

book
reviews

Alternatives beyond psychiatry edited by Peter Stastny and Peter Lehmann



Alternatives beyond psychiatry
Peter Stastny and Peter
Lehmann (eds)
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Alternatives beyond psychiatry is a welcome breath of fresh air. In its pages, 61 authors from around the world (mainly Europe and North America) describe initiatives, projects and personal strategies that challenge traditional approaches. It will be thought-provoking and inspirational reading for anyone interested in innovative responses to madness.

The shortcomings of biomedical psychiatry have been much explored and this book does not uncover new territory in this respect. Familiar messages are hammered home around central issues like coercion, diagnostic systems and over-reliance on psychiatric medication. There are two passionate personal statements against the psychiatric enterprise by Kate Millet and Dorothea Buck, whose 70 years experience of the German psychiatric system includes compulsory sterilisation, and an interesting short (too short) piece by Pat Bracken about the need to move away from paradigms and models entirely.

But at the heart of *Alternatives to psychiatry*, and what makes it such a valuable resource, are the many chapters describing actual alternatives. A few of these have attracted attention in recent years and may already be known to some readers, but a large number have received little coverage and will be hardly known outside their own countries. The editors have done a great service in drawing all this information together.

The alternatives included cover a huge range, from crisis provision and Hearing Voices groups to service user-led

research, personal ombudsmen and advance directives. Perhaps inevitably with so many contributors, the quality of writing is variable and I found one or two chapters quite difficult to digest. It is not easy to compress the description of innovative work into one short chapter and I sometimes felt I was not being given enough relevant information to really appreciate a new approach. On the other hand, there are many excellent summaries. I thought the chapters 'Intervoice: Accepting and making sense of hearing voices' and on 'Soteria: A treatment model and A Reform Movement in Psychiatry' were particularly good.

There is so much positive practice and experience captured in this book that it is impossible not to feel encouraged about the possibilities for a better way forward. Nevertheless, the editors are quite downbeat about the overall impact of alternatives, admitting in the final chapter: 'Since there are currently no widely encompassing alternatives available that offer humane help, psychiatric ex-users and survivors must learn to make the best of the existing services.' This is probably a realistic judgement. On the other hand, *Alternatives beyond psychiatry* is an excellent argument and blueprint for a continuing effort to construct alternatives. If you are making a list of important mental health titles for 2008, this one should certainly be on it.

Peter Campbell