Book Reviews

Making Sense of Social Development. Edited by M. Woodhead, D. Faulkner, and K. Littleton. Routledge, London, 1999. pp. 278. £13.99 (pb). This book is one of a series of three core study readers for the Open University course Child Development in Family, Schools and Society. The introduction states that this volume builds on the previous two but for the purposes of this review this volume has had to stand on its own in its stated aim of “making sense of social development during the school years”. Middle childhood to adolescence are the themes of a number of chapters. I looked for a logical approach to issues and theories, descriptions of studies, and specific recommendations for future reading.

Many chapters make a plea for pluralism in considering children’s learning of socialisation from a broad perspective rather than a narrow child-centred biologically based one. (The lifetime perspectives of the research of Rutter and Bronfenbrenner are praised.) The theoretical perspectives are to be found in several different chapters not necessarily placed in logical order. The last chapter presents a historical perspective of the “individual stages within child” approach and a social/cultural point of view of development. Helen Haste discusses the Vygotskyan perspective as bridging the individual child-based approach and the psychosocial approach to children’s learning of social skills, emphasising the child as an active learner. The theoretical perspectives, however, are not critically appraised in relation to some of the studies quoted and some of the findings.

One of the chapters that could helpfully have been expanded is that by Youniss, who has articulated the theory of the individual child bringing variable skills to the task of interacting with the social world as an extremely limited view of the importance of learning reciprocity, and who emphasises group social learning and the mutual understanding that leads to future responsible participation in close relationships and societal functioning. It would have been very helpful if some of the chapters could have explored the evidence for this theme.

Problems of psychosocial development appear to be on the increase in many societies. These are considered in a chapter by Smith et al. entitled Bully Victim Problems. The chapter briefly summarises the individual social skills deficit model as well as other explanations involving synthesis of individual temperamental and other characteristics, with attachment theory leading to abnormal internal models of relationships, combined with child-rearing practices that may be negative or full of conflict. The role of the school and peer support for this group of children experiencing problems is discussed by Cowie, who has done much work in this area.

Other chapters describe the studies of child and adolescent friendships, playtime in schools, and whether or not this is a good place to either observe or try to change children’s social relationships. Home versus school as a setting for social learning is discussed. Several chapters bring out the importance of the researcher’s background in influencing the observations and inferences that they make. Schneider describes a cultural perspective as influencing children’s social skills.

There are no chapters on children with specific disabilities and their effect on socialisation skills, nothing about the different contexts or types of school and the influence these have, nor the particular attributes of a school that might impact on socialisation skills. Nor are there chapters on recent work on social cognition and the integration of emotional and social recognition of self and others.

I did enjoy reading this book because it gave me an opportunity to read views I might not otherwise have absorbed, but a more critical analysis would have been welcome, along the lines, for example, of the chapter by Gian Capