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## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Questioning Psychology: Beyond Theory and Control by Brian E. Levitt, Ontario, Canada; PCCS Books, 2019, 161 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN: 9781910919484**

What gets in the way of us understanding other people? This is the central question that drives Brian E. Levitt's book *Questioning Psychology: Beyond Theory and Control*, published by PCCS Books.

Levitt may be best known to readers of *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies* as the editor of two published collections in which he brought together a range of voices from the international person-centered community to explore contemporary theory and practice in relation to non-directivity (Levitt, 2005) and the actualizing tendency (Levitt, 2008). In this latest book, *Questioning Psychology*, we are privileged to listen to Levitt's voice throughout, as he shares his perspective on the ethics and practice of psychological helping shaped by 25 years' experience of working as a psychologist in North America.

These days, Levitt describes himself as a nomad, having moved away from the person-centered community, and also as an orphan following the deaths of his mentors Barbara Brodley and Garry Prouty. Nevertheless, *Questioning Psychology* is a masterpiece in articulating the ethical values that, for me, are the basis for person-centered theory and practice. Levitt introduces his book as a personal reflection offered as an alternative to the usual textbooks in clinical psychology. His audience are new and experienced psychologists who are beginning to question the dominant belief systems that shape their profession, which - Levitt argues - inevitably dehumanize the people with whom they are working. Although I am not a psychologist, the questions that Levitt asks – and the traps that he shines light upon – are equally relevant for

me in my work as a person-centred counselor, supervisor, trainer and researcher living in Scotland.

The book consists of ten chapters organised in three parts followed by a concluding chapter. The title of each part and chapter is carefully chosen and thoroughly thought-provoking. Levitt explains that the order of chapters is deliberate: moving progressively from the big questions (questioning our reality) to the personal (questioning ourselves to know ourselves better). As I read, I experienced this progress not as a linear journey but a continual re-visiting and deepening of themes.

***'Even a so-called theory of everything does not explain everything' (p. 15)***

Levitt begins Part 1 (Science is dead) by shaking us awake. In Chapter 1 (Life-giver), he argues that questioning is essential for life. Belief systems (such as religion and science) provide guiding stories that point to something beyond themselves but are not in themselves 'real'. Nevertheless, they are powerful, shaping how we see and make sense of the world. Questions challenge uncomfortable ambiguity in the status quo, and highlight a need for change. Levitt reminds us that when we forget to question our belief systems, we give our authority away.

Building on this argument in Chapter 2 (Misalignment), Levitt highlights the limitations of scientific research when biases are unacknowledged and unquestioned, and suggests that psychologists are in danger of obsessing on scientific research as the only credible source for understanding the human experience. He is clear that he does not reject or dismiss psychological science. His intention is to highlight its limitations, in particular when 'objective' data (numbers) are privileged over subjective data, highlighting how much of a person's story is lost without context. He points out that contemporary physicists have moved beyond Newton... and psychologists can too.

Levitt demonstrates this in Chapter 3 (Paradigms lost), by weaving together four key concepts from post-Newtonian physics with the work of Jung, Freud, Perls, Rogers, Buber, Laing, Erickson, Bohart, and poetry of Walt Whitman. He highlights how the complexity of being human can easily be lost in a reductionist Newtonian-type approach to others but promises that, despite the dominance of cognitive-behavioural thinking in the psychology profession, 'these paradigms have never really been lost... all we have to do is seek them out. Science does not have to be dead' (p.41).

***'It's about the other person, stupid' (p. 57)***

Part 2 (Beyond theory and control) takes us on a journey into psychology practice in which, Levitt argues, there is a real risk of dehumanising people when we lose sight of their uniqueness. His focus is on personality theories (Chapter 4: The cult of personality theory), diagnoses (Chapter 5: Diagnosis disorder), personality testing (Chapter 6: Personality by numbers) and language (Chapter 7: Delusion of shared language).

Levitt acknowledges the attraction for psychologists in structuring practice using these frameworks as they provide a feeling of control in the face of another person's distress. Nevertheless, Levitt reiterates, personality theories, diagnostic classification, test results and the language privileged in psychology (which he describes as unexamined theory) are not truths. At best, they provide socially-constructed guiding stories that may act as compasses but cannot explain an individual person. Furthermore, they can do harm in the hands of a psychologist who lacks awareness of the power that they hold. Levitt shares the tension that he experiences as a psychologist, and gives examples of the ways that diagnoses can be misused to control vulnerable people, locating societal problems within the individual. He calls out the system, noting that it does not target issues such as 'racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, anti-semitism, ageism, ableism or a more global bigoted personality disorder' (p. 67) with diagnostic categories, and proposes a new category: diagnosis disorder. Nevertheless, he describes himself as a

cautious optimist, asking readers to consider if there is 'a way to live with the diagnostic system and not dehumanise others, while advocating for change?' (p. 68).

Levitt introduces the work of Carl Rogers as an alternative. He describes a values-driven approach that offers a solid foundation and exquisite flexibility, which requires that the practitioner not only strives to understand the other as fully as possible - from their perspective, using their language. He reminds us of the opportunity we have to learn about context from our clients... by asking questions.

