

Book Reviews

Existential Psychotherapy and Counselling after Postmodernism: The selected works of Del Loewenthal

By Del Loewenthal

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Reviewed by **Michael R. Montgomery**, social worker and psychotherapist.

After Postmodernism?

This is a most ambitious book in its attempt to capture some of the Zeitgeist around psychotherapy in the UK: the continued debates around CBT, managerialism culture, scientism, privatisation, the place of the political and the social responsibility of the psychotherapist. By looking back, it questions the very heart of current existential thinking and how it relates to practice in light of postmodernism. Postmodernism, once of great interest only to social scientists and broad-minded philosophers, lately has been thrust into a more public audience, with its negative, conspiratorial and anti-semitic critique, being an ever-increasing focal point of the radical right (Jamin, 2014). The thought of 'after' postmodernism is therefore a most intriguing proposition, to say the least.

Del Loewenthal is Professor of Psychotherapy and Counselling and Director of the Research Centre for Therapeutic Education at the University of Roehampton. He is the author of numerous books and papers and is Founding Editor of the *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*. His

extensive career has spanned existentialism, psychoanalysis, critical psychotherapy, humanism, postmodernism, phototherapy, cognitive behaviour therapy and childhood studies. This collection combines new and recent works with earlier writings, drawing together his outstanding research and contribution to psychotherapy theory, practice and research.

The book begins with a newly written introduction – 'Existential psychotherapy and counselling after postmodernism and R.D. Laing'. What follows is an attempt to answer the questions posed in the introduction by considering existentialism after postmodernism (post-existentialism). The writings are ordered into 6 main parts. Part I – *Existentialism after postmodernism and the psychological therapies*, Part II – *Practice, ideologies and politics: now you see it, now you don't!* Part III – *Practice issues and the nature of psychotherapeutic knowledge*. Part IV – *Practice and theory: implications not application*. Part V – *Thoughtful practice or research*. Part VI – *Conclusion: hopefully unending, continually changing and astonishing*.

The aim is best summarised by the author: 'this book is less about existential psychotherapists ... than it is about revisiting some implications for psychotherapy and counselling of existentialism and phenomenology – stemming from those such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau Ponty and Levinas – in the light of postmodernism' (p.3). Although preceded by according primacy to the existential relationship, Loewenthal states that the book can be seen as an evolution of R.D. Laing's approach to existentialism, including the influence of psychoanalysis. If that is not enough to whet one's reading appetite, he also calls out existentialism for its inherent egocentric narcissism

via postmodernism, posing the question 'where is Marxism in existentialism?' (p.4). He reframes psychoanalytic theory as something that can 'helpfully come to mind', in contrast to the full adoption of any theory 'doing violence' to the client (p.6). The consideration of 'others', as highlighted by Hannah Arendt, Carl Rogers and Emmanuel Levinas, is a core influence throughout. Loewenthal lists his assumptions underlying the book, which include: starting with practice, existential ideas and theories have implications rather than applications, psychological therapies are cultural practices, and the political/ideological is everywhere.

Loewenthal begins by trying to capture the essence of postmodernism, no mean feat given it is an umbrella term to catch a wide spectrum of ideas. It is however a worthy one, as he reminds us of the usefulness to practice of retaining a 'radically sceptical questioning attitude of mind' (p.18). He proposes that the postmodern challenge to universal truth can make us more open to the shifting moments of our clients 'truths' and that what is true for one is not true for all. Like Wilson (1966) before him, he argues that contemporary readings of existentialism are dated and losing some of the original capacity to astonish. The alienation of people in a technologically advanced society remains a concern, and the exploration of existential values of meaning and experience is desirable, whilst he rejects the philosophy's inherent narcissism. Loewenthal proposes post-existentialism as a provisional term to reconsider original existential thinkers and to open a space for structural linguists and postmodern writers; a space where the greater possibility of accepting rather than escaping who we are could exist. He re-privileges Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology to promote the intersubjective focus of therapy; post-phenomenology. In sharp contrast to the, at times, impenetrable writing of postmodernism, Loewenthal is adept at simply conveying complex ideas: 'psychotherapy can be considered to be an attempt to carry out phenomenology à deux' (p.12).

Loewenthal moves on to draw from his own work with prisoners, to challenge the notion that

the prisoner's issues are located solely within them. He uses the micro example to highlight the macro issue of society's responsibility for rehabilitation and social justice. Continuing with the theme of politics, he explores the interplay between culture and politics and how politics informs the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE), and the implications for the cultural practice of research. The remaining chapters focus on Loewenthal's pithy editorials, and various chapters on Rogers, psychoanalysis, training and research, and critical psychotherapy. Fittingly he offers the last words from where he began, with R.D. Laing: 'Existence is a flame which constantly melts and recasts our theories. Existential thinking offers no security, no home for the homeless. It addresses no one except you and me' (p.204).

