

Skills in Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy

Emmy van Deurzen and Martin Adams. (2011). London: Sage.

All too often new books on counselling and psychotherapy fail to directly address the needs of students but instead serve to regurgitate, albeit in an updated form, what others have already written. *Skills in Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy* is a notable and welcome exception to that tendency. This book sets out to provide a more practical introduction to existential counseling and psychotherapy than we have seen before and, in the process, addresses a key issue for so many students of the existential approach, the lack of guidance in the literature on what they should *actually do* when working existentially with a client. The book is structured into eight chapters, beginning with an attempt to define and situate existential counselling and psychotherapy and then a discussion of the personal and professional qualities needed to become a therapist, before moving on to outline the foundation for all practice, the phenomenological method. Whilst the phenomenological method is necessary for existential therapy it is, of course, not sufficient and Chapters 4 to 6 engage with key ideas from existentialism that provide the theoretical backbone of practice. The penultimate chapter focuses on the practicalities of working as a therapist with the book ending with a summary of the key ideas that have been espoused, a glossary and suggestions for further reading (and viewing).

The huge value of this book comes from the wonderfully practical approach that is taken throughout. Instead of simply parroting ideas that for many seem vague or even incomprehensible, the authors provide concrete suggestions for practice. This is a brave and very welcome move and will ensure that this book becomes the key text for students (and experienced practitioners alike) struggling to comprehend exactly what they are supposed to do when working as an existential counsellor or psychotherapist. The real highlights of this book for me are Chapters 3, 4 and 5 where the authors provide the most practical guide to phenomenology and existentialism in practice that I have ever read. Throughout these chapters concrete suggestions for interventions are supplemented by client vignettes (with commentary) which serve to bring the different elements of practice to life. Detail is provided about the heart of our approach with information lightly presented on theory, much practical advice (or perhaps I should say, wisdom) and exercises designed to reflexively engage the reader. Whilst the theory is very light, and students will need to look elsewhere for theoretical depth when they write their essays, this is actually a positive rather than negative thing here. This book is not about the minutiae of theory but an invaluable guide to the skills needed to work effectively within this particular therapeutic approach.

There are of course omissions and areas of disagreement but it would be remarkable if there were not. One area of disagreement, for instance, lies with the argument forwarded at the very start of the book about the reluctance to prescribe the limits of this form of psychotherapy. Van Deurzen and Adams celebrate the diversity of existential practice, something I would not disagree with, but argue that this diversity is a strength rather than weakness and it is here that I believe we may have a problem within contemporary UK existential counselling and psychotherapy. For me the reality is that diversity is too often a masquerade for ill-informed integrationism. Whilst there is nothing inherently wrong with systematic integration within psychotherapy, too often the result within existential psychotherapy is an impractical hotchpotch of ideas and techniques, which do little to focus the therapist (and perhaps, most importantly, client) on exploring their worlds together such that whatever challenges the client faces can be met with renewed vigour. Without some real sense of what lies at the core of an existential therapeutic approach (and for me, and I think also for van Deurzen and Adams, this must be a phenomenological method augmented by existential and hermeneutic philosophy), with real commitment to such a foundation, clients are liable to be met with either a rather watered down or confused person-centred method or cold analytic presence. I appreciate their position that existential therapy is paradoxical and, of course, should not be manualised or simply taught as a set of skills but if our form of therapy is to thrive and really benefit our clients then I believe it is vital that we do not shy away from setting boundaries. These boundaries must of course be tested theoretically and practically as an ongoing process, but without such a foundation we will never mark out our unique contribution to the field and provide clear limits that can truly be tested.

The brief discussion of politics and recognition that the personal is always political in Chapter 2 is, for me, all too brief and also perhaps a little simplistic. The example is given of voting in an election that is given as an example of engaging politically, with the person who abstains from such events described as someone 'who gives up belonging to the wider world of society or who gives up having an effect on it' (p. 33) fails to take account of the variety of ways of engage politically, beyond that of engaging with the establishment. People may be choosing not to vote on the basis of belief that none of those participating in the election are worthy of their vote or that the election process itself is inherently flawed or corrupt and furthermore, such people may also be engaged politically in society in myriad other ways through direct action, protest, community building and so on. The lack of subtlety in this section is a shame but I suspect, at least in part, reflective of a need to keep the book tightly focused on practicalities. Whilst I feel that the political (and indeed, ethical) is something that continues to be lacking within the existential

tradition, others may not be quite so concerned about this omission.