***'Privilege bestows numbness; numbness protects privilege' (p.126)***

In Part 3 (The impersonal is political), Levitt invites us to focus on ourselves and reflect on the way that we can become numb in our work with others: through the systems we work in (Chapter 8: Welcome to the machine), our personal need for power (Chapter 9: It's about the power) and in response to fear (Chapter 10: Fear itself). In his experience, systems create a power dynamic built on roles (as authoritative, professional experts), goals (defined by the system or the experts not the people seeking help), and parameters (usually money and time). Levitt makes a convincing case that the system defines how we encounter other people and the tools we use to listen to them. Safe within our systems, we have the power and privilege to observe the other, requiring them to conform to our reality while we avoid the discomfort of being in their world.

Challenging the numbness this privilege invites, Levitt says, requires dedicated attention to expanding our self-awareness, examining our stereotypes and exploring the fears that naturally arise in our work. Levitt describes this 'a journey of continual return, refocusing and recommitting to awareness, shifting patterns of awareness and returning numbness' (p. 127). He argues that we must question and be honest with ourselves when we feel the subtle discomfort through which our fears present, including fear of the unknown or of not having an answer and looking stupid. Indeed, he suggests,

‘when we don’t feel the need to fight or run away, there are no “difficult patients”’ (p. 138). Blaming the patient merely ‘saves our sense of dignity’ (p. 138). He shares that for him this is the most important message of Garry Prouty’s work: its challenge to the notion that some people cannot be reached.

Levitt tells us that he has found that facing what we fear in ourselves ‘requires a loving attitude towards ourselves, an acceptance and a moving beyond judgement that is quite difficult to achieve and is likely to be an ongoing and sometimes messy process’ (p.142). He finishes the chapter by sharing a lesson learned from Barbara Brodley: ‘I can still hear Barbara’s uniquely warm voice: “Brian, if you need to pee, you should go and pee”’ (p. 144). This, for him, is a simple yet profound reminder that we need to deal with our distractions, whatever they may be, in order to be fully present.

**‘With each passing day, I am learning to be OK with being a schmuck’ (p. 148)**

Levitt concludes with a chapter called Egoless practice. He reminds us that it is what goes on inside us that determines how well we listen. This is our challenge. It does not mean disengaging with our internal world but to become more aware of it and to be curious about how we shape what we hear. Paradoxically, Levitt suggests that if we can become less interested in self – less self-absorbed - then we can become more fully interested in the other. He acknowledges that this is easier said than done. For him, the starting points are humility and taking responsibility ‘for the things I do that might make the other person less human’ (p. 148). This is what being respectful means to him. It requires questioning everything including ourselves. Questioning promotes self-awareness. Questioning enables letting go. Questioning also reminds us of the need to take care of ourselves. Levitt writes:

The work we do can be challenging and draining. We find ourselves soaking up pain and distress. If we are not nurturing and tending to ourselves, we set ourselves up to burn out and shut down. When we

don't take care of ourselves, it also becomes more challenging to be fully present to face the people we encounter in our work. (p. 151)

Levitt's upbringing within the person-centered approach is clear throughout the book and this is acknowledged by him. His words embody the radical intention of non-directivity: letting go of the need to hold power over the other. Levitt shows us how easily and unthinkingly we can exercise power when we over-ride our clients' stories with our own. He reminds us that context is everything and that we have the opportunity when working with clients to ask questions, enter into the context of their stories, their lives, and listen so we can really begin to understand.

Levitt writes in an engaging style and, throughout the book, owns his own context as a gay, cis, secular Jewish man born in the USA, now living in Canada, married to a classical pianist, lover of art, nature and Japanese culture, and working in a specialised field within the psychology profession. Reading his book has opened up aspects of the world that I might not have encountered elsewhere. This reinforces Levitt's message: listening to the other, being open to their context, expands our awareness and the possibility of us becoming open to every other.

In my view, one of the strongest threads throughout this book is its emphasis on the practitioner's ongoing development of congruence (as self-awareness), a prerequisite for ethical, respectful practice. This is a theme that is close to my heart (Stephen, 2023). I admire the accessible ways in which Levitt explains why he sees this as important. For example, in Chapter 4 he writes: 'To love the stranger, we have to recognise also how we are strangers and love our own strangeness [...] we have to know our own shit and be comfortable in our skin' (p. 55). In Chapter 9, he makes clear the cost of not committing to an ongoing process of developing self-awareness: 'Only when we become better at seeing ourselves will we become better at seeing others' (p.129).

I found this book refreshing, powerful, and full of riches that cannot be conveyed in a short review. For me, it was a stimulating re-immersion in the core values of person-centered therapy. For others, it may be uncomfortable reading. I hope that this book finds its way into the hands of psychology, counseling, and psychotherapy students and practitioners across the world: a little trouble-maker reminding us to question everything, especially ourselves.

## References

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## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author

## Biographical note

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