
Vivid and readable, a large variety of brief anecdotes are used to bring the subject to life, including something of the humour that carries many exasperated families through difficult days. The subtle handicaps of autism are well described; hidden traps that wreck any attempt to use standard, nonspecialist services. From symptoms the book moves onto solutions, using vignettes drawn from the author’s great breadth of professional experience and, throughout, it describes the services available in Britain. The result is a book that is useful because it is so practical and so accessible to parents and professionals in every discipline and agency concerned with autism. Problems in the areas of sociability, communication, and obsessive and ritualistic behaviour are dealt with sympathetically and systematically. The social naivety is well described; its attractive charm belying a curse requiring a course in etiquette more fitting to a particularly orthodox religion. Although the difficulties linked to the deficit in imagination are touched on frequently, this could be more prominent. For example, the inability to cope with unpredictable change is identified in the introduction to the use of self-control techniques for obsessive behaviour. The focus is on the more able person, although the conflicting definitions of Asperger’s syndrome might be more explicit. Their ambiguity has bedevilled research and its conclusions, as well as confusing parents and services.

I was glad to see legal issues given their own chapter, for Howlin has a broader view than most. She is wary of any speculation about an association with criminality. At the same time she recognises that the low rate of recorded offending for the person with autism says more about the tolerance and flexibility of their environs than about the nonviolence of their lives. I found the section on psychiatric disturbance disappointing; the confusion with the spectrum of schizophrenic disorder was not well analysed, references to thought disorder and first rank symptomatology obscuring, rather than clarifying, the issues. Affective disorder was mentioned but cyclical and panic states were not. Medication was touched on but, judging by the parental correspondence on the Internet, this would warrant more space.

The book addresses the British market with a good account of the potential for Further Education. The statutory limitations on funding (up to 5 years duration and up to 25 years old) will shape its development and these should be spelled out. More might be said about the part played by residential colleges which, as in the wider population, allow young people to leave home to develop some emotional and practical independence from their families. Although they may attract sufficient students with autism to acquire an ill-defined expertise, nearly all are for people with some other form of disability. Some detail might be given of the two colleges, specifically for people with autism, which are run by Communities for Autistic People, a charity in the North-east of England. These have been providing Further Education since 1993 and now have 50 places. Others are in the making.

There seem to be few alternatives other than hospitalisation for the persistently disturbed or violent person once they have to leave home. Does this matter—when “Rain Man” returned to his institution did he hanker after the more varied community life he had glimpsed? He seemed frightened by its messiness but, had he been brought up at home, would he be so willing to turn his back on the wider world? Although not included in this book, specialist urban accommodation has been developed by various groups so that there is a lengthening menu of care ranging from shared community houses to individual flats. Their high cost means that they are available only to those who have earned their place by behaviour so disruptive that their local authority is willing to provide funding. Unfortunately the commissioners of health services are usually blind to the resources these homes will need.

Autism is a fast-growing field and is no longer solely about children. Our perception and approach has shifted and this book reflects this change and fills a newly recognised gap. As a reasonably priced, well-indexed paperback, it covers symptomatology, remedies, and services. I recommend it to parents, to my colleagues, and as an essential part of any library on autism.

T. P. Berney


The editors are certainly among the most experienced psychologists in this field. They have recognised the considerable need for such a book and should be praised for taking the initiative in producing this volume. They have drawn on a number of chapter authors who, between them, cover a wide area of experience related to the topic of the handbook. It is a good source of up-to-date references.

It is always difficult, in a multi-author book, to retain consistency and to avoid overlap. There is a certain degree of overlap but this should not be viewed as a criticism. The authors of the various chapters have taken different approaches to the subject. Some of the chapters are very readable and concentrate on the practical aspects. Others are more reminiscent of a partly written chapter for an academic thesis; less specialist readers might find these chapters difficult and unrewarding but might find other chapters valuable. The last chapter: The Way Forward, provides a balanced view. Few would argue with the views expressed in the final sentence:

In order to further develop the role of the clinical psychologist in this area, psychologists need to be undertaking relevant clinical work, within the framework of formal research protocols based on sound experimental design, with a view to publishing findings in order to better inform subsequent clinical practice.

This handbook should form a firm foundation for future editions, which will become more and more valuable as knowledge grows, perhaps partly in a response to the exhortation by Christine Cull and Laura Goldstein for workers in the field to perform well-planned, high-quality methodical research.

Frank Besag