

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

demoralising realisation that not only was there Black Existentialism, but that it was not a ‘new thing’ that could be ignored on the basis of history, but that European Existentialism (the philosophical rather than practitioner kind) was preferred on the basis of I am not sure what. Then I remember conversations with colleagues at the Minster Centre who have more widely read existential practitioners than I have (or at least can cite them) and who are shocked that I had not encountered more than a page of the works of Emmy van Deurzen or Mick Cooper, nor any Irvin Yalom in favour of philosophers themselves.

This book is a practical, useful aid to practice and I cannot help but wonder if as a community of existential practitioners we do ourselves a disservice by not encouraging, or demanding, that the approved training institutes update their teachings to reflect newer thinking (not that this is ‘new’). While Wurm may be limited in his goal, he more than meets it.

One criticism I have – and I want to get this out of the way early and, if you have read past my unequivocal introduction, you will read beyond this paragraph as well – is the medical leaning evident in some of the writings. It speaks to a view on mental health that does not align with my understanding of existential psychotherapy. Given that all the authors are members of the Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis in Vienna, I wonder if there is a societal construct at play. It seems that psychiatry and doctorate degrees are mandatory – the list of qualifications of the authors just enforces a desire for postgraduate study, rather than a firm leaning toward medicine – in a way that the English/UK system does not.

One of the most enlightening chapters is the fifth, by Helene Drexler, entitled ‘Steps towards meaning: the method of grasping meaning’ where she details her interpretation of Alfred Laengle’s ‘Method of Grasping Meaning’ (p 66) derived from the work of Frankl. She gives an initial overview of the theory of the four-step process in two clear, concise and punchy pages and does not fall into the trap of sounding like an academic textbook. Interestingly, and helpfully, Drexler identifies questions common to the individual steps, such as those that help the client gain awareness (the first step) by asking, ‘What is the situation like? What has happened? What is possible now?’ (p 67). I found this useful as a theoretical grounding, even if the questions used were not ones that I could feel forming in my mouth. Having identified her four steps (awareness, assessment, decision and execution), she uses three case studies to demonstrate the experience in each of the steps.

Perhaps the most intriguing case was that of Karola M., who wanted a family while the focus of the first step of assessment was on her “numerous activities, hobbies and achievements” (p 72). The author articulates coming up against a barrier whereby encouraging her to revisit the feelings and experiences around playing the piano, but her answers were the same. At

this point Drexler writes, “I realised that the messages from her childhood and her fixed ideas did not allow her to feel the value of a given situation. At this point we parted from the method of grasping meaning and turned to working through the obstacles of Karola’s biography.” (p 72). I found this inspiring; I am not sure I have read anything that so sharply exits a case study on the basis that the method advocated is not working. It implies that the four-step process can be limited, something I think existential therapy as it was taught does not readily do. It also seems to suggest a deep commitment to working for the client ethically, rather than dogmatically for the therapist. This is what makes the chapter more realistic and potentially truthful, rather than just acting as a billboard for the method.

I thoroughly enjoyed other chapters as well, including Christoph Kolbe’s ‘Meaning and happiness: on the vital significance of meaning’ where he examines what happiness is, and offers ten preconditions and attitudes for personal happiness. That is not to say I agree with all of them, some positions are a challenge, but there is a strong provocation in his words and a certainty that I found useful. I can see how I might offer this to some clients at various stages of the work.

Although this is an edited book, it feels more like a collection of works rather than a number of chapters. Overall, it contains a good balance of in depth case studies, theoretical foundations and challenging provocations.

I was not joking in my introduction. I thoroughly recommend this book. It is different from almost any therapy-related books I have read, and importantly it reads easily in English, something I was slightly nervous about given the entirely international authorship and previous experiences with non-English writers – Heidegger immediately springs to mind – which have left me scrabbling not just in a philosophical but also in a linguistic sense. I feel there is enough in this book to interest anybody, ranging from the newest of new trainees to the most experienced of old hands at this therapy lark. Even if you disagree after reading your purchase, the creaminess of the custard cover will appear comforting in the testing times that we find ourselves in. My horizons have been expanded and my energy truly lit. I can give it no greater endorsement.

Ben Scanlan