The book is very readable, despite the wordy terms and major references to, at times mind bending, continental philosophers. Although including a wide spectrum of references, Loewenthal reminds the reader of the importance of returning to original texts and the benefits of doing so. The chapters and sections follow a logical progression, drawing from a steady body of work, and building on Loewenthal's core themes and arguments. The gentle introduction to each chapter gives great insight into what Loewenthal is trying to achieve. With a total of only 204 pages, each individual chapter packs a challenging punch but tends to be short and accessible with references conveniently concluding each.

Although referencing many postmodern continental philosophers and theories, well known and otherwise, his focus on the implications of some of these ideas, as opposed to their complete digestion, safeguards him from descending into the abyss of infinite theoretical tussles. Readers must decide for themselves whether this tertiary flyover enhances the author's mission or detracts.

Despite a focus on the intersubjective leading to more humility, the grand ideas within the text can sometimes come across as rather grandiose and at times ironically alienating. Whilst some of the Frankfurt School's pessimistic arguments

remain relevant today such as alienation and the negative impacts of capitalism, coupled with his citing of Marx, Loewenthal may have been better served offering a more contemporary form of socialism to meet the desire for consideration of the political. Whilst commonplace in critical theory and humanities departments, when considering the less academic and more practically inclined reader, the inclusion of these far-left thinkers is a precarious choice and one that may turn some more centrist readers cold to what is otherwise a most challenging and engaging read. The inclusion of these thinkers also highlights a lack of humour or lightness of touch, a quality that I would associate centrally to support existentialism (as does the author when he presents), avoiding it becoming another dogma or grand narrative. Further to that, show me a totalitarian regime and I will show you a humourless situation.

Loewenthal writes with such clarity and humanity, until he discusses postmodernism in more detail. It is difficult to ascertain whether this is his complexity created by covering so much ground in such a short space of time, or the inherent complexity in some of the most intellectual/ pseudo intellectual thought of the last century. Thankfully, if one perseveres with Loewenthal and retains the focus on psychotherapy and counselling then this exploration bears some essential fruit. It would be useful to consider perhaps the arguments that there is a noteworthy swing in the Left towards a focus on weaponising: anti-reason, anti-science and cynicism, that makes the emancipatory potential of original postmodern thought now sound somewhat oppressive (Hicks, 2011).

Maybe given that the stated aim of the book is to look at implications rather than application, without getting snagged on complex conceptual frameworks, Loewenthal rescues himself from a further or more comprehensive critique. However, in doing so it may leave a less well-informed reader to include these theories in their portfolio without proper due diligence to their inherent values and underlying ideologies.

The book is an enthralling well edited read,

provocative, challenging and opinionated, but never does the reader get a sense that this is coming from any place other than a desire to advance an understanding for better contemporary practice – ultimately with the 'other' always front of mind. We are living in unprecedented times politically and this book makes a courageous attempt at tackling some of the wider implications for society, injustice, and the psychotherapy practice contained within, not outside that society. When considering the definition of existential therapy in the UK, Ernesto Spinelli and Emmy van Deurzen are often the two contributors that come to mind. This current compilation highlights a significant and contrasting body of thinking and output that may be justified in elevating Loewenthal onto the same podium for consideration. 📧

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Existential Psychotherapy: A Genetic-Phenomenological Approach

By Daniel Sousa
2017, Palgrave Macmillan US, 233pp,
ISBN 978-1-349-95216-8
£67.99 (hardback)

Reviewed by **Andrew Miller**, existential psychotherapist,

There are three questions (at least) that preoccupy existential therapists, wherever they are gathered and whether in print or in the flesh: What is existential therapy? How does it 'work'? Is it actually effective? It may be that similar questions entertain and disturb therapists of all theoretical persuasions, but I am convinced that existential therapists have the most fun, and the least success, in trying to answer them collectively.

We have the most fun, I think, because asking fundamental questions about our very being and meaning are at the heart of what existential therapists like to do after breakfast. And we are the least successful because we are prone, in our role as applied phenomenological and sceptical philosophers of individual living, to discount, undermine or 'bracket' almost every generalised, reified, quantified or systematised account of human being. Therefore, a book on existential psychotherapy which attempts to provide a model for it is almost by definition bound to be both of great interest to existential therapists and yet fail to satisfy many of them. Daniel Sousa's *Existential Psychotherapy* is likely to be no exception to this, although he offers useful information on therapeutic effectiveness and ideas to provoke our niche of the therapeutic community.

