Book Review:

Counseling for People with Severe Mental Illness - Theory and Case Study. Young, K.W., Commercial Press (Hong Kong), 2013

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Globally, severe mental illness (SMI) causes both short-term and long-term disabilities (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2009). In China, there are about 16 million people with SMI (Phillips et al., 2009). Secondary handicaps due to social stigma are common which result in severe deprivation of community re-integration (Social Exclusion Unit, 2004). Such alarming situations further highlight the pressing needs of developing culturally sensitive counseling strategies and practices.

The reviewer was excited when coming across the book written by K.W. Young (a social worker and an assistant professor in Department of Social Work at Hong Kong Baptist University) which is an innovative attempt to analyze how counseling as a social work intervention can be incorporated into the process of rehabilitation of people with severe mental illness (SMI) in Hong Kong (a city of China). Its seven chapters covering causes and interventions of SMI provide a comprehensive review of the etiology as well as the management work from multiple perspectives including biological, psychological, social, spiritual and environmental. For instance, the first chapter which analyzes the risk factors of SMI using "Vulnerability-Stress-Coping-Competence Model" interprets the multi-dimensional interaction of the factors predisposing and precipitating SMI. Instead of mainly focusing on social model which many social workers do, the recognition of "Vulnerability-Stress-Coping-Competence Model" by the author as a social worker and scholar should be able to enlighten the fellow workers to "think out of the box" to widen their horizon on the causes and triggers of SMI. It forms a more comprehensive and hence more solid foundation for them to understand and analyze the management strategies (such as pharmacotherapy, psychotherapy, rehabilitation, and mental health promotion) discussed in the subsequent chapters. Nevertheless, it would even be better if the author can make some critiques on the limitations and drawbacks induced by failure to realize the multi-factorial nature and management of SMI in the current social work practices and hence some implications for future practices so that readers can gain some insights via reflection. This would help to achieve what this book mainly intends to do – boosting the confidence of frontline social workers in managing psychiatric rehabilitation.

Perhaps it is the fact that psychiatry is neither simply a concern of medical science nor social science which makes it so complex that it constantly arouses debates on its origins and hence management. Indeed, debates can be constructive when people involved heartedly open their eyes to realize the discrepancies of the fundamental ideologies of SMI among various disciplines and then analyze the corresponding pros and cons with reference to the global contemporary trend as well as the regional contexts (such as cultural specificity).

This book serves as an opportune initiative to start off the unattempted yet crucial discussion among the various disciplines (at least including social workers and healthcare practitioners) on those old yet unresolved issues such as the recognition of the multiple causes of mental illness and thus feasibility of trans-disciplinary interventions. It does not need to reach a conclusion (actually hard and unrealistic) but at least a start of inspiring exploration and, if possible, consensus. Only then will the people in need truly benefit.

References

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