These disagreements (and indeed, any others that I might have chosen to highlight) in no way undermine the value of this book. In terms of meeting the needs of the likely key market (students studying on courses in existential counselling and psychotherapy) it is nigh-on perfect. If any students are reading this review then I would strongly recommend you buy this book. Indeed, I would recommend that anyone interested in existential counselling and psychotherapy, whether student or experienced practitioner/teacher, buy this book and relish the clear, accurate and superbly practical exposition contained therein that is all too rare in this field.

Darren Langdridge

Do You Realize? A Story of Love and Grief and the Colours of Existence

Marion Steel. (2010). Ropley, Hants: O-Books.

Members of the Society who heard Marion Steel's lecture at the 2009 Annual Conference, or read her article in the July, 2010 issue of *Existential Analysis* (21.2), will already be aware of the power, depth and insight of her writing. *Do You Realize?* both confirms and extends Ms Steel's ability to move, surprise and challenge her readers.

Do You Realize? begins with a psychotherapist, *M*, recalling the death of one of her hospital clients, Mina. The reverie of their time together provokes *M* to detail her account of a romantic encounter in her life which, through Mina's death, she can now begin to explore and consider. This revealing investigation of a lost relationship makes up a substantial part of *Do You Realize?* and is written in various styles - short epigrammatic challenging and disturbing statements reminiscent of Nietzsche, snatches of remembered conversations and discussions, and (at times lengthy) poems. Interspersed with these are various philosophically-imbued explorations focused on questions and concerns surrounding relatedness. In another author's hands, this reliance upon multiple foci could have easily irritated and confounded the reader. That this is not the case, and that everything flows beautifully (though, personally, I thought that some of the poems' power was blunted by their unedited length), is indicative of Ms Steel's skills and qualities as a writer.

Throughout the text, readers are also provided with accounts of *M*'s work as a hospital-based psychotherapist. Interestingly, much of what is recounted of *M*'s encounters with clients focuses on dreams - the clients' and *M*'s own dreams. Although little is stated explicitly about a way of working with dreams from an existential perspective, what is conveyed and recounted seem to me to capture with precision an attitude of respectful

'staying with' the dream world experience. Equally, the book recounts *M's* own personal struggles with disconnectedness and death. I found this section of the text to be particularly moving and searingly truthful.

The writings of two writers in particular influence both the content and overall feel of the book. Heidegger's works - especially the later metaphysical papers that explore the 'no-thing' within Being - permeate the book as a whole. But, perhaps even more significant, is the input provided by the author's use of various key ideas and themes presented by the French poet, novelist, and social critic, Georges Bataille. Bataille is probably best known for his highly original (and, for many, highly disturbing) writings on eroticism which he saw as the pivotal means of 'assenting to life up to the point of death'. It is in the spirit of this Bataillan sense of the erotic that *Do You Realize?* can be described as paean to eros.

About a quarter of the way through *Do You Realize?*, the author writes:

In his book, Inner Experience, the philosopher Georges Bataille wrote: "We are no thing, neither you nor I, beside burning words which could pass from me to you, imprinted on a page: for I would only have lived to write them, and, if it is true that they are addressed to you, you will live from having had the strength to hear them."

As I fell upon this passage again while preparing this review I thought how apt they seemed in capturing something of my engagement with *Do You Realize?* and, through it, with its characters and its author.

There are (many) more details regarding the content and direction of the text that I could convey. But it seems to me that to do so would take something both important and pleasurable away from its readers. I'm loathe to do this. So, instead, I will offer one final comment. On the front and back cover of *Do You Realize?* there is a short blurb by the Booker Prize winning novelist, Hilary Mantel. She writes: '*A thought-provoking book: the fascination of its themes, and the delicacy of their handling, will stay with me for a long time.*'

I agree. And I have the feeling that you will, too.

Ernesto Spinelli

Cognitive Therapy: An Introduction.

Diana Saunders and Frank Wills. (2005). London: Sage.

This is the second edition of a book that was first published in 1997. The authors asked therapists in training at that time to describe how they saw the different therapies and their therapists. The image of cognitive therapy (CT) and cognitive therapists that the trainees described was a system that was cold, intellectual, analysing, clever and unemotional.