
Book reviews

Seminars in Psychology and the Social Sciences. Edited by Digby Tantam and Max Birchwood. London: Gaskell (Royal College of Psychiatrists). 1994. Pp 358. £17.50

College Seminars comprise a series of separate volumes covering clinical psychiatry, each of the sub-specialities and the core basic sciences. It is primarily aimed at the psychiatrist in training and those preparing for the MRCPsych examination.

This volume gives a review of the current understanding and theories of the basic sciences of psychology likely to be pertinent and of clinical relevance to the psychiatrist. The contents are organised into three parts: cognition and emotion, social psychology and social sciences. These sections give clear accounts of the development of newer theories with well structured arguments questioning currently applied theories, e.g. chapter on Piaget's theories of cognitive development and models of attention and memory. This results in a stimulating and informative text but which some may find a rather rich menu with almost too much information to digest. Although each chapter provides an introduction to the theories underpinning the subject, it is the development of these which can make it at times a slow read, despite the clarity of style in which the book is written.

Despite the number of contributors, there is continuity of approach and style with important salient points drawn out in a concise and clear conclusion in each chapter. The text is closely referenced and authoritative and its approach aids the assimilation of factual information. It is very much a book for those who favour education by reasoning rather than by rote learning of facts and lists.

In this one volume, the subject is brought together logically and scientifically and will be welcomed by practitioners who often have little exposure to psychology and social sciences during training. It will certainly be valuable for those preparing for their membership examination which increasingly contains a substantial number of questions on the subject. The book will also appeal to psychiatrists and their colleagues in allied specialities wishing to gain insight into the psychological and social science roots of their subject.

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Law, Process and Custody: prisoners and patients. By Geneva Richardson. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 1993. Pp 342. £19.95

For all the sophistication of the ideas expressed, this is a readable account of the law and processes governing public interest decision-making in the custody of prisoners, and patients in special hospitals. The breadth of the approach makes it of interest to a wider readership than just those concerned with the specific client groups. Ms Richardson defines process broadly to include the structure and functioning of the organisations involved. She starts from the very broad principle of 'liberal pluralism' and 'strong democracy' and examines the process through its stages of policy information, application and validation, and its levels of Parliamentary and administrative decision-making, adjudication, and validation. She examines not only the powers involved but their purposes in relation to the public interest, stressing the importance of participation in decision-making. In the application of policy within prisons and special hospitals a healthy regard is shown for local administrative decision-making. In these settings it is recognised that local knowledge and speed of decision-making is important. If, in special hospitals, this is to include clinical decision-making, it will be welcomed by clinicians. The open giving of reasons for decisions is stressed, together with the need for the deciders to be answerable for their decisions and subject to validation processes.

For the general reader the appeal of this book will lie in its analysis of law in relation to society and the public interest. For example, the analysis of instrumental and value based approaches to process raises issues similar to those of concern in bio-medical ethics and similar to the technique of clinical decision making advocated by Dowie & Elstein (1988). Those in special interest groups, including forensic psychiatrists and Mental Health Review Tribunalists will find much helpful detail.

Reference

DOWIE, J. & ELSTEIN, A. (1988) *Professional Judgement. A Reader in Clinical Decision Making*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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