

Questioning Psychology: Beyond Theory and Control

Brian E. Levitt

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In his recent book *Questioning Psychology*, Dr. Brian Levitt takes the reader on a personal and intellectual journey through the field of clinical psychology and mental health practices. His fundamental question asks what gets in the way of our understanding other people? His response to this question examines myriad barriers to understanding including the pathologizing of suffering and distress; reductionist diagnostic practices used in assessing persons; and failure to educate practitioners to question all orthodoxies. He asserts that scientific knowledge can only move forward through constant challenge and leaps of imagination. Levitt states “From my perspective, I am just a Jew who loves to ask questions—questions upon questions. I am uncomfortable when questions are not permitted.”

Levitt’s debt to his intellectual elders including Carl R. Rogers, Gary Prouty, Barbara Temaner Brodley, Thomas Szasz, Jung, and Freud is evident in his defense of subjectivity as an essential aspect of understanding, and the difficult task of self-examination and self-understanding. He begins his essay with a review of the power of belief systems and presents his subversive feminist interpretation of the story of Adam and Havva (Eve). Where, he asks, would we be without Havva’s disobedience? Levitt brings to this work a deep interest in Jewish history and traditions, an appreciation of diverse cultures and literatures, the evolution of science from Newton to Einstein and the profound turning point of learning that the acts of observation are affected by the observer. He also writes from his perspective as a clinical scientist, and from living life as a gay, Jewish man. In this regard, Levitt’s openness about his own struggle with understanding and learning about his own prejudices and stereotypes encourage the reader to embark on examination of our own inner killer (The killer in you is the killer in me). I might add that the last four years have certainly brought that aspect of American citizenry into a tighter focus.

Levitt has the breadth and depth of training as both a scientist and an active clinician to mount a strong, persuasive critique of clinical psychology and social work. Levitt urges practitioners of all stripes to question all ideologies, including our own person-centered and humanistic framework. On one hand, Levitt defends the practice of scientific inquiry, thus aligning him with the project of finding stable patterns in the data,

advocated long ago by Carl R. Rogers and his colleagues. On the other, his chapter on the development and use of psychological assessment instruments illustrates the limits of belief in commonalities, of using a “paint-by-numbers” approach to understanding personality and human behavior.

Levitt describes what a meaningful and respectful process of assessment and evaluation can look like based upon his many years practicing in hospital settings, the courts, nursing homes and with individuals in distress. He ably describes how he honors the persons’ fears that they are “crazy” or “out of control” with kindness and humility and sincere presence. This takes time and patience, and he argues, and an egoless mindset that goes beyond the numbers, allowing him to plumb the context and personal meanings of the other. If you are a student who is pursuing competence in testing and evaluation, this chapter is the most articulate and powerful critique I have seen in my own experience of 30 years teaching clinical psychology. I urge those of you who are educating graduate students who administer these instruments to read this chapter and assign it every term for the foreseeable future. It provides a powerful corrective to oversimplification and arrogant confidence in the collection of data as the final answer to assessment questions.

Levitt’s provides a delicious and hilarious satire of the DSM V’s diagnostic categories with his new entry called “Diagnosis Disorder.” In this disorder, the “the clinician diagnoses distress experienced by other people as a mental disorder” and that the resulting diagnoses are not just theoretical descriptions but instead are true things, in and of themselves. Other criteria state “The clinician is uncomfortable engaging in “treatment” without the diagnostic label, and the clinician treats the diagnosis and not the person. This new diagnosis includes the specifiers, and ratings of severity typical of the DSM. I found it compelling and hilarious at once. This chapter alone is worth the price of this book!

But Levitt also probes the deep problems of this ubiquitous practice in clinical psychology involving “conceptualizing the client.” This was a standard requirement in our professional psychology school in Chicago which Levitt attended. The tests of “clinical competence” required the student to construct a diagnostic picture of the person including the cultural, social class, racial, gender, and sexual orientation factors which positioned the client in the social class structure. I think Levitt would agree with me that these conceptualizations were basically elaborate fictions which encouraged students to categorize and classify the characteristics of the client as if they were important and real. I think that unwittingly at worst

this practice tended to increase stereotypical thinking about client populations.

Levitt, by contrast, inveighs against the fear, and sometimes the numbness, that we experience in the face of the suffering of the other, and recommends nourishing the spirit with music, literature, and art. He says,

I find myself asking how I can open my heart to intense pain and not be consumed by it, so that I can hear it and come back and tell the story as fully and accurately as possible. Without opening my heart to the other person's experience of pain and suffering, can I ever really see and understand them? Can I bear a wound to my heart and stay connected, not get lost in the moment, and not get lost over time to burnout, awash in pain and suffering? I often hear myself saying that the day I can no longer allow my heart to be scarred is the day I will have to leave this field. I hope that day never comes (p. 139-140).

The scope of this book is extraordinary. The wisdom Levitt shares is peerless. I recommend it to any reader willing to ask the big questions and face the uncertainty and ambiguity of human life.

Reviewed by

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