

Spirituality and the Therapeutic Process: A comprehensive resource from intake to termination

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Book Review by Prof. Chris Cook

This book provides a valuable clinical resource which addresses the practical issues surrounding the integration of spirituality into therapeutic work in mental health. It is readable, evidence based, and comprehensive in its approach to 'the therapeutic process'.

As the editors indicate in the introduction to this book, it brings together 'a diverse group of therapists and researchers from various mental health fields' (p4). As the title indicates, it covers the full span of issues arising in therapy, from assessment through to termination of therapy. It also addresses issues surrounding the spirituality of the therapist, ethical issues and training. Authors write from diverse perspectives on spirituality, including those of the major monotheistic faiths and also agnosticism.

Amongst the many strengths of this book are its attention to the spirituality of the therapist, its interesting case studies, and its sound foundation built upon evidently extensive clinical experience as well as the research evidence base. I like the way in which a number of authors distinguish implicit and explicit spirituality, thus alerting the reader to the various ways in which spiritual issues are raised by clients without the word 'spirituality' being used (as, for example, in discussions of meaning and purpose in life). Attention is also given to how the family context influences spiritual dynamics.

Unfortunately, from this readers point of view, the diversity of contributions does not include a breadth of disciplinary perspective. Almost every contributor is a psychologist. One author is a chaplain, several authors are students and specialties vary from counselling, to family therapy and clinical psychology. However, not a single psychiatrist, social worker or service user is to be found amongst the authors, and all work in the USA. The North American cultural influence may be illustrated by one pair of chapter authors who are able to write that 'therapists no longer argue whether mental health treatment ought to include attention to the spiritual and religious lives of clients' (p145). This 'easy question' is not quite so easily dismissed in the UK! However, to be fair, that does not really limit the relevance and usefulness of

the book to clinical practice in this country. Its breadth of attention to the diversity of client spiritualities would render it just as relevant here as in any other western country and no psychiatrist could fail to learn something from it.

At times I found myself concerned that the metanarrative of this book is firmly that of science rather than philosophy or theology. It is thus very post-modern in its acceptance that there is an objective reality that can be studied at some level (the science of spirituality) but that truth claims of different faith traditions may be relativised. Perhaps this is the only way in which such a book can be written for a broad professional clinical readership in the pluralistic western culture of today's world. However, it is contrary to the very nature of spirituality that science should be elevated to this dominant position of providing a framework for all meaning. Happily, I think that this is implicitly compensated for by the repeated emphasis on the need for therapist integrity. The book does not allow its readers to imagine that their clinical work is entirely separated from, or uninfluenced by, their own spirituality. Whilst it offers appropriate caution and advice about the dangers of excessive therapist transparency on this account, it is equally rigorous in addressing the potential dangers of the resistance or lack of self awareness of therapists towards their own spirituality, and the likely impact of this on their clients.

This book is highly recommended for all clinicians working in the mental health field.