

Book Review

***Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy*. By Karen Weixel-Dixon. Routledge, 2020.**

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Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy packages the primary tenets of existential phenomenology in a concise and clinically applicable work. Repeated explicitly throughout the book, the reader gains both a “why” and “how” understanding of existential phenomenological group psychotherapy—reinforced with clinical vignettes and anecdotal material (Weixel-Dixon, 2020).

The book is well organized, divided into three parts: “Modern Western origins,” “Being and doing,” and “Doing and being.” Within this structure, Weixel-Dixon grants the reader a broad foundation in the theory and practice of group psychotherapy upon which to build an understanding of the theory and practice of existential phenomenological psychotherapy, specifically. With the inclusion of the challenges in doing this type of therapeutic group work, the author gives an implicit challenge to the reader—one likely appreciated by any action-based group worker—to try, fall short, learn, and try again.

In Part 1, Weixel-Dixon provides a survey and theoretical overview of modern Western sources of group psychotherapeutic thought. She discusses five group workers—Kurt Lewin, Wilfred Bion, S. H. Foulkes, Carl Rogers, and Irvin D. Yalom, including brief personal histories of each. Within each section, the author explores which and in what way each group format and theoretical underpinning has endured, and how each is distinct from current group psychotherapy paradigms. In focusing on three classical dichotomies in psychotherapy—inside/outside, nature/nurture, and individual/group—Weixel-Dixon weaves a thread through each section tying directly to the succession of existential phenomenological group psychotherapy.

In Part 2, “Being and doing,” the author describes the existential phenomenological paradigm for group psychotherapy. Through the exploration and description of major themes within this work (temporality, relatedness, uncertainty/angst/anxiety, freedom/choice/change, death, meaning/meaningless/nothingness, embodiment/spatiality, emotions, language), Weixel-Dixon emphasizes the need to understand intersubjective processes and the ways in which the existential phenomenological paradigm does so. In finishing the section, the author reviews and clarifies the suitability of this model for group work, reminding

the reader, “our practice is not an intellectual exercise but a *meeting* of persons who participate in inform, and impact upon our shared world” (Weixel-Dixon, 2020, p. 112), a sentiment shared across all experiential models of group work.

Finally, in Part 3, “Doing and being,” Weixel-Dixon dives into practice, procedure, focal points, process, and challenges in applying the model. Similarly, she does so through the discussion and exploration of a theme rather than strict practical outlines—in this instance, the nature of dialogue. In doing so, the author successfully creates a frame of application in which “listening, exploring, and responding, a cycle of clarification and understanding that can continue indefinitely” is the technique, rather than specific steps or actions (Weixel-Dixon, 2020, p. 2). She creates a frame in which the worker can practice the art, as well as the science, of both listening and group facilitation, finishing the section with a candid look at the challenges this paradigm presents.

Like many texts with the task of synthesizing philosophical and clinical principles into a user-friendly package, *Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy* is limited in those places where the outside-of-the-paradigm group worker may get lost in model-specific jargon. Whereas Weixel-Dixon mitigates this difficulty with her historical background (though with the complete exclusion of Moreno and his triadic system), plentiful references to seminal works of existential phenomenology and explicit naming of limitations, a group worker with a heavier foundation in practice than in various theories may find it burdensome. For psychodramatists, too, the dense psychodynamic parts of existential phenomenology may feel disruptive and counter to the goals of psychodramatic group work. Finally, Weixel-Dixon’s historical background to therapeutic group work has a narrow focus on Western practices, which works in the context of existential phenomenology but leaves questions as to what other types of non-Western group work antecedents may inform this work.

Beneath the critical thinking that comes with reading academic text, this reader assesses books with one question—“Did it enhance my group psychotherapy practice?”—to which the answer is a resounding yes. *Existential Group Counselling and Psychotherapy* is a strong text recommended for all group workers. Regardless of whether or not a group worker practices within this paradigm specifically, Weixel-Dixon provides a frame within which one can assess the intersubjective and interrelated processes that inevitably occur in any type of group.

REFERENCE

Weixel-Dixon, K. (2020). *Existential group counselling and psychotherapy*. Routledge.