

Interpersonal Conflict: An Existential Psychotherapeutic and Practical Model

Karen Weixel-Dixon (2017). London: Routledge.

My own relationship to mediation was one of ignorance, so I welcomed the timely opportunity to read this book when it arrived in late April 2020. Lockdown had started to fatigue both me and my wife and the level of conflict between us was exacerbated by our twins (born a few weeks earlier). It is fair to say there is a level of conflict between us and within that a lack of communication. I try to be somewhat forgiving and considerate but a lack of sleep and the continuous face-to-face interaction was testing us both. I looked forward to learning something useful and productive from the read.

The book is logically laid out and easy to follow. There are two main parts, one dealing with theoretical foundations and another about the practice of facilitative conflict resolution. Each part contains a final case vignette and a number of chapters which build, easily and authoritatively, upon the previous words. For example, in the second part Weixel-Dixon begins with a chapter on attitudes towards conflict and resolution, before looking at a theory of emotions and how to work with them. The next three chapters look at skills, strategies and format/protocol/process for managing and facilitating conflict. Finally, there is an examination of ethical considerations.

I admired the level of honesty about what can go on for the mediator during the interactions with clients:

I had some difficulty bracketing my own bias on the issue of responsibility. Max claimed that his addictive behaviour was the result of circumstances beyond his control; if this had been therapy, I might have explored this perspective further.

(p 70)

It takes courage to admit to difficulties with clients and their behaviour. The challenge of bracketing is there for all of us, but especially trainees who may think that it should come easily and naturally, rather than realising what a difficult process it can be in and of itself.

There are some clear ideas that are applicable to therapy in the book, for example when ‘staying-with’ is examined:

...that the facilitator does not add anything that has not been communicated already. To do so would be to impose their own interpretation, and may result in obstructing the party's own, personal clarification; it could also designate the listener as the 'expert' on a situation that belongs to the speaker.

(p 93)

This speaks to the continued theme, worth repeating, that as mediator, one must try and put aside one's own view and 'expertise'. In the attempt to really listen and be-with, we must give up our own 'ego'. That may be easy to agree with as a therapist but for the wider world, it feels more breathtaking.

My biggest criticism is that there are only two case vignettes; they are both insightful in the type and level of description of the mediation undertaken, and in the reflections afterwards. While I understand there are spatial constraints, the uniqueness of each interaction, and the lack of fixed 'how to do this' give rise to my need for more examples. In the first, 'The Family', Mr and Mrs H. are presented as in conflict with their adult son Max who exhibits addictive behaviour. There is a great level of detail around the interactions, initially as a group, then as separate parties and finally when they come together to agree a potential, written way forward.

Some of the other examples in the text are repetitive, such as the queue at the bus stop where a passer-by offers a critical remark about what the author is wearing compared to their husband, and how the reaction is dependent on the context which is repeated twice (p 78). This may have been illuminated due to my reading across two evenings so the duplication is obvious, but it seems a shame that other examples, and potentially those rooted in mediation, are not offered to provide greater context.

But when Weixel-Dixon writes that one "may also become exasperated, if not frustrated and angry, at others for failing to actualise a change that they, or others, or we, deem necessary or desirable" (p 24) in relation to existential givens, I found myself struck by the simplicity of her words. I was reminded of my work with a supervisee who has found herself frustrated in all areas of life, a new experience to her. The general mood of annoyance appears to have coincided with her starting work at an addiction service where there is an explicit desire for client-change and an expectation that the therapist facilitate this transformation, and that in twelve weeks. I wonder, now, whether the assertion of what is an essential requirement of the service, something my supervisee has not signed up to, could be contributing to her overall disposition outside of her clinical work.

There is nothing ground-breaking in the book but Weixel-Dixon is explicit at the start that her aim is "to offer readers the opportunity to consider their attitude towards, and understanding of, interpersonal conflict and resolution" (p 1), and so she does. Perhaps I am harsh and looking to anchor my current frustrations outside of my relationship, or maybe I am forgetting that I am still close enough to my recent training to remember a lot of the texts and ideas offered in the first half of the book. I think to a mediator/therapy trainee the first half of the book is actually useful as it helps to clarify and boil down some existential concepts and ideas.

Would I recommend you buy this book? It is a question I find hard to answer.

The book is short and well written. I think it could add real value to anybody thinking of, or working with families or couples as a therapist, and anybody working in mediation (or considering it). That I struggled to write this review over a number of weeks was in part due to the novelty of fatherhood and its accompanying sleeplessness, as well as the lockdown. I feel I have grown as a result of reading and reviewing it but I struggle to pinpoint precisely how. Perhaps it is my growing awareness of the book's major theme, that everything is personal and all conflict is rooted in the interpersonal, something I am guilty of forgetting at times, that has helped me develop.

Ben Scanlan

Living Your Own Life: Existential Analysis in Action

Silvia Laengle & Christopher Wurm (eds.) 2016. London: Karnac.

Buy this book. Go now. Buy it.

Simple.

In the spirit of encouraging one to live one's own life, I will offer a justification for my instruction. In fact, I will offer several to support such a confident recommendation.

When I first saw the cover, a light yellow, with a darker yellow rectangle, an empty chair casting a shadow with a seated person, I was not particularly enthused. The slightly abstract cover seemed to tick the boxes that therapy books tick, one of a clinging to the hope that purchasers do not judge a book by its cover. Now, having devoured the book, it has caught my eye several times and triggered alluring feelings reminiscent of Fridays in my boarding school where the Catholic tradition of no meat was well off-set against the spotted dick on offer with, specifically for this image, custard. Perhaps the main privilege of being head boy in my final year was basically unlimited supplies of this Friday treat. Where once it was simply a book with a yellow cover, it now summons similar feelings.

Surely, a good, pudding-inspiring cover is enough to sell the book?

Onwards.

In his foreword, Christopher Wurm is clear that the book's motivation aims to "to highlight new applications and methods in...Viktor Frankl's logotherapy...but this is the first book in English to outline the ways in which the approach has developed" (p xiii). On reading this, I realised I had not really engaged with logotherapy in any meaningful way, aside from possibly a third of a lecture on my foundation course. Not something I draw upon at any rate. It makes me wonder why this has not translated across the channel, and I speculate about language, a narrowness of view perhaps and whether existential practitioners in the UK are as welcoming to new ideas as the label suggests. I think back to my own studies and the