

A Transcontinental Journey brings Transcendental Understanding

Existential Psychology East-West. Edited by Louis Hoffman, Mark Yang, Francis J. Kaklauskas & Albert Chan Colorado Springs: University of the Rockies Press, 2009. 408 pp. ISBN: 978-0-9764638-6-3. \$34.95. Paperback.

Reviewed by Robert Garfield McInerney

Existential Psychology, East-West (2009) is too important of a contribution to existential psychology to merely summarize as a whole; therefore, I will additionally highlight certain chapters (chosen idiosyncratically) while generally reviewing the entire book.

This compelling book comes to us partly from the hands-on work done in mainland China and Hong Kong, in March of 2008, when “a group of United States graduate students and their professor journeyed to China to engage with Chinese psychologists about the theory and practice of existential psychology” (p. 95).¹ They wondered, “how a Chinese perspective offers fresh insights for existential psychology” (p. 95). The journey, which began as literally transcontinental, now in book form, is potentially *transcendental* as it moves us beyond the sedimentary thinking that plagues any longstanding philosophical tradition (i.e., existentialism).

Many chapters actively engage existentialism with the diversity brought by others who have been traditionally outside of existentialism’s paradigmatic comfort zone. The work, then, provides a beginning and corrective step in a desirable and needed direction.

The reader is first offered a lovely *Poetic Preface* by Tom Greening that establishes a mood of humility; perhaps the reader is wise in the striving to know, but foolish and forewarned if seeking *the* truth in any one perspective. After all, how else can we begin the embrace and celebration of *otherness* except with an openness to alterity and difference? And so, the mood is set for various authors to facilitate a dialogue between existential philosophy/psychology with parables of Jesus, film analysis, depth psychology, postmodernism, as well as Western and Bahamian cultural myth. This fine book additionally provides thoughtful biops, and practical application.

Louis Hoffman, one of the editors, adroitly sets the next stage as his beginning chapter ultimately reveals why existential psychology is, at its structural core, amenable to cultural diversity and synthesis. Hoffman exposes the critical tension many of us in the field have long realized – existential psychology has not been active enough in taking up cross-cultural perspectives. This is a sad fact perhaps easily remedied, for as Hoffman reminds us, existential philosophy is by its very nature eclectic, and following the seminal work of Kirk Schneider (2008), it works best as an *integrative* psychotherapy that adapts to our diverse backgrounds.

The existential structures of human existence, as Hoffman explains, are not ethnocentric or prescriptive. Embodiment, for example, recognizes and interprets any kind of lived bodily experience: gendered, transgendered, darker or lighter skin, bigger bodies, smaller bodies and so on. The existential givens of human existence, Hoffman suggests, are a hospitable framework in which to cross boundaries and interrelate with others. But, if any of the existential givens are made into a metanarrative that reduces, measures, predicts and controls, they then become oppressive. Hoffman writes: “The givens themselves are merely conditions that often spark people into creating these grand metanarratives” (p. 11).

Interspersing his chapters with quotes from some of the most influential existential thinkers in history, Hoffman manages to both embrace, and move beyond, orthodoxy, as he tells us, “the ongoing mission of existential thought should be to continuously develop and expand existential thought. Existential therapists should fight ardently to assure that existential thought never becomes stagnant” (p. 59). Hoffman leaves us ready to journey further, across an ocean of ideas, now no longer stagnant waters, but instead an ebb and flow of an “intercultural dialog” (p. 59).

Just as this book has multiple trajectories, it has multiple beginnings. Part I, is decidedly an overview using theoretical and practical chapters; Part II leads us to the *East-West* discourse proper, with *Existential Psychology Dialogues in China: Beginning the Conversation* (Dyer, Kaklauskas, Dow, Saxon, Chan, Yang & Hoffman, 2009). We are presented a brief historical background regarding China’s political and theoretical development and then, to the prospect, “that the Chinese participants would examine models of existential-integrative psychotherapy within their own cultural context and understanding of psychology” (p. 99). Problems of translation, Western individualism, and cultural taboos are pointed out

not pessimistically, as if we cannot understand each other, but as places where we must strive to critically examine our assumptions about any representation of otherness. Moreover, potential censorship from the Communist government is another concern raised in this chapter. Still, the authors “hope that if existential thinkers demonstrate appropriate respect for cultural differences that it will not be deemed a threat to social harmony” (p. 105). The authors understand the *East-West* dialog as a “window of opportunity” and they show us “how Eastern thought might sharpen and improve Western existential psychological theories” (p. 103). A fruitful synthesis emerged, we are told, as the Chinese participants “recognized the value of individual choice, but valued the choice to prioritize the collective. Thus, choice and the recognition that one must own one’s choices are shared by both cultures” (p. 108).

Eric Craig’s *Tao, Dasein, and Psyche: Shared grounds for Depth Psychotherapy* was a pleasure to read. This chapter continues a main theme of the book: that despite the seeming disparate concepts that have been formed deep within a culture’s development, there are common grounds upon which to foster understanding. Craig uses our cross-culturally “distinct languages of being” in hopes of further understanding each other (and otherness) within “the complexity of unity and diversity” (p. 113). Well-written and scholarly, Craig steps deeply into primary and “foundational matters regarding the nature and practice of psychotherapy” without leading the reader into overly abstruse reflection. He does this by showing the “important confluences between three specific approaches to depth psychotherapy: classical psychoanalysis, daseinanalysis, and Tao psychotherapy” (p. 142).

