Working with people outside the limelight

Book review
Lea, S & Foster, D (eds) (1990) **Perspectives on mental handicap in South Africa.** Durban: Butterworths, ISBN 0 409 10919 3.

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Estimates of prevalence suggest that there are 150 000 - 250 000 South Africans with moderate or severe mental handicap. A further 1 million or so might be described as mildly mentally handicapped. Each of these people is linked with a family and community which also has to come to terms with the social, emotional, physical and financial implications of mental handicap.

If only because of the numbers of people involved, mental handicap must thus be seen as a major mental health issue in South Africa. The inequity/iniquity in the treatment of people with mental handicap, especially those not classified white, should also surely be of concern to progressive mental health workers. Yet, despite the upsurge of involvement in social issues during the eighties, for most mental health workers, mental handicap has remained invisible. A book devoted to the topic and written from a progressive perspective is therefore long overdue.

It is fitting that the book is dedicated to a pioneering worker in the field. Vera Grover has spent the major part of her very productive life working with and on behalf of people with mental handicap and her influence continues to be felt, not least on her younger colleagues, many of whom

have contributed to the book. Appropriately enough, Grover is herself a contributor and the central thrust of her work is well represented by her chapter, which deals with psycho-educational aspects of mental handicap.

The editors state that the book is an attempt to document mental health and medical practices with regard to mental handicap in South Africa. They argue that such documentation is necessary for three reasons. Firstly, better understanding of the fragmented existing service provision is necessary for ensuring more efficient and effective service provision. Secondly, the book may encourage greater attention to the neglected field of mental handicap in professional training. Thirdly, examination of existing practices can provide the basis for formulating - perhaps, re-formulating - an adequate theoretical framework.

The book consists of twelve chapters written by a range of contributors, both academic and those practically engaged in work with mental handicap. It includes numerous figures and tables illustrating and amplifying the contributions. A useful glossary, mainly of medical and legal terminology, is provided, as well as author/name and subject indices. A comparative table setting out the various classificatory systems based on IQ and used in South Africa, might have reduced the confusion arising from the different figures quoted by different contributors (e.g. Lea & Foster, p10; Davidson & Dickman, p139; Grover, p174).

The book is an interesting blend of the theoretical and the practical; of history and policy; of psychology, sociology, education and medicine; of politics and the law. Its intended audience appears to be diverse. The book speaks to academics (including students), but also to practitioners in the field. It provides an introduction for those for whom mental handicap is an entirely new concern. Yet there is much to challenge those already familiar with the field.

The book deals with a diverse set of concerns and, inevitably, succeeds better in some than in others. There are, firstly, a number of contributions which focus on **changes in legal and service provisions** for mental handicap in South Africa. These historical accounts are useful, even at a descriptive level, as a basis for understanding other aspects of the field. In particular, they offer unique insights into the ways in which mental handicap has been and is understood.

Secondly, critical surveys of service provision emphasise the **uneven and**

inadequate nature of service provision, particularly, but not exclusively, across "racial" categories. There is extensive documentation of the nightmare of fragmented service provision, which, in mental handicap, as in other fields, has vastly retarded and made more expensive and difficult any rational service provision. In this regard, a problem alluded to by various contributors is the lack of definite information on prevalence, against which to judge existing provision and plan for the future. Exemplifying the problem is the fact that rates mentioned in the book result in discrepancies as large as 100 000 in estimates of the prevalence of moderate and severe mental handicap.

Thirdly, there are contributions which reflect critically on **approaches to assessment and intervention** in the case of people with mental handicap. Questions of assessment and appropriate intervention are difficult, in any context; the lucid accounts provided here will be particularly useful at the level of initial (and not so initial) professional training. Of particular value is the fact that general issues, derived from the international literature, are clearly and succinctly conveyed, yet with careful and critical examination of their relevance and application within the South African context.

Fourthly, the question of **alternative/appropriate models for future service provision** is raised. Some contributors provide detailed descriptions of particular local services of an exemplary kind, while others (including the editors in their "Afterword") refer to the issue of future service provision, although generally in passing or in concluding comments. It would have been useful, however, to have a chapter dealing comprehensively with the various proposals and the issues they raise, taking account of existing services, critiques of these services and the likely availability of funding for services in future. There is currently a scramble to define new and different structures for future education, health and social services. Greater attention to the topic in this book might have helped to ensure that services for persons with mental handicap are not yet again last on the list of priorities - and that they are defined by those most intimately involved: persons with mental handicap themselves and their families, together with those working in the field.

A number of themes run through and link the various concerns outlined above. One involves long overdue comment on the **effects of apartheid and racism** in the field of mental handicap and is to be welcomed. It is refreshing to note that criticism is not directed only at government structures and policies. There is, for example, acknowledgement by its

Director that the National Council for Mental Health, acting as " .. an important front organisation for the government... acted out government policy" (p86), that the influence of the Broederbond on the Council was considerable and that there was implicit and explicit racism in its policies and pronouncements. Such frankness is reassuring and makes more noticeable the odd reference, even in this book, to cultural difference as some justification for the continuation of racially segregated and different services (p275).

Two further themes are closely related. One refers to the various and changing **conceptions of mental handicap**, internationally, but particularly as reflected in South Africa; here there is particular reference to social constructionist conceptions of mental handicap. The other theme raises the issue of the **rights** of people with mental handicap - an important issue in the context of developing a culture of human rights in South Africa. The two themes are important and difficult, both for novices and for those with extensive experience in the field. For novices, including those in training, the themes may induce a sense of confusion about how to view mental handicap and could encourage the feeling that it is best to keep clear of the minefield. Practitioners, on the other hand, could feel that the value of much of their work is being called in question - and, nogal, by relative outsiders.

But there is an alternative response. In challenging established wisdoms, the two themes should instead be seen as offering a valuable opportunity for re-evaluation - and potentially opening the way to a new creativity. Certainly, there is a tension, an apparent contradiction, between the individual (clinical) and social perspectives. But a resolution may be found in the recognition, from both perspectives, that mental handicap is indeed in major ways socially constructed - but not (or not always) entirely so. In trying to understand or acting in relation to mental handicap, both perspectives should therefore be kept in mind.

In summary, this is an important book, which deserves to be widely read and not only by specialists. In focussing attention on the neglected field of mental handicap in South Africa, it calls on mental health workers to re-examine their attitude to working with people outside the limelight. It also suggests that, far from being dull and boring, mental handicap is a field which offers the possibility of grappling with stimulating and important issues - and doing useful work at the same time.