

THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL SIDE OF HEALTH CARE

Ross, E & Deverell, A (2004) **Psychosocial approaches to health, illness and disability : A reader for health care professionals**. Pretoria : Van Schaik Publishers. ISBN 0 627 02567 6. Pages 327.

*Pravani Naidoo
Department of Psychology
University of the Free State
NaidooP.blms@mail.uovs.ac.za*

Psychosocial approaches to health, illness and disability : A reader for health care professionals is a concise, comprehensive academic text geared at both students of health care as well as practitioners in developing and developed regions. Ross and Deverell support a smoothly integrated articulation between theory and practical application with references to research findings and health care professionals' clinical experiences in both international and local treatment settings. While the book maintains easy dialogue with audiences from more developed regions – an international audience should also find the local flavour of the text refreshing and informative - I was struck by its African, and uniquely South African, voice.

The text is divided into four sections, with each section engaging with particular themes that are contemporary to understandings of and the practice of caring for individuals' health, illnesses and disabilities. While they articulate well with each other, the chapters are self-contained, and form an easily accessible reference source for specific theoretical and practical issues.

Part one, the prologue, serves to establish a foreground for the health care professional, introducing what the authors regard as key issues in the social psychology of health, illness and disability. In keeping with the title's promise to engage with psychosocial approaches, the text contributes to existing literature by highlighting the significant role played by the interaction of psychological and social factors in understandings of, attitudes towards, and beliefs around health, illness and disability, and the treatment thereof.

A valuable feature is the text's engagement with those subjective aspects of being human that permeate the experiences of consumers of health care services. In particular, the meaning of chronic disorder and disability for affected individuals and their significant others is considered. The authors accord due precedence to how people make meaning in their lives, and the text outlines how individuals' attitudes, beliefs and frames of reference play themselves out in their experiences of self, of

illness and of disability. Thus, students and practitioners of health care are given insight into the subjective lived experiences and life worlds of those for whom they (will) care.

I was also impressed by the chapter on multiculturalism (p22-34), which offers an integrated, well-rounded discussion of the diverse cultural influences at play within (what are in the South African context largely cross-cultural) therapeutic encounters. A comprehensive range of cultural influences is considered, including language, gender, age, social class, race and ethnicity. I found the presentation of a colourful array of examples from such diverse groups as the South African Muslim Community and the BaVenda set alongside Japanese, Greek and American cultures for instance, to be most enlightening; this broad frame of reference is a commendable feature.

Furthermore, in their discussion of cultural influences at play within health care settings Ross and Deverell affirm a view of Western and traditional African paradigms as in constructive dialogue with each other with respect to understandings of health, illness and disability; they then take this view further through their considerations with respect to serving clients effectively. While these ideas are not new to the health care professions, they are contemporary, and serve as understandings that should warrant attention by students and practitioners of health care working within broader African and South African contexts in particular.

Part two of the text covers psychosocial issues in selected health conditions, illnesses and disabilities, and targets physical, emotional, familial, sociocultural, economic and vocational aspects likely to be associated with the experience of illness and disability at different stages of the life cycle. I have read fairly extensively in this area as my own research is concerned with children with cerebral palsy, and I found the chapter on psychosocial issues in cerebral palsy a welcome addition to existing material. It concisely draws together a number of key issues related to cerebral palsy that are psychosocial in nature and that form an essential consideration for researchers and practitioners alike. The chapter is structured developmentally, from infancy to the early adult years, and speaks eloquently to the range of concerns that face individuals with cerebral palsy and their families. Examples of the host of pressing issues raised by the authors include care and management at infant and toddler stages, the choice of educational programmes during the school years, and psychosocial issues typical of the adult years such as employment and establishing relationships. I think that the health care professional will find not only the chapter on cerebral palsy, but also those on other conditions, illnesses and disabilities including cancer, prelingual deafness, autism and HIV/Aids a ready source of information within the practice context.

Part three is fairly standard in its engagement with issues regarding treatment. The section discusses psychosocial interventions/methods (within the health care context) at individual, group, family and community levels and includes engagement with theory as well as practice issues. The introductory chapter effectively summarises theories/models of counselling, highlighting the strengths and shortfalls of each. This theoretical grounding is used as a basis for a practical move towards presenting highly useful guidelines for practitioners regarding the phases of counselling as well as specific counselling skills. Students are provided with the opportunity to practice what they have engaged with via classroom discussions incorporating such activities as role plays, which are carefully planned and cover issues that health care professionals are certain

to be faced with in practice. Together with role plays and discussion questions, the commendable use of textboxes which are well knit into the text, as well as the presentation of telling photographs – most by (co) author Andee Deverell – that give a human face to the issues being raised, all lend themselves to providing the reader with valuable interactive learning experiences.

While the text so efficiently encompasses psychosocial issues in health, illness and disability, an overt engagement with issues within Positive Psychology would have done much to add to its value for those in the health care professions. Described as “the science of psychological strengths” (Wissing and Van Eeden, 1997; Wissing, 1998) Positive Psychology (also known as Psychofortology) has a growing representation in the South African academic environment as well as internationally. And, while it is not standard practice for Positive Psychology’s concepts to be applied to disabled populations, this text could have served as a fitting introductory arena for such an endeavour.

Numerous opportunities to build on the understandings and perspectives presented arise in the text. The authors’ discussion of resilience, and comments regarding coping and adaptation (p18) are a case in point. Further, the first chapter closes with a fleeting reference to strengths, and maximizing human potential (p19), yet a more thorough engagement with these key issues in Positive Psychology is nowhere to be found. At other places in the book reference is made to considerations regarding patients’ well-being, and the goal of health promotion is discussed within the context of Health Psychology (p10), but the link to wellness within a Positive Psychology framework, and hence an opportunity for even further theoretical groundedness, is missed.

A fundamental principle of Positive Psychology is that treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it entails nurturing what is best for the individual concerned (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This indicates an emphasis on building the qualities that help individuals not just to endure and survive, but also to flourish within their contexts. Hence it is my contention that such a text would have done well, in the present climate of health care practice and research that looks at holistic patient care, to engage more explicitly in attending (on theoretical and empirical levels) to the identification and promotion of strengths and capacities of those individuals receiving health care, with a view to enhancing their wellness. Such considerations already form an integral part of health care professionals’ agendas at the level of practice, and it is disappointing that a text of such quality and relevance should fail to engage fully with issues of wellness as key to understandings and interventions with respect to health, illness and disability. A broader, related issue – one that is, in my view, great cause for concern – is the text’s fundamental lack of any direct and meaningful engagement with a key principle on the agendas of all health care professionals both locally and internationally, namely the goal of facilitating optimal human functioning. That said, Part four, the epilogue, is commendable by virtue of its reflexive stance where health care practitioners are encouraged to care not only for their clients professionally, but also for themselves and their own health and well-being. This serves as a fitting and thought-provoking conclusion to a fine text that is sure to gain the readership of local and international students and practitioners both within and outside of the health care professions.

REFERENCES.

Seligman, M E P & Csikszentmihalyi, M (2000) Positive psychology : An introduction. **American Psychologist**, **55**, 5-14.

Wissing, M P (1998, May 25-27) **Health psychology and psychological health: Explicating the (not so) obvious**. Proceedings of the Second Dutch Conference on Psychology and Health, Kerkrade, The Netherlands.

Wissing, M P & Van Eeden, C (1997, September 10-12) **Psychological wellbeing : A fortigenic conceptualisation and empirical clarification**. Proceedings of the Third Annual Congress of the Psychological Society of South Africa, Durban.