I would like to declare at this point that my reading comes from the particular and undoubtedly limited perspective of a practising private therapist and not a research psychologist or academic philosopher. And in relation to the evidence for

what I do, philosophically speaking, my heart lies with the unique experiences of individuals, rather than the measurement of statistically generalised abstractions (such as 'outcomes'). Having said that, I confess that my head also quite likes it when the numbers add up to my heart's instincts.

The book opens from the perspective of quantitative data, with an extensive – if somewhat repetitious – chapter reviewing recent research literature on the effectiveness of psychotherapy generally. This takes up about a third of the book, and is intended to show the principles of effective therapy that 'should be integrated into existential therapy' (p. xvii). It is very helpful to have a summary of recent research on therapy's efficacy and the chapter would stand alone as a good review paper.

The conclusions from these research studies about what makes a good therapist will surprise few practising therapists by now, I would hope:

the most efficacious therapists combine the following characteristics: they form good therapeutic alliances with different types of patient; they have excellent interpersonal skills which prove particularly useful in more challenging situations; they are professionally self-critical; they engage in deliberate practice and training over the course of their professional development (p. 68).

Encouragingly for those existential therapists who eschew the use of manualised techniques and prescriptively formalised interpretations or interventions, Sousa says that Saul Rosenzweig's *Dodo Bird Verdict* is still alive and well after 80 years, according to the latest research. This tells us that talking therapies in any of their variations are more or less equally effective. Different methods used by therapists from different tribes – transference interpretations, Rogerian unconditional positive regard, behavioural exposure techniques, for example, – account for only 1–5 per cent of the variation in therapy outcomes. Helpful therapy mostly depends upon a client's motivation and circumstances, the 'common factors' of trust, understanding, acceptance and hope.

Having finished Chapter 1, I was left wondering

about the need for the rest of this book, or indeed why existential therapists continue to bother with trying to define something as abstract as the term 'existential psychotherapy' (apart from the entertainment value of searching for conceptual unicorns, or the political needs of professional accreditation, funding, and jobs). If all halfway human, self-reflective therapists with hopeful and committed clients are well on the way to success regardless of the form of therapy, it is not clear why we need a book on a specific form of therapy, not least existential therapy. However, I believe the rest of the book may be meant to show that practising existential therapy is at least partly about being human, self-reflective people who can form good relationships, and is therefore, by association with the research on therapy generally, effective.

The remainder of the book lays out a methodology of existential therapy based upon an understanding of Husserl's two forms of phenomenology – the static and genetic – and integrating these with the principles of effective therapy found by research:

With the static method, the therapist, through *epoché*, phenomenological reduction and description of his patients' experiences, is able to help his clients feel validated and succeed in other aspects essential to therapeutic processes... With the genetic method, the therapist introduces challenges and re-thinking of beliefs, as well as other types of therapeutic intervention (p. 156).

The book ends with clinical vignettes and a case study attempting to show how the preceding phenomenological ideas and research material might apply in practice.

As someone who is not an academic philosopher, with only a passing knowledge of Husserl's ideas, I found the chapter on his phenomenologies hard going. The explication of Husserl's ideas is philosophically very technical. Here, for example, is Sousa's description of 'psychological-phenomenological reduction' as one element of static phenomenology: 'to analyze the correlation interdependence between specific

structures of subjectivity and specific modes of appearance or givenness' (p.91). You will need to study Husserl in a little detail before you gain much from this part of Sousa's book.

Sousa's subsequent description of a model for existential psychotherapy as a genetic-phenomenological approach then takes Husserl's theories and the general principles of therapeutic effectiveness as the basis for marrying existential relational 'being' with a client, and the 'doing' of specific technical interventions. It was useful and thought provoking to look for my own practices and experiences in amongst the resulting two-headed taxonomies of *Static Phenomenology/Relational Stances and Genetic Phenomenology/Therapeutic Techniques*. I certainly identified much of what I am or do. I also found some techniques I had never heard of before, like 'reflexive reactivation' (perhaps a natural consequence of the variations in existential therapy worldwide).

In the end though, I am not convinced this dualistic classification into stances and techniques is itself particularly phenomenological, or adds much to my understanding or effectiveness. For example, dialogue as a phenomenon in therapy may entail a dialogic attitude on my part (a 'relational stance' for Sousa), but may also arise in my intent to existentially challenge the client (a "technique" for Sousa). If I conceptualise one as relational and the other as a technique, I am not sure what I have gained, nor indeed that parcelling up the lived experience of therapy into these categories is itself phenomenological. Being is doing, in other words, and doing is being. Dividing up our experience between the two seems, philosophically and psychologically, quite beside the point – which is also what I think the Dodo Bird is telling us.

