as possibilities. To be formed by anguish would be to learn from this, even if anguish reveals it to us. The individual, however, often, at the moment he sees this character, runs away from it, returning to the illusion of being determined by the world, and the task is to return, each time, to oneself.

Kierkegaard (1859/1986) says that man usually lives without reflecting on what is around him, immersed in the demand directed by the crowd, by the whole world. Without being close to himself, that is, to his task and justification for existing, he acts as everyone acts, thinks as everyone thinks, like a pebble that rolls according to the current. In the crowd, man is not a singular individual, just an example that lives according to what is said about how one should live. This crowd is nobody, despite being taken as the truth. According to the philosopher, in the crowd lies the lie, because it makes the individual, his responsibility and repentance disappear in favor of a whole world that is nobody, is an abstraction, is an invisible network. For Kierkegaard, each one can become a singular individual; however, many do not inhabit this place, excluding themselves from being, becoming just one more in the crowd.

Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016) says that the awakening to the reality of freedom as a possibility that constitutes us makes the individual come closer to himself. This coming closer to himself, however, is not something that is achieved and ends by itself. It is an approach that is movement, in a constant approach and moving away from existence. A losing and gaining of oneself that remains in its existential movement.

In view of this, Kierkegaard, in his reflections on anguish and its concealment in the impersonal, helps us to think about the place of the psychological clinic. According to Protasio (2014), we can find support in Kierkegaard’s reflections for the exercise of psychology in two directions: within the project of indirect communication developed by the author, and in the consideration of the atmosphere of seriousness as the most appropriate for dealing with the task of existing, an existence that is anguish.

Kierkegaard (1859/1986) reveals that his authorial path has always developed in search of dispelling illusion, presenting, in detail, the intentions and motivations of his writing project. In revealing his purpose, the Danish philosopher states that the key point of his works is indirect communication. According to Feijoo (2000), in Kierkegaard’s account of his journey as a writer we can find inspiration for the work of the psychological clinic, taking as a reference the indirect method of reaching the other in the illusion in which he finds himself.

Kierkegaard (1859/1986) says that, in a relationship that is intended to be helpful, the helper must “reach the reader where he or she is and, by becoming one with him or her, keep the space of possibility open” (Protasio, 2014, p. 208). For the philosopher, the issue lies in the way in which one reaches the individual and what concerns him or her. If it is done directly, making his or her illusions evident, the individual soon feels invaded, ignores what was said and, if pressured, even thinks briefly about what was said, but soon calmly returns to the illusion, creating justifications for it. In a direct way, the helper has the illusion of being able to give what only the individual can achieve for himself or herself. The

indirect method, on the other hand, presents the other with what is at stake, but in a subtle way, giving back to him or her what belongs and is only his or hers.

Considering the importance of indirect communication, Feijoo (2000) states that it is up to the helper to get closer to what is shown in the other person's own existential situation, in what touches and disturbs them, in order to slowly return it to themselves, taking care to withdraw at the right moment when they need to be in their solitude, "so as not to witness the recognition that man makes of himself for having lived an illusion" (Feijoo, 2000, p. 73). This indirect form of communication can occur in several ways: as irony, questions that can return to the person the issue that is being presented to the psychologist, metaphors, among others (Feijoo, 2008). However, it is necessary to be in the addition.

Although the Danish thinker states how impossible it is to encompass the existence and know the other more than he knows himself, Kierkegaard (1859/1986) emphasizes the importance of the addition of the one who intends to help. The addition consists of the questioning and reflective element that the helper-psychologist has to offer to the individual who seeks help. Thus, it is precisely because the psychologist knows that the individual is fundamentally freedom, that it is possible to question the illusions, sedimentations and orientations of the *whole world*, of the crowd (Feijoo, 2012). Only in this way will the psychologist be able, at the very least, not to sediment the illusions of the one who seeks the psychological clinic.

