

Inside out, outside in: Transforming mental health practices

Edited by Harry Gijbels, Lydia Sappouna, and Gary Sidelý

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1 | DETAILS OF A BOOK I HAVE PARTICULARLY BEEN IMPACTED BY

This edited book of essays seeks to challenge the medicalization of mental health, particularly around the pathologizing and treating of symptoms rather than of people. The central theme of the book is how to work with *people* affected by mental ill health rather than their diagnosis. It does so by exploring how practitioners, organizations, and survivor/community-led initiatives are challenging established methods of working with and understanding mental health, and how they are advocating systemic change. To do this, specific issues are considered from the 'inside out, outside in' perspective as described in the title of the book. 'Inside out' relates to practitioners who work in mental health services and thus challenge it from within; and 'outside in' relates to survivor- and community-led approaches. A third section considers how to challenge the broader societal context.

The first section of the book ('Inside out') is written from a critical pedagogical perspective and those using a medical model; however, it contains plenty for the counsellor and psychotherapist to think about and apply to their own practice. It feels especially pertinent as counselling and psychotherapy discourse seems to be moving more to 'evidence-based practice'—arguably this book could be viewed as an indication of what may happen should this discourse become more embedded into theory and practice. I also felt that the arguments put forward in the first four chapters of the book, which discuss critical pedagogy in social work, clinical psychology, occupational therapy and nursing, could be transferred to counselling and psychotherapy. In these chapters, the authors outline the critical pedagogical approach they take by including issues of power, identity, social justice, and politics when teaching about mental health. Perhaps, this connecting of personal distress to wider societal issues is something counselling and psychotherapy training could adopt, thereby centering politics into counselling practice itself.

The second part of the book ('Outside in') was particularly powerful as it showed survivor- and community-led alternatives to mental health practices. Fiona Venner (Chapter 9) offers a third sector, community-based 'alternative approach' to the mental health crisis which may be more familiar to the counsellor and psychotherapist given the Rogerian person-centered approach, particularly the core conditions, which is non-medicalized and concerned with equal power dynamics. Reading about an approach that feels so familiar but is presented in this book as an alternative to statutory mental health services, serves as a powerful reminder that counselling and psychotherapy can in fact be a radical and empowering way of working with mental health.

However, although counselling and psychotherapy seeks to create a more equal power balance than perhaps its medical counterpart, reading the second section ('Outside in') led me to question whether the voices and experiences of clients are centered enough in counselling theory. Whilst individual practitioners may always strive toward client autonomy and empowerment, how much is this done at systemic levels? How often are clients consulted

about their experiences of therapy (positive and negative) and, if they are, is this feedback *really* incorporated into theory and practice? A client-led book about the experiences of counselling, echoing the second section of this book, may be of value.

A mild criticism of the book is with the title itself. At first glance, it did not seem to explain what the book was about; however, upon further reading, the 'Inside out, outside in' perspective quickly becomes clear. Although the subtitle does discuss transforming mental health practices, I think there could be emphasis on the fact it *challenges* medicalized systemic mental health practice. I would have also liked a reflective chapter dedicated to the impact on the mental health of practitioners who work within a system they disagree with. As a counsellor who experienced vicarious trauma and burnout, became disillusioned with the systemic inequalities within the profession and ultimately stopped practicing, it would have been insightful for me to read how the practitioners cope working within a system they disagree with and the toll that challenging that system takes on one's well-being. This results in a rather ironic situation: as a practitioner who disagrees with systemic approaches, advocates for changes but becomes burned out in doing so, we are left having to use those very practices/systems/approaches which caused us to burnout in order to recover. This may have been a powerful way of bridging the 'inside out, outside in' perspectives.

2 | WHAT THE BOOK TELLS US ABOUT PSYCHOTHERAPY AS A POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Although this book is not written for counsellors and psychotherapists per se, it clearly demonstrates systemic issues with mental health practice and presents alternative approaches. It shows that mental ill health is not a collection of symptoms or an individual problem; rather, a response to systemic inequality and broader societal issues. Applying this stance to counselling and psychotherapy, the book highlights how political decisions underpin all of our lives, including emotional and mental well-being, and the ways in which we address distress.

Overall, this is a powerful and timely book which will give counsellors and psychotherapists much to reflect on about systemic approaches and attitudes around mental health and ideas that can be interwoven into their own practice. Whilst at first, it may not seem directly applicable to counselling and psychotherapy, given its pedagogical and medicalized point of view, for those therapists who are concerned with client empowerment, equality, social justice, and the politics of counselling, this book potentially provides a starting point to how a similar challenge could be made to systemic issues within counselling and psychotherapy.

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