Existential Themes in the Parables of Jesus by Mark Yang allows us to traverse the boundaries between Christianity and existentialism. Yang states: “it is my passionate belief that existential psychology and philosophy share much more commonalities than differences with Christian teachings” (p. 177). Yang juxtaposes Jesus’ life of existential authenticity and responsibility relating that, “We all have our own destinies to fulfill” while reminding the reader that “Christians are called to be *like* Jesus, not to *be* Jesus” (pp. 193-194). To be *like* Jesus means, for Yang, to identify and remember, through parable, the existentially grounded life of the Christian messiah. Jesus struggled in existence, in part, because of the hellish, and all-too-human consciousness (shaped by others) as well as greed, jealousy and power (Sartre, 1989;1956). But, to be like Jesus, to do

as Jesus did, Yang recounts, is to make meaning of our struggles; some may recognize in their struggles the beatific sacrifice of much of it, and endure, even thrive.

Albert Chan's (editor and author) *In Harmony with the Sky: Implications for Existential Psychology* explores the cultural tension between collective views on self *with* society and individualistic views of self *in* society. Using a fascinating case example, Chan wonders "how much China's way of collectivism stifles individual's authentic self as proposed by existential psychotherapy" (p. 320). Chan states:

I believe that individualism and collectivism are continuous variables. No person or community can be characterized as being entirely one or the other. At its best, the collective society allows families and communities to share life experiences, care, love, cooperation, responsibility, and meaning closely with one another. At its worst, collectivism can suffocate creativity, freedom, individual and collective growth. (p. 323)

Living authentically in the face of persecution is a theme found in Ilene Serlin's elegant chapter on the film *Brokeback Mountain*. She interprets the film through the lens of existential (social) alienation and authenticity: "Both men live a secretive double life, and neither is able to commit authentically to either life" (p. 302). Serlin states: "I see this film as showing the enduring power of love. The director set out to sympathetically portray the challenges of two men in love and the human need to live an authentic life" (p. 304). Ultimately, Serlin's goal is to demonstrate how archetypal themes and myths are, in therapy, potentially healing to those struggling with our society's sometimes rigid distinctions of proper sexual identity and behavior. Serlin tells us "We should be as informed as possible about the nuances of all kinds of love and be aware of our own biases and perspectives" (p. 299). Serlin offers an lucid account of Western film and myth, and uses Carl Jung and Rollo May to support her premise that "a mythic approach to psychology aims to help people deal with the real complexity between individuation and adjustment to reality, freedom and fate, and multiple selves and identities" (p. 303).

Junkanoo: A Bahamian Cultural Myth by Heatherlyn Cleare-Hoffman is an excellent example of the unreserved reach of this book beyond conventional notions of *East-West*. Cleare-Hoffman explains,

“Although located in the West and heavily influenced by British culture, *Bahamian culture rightly falls between the East and West* (p. 366). Bahamian culture is, “more collectivist than...most Western cultures, but more individualist than China and most Eastern cultures” (p. 366).

The reader is invited to appreciate that “Families across the Bahamas celebrate Christmas in its usual fashion: church, gifts, food, and time with the family” (p. 363). And then, “As it turns from Christmas night to Boxing Day, people begin to venture downtown for the festival” (p. 363).

A brief, formal introduction to Bahamian culture and the history of the Junkanoo leads the reader to an existential analysis of myth. Here Cleare-Hoffman draws a comparison between individualist and collectivist cultures (a theme that runs throughout the book) and the competition (individual) and celebration (collectivist) that is part of the Junkanoo. She relates, “From an existential perspective, the goal is not to solve the paradox, but to accept it and integrate both aspects” (p. 368).

Another dichotomy pointed out is the constrictive and expansive tendencies of any culture. Cleare-Hoffman clarifies that Bahamian culture may err on the side of “too expansive” but suggests, “Junkanoo provides an important, healthy expression for the expansiveness tendencies in the culture. It also provides a particularly important illustration in that it connects the expansiveness to meaning” (p. 370). This chapter ostensibly ends the book’s journey (aside from the annotated bibliography; a great inclusion). Interestingly enough, the Bahamian culture and myth, not fully East or West, ends up appropriately representing the open, holistic and synthetic character of the entire book.

In sum, the linear destination, and implied arrival, “East-West” does not do justice to the book’s breadth and concern. The reader will be mused, but not bemused, by this book as *bricolage*— as it makes use of many perspectives to re-understand and re-invigorate existential thought (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and provides a text where the practical and poetic merge (de Ceateu, 1984). It is, thankfully, not a “how-to” book nor does it attempt to offer some essentialized account of exactly what is shared by all. Rather than simply crossing an ocean (which, as we sadly know, may lead to enslavement), this work is an *oceanic* journey as William James (1902) described. With no firm anchoring, existence is unmoored in the complexity and splendor of diversity. This is a good thing, as this book attests. In fact, using Ed Mendelowitz’s line on Kafka from his erudite

chapter entitled *Building the Great Wall of China: Postmodern Reverie and the Breakdown of Meanings*, this wonderful book is, in its entirety “the inspired act of creation out of notable decay” (p. 346).

Notes

¹ Louis Hoffman, PhD and many other distinguished scholars from around the world created the *First International Existential Psychology Conference*. The conference took place on April, 2, 2010 in Nanjing, China. For more information, see here: <http://www.societyforhumanisticpsychology.com/spring-summer-2010-1/china-2010>. The Second Annual Conference on International Existential Psychology is set for Shanghai, China, on May 24-27, 2012.

References

- de Certeau, M. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. (S. Rendall, Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2000). “The Discipline and Practice of Qualitative Research.” In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.). *The Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-42). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- James, W. (1902). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New York, NY: Longmans Green.
- Sartre, J.P. (1989). *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage Press. (Original work published 1947).
- Sartre, J.P. (1956) *Being and Nothingness* (H.E. Barnes, Trans.). New York: Washington Square Press. (Originally published in 1943)
- Schneider, K. (2008). *Existential-Integrative Psychotherapy: Guideposts to the Core of Practice*. New York: Routledge Press.