

too easily stunned, intimidated, ignorant of what is happening ‘out there’ and too eager to see the other side of any question which isn’t helpful when dealing with murderous fanaticism (p312). All true, but as this book makes clear, the ideal of a humanistic way of life has shown impressive staying power in the face of active opposition to its rebellious authority-challenging adherents and ideas. We can hope it will continue to inspire, flourish and evolve despite those who would destroy it in their pursuit of power and control.

Diane Pringle

References

Bakewell, S. (2011). *How to Live. A life of Montaigne in one question and twenty attempts at an answer*. UK: Vintage Publishing.

Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy

Karen Weixel-Dixon, 2020. London: Routledge.

I have been interested in groups for most of my adult life. Initially through coaching rugby, a challenging and sometimes hostile environment to lead and mould, then as a member of variously themed groups as a psychiatric inpatient. Upon my release I joined a fortnightly men’s group where I stayed for several years until I could no longer combine it with my private practice. Last year I joined a quarterly men’s workgroup that was recommended by a couple of unrelated friends as a good place. Given my background as a participant in groups, I have long harboured a desire to set up a group work practice, but it is unlikely I will develop this until my commitment to the after-nursery/school situation of my children can change.

I was excited to read this book. It is straightforwardly laid out. A vivid and accurate introduction precedes three parts which have numerous chapters within them: Modern Western Origins, Being and Doing, and Doing and Being. Each chapter has its own reference list that is simple and accurate, and each part ends with a summary and conclusion. As a result, all can be comfortably read as standalone.

The first part is a quick tour in thirty pages through the origins of thought around groups, drawing on Lewin, Bion, Folks, Rogers and Yalom. The section covers a balance of the authors’ thoughts and critiques as well as how earlier ideas are positioned and considered today. The Being and Doing part proposes a model of existential phenomenological thinking around group psychotherapy in chapters modelled on the authors’ take on important existential givens and themes. It is well-argued, shows a relatedness to previous works and that there is a consistency in Weixel-Dixon’s thinking. The final part, Doing and Being, is the most instructive and inspiring part

as it deals with the ins and outs of being in, and facilitating, a group. At sixty pages, it is somewhat dwarfed by the Being and Doing section. This is a shame as this is where the specific experience of the author, rather than their 'thought leadership' (eye-roll at myself there) shines through.

I have reviewed previous publications by Weixel-Dixon and this work stays true to some aspects of what I have come to expect through experience; there is a vulnerability from the author, an openness, a brevity and a real depth of understanding that shines through. Recently, I was talking to someone who suggested that too many authors write one way and speak another. Perhaps, but for me, I hear Weixel-Dixon speaking as she writes/I read. That is a (somewhat) rare and precious thing. One strange exception occurs at the start of Chapter 13 when she cites herself in the third person rather than owning her previous work through a "as I've previously written...". I found this jarring as I read it and even looked at the cover to make sure I had not completely mis-remembered the author, as it felt overly academic. This is obviously a criticism, but one born out of its jarring nature compared with the ownership displayed elsewhere in the book.

My biggest criticism is an absence of more examples. Not that there aren't any...there are, and they are great...but, and I write this as a reader and a psychotherapist, the book could have been an extra twenty pages longer and still under the two hundred-page mark and therefore still 'small'. I want to acknowledge that this is often how I am left feeling by books in our profession, so it could be something I struggle with; I like some reassurance as to what could happen, and how she would have managed it. Perhaps my desire is somewhat un-existential in nature, and I should feel more comfortable with uncertainty after years of living and practising, but I stand by it nonetheless. To reinforce my point, I feel I should give a very specific example. In ending a group section, she writes

This is not to say that the facilitator shouldn't disclose their own reflections on the eventuality. In fact, such a revelation may well be just the encouragement the others need to consider and articulate their views on the matter. I recall an instance in which I revealed that I would miss the meetings of a group that had met weekly for eighteen months. Some members of the group were a bit taken aback by my disclosure.

(p126)

This provides me with insight into how the group was able to use her disclosure to explore their own experience. Yet, I am willing to bet my fee for this review that she has several other experiences around endings of groups that could have really fleshed out other depths of disclosure, whether she disclosed less and, if so, why, and her own experience of disclosing

or the group potentially not being that interested in her disclosure or the ending.

I would not hesitate to recommend this book to anybody with an interest in group work, whether that be of an existential nature or other orientation, anybody who works with groups in a non-therapeutic setting and wants to better facilitate them or anybody who wants to gain a greater understanding of the existential position with a degree of clarity and unwasted words. This is a useful read.

Ben Scanlan

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