This book is, however, a serious addition to texts on existential psychotherapy and it deserves serious reading by both researchers studying psychotherapy and practitioners keen on applying Husserlian phenomenology. But for most therapists, I think it has limited value. The research review simply confirms that what we mostly do is mostly helpful, the phenomenological theorising seems

highly technical and obscure, and the model for knitting these two together feels over-systematised and artificial. While Sousa says he admires Rollo May's suggestion that existential therapy is 'an encounter by the person with his own existence' (p. xv), the rest of his book seems to flatten that vision with cumbersome theorising and an anxious (in its length and repetition) appeal to quantitative data.

There are professional political reasons for doing so – Sousa makes the important point that existential psychotherapy is 'an outsider in the world of psychotherapy, excluded from mainstream research and consequently held back from achieving political, academic or social influence' (p.129). I know that some, perhaps many people who call themselves existential therapists are concerned about this agenda. The lack of influence or recognition impacts research funding, job opportunities, and professional status. In this respect, the book may serve a useful purpose in promoting a category of therapy and supporting those adopting that category for their work.

In the end, however, from a practitioner's perspective, the structuring and philosophising get in the way of something more fundamental, which Sousa puts very neatly in his description of Ernesto Spinelli's approach to existential therapy: 'The therapist provides the person with a particular experience of an "other," who, representing all others and the world, simultaneously offers the person the possibility of rethinking and reliving his being-in-the-world emotionally in a safe environment' (p.114). As a definition for existential psychotherapy, this more or less hits the spot. 📍

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Other Than Mother – Choosing Childlessness with Life in Mind: A private decision with global consequences

By Kamalamani

Earth Books (imprint of John Hunt Publishing)

Alresford, Hampshire, 2016, 288 pp

£14.99 (paperback)

ISBN: 978-1782798200

Reviewed by **Dorinda Talbot**, Core Process

Psychotherapist.

It might have a rather cute and clunky title, but *Other Than Mother* is a welcome and timely plea to open up a wider discourse around an enormous taboo – the subject of being and choosing childlessness in a rabidly pro-natal world.

The book is aimed primarily at those who are in the process of deciding whether to have children, as well as those who know that they will not. The latter category includes women like myself whose childless status is less about consciously and conspicuously drawing a line in the sand and more to do with circumstance – as well as motherhood simply never being the primary guiding force of life. Kamalamani acknowledges the extensive grey area between those who are intentionally or voluntarily childless and those who are unintentionally childless: 'There can be an overlap between those of us who do not choose to have children and those of us who are childless by circumstance. From this point of view I rather like [Ellen] Walker's pithy... definitions of: childfree by happenstance, childfree by choice and childfree by circumstance' (p.16).

Kamalamani briefly considers who the childless actually are, how they have traditionally been defined and the way trends are changing. Research in this area is beginning to open up, but there is a need for more. Apparently, until recently, studies failed to distinguish between voluntarily and involuntarily childless women altogether. Today there is a growing trend of childlessness in the UK,

Europe and the US (around one in four women in the UK and the US are remaining childless) but it is still not completely clear how many of those women are consciously choosing not to have children.

Later in the book, the author mentions the work of California-based psychoanalyst and writer Mardy Ireland, who categorises women without children in a particularly interesting way – as traditional, those unable to have children for biological reasons; 'transitional', women who may want to have a family along with other life goals but who delay childbearing until it is too late; and 'transformative' women, who positively choose to remain childless. What a different spin the word 'transformative' offers compared to the derogatory term 'barren'. Although Collins English Dictionary describes 'barren' as an old-fashioned word, the term continues to colour the way society views childless women, and it is still used in a pejorative way today – most famously in the recent past to suggest that former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was unfit to be a politician.

But the main purpose of *Other Than Mother* is to throw light on what comes into play when grappling with the question of parenthood. The author describes how 'it can be illuminating – even liberating – to understand how we arrive at the decision as to whether or not we will try for children, helping us better understand ourselves, each other, and our life purpose' (p.133). The book is not an academic treatise or a feminist analysis, but rather a personal reflection that traverses broad territory without drilling down exhaustively into any one topic. The author decided to write it after fruitlessly searching for a book that would capture the spirit of how she might 'give birth' in an alternative sense, by 'giving expression to my nurturing and creative instincts, through living, working, relating, and Buddhist practice. Honoring life without producing an earthling. Being a woman but not choosing to be a mother' (p. 5).

