

Book reviews

EDITED BY SIDNEY CROWN and ALAN LEE

Violence, Crime and Mentally Disordered Offenders: Concepts and Methods for Effective Treatment and Prevention

Edited by S. Hodgins & R. Müller-Isberner.
Chichester: John Wiley & Sons. 2000. 233 pp.
£27.50 (pb). ISBN 0 471 9772 6

Violence among the Mentally III: Effective Treatment and Management Strategies

Edited by Sheilagh Hodgins. Dordrecht:
Kluwer Academic. 2000. 416 pp. £107.00
(hb). ISBN 0 7923 6437 6

It's a funny business, forensic psychiatry. You wait years for a decent book on the treatment of mentally disordered offenders, and then along come two at once. This phenomenon is well recognised in the public transport industry, where researchers devote their lives to the problem of 'clustering'. I do not know why no. 12 buses hunt in packs, but I am confident that it is not because they share a driver.

The simultaneous appearance of these two books raises other issues, of more direct relevance to the academic world. Anthony Burgess expressed a belief that the desire to write was inseparable from the need to make money, but he was speaking of a more innocent age, before the advent of the Research Assessment Exercise. Burgess also reflected gloomily that he may have achieved nothing more than to increase the number of words in the world. It is a sobering thought that this is now the definition of success, provided that the words are published in the right place. When playing by these rules, it is no surprise that an academic publishes two books where one would do. The more difficult question concerns the rest of us. Why should we read them or, more to the point, buy them?

That question is easily answered for the first book of the pair, *Violence, Crime and Mentally Disordered Offenders*. It is an excellent book, summarising current knowledge about a wide range of treatments. Drugs, psychological and social treatments

are all covered. Each chapter is self-contained, so it is easy to find the topic you are interested in, and each begins with a review of background knowledge about the disorders concerned, before going on to deal with research into treatment. The book is a bargain and it will be useful to a wide range of practitioners, whether they are planning services, treating mentally disordered offenders, or thinking about a research project.

By contrast, *Violence among the Mentally III* is disposable. It is a book in disguise. Although the cover makes no reference to it, the introduction begins by talking about the "NATO Advanced Study Institute on the Prevention of Crime and Violence Among the Mentally III", held in Italy in May 1999. Just as 'collateral damage' means dead civilians, so 'Advanced Study Institute' is NATO-speak for what the rest of us call a conference. We are in the dreaded world of conference proceedings, and the book has all the faults of the genre.

At first sight, it seems surprising that the book is such a disappointment. The contributors are eminent, many of them have published widely and some have written essential texts in the area. Several of the chapters are well written. The problem lies in the fundamental difference between good conference presentations and good books. I like presentations that are lively, spiced up with a few anecdotes and not too dense. One can imagine that some of the talks here, presented on a hilltop in Tuscany, with a Powerpoint backdrop, had the audience crying out for more. In the cold light of the printed page, they just do not work.

As an example of the problem, consider one speaker/author's explanation of how most of the problems in institutions are caused by a small number of difficult individuals. It is impossible to disagree with the point. I have even seen "The few who spoil it for the rest" stencilled on the leather jackets of a gang of Hell's Angels, suggesting that the notion is accepted even among those who are not social scientists. Here, the explanation takes more than a page and it appears complicated and meandering. Other presentations have similar

faults. Few have the breadth that is implied in the book's title, tending to concentrate on a particular area of interest, rather than a comprehensive review.

If these comments seem unduly harsh, it is important to remember the context. I would not complain if this book were given to me by the representative of a pharmaceutical company, to be placed on a shelf alongside my other volumes of conference proceedings (especially if a couple of pens and some sticky labels were thrown in with it). But when I am asked to pay over £100 for the privilege of owning it, I feel entitled to voice some reservations.

It is unfortunate that the book as a whole cannot be recommended, because there are some gems within it. For example, there is an account of some of the findings of the MacArthur Study, followed by a reasoned and effective critique of that study's methods. This makes for great reading, but it sits uncomfortably in a book that is supposed to describe "effective treatments and management strategies", as the debate revolves around issues far removed from the clinic. Several other chapters have only distant relevance to the treatment theme. The overall impression is of a mixed bag of papers on mentally disordered offenders, squeezed to fit in under a catchy title.

In a rational world, the appearance of two books on the same topic begs the question, why was the second one necessary? Important material about treatment should have been included in the first book, which feels like a comprehensive account. If the material is not sufficiently important, then why bother to publish at all under a similar title? One of these books is good, the other is not so good. They could have been combined into an excellent text, leaving the world a little less crowded.

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Essential Psychopharmacology of Depression and Bipolar Disorder

By Stephen M. Stahl. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000. 187 pp. £16.95 (pb). ISBN 0 521 786 45 2

This is an impressive book by an author who clearly knows how to communicate his subject in a clear and interesting way. Drawn