

Reviews

Introduction to Systemic and Family Therapy: A User's Guide

By John Hills
Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, £23.99, pb, 216 pp.
ISBN: 9780230224445

This book, written by a humane, philosophical and highly experienced clinician, is in a 'Basic Texts in Counselling and Psychotherapy' series, billed as accessible, readable and introductory.

John Hills is ambitious in his range. He covers the vital basics of systemic family therapy: the genogram, how to engage families, the therapeutic stance of curiosity, pattern recognition, non-blaming, skills in asking questions that open up a family's awareness of itself. He also sprinkles the text with clearly written, brief clinical examples and exercises the reader can try out. Each chapter is summarised at the end for easy recall. There is a helpful glossary and a 'how to' guide to genograms at the end.

Hills takes us through the main threads of developing systemic ideas, Bateson and cybernetics, structural family therapy and Minuchin, attachment theory with Bowlby and Skeyner, the Milan school, social constructionism, scripts and the rest. Nevertheless, this book is much more than a beginner's introduction to systemic family therapy. It is both far richer and also more distracting. John Hills refers us across theologues, philosophers and writers, from Jainism to Wittgenstein, from Eugene O'Neill to Santayana. He writes: 'systemic ideas are a way of looking for meaning [. . .] looking across the whole relational environment in which an individual difficulty is embedded'. So far, so good.

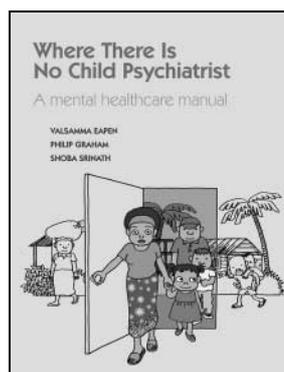
But Hills is interested in the big existential questions: 'the fact of death, isolation, the search for meaning amidst absurdity and our freedom'. He discusses the political context in systemic terms, such as a rising Greek suicide rate in the current economic crisis. He sees systemic thinking as not only drawing on scientific empiricism, but also on the observation of 'patterns that connect' as art does, and on the awareness of massive discrepancies in power relationships, the traditional stamping ground of politics. And even more ambitiously, he discusses and emphasises the ethical and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

Personally, I applaud his breadth and inclusivity, but this book is not only what it says on the tin. The clear, accessible, didactic account of systemic family therapy is there; but there is much more to intrigue and stimulate the wider reader. Perhaps it would be fair to describe the book as in itself an enactment of systemic thinking, as Hills moves from the clinical and interpersonal world of the particular family, out into the political sphere and up into the reaches of existential thought. As E. M. Forster, one of the writers he does not quote, advised: 'Only connect!'

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Where There is No Child Psychiatrist: A Mental Healthcare Manual

Valsamma Eapen, Philip Graham & Shoba Srinath
RCPsych Publications, 2012, £10.00, pb, 208 pp.
ISBN: 9781908020482



This manual is for primary care health professionals working in low- and middle-income (LAMI) countries. Studies have revealed a lack of knowledge of mental health problems in these professionals which meant that mental health problems in many children went unnoticed.

This manual is to give professionals relevant information so that they can adequately assess and start effective

management of children with mental health problems. It uses simple language and explains medical jargon. It is not meant to be used to diagnose mental health disorders, but to help professionals come to a formulation of a particular problem looking at predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors. It also offers basic understanding on mental health problems in general, their assessments and treatments, and contains comprehensive information on childhood development, parenting and secure attachment. As a practical aid, the authors included a star chart which is a universally used reward system for children.

A wide range of specific mental health problems are described, among them bed-wetting, stammering, separation anxiety, bullying, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, anorexia nervosa, self-harm, psychotic disorders, child abuse, and mental health problems occurring in children with chronic illnesses such as sickle cell disease. The authors also included contemporaneous problems such as social networking and its impact on children.

The layout of chapters is very simple: general information on a particular topic followed by a list of relevant questions to complete a thorough assessment and eliminate possible organic causes. A suggested management plan is broken down into simple steps and takes into account the resources likely to be available in LAMI countries. There is not much reference to pharmacological treatments; a short chapter and an appendix summarise the necessary information. Case scenarios help illustrate the practical challenges and encourage the reader to make their own judgement and think about a possible treatment plan. The importance of partnership between health professionals, teachers and the family is recognised and one chapter offers advice on how to summarise and communicate an identified problem, including an action plan, to the family and the child.

The authors have created a comprehensive and very practical manual which enables primary care professionals in