

BUT WHERE'S THE COPING?

Book review

Gibson, K, Swartz, L & Sandenbergh, R (2002) **Counselling and coping**. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0 19 571868 2 pbk. Pages 143.

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Since Christina Maslach (1997) brought attention to the detrimental effects of burnout, there has been a continual barrage of theoretical and self-help texts that provide talismans against the possibility of being one of the victims. Counsellors, professional or lay, with their commitment to the mental well-being of others with scant regard for themselves, openly admit their vulnerability, but take few preventative measures in this regard themselves. What joy then to see authors pen a book that offers both accessible practical examples and case studies pertinent to South Africa while, most importantly, focusing on the important need for coping; an unfortunate disappointment then that the former are dealt with in great detail while the reader is left asking a glaring question: but where's the coping?!

Readers of the book would argue that it is made quite clear, coping is a function of acknowledging and understanding our emotional reactions to the material that clients bring to the counselling encounter. This point is not disputed. However, it is a rather tenuous assumption that somehow in understanding our own responses we automatically have the ability to cope. Coping, unfortunately (and challengingly) is far more complex than this and is dealt with throughout the book in a superficial manner, lacking both theoretical exploration or practical application. As an example, **Counselling and coping** fails to, at the very least, define such crucial concepts as stress, burnout, and coping or the practical strategies that may be engaged in the coping attempt. Not only is the work of leaders in the field of burnout, such as Maslach, Leiter and Jackson ignored altogether but neither is the excellent work of Palmer and Dryden (1995) (or any other author) on practical means to cope with stress offered. A single chapter attempts to address this issue, hinging on the now heavily critiqued response-based fight-and-flight model of Hans Selye (1956), while failing to acknowledge the more comprehensive and pervasive transactional model proposed by Richard Lazarus (1966). Consequently the reader is left with more questions regarding coping than any sense of having gained any practical means to address burnout; stress or coping.

A particular strength of the book is the authors' acknowledgement that counselling as an activity not only takes place in a myriad of settings, but is by and large undertaken by individuals who are in all likelihood not trained psychologists. Given the diversity of the South African mental health landscape and needs, this break from focusing on a small group of professionals who have elevated themselves above the work of lay counsellors, is particularly useful. However, the authors inadvertently (or perhaps purposefully) continue to explore counselling as a professional pursuit, describing and setting up counselling as a (psycho)therapeutic endeavour. Initial attempts to demystify the process are thus simply re-mystified, continuing to rely on such concepts as transference, counter-transference, empathic understanding and containment, concepts useful to trained professionals, but often, without greater explanation, inaccessible to lay counsellors.

Over and above the continual casting of counselling in a particular light and the scarcity of useful information regarding coping, the chapters on culture and diversity, and understanding trauma leave more questions and raised eyebrows than providing answers. Few would argue the challenges inherent in our multicultural society, particularly with regards to the delivery of psychological interventions. Like so many South African examples though, the authors seem to get sucked into considering cultural differences largely on the grounds of "race" differences. Not that this particular debate is one that should be abandoned but rather cognisance needs to be taken of the complexity of a concept such as culture. As with burnout, stress and coping, no attempt is made to define this elusive concept. The chapter though does take steps to highlight the need for counsellors to begin challenging prejudicial and stereotypic cultural assumptions but, ultimately, doesn't seem to provide any useful understanding of how to address this challenge nor explore the relationship between these issues and coping.

One of the realities of South Africa is the daily exposure to a range of traumatic and trauma inducing situations. Unfortunately **Counselling and coping** relies heavily on traditional Western, DSM conceptualisations of the process while ignoring the myriad of advances made in this arena. To continue understanding and working with trauma in such a narrow manner does little justice to those struggling to come to terms with the impact and symptoms of trauma. Posttraumatic stress disorder is a far cry from the South African need for a model of complex traumatic stress disorder. More distressing though is the chapter's acknowledgement of the dangers faced by counsellors working in the field, where the possibility of being traumatised by the client's material is a distinct possibility, but with absolutely minimal engagement as to how counsellors can cope with this experience.

Attempts to include the role played by organisations in the burnout process are commendable. Organisations are increasingly being expected to take cognisance of the complex interplay between stressors that are inherent to the organisation and those that could be considered the domain of the individual. Unfortunately, as with many of the chapters in the book, a single chapter devoted to this cause barely scratches the surface of this interplay. More distressing are the few lines that attempt to grapple with the complex concept of burnout, the end result being a dismal handling of what is purported to be one of the major foci of the book. A review of the work of Cary Cooper (2000) and colleagues, and as mentioned previously, Christina Maslach (1997), may have been useful.

Despite the largely absent engagement of issues relating to coping, together with a host of other shortcomings, **Counselling and coping** still has something to offer the reader. Its ease of reading and excellent use of practical case studies brings to life some of the theoretical constructs being explained. Similarly, its acknowledgement of counselling as extending beyond the confines of trained professionals invites a range of readers to engage the text. Suggestion boxes provide the foundations for some practical activities and possibilities that the reader may engage and pursue to a greater extent.

Counselling and coping posits itself as an important text for anyone working in the helping professions with a strong focus on coping. At the outset a welcomed endeavour to highlight and provide strategies to assist counsellors in coping but one that falls well short of its claimed usefulness. In the final reckoning, **Counselling and coping** becomes another attempt to provide a text, and even in this regard offers little new, that teaches counselling skills in a market that is already flooded with both technical and practical how-to books. A great pity!

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