Other Than Mother functions as a guidebook, even a workbook of sorts. Comprised of 42 short chapters, it is divided into three sections that 'roughly equate to the before, during and after

phases of deciding not to have children' (p.21). Kamalamani admits that this process is not as neat as the above statement would have us believe, but rather a messy, mysterious journey that is likely to unfold over decades, which may explain the repetitive feel to some of the themes that are suggested for exploration. Most of the chapters end with a series of questions or 'reveries' designed to encourage the reader to reflect on her own life (some are twee headed 'A pregnant pause', a device that I feel detracts from the gravity of the subject). Among various themes and topics, we are invited to think about the cultural conditioning surrounding motherhood and childlessness; role models and influences; familial patterns; our hopes and dreams; and our relationship to the earth and the crises facing the planet. And throughout, Kamalamani talks candidly about how the decision-making journey has been for her and what has been most inspiring and encouraging along the way.

Each section, as well as the individual chapters and meditations, can be read independently, which is just as well because there is a lot of food for thought here, and not everything will be relevant or of interest to all readers.

On the whole, I found the essential subject matter of *Other Than Mother* to be refreshing, inspiring and galvanising. The topic is not only pertinent to me personally, as a childless woman – as 'other' – but also in terms of my work as a practising psychotherapist. For the vast majority of my clients, who are mostly under 40 and without children, the baby question is highly relevant to their enquiry. In one way or another, they are all seeking greater connection, creativity and clarity in their lives, but does that have to involve becoming parents?

This question tips us into the territory of Part I of the book, 'The Worldly Winds', which looks at the realities and myths of parenthood and non parenthood. Given that society overwhelmingly perceives choosing not to have children as negative, how free are we to take the road less travelled – let alone embrace that choice? As Kamalamani says, 'the assumptions, rules, norms and prejudices of our

societal conditioning seep into every corner of our being' (p. 83). That may seem blindingly obvious, but the more we are invited to look at the elephant in the room the bigger it seems to grow.

For instance, I am a mature, childless woman living a fulfilling life in London, one of the most culturally diverse and tolerant cities in the world. And yet to what degree am I metaphorically creeping around the edges, subliminally feeling somehow lesser? Before reading Kamalamani's book, a friend related that in reply to a question about my status from her 14-year-old daughter, she had informed her that I had 'missed the boat'. I was stunned into silence – the very silence that defines and maintains this or any taboo. In one throwaway comment, I was cast into that desolate, barren, no-good place. You've missed the boat and that's the end of it. For me, *Other Than Mother* gives permission to that silenced voice, the one that says, *hang on a minute, whose boat are we talking about?* Actually, I'm on my own boat, and from my perspective there is absolutely nothing missing – this is my life and I deeply appreciate it.

Finding a voice and a presence as an emerging body of 'transitional' and 'transformational' childless women is a theme that runs through each section of the book. Not only is there encouragement to reclaim stereotypes and the notion of being 'other', but there is a recognition of how vital it is to offer inspiration and new models of living to younger women – as well as men. My friend's daughter, my nieces and nephews, need to know there is more than one boat.

Of course, it is not only important for individuals to feel empowered to consider alternative ways of living creatively in the world, but as the book's title suggests – continuing to populate the earth as humankind has been comes with massive global consequences. Part II of the book is a more personal look at the nuts and bolts of the decision-making process, but also contains the key chapter 'A private decision with very public consequences'. With the population of the planet now exceeding seven billion, it is strange that having a child is considered to be a right, 'rather like deciding to buy a new house

or car' (p.57), while at the same time not having children is very often perceived to be selfish. But as Kamalamani stresses, exploring this subject is 'not about whether having children is right and not having children is wrong, or vice-versa ... It is about understanding the consequences of our actions and the sphere of our influence... we need individual and collective courage to open up an area that is still often considered to be a personal rather than public matter' (pp. 128–129).

Buddhist understanding and practice have been hugely important in Kamalamani's life, and wanting to dedicate as much time as possible to committed practice was the original reason why she decided not to have children. So teachings that have been particularly inspirational to the author – from the practice of radical loving kindness to the bodhisattva ideal – are presented throughout the book. Although in danger of feeling overweening at times, Kamalamani's enthusiasm for the Dharma imbues this book with passion, fire and urgency.

For individuals wishing to engage with the truth that we are all stewards of the earth – that everyone is a parent in a sense, regardless of the status of the small self – *Other Than Mother* is a call to action; for those wrestling with whether to try for children it offers heartfelt guidance, and for childless women wanting to find their voice and embrace their status, Kamalamani's book provides both courage and companionship. 5

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