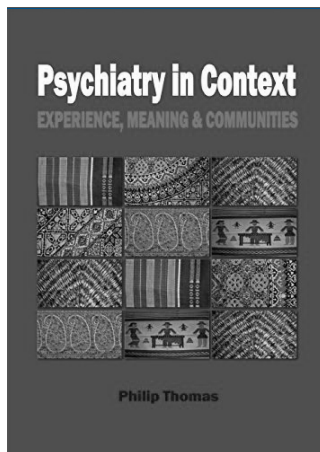


Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyeboode
and Rosalind Ramsay



**Psychiatry in Context:
Experience, Meaning
and Communities**

By Philip Thomas
PCCS Books, 2014.
£26.99 (pb). 304 pp.
ISBN 9781906254728

This important book provokes both admiration and indignation. It is a lucid and well written book which meets all the Stephen Pinker criteria for good style apart from the occasionally rhetorical flourish. Let us start with the negative bits.

Thomas depicts the early 21st-century psychiatrist as a reductionist prescriber who perceives patients (or service users/survivors) as a network of synapses and neurotransmitters whose aberrant thoughts, sensations, impulses and behaviour are determined by their genes. Through this neurotechnological lens the distressed or deviant individual is almost reduced to a disembodied brain suspended in metaphorical formaldehyde, bereft of biography, intention, sensibility or selfhood. The only remedy is psychoactive drugs.

Exciting developments in epigenetics, which unite the personal, the biological and the social are relegated in this book to a single footnote. Thomas refers dismissively to earlier speculation that genetic changes might contribute to the apparent increased risk of schizophrenia in African–Caribbean men born in the UK. This research was carried out ‘at a time when black people were taking to the streets in a blaze of anger in Brixton, Toxteth and Moss Side, [so] one is left with the image of psychiatry fiddling while inner-city England was aflame’ (p. 111). But when the social psychologist Angela Summerfield and the psychiatrist David O’Flynn devised an innovative training programme for unemployed, mainly African–Caribbean, long-term patients at Speedwell Day Hospital in the 1980s they were fiercely opposed by militant staff who claimed that the project was merely a reactionary scheme to instil a bourgeois work ethic. Resistance to creative innovation and reform is not just the prerogative of the conservative Establishment.

Dr Thomas and his post-psychiatry colleagues have agonised about the legitimate role of the medically qualified practitioner in the field of mental health. He concedes that the psychiatrist-as-physician can be useful to provide general medical help to people in distress and with psychotic symptoms. But so could a general practitioner.

So how can a critical psychiatrist justify his specialist role? Thomas asks: ‘If not as a neuroscientist, then what is the future role of the doctor in mental health care?’ In addition to general medical care he envisages five aspects of the future, socially aware psychiatrist’s role: narrative psychiatry, engaging with

communities, non-technological modes of care, placing ethics before technology, and what he calls ‘science and psychiatry’. This refers to the exciting model proposed by Harland, Morgan and Hutchinson¹ in this *Journal*, which mobilises insights from phenomenology and anthropology to elucidate the relationship between subjective experience, social factors and the biological basis of psychosis in terms of neural plasticity.

This reviewer endorses all these proposals. Essentially they are already required knowledge, attitudes, enthusiasms and commitments for all biopsychosocially informed psychiatrists, whether critical, post- or mainstream. It is a pity that Thomas seems to have felt that an account of positive recent models of creative and sensitive care requires the rhetorical counterpoint of an alleged inhumane, coercive and technological system. The development of a patient-centred, individualised, narrative-based approach with shared decision-making is not being resisted by the psychiatric profession.

- 1 Harland R, Morgan C, Hutchinson G. Phenomenology, science and the anthropology of the self: a new model for the aetiology of psychosis. *Br J Psychiatry* 2004; **185**: 361–2.

Maurice Lipsedge Emeritus Consultant at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust and Visiting Senior Lecturer at Guy’s, King’s and St Thomas’ School of Medicine, Keats House, 24–26 St Thomas Street, London SE1 9RS, UK.

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**THE PARADOX OF
INTERNET GROUPS
ALONE IN THE PRESENCE
OF VIRTUAL OTHERS**



HAIM WEINBERG

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**The Paradox
of Internet Groups:
Alone in the Presence
of Virtual Others**

By Haim Weinberg
Karnac Publishing, 2014.
£22.99 (pb). 224 pp.
ISBN 9781855758933

If you have wondered why we readily share our personal details on social media, why a slight disagreement on Twitter can unleash a torrent of ‘Twitter-storm’, or why one feels attached to virtual friends even though we know little about them, this book will provide you with some answers. Dr Haim Weinberg’s eclectic career (from electrical engineer to clinical psychologist and group analyst) is reflected in his book, drawing on psychological, anthropological, sociological and analytical literature to explore the creative and destructive forces behind the new medium of virtual groups.

