Book Review

Corrigan PW, Roe D, and Tsang HWH: Challenging the Stigma of Mental Illness. Lessons for Therapists and Advocates

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This is a small book – but exceedingly large in useful content.

This is just one positive comment of the many that could have been selected to open this review, on a helpful book where the delivery of well-presented and updated knowledge on the field of stigma and discrimination is for the sole purpose of prompting and guiding action. But, however appropriate this opening comment may be, it will be incomplete if the reviewer would not hastily add that the book is impregnated by a deep commitment to remove stigma, and more emphatically, discrimination in all walks of life, both ugly expressions of social injustice (cf. chapter 6).

This book assembles in a reader-friendly fashion the expanding knowledge that is accumulating in the field of stigma using for such purpose the contributions of research, practice (with regard to the affected person, the family and the public – the latter represented by its different sectors) and the direct experience of the service users illuminated by several personal narratives. In the authors own words, they address the book to the doer, the activist per se... In other words, the book is geared to all those who advocate for change through anti-stigma and anti-discrimination programs on account of mental disorders.

How do the authors achieve their ambitious objectives? Simply, and intelligently, through the use of the different complementary procedures mentioned above, which dove-tail nicely. This enables the book to have coherence, within and between the six chapters when addressing public stigma, self-stigma, and structural stigma.

But let us not make a (serious) mistake by omission. The reading of this book should not be skipped by people who may (mistakenly) see themselves as no advocates or doers, since they may not lobby for legislation or work in a NGO. This book – or at least parts of it – should be read and discussed by graduate and post-graduate students of the mental health professions, including residents and junior staff, whether they currently – or in the future will – practice in hospitals, community mental health settings, or are engaged in planning and administration. For example, all of them should undertake answering truthfully two questionnaires included in chapter 3 (Challenging the public stigma...) purported to explore their own beliefs about persons with mental disorders and the relation of those beliefs to their values about society (pp. 97 and 98). The reading of this book could sensitize the mental health clinician to issues of self-stigma among service users and carers, often a neglected component in routine clinical practice, despite its negative impact. Teachers may well take this use of the book into account.

The book carries other important tips for each one of the three areas of stigma that are tackled, complemented by easy methods of evaluation. This tendency to evaluate the process and outcome of the anti-stigma and anti-discrimination actions is a salutary characteristic of the programs, which this book promotes systematically throughout. This is moving the field from a do-good stage to a do-right stage, to assure that human and scarce financial resources are not wasted.

Of interest to many readers would be the description, advantages and drawbacks of protest, as a strategy to do away with stigma and discrimination. The section reminds mature readers about the African-American movement in the US that took to the street the fight against racial discrimination. The authors are entirely correct: the fight against discrimination cannot be delayed nor carried out wearing silk gloves or dressed in black tie – because for those who suffer from it the clock runs continuously. Yet protest, against the media, public health authorities, legislators or employers, to mention just a few, is too serious a strategy which requiring careful consideration of the possible unintended adverse effects.
But as there are no peaks without valleys, this valuable book is saddled with some – mostly not serious – problems. The following are a list: the reader may find that some of the narratives are too long, and as such they risk losing their impact; the use of the term mental disorders to mental illness would be preferable all along, to fit the ICD-10 classification; and at times, some references are missing when some definitive statements are made, such as “The Old Testament urges ‘disturbed’ behavior to be punished by ‘death’.” (A consultation with a highly reputable Old Testament scholar, Professor R. Elior, yielded no such a statement.) There is one valley that is too deep to overlook however: the experienced and well-published triad that wrote the book is international (US, Israel, and Hong Kong, China), yet too many examples are US-based, including references to people or merchants that are not necessarily known by readers from other countries.

To conclude, this is a highly recommendable book for all mental health stakeholders.

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