Humility and patience are also fundamental aspects for building a relationship that aims to help. They are important because if we are not in these atmospheres, we may find ourselves in the illusion of a knowledge-power that is not possible for us. We may believe in a power to generate a transformation in the other, which only we can experience for ourselves; the illusion of being able to advance in the reflection of the other's issues in an impatient way, whose time will only be given to the measure and process of the person being helped. The psychologist who does not see himself in humility, but rather in pride, cannot help the other, because, as Feijoo (2000) tells us, his desire becomes to be admired and recognized. In this desire, he loses the task of being with the other in the unveiling of the existence that is his own. In the illusion of superiority, the psychologist, who is proud, only sees himself in the relationship, and the most valuable thing, which is the other and the closeness to himself, is lost. Inspired by Kierkegaard's reflections, Feijoo (2000) says that helping does not mean being sovereign, but rather being created. Helping does not mean being ambitious but rather being patient. Helping means having to resist, in the future, the accusation that one is mistaken and, therefore, incapable of understanding what the other understands. Despite all this, helping without fear, even though one knows that, in truth, this task is impossible to carry out without fear and without trembling (Feijoo, 2000, p.74).

We understand that a psychological clinic that follows Kierkegaard's thinking takes on the task of helping others to overcome the illusion of being what they are not, pointing to the possibility that individuals can find answers to the questions that torment them and become what they are, that is, take on the task that is theirs in their existence. This clinic is therefore responsible for understanding the ways in which individuals try to keep hidden the atmosphere of anguish and tension with their existence, so that, in this understanding, they can help them on the path to seeing themselves. The clinical psychologist cannot reach the moment when the individual sees themselves, however, they can accompany the other in the process of life, questioning the sedimented meanings, helping them to reflect on their established truths, the justifications that permeate their way of dealing with themselves and with what is presented to them. Returning to the other, like a mirror, themselves, what worries them and makes them seek help, always sustaining the possibility of transformation, of sudden eruption.

In the phenomenological-existential psychological clinic inspired by Kierkegaard, there is no search for a cure for a disorder, but rather an opening to the possibility of the other person encountering themselves, of the sudden, knowing that this moment comes as a fright. Existential clinical psychology encourages the other person to reflect on their existence in its multiplicity, to think about how they deal with themselves, with others and with the world, to unravel and weave meanings that give substance to their existence. Knowing that, when we get closer to ourselves, we do not start to do things in the contemporary world better, such as working, being productive, proactive etc., but everything we do becomes more evident to us, everything becomes clearer, including our relationships with others and with the world.

Psychology inspired by Kierkegaard is moving towards a type of care in which the atmosphere of anguish is extremely relevant due to its constitutive and unique nature in bringing the individual closer to himself. Following the indications of Haufniensis (Kierkegaard, 1844/2016), we believe in a psychological clinic that approaches experience as it reveals itself, without relying on assumptions, with conclusions that anticipate what is revealed in the showing itself. The psychology that we affirm, therefore, is one that, according to Protasio (2014), sympathizes with the interests of man and that leans, like a doctor at the patient's bedside, to listen to the speech of anguish and despair, knowing that it is there, in the space of speech, that possibility lies. And that it is from possibility that a transformation can come (Protasio, 2014, p. 219).

The possibility of transformation is of special importance for the practice of clinical psychology (Feijoo et al., 2015), considering that it is precisely this atmosphere of possibility that must be ensured in a relationship that aims to help, since the interest, that is, what unites those involved in the clinical process, is precisely the possibility that another possibility may occur (Protasio, 2014). The psychologist waits patiently, following the manifestation of the existence of the person

who comes to the psychological clinic. In this waiting that occurs with the other, something can erupt, existence can be revealed and, in this manifestation, there can be a transformation, as Protasio (2014) tells us.

The psychologist “listens” to the speech of anguish and protects its space, reaffirming faith in the possible, because it is in this space that freedom can reveal itself. By revealing itself, freedom can constitute a transformative moment. From a privileged listening, it is therefore up to psychology to protect the space of possibility, that is, the space in which anguish returns man to himself and his possibilities (Protasio, 2014, p. 225).

Feijoo (2000), in his pioneering study on a phenomenological-existential clinical psychology inspired by Kierkegaard, states that it is up to the psychologist not to obscure the “restlessness inherent in the condition of recognizing one’s existential indeterminacy: anguish” (Feijoo, 2000, p. 111). Rather, he should try to maintain the atmosphere of anguish of discovery, enabling the individual to recognize his character of openness to possibility, knowing, however, that this recognition occurs suddenly, in the transformative moment of anguish.

