



Book review

Integrated Media and Book Review Editor:

Dr Francis C. Biley

Submissions address:

IHCS, Bournemouth University, 1st Floor Royal London House, Christchurch Road, Bournemouth, Dorset BH1 3LT

Mental Health Ethics: The Human Context

Phil Barker

Routledge, London

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Most people who are in the business of trying to help people deal with difficulties in their lives, their relationships and with negotiating health, welfare and justice systems do so with the best of intentions. However, as the proverb goes, ‘the road to hell is paved with good intentions’. The importance of this edited book by Phil Barker is the unrelenting subtext that the best of intentions are insufficient to be ethical in the helping professions. Indeed, the very foundations of mainstream/orthodox psychiatry and arising claims of authority are called into question. Many of the arguments will be familiar to readers who have sampled some of the now vast swathes of critical psychiatry and sociological literature pertaining to mental health care. However, this text brings many of the arguments together in an accessible way and begs the question, ‘Can the business of mainstream mental health care as practiced in many places be ethical at all?’, if the justification for paternalistic and coercive practice is founded on flawed or over simplistic assumptions about the very nature of mental distress and how it ought to be dealt with.

The book falls just short of providing an emphatic answer to the question. Professionals do not deal with mental illness they deal with people. For Barker, being ethical is not simply about justification (which is often the focus of much academic writing in the field); it is a deeply personal process of being and acting. Accordingly, Barker writes in a personal style, peppering the text with anecdotes which provide some guidance as to why he has reached the conclusions or viewpoints he proffers.

Context and the personal narrative are as important in understanding the moral life as they are to helping people. Most of the professions with a ‘clinical’ interest in helping people are represented as contributors. Not all manage the personable style of Barker, nor do they necessarily share the same central concerns in their discussion of the ethical issues confronting them, their disciplines or the field in general. They do, however, share something of their own struggles in negotiating an ethical path and all acknowledge the centrality of being in relationship with others.

The text is structured into six sections with a brief editorial preface to a range of chapters, followed by a set of ‘ethical dilemmas’ or essentially thought-provoking questions. Such is the nature of ethics that there are rarely clean-cut answers. The first section consisting of three chapters is written by Barker. They provide an overview of ethics, psychiatric ethics and a history of psychiatry (or rather how such a history is littered with examples of good intentions but insufficient care). The following section, written by a range of authors addresses particular ethical problems encountered and negotiated by the different professions commonly represented in mental health services. All have somewhat different takes on the key dilemmas and problems which their disciplines confront and most discuss their local history and context (largely the UK). Service user/consultancy roles, researchers and those hybrid professional roles of clinician and researcher are not addressed.

Section 3 returns to more universal concerns around care and treatment with chapters on psychiatric diagnosis, professional relationships, restraint, electroconvulsive therapy and medication. All more or less address history, scrutinize the evidence relating to the efficacy of interventions and discuss particular dilemmas associated with treatments. This section will challenge anyone who holds assumptions that the foundations of good mental health care are an accurate diagnosis, followed by the

selection of the best medical treatment and if necessary some degree of persuasion. Clearly, this is not the case and this section stakes out in detail why this is so.

The section on 'The Human Context' is a mixed bag of chapters addressing a range of practice contexts such as acute care, forensic care, dealing with younger and older people, addictions, race and culture, and suicide. Some parts are exceptionally well written, others leaving one craving more; all are thought-provoking. Surprisingly, contexts such as community care, assertive outreach and consultation liaison receive little attention, nor do issues relating to particularly vulnerable populations such as the homeless.

A section on legal context addresses advanced directives and the insanity defence. Chapters also address mental health law (i.e. Mental Health Acts rather than the whole gamete of legislation related to privacy, guardianship, housing provision, etc.) in England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Barker acknowledged that this would provide a good sample to illustrate the moral reasoning behind legislation influenced by British jurisprudence. However, I felt a little short changed here, given the acknowledgement in the text of the influence of the USA on the practice of psychiatry and the development of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) arising in a peculiar and complex legal context in which a diagnosis may be the only pathway to receive health, housing and welfare services that are taken for granted in the UK. The balancing of federal and state laws in confederations such as Australia and even Europe throw up some particular dilemmas and cultural factors across the globe contributes to radical departures from the British model of law or at least its application. Such an exploration of differ-

ence might have been helpful even to British and Irish readers. The final section of this text deals with ideology and critically considers the ideology underpinning mainstream mental health care and alternatives such as recovery. None of the three authors (Barker included) mince words in these chapters and readers are left with a challenge to ensure that people are dealt with ethically and remain 'at the centre' of care.

This is not a comprehensive text book of mental health ethics, but what it does deal with, it deals with comprehensively. While it has a particular UK flavour, it is likely to have universal appeal. It is well structured (and suitably priced) and lends itself to being a core text in undergraduate or graduate mental health ethics courses. Many of the authors identify as nurses and it addresses some of the ethical challenges nurses encounter particularly well. I was personally fairly familiar with and committed to the underlying thesis and found much that resonated with my values. That is, the essence of ethical practice is a lot about values, but values demonstrated rather than merely espoused. After reading this text, I felt better able to articulate the issues and found myself recommending it (or particular chapters) to students. It deserves a wide readership, as it will surely assist people to develop ethical sensitivity and importantly to ponder the important questions that confront anyone working within mental health services.

*RICHARD LAKEMAN DNSci
Lecturer
School of Nursing
Dublin City University
Dublin
Ireland
E-mail: richard.lakeman@dcu.ie*