

Book reviews

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Toxic Turmoil

Edited by J. M. Havenaar, J. G. Cwikel & E. J. Bromet. New York: Kluwer. 2002. 279 pp. £44.00 (hb). ISBN 0 306 46784 4

Havenaar and his colleagues have collected a set of essays about the effects of man-made ecological disasters into a single volume that does not hang together as well as it might. Havenaar muddies his own waters considerably by beginning and ending the book with reference to September 11, which was a terrorist outrage rather than an event affecting the ecology of the city. Many of the chapters are very good indeed – in particular, Wessely points out that the French military do not have a Gulf War syndrome, since French medicine does not recognise such a disorder, and that the Danes – who were vaccinated against neither chemical nor biological warfare – nevertheless reported high rates of symptoms after service in the Gulf. Murthy and Baxter contribute excellent chapters on the Bhopal disaster and on other chemical catastrophes, respectively.

Havenaar excoriates the news media for spreading disturbing stories after such disasters – but governments (including our own) have not been as forthcoming as they might about nuclear disasters, and it is the duty of a free press to dig out stories that officialdom wishes to suppress. He is correct in arguing for the prompt release of accurate information, but sometimes, as Yzermans & Gerson point out in their account of the El Al crash in Amsterdam, it takes some time before it is possible to say exactly what the toxic risks are.

I drew somewhat different conclusions from those drawn in the final chapter: the heterogeneity of the consequences of the various disasters was more striking than were the commonalities. The nature of the toxic substance(s) released and the character of the host population are crucial determinants of the resulting harm; fear and uncertainty about risks also contribute greatly. In the case of the first Persian Gulf War and the El Al crash, there was a period

when dangers were unknown and fear took hold of the affected populations; by contrast, in the disaster in the Tokyo metro the resultant damage seems to be largely accounted for by the known toxic effects of the sarin that was released.

The near elimination of the Aral Sea is described as a ‘diluted disaster’ rather than an unmitigated disaster for the damage has crept up on the population over years, and the resultant morbidity is no higher than that measured in the Russian Federation, which bears the responsibility for these events. Not mentioned at all is the destruction of the rain forests in Brazil, or the fact that large areas of Africa and Asia are impossible to cultivate because of landmines and cluster bombs. Both of these are man-made ecological disasters – and it hardly seems sensible to describe either as ‘diluted’. It is also likely that some of the disasters described have psychological consequences more in common with those produced by a natural disaster such as a hurricane, earthquake, volcano or flood than they have with the man-made ecological disasters mentioned.

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Psychological Therapies with Older People. Developing Treatments for Effective Practice

Edited by Jason Hepple, Jane Pearce & Philip Wilkinson.

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This is an ambitious book. The main chapters cover five forms of brief psychological therapy: brief psychodynamic, cognitive–analytic, cognitive–behavioural, interpersonal and systemic. Each of these is described in terms of background and theory, and then exemplified by case

studies. The book follows a format similar to that of a number of other publications (e.g. Eells, 1997), but it is the only one that exclusively examines psychological approaches with older people.

The contributors are to be congratulated on producing a good overview of the various forms of psychotherapy currently in vogue. However, I have some concerns about the breadth and pacing of the material. For example, some of the case studies were so abridged that they were of little help. Some of the patients also seemed to be classic textbook cases, responding so rapidly to the treatment protocols that it made one wonder whether medication was ever necessary.

My only other disappointment concerned the final chapter, which discusses the empirical status of the different forms of therapy. Although the authors rightly state that there is scant evidence regarding the efficacy of some of the psychotherapies, they fail to do justice to the existing evidence. This is an unfortunate omission, especially as I presume that one of the aims of the book was to encourage people to use psychological treatments. Also, in view of the poor empirical status of three of the five therapies, it would have been more interesting for the final chapter to be a little more daring, speculative or controversial. For example, it could have been used to hypothesise about the effective components of the therapies, in terms of both generic and therapy-specific components. Indeed, a discussion of the effective ingredients of