In this way, we find in Kierkegaard’s thought the foundations for thinking about a practice of psychological clinic that recognizes anguish as a constitutive character of man’s way of being and not as a pathology or problem that must be cured, eradicated, overcome, as Feijoo stated (Feijoo, 2000; Feijoo et al., 2015). Rather, it is an aspect that returns man to himself, to his task and justification in existence.

Psychological appropriations based on humanism and phenomenology in the experience of anguish

In this paper, we show how the perspectives that are called existential are inspired by Kierkegaard’s thinking on anxiety to clarify the similarities and differences between the existential-humanist and phenomenological-existential perspectives in psychology. Our main objective was to answer the guiding question of the research: the way in which each of these perspectives appropriates the concept of anxiety, as developed by Kierkegaard, points to significant differences in the clinical action in these two perspectives, preventing them from being considered the same.

We have concluded that humanistic psychology, inspired by Kierkegaard to build its foundations, presents radical disagreements with phenomenological psychology. These points include stating that anxiety is a threat to freedom; considering freedom as something that concerns free will, the will; as well as thinking of the individual as possessing an intrapsychic mechanism that develops causes and effects in relation to anxiety, in a subjective interiority. Furthermore, humanistic existential psychology prioritizes the development of an identity-based *self*, with an essential power, which asserts itself through characteristics external to itself, these being the essential values of its existence.

The phenomenological-existential perspective, in another movement, supports the absence of a priori determinations of the human being, affirming that the same must constantly make and remake itself in existence, in seriousness with its task of existing, considering the human being for its nothingness, and not for its positivity. The foundation of existence is, precisely, to be freedom as a possibility before possibility, a freedom that occurs in a constant movement. Anguish, therefore, awakens the individual to his own character of nothingness, revealing to himself, in an instant, the reality of being freedom. The foundation of the individual, in this perspective, is indeterminacy. Therefore, there is no *self* or power that defines the human being in advance.

In clinical psychology, from both perspectives, the way in which the individual and anguish are understood is extremely important for us to think about their actions. In clinical psychology, existential-humanist psychology, we identify some essential elements such as the conception of a psychic interiority, a potentiality, the premise that psychic health can be achieved and anguish as something that can and should be cured and transformed into productive power. In clinical psychology, the phenomenological-existential clinic is based on the indeterminacy and nothingness of the individual, health as something to be continually achieved and regained in existence, and anguish as constitutive of the individual, which reveals his or her own character of freedom.

Thus, we find crucial differences in the performance of the existential-humanist and phenomenological-existential perspectives in relation to anguish. These differences prevent both from being considered the same or even similar.

Final Considerations

Both in the appropriation of the concept of anguish and in the consequent clinical action in psychology, the perspectives addressed in this work, the humanist-based one, represented by Rollo May, and the phenomenological-based one, by Feijoo and Protasio, highlight important differences to clarify the identity of each of them.

In the formulations on anguish based on humanism, we identify that the experience of pathological anguish points to something that needs to be cured, to release the individual’s productive power. In this potentiality, freedom is considered as free will, remaining, in this perspective, the binomial freedom and responsibility.

Anguish understood on a phenomenological basis is constitutive of existence which, in an original opening, reveals in this opening the very character of freedom, here understood as possibility and not as free will. In other words, binomial

freedom and responsibility are not established by a causal relationship. Responsibility comes to be understood as the care for the very task of existing.

We conclude that there are crucial differences in the way of understanding anxiety that have repercussions on the clinical practice of existential perspectives based on humanism and phenomenology. Therefore, we understand that how each of these perspectives appropriates the elements developed by Kierkegaard about anxiety prevents both from being considered as synonymous or even similar. Finally, in theoretical foundations and clinical practices, existential-humanism and phenomenological-existential psychology refer to two completely different perspectives in psychology. This study undoubtedly provides theoretical and practical contributions to clarify the differences between these two approaches to the issue of anxiety. We believe that the misunderstandings present in the way this topic is presented in psychology training courses can be corrected by clarifying this topic in this study. We emphasize, however, that there is a need for further research to be developed so that these misunderstandings can be definitively clarified.

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