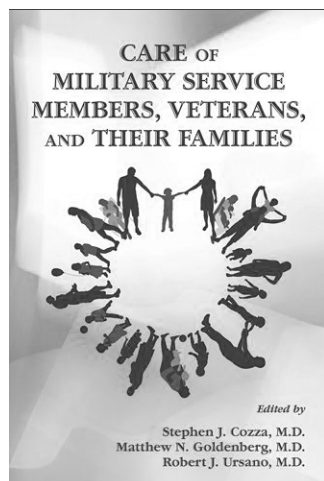
The book places the traditional art of psychoanalysis, bound by its customs and practices, into the modern world of cyberspace, drawing out similarities, differences and paradoxes. For example, in the virtual world, Bion’s basic assumptions of how individuals within groups behave (dependency, flight-fight and pairing) can be seen; the group conductor morphs into a virtual group moderator with similar but subtly different functions of maintaining group safety and dynamic administration. Weinberg explores the paradox of why people who post on websites feel bold

about disclosing intimate facts because they feel protected by boundaries of their own making. However, the lack of visual and tonal cues makes the comments overly concrete or prone to misinterpretation. The ambiguities of the interactions can be hard to tolerate, demonstrating that virtual groups give the illusion of being small groups (i.e. intimate and safe), yet in fact are large groups in the dark (prone to alienation, isolation, splitting, aggression).

Rather refreshingly, Weinberg does not hold back when suggesting who this book might be for – ‘everyone’, he writes. I must agree with him. The book is grounded in literature, well written and accessible to non-specialists. Just as Foulkes had to create his own theory and practice for the newly formed modality of group psychoanalysis, so will those using cyberspace for group work. Weinberg has started to develop this new theory.

Clare Gerada Psychiatrist and Trainee Group Analyst, Hurley Clinic, Kennington Lane, London SE11 4HJ, UK. Email: Clare.gerada@nhs.net; Twitter: @ClareRCGP

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Care of Military Service Members, Veterans, and their Families

Edited by Stephen J. Cozza, Matthew N. Goldenberg & Robert J. Ursano
American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014.

£32.00 (pb). 352 pp.
ISBN 9781585624249

The book has been split into three parts. Part one covers the fundamentals of treating military service members, veterans and families and includes the basic introduction to military service, understanding military families, military children and the military healthcare system in the USA. Part two focuses on military service-related conditions and interventions for combat stress reactions and common psychiatric disorders after deployment. Substance misuse disorders, caring for combat-injured service members, traumatic brain injury, suicidal thoughts and behaviours, and collaborative care are all covered. Part three discusses meeting the needs of the children and families of military veterans, particularly deployment-related care for military children and families, families with an injured service member, caring for the bereaved military family members and building resilience.

The book is written primarily for an American audience. Its usefulness to others will be somewhat limited owing to the differences in the way healthcare systems are organised. For a UK reader there will be some useful information, particularly on recognising and treating traumatic brain injury, which has a much higher profile in the USA. The chapters are predominantly well written and referenced, although I did find that some of the treatments recommended, particularly for post-traumatic stress disorder, would not be prescribed in the UK. The book is easy to navigate. I particularly liked the summary recommendations

for civilian clinicians and the summary points at the end of each chapter.

Overall, this is a useful resource for individuals interested in the topic, but it will have less appeal to practitioners who do not work in the USA or need to know about how the American system works.

Neil J. Kitchiner Principal Clinician and Honorary Research Fellow, Veterans' NHS Wales, Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, University Hospital of Wales, Monmouth House (Second floor), Heath Park, Cardiff CF14 4XW, UK.
Email: neil.kitchiner@wales.nhs.uk

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Creativity and Mental Illness: The Mad Genius in Question

By Simon Kyaga.
Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
£58.00 (hb). 224 pp.
ISBN 9781137345806

The possible association between mental disorder and creative genius has long been the subject of clinical and public interest, with many publications in the past 5 years. Simon Kyaga has had a hand in many of the major academic contributions to the field of creativity and psychopathology in recent years. This book aims to communicate these findings to a wider audience and acts as a comprehensive review of the history, epidemiology, neurobiology and genetics of the association of creativity with mental health. The main finding is that whereas there appears to be an association between bipolar disorder and artistic occupations and an association between being relatives of these patients and creativity, this is not true for other mental health problems.

A question who the audience will be for this book, not least because of its cover price. At times I feel that I have been tricked into reading a PhD thesis with a nice cover illustration. Those with some academic understanding of the field would be better served by reading Kyaga's journal publications and his PhD thesis (which is freely available online). Indeed, the same may be true for lay readers. The main additions come in the form of explanations of technical language – defining schizophrenia or explaining what a confounder is, for example.

Kyaga waits until the final page to explain the purpose of this work as he sees it: 'Research on creativity and psychopathology . . . may give hope and optimism back to those struck by mental illness'. But here's the rub: can proof of an association really reduce stigma? Surely if you find yourself with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder and you are not creative this is a double blow? The work is admirable, has moved forward the debate and is interesting in and of itself, but this presumed impact on reducing the stigma of mental illness is a reach.

Also we should be clear that this association does not reflect an impact on creativity at the population, or indeed, individual level. By my reckoning if it was possible to remove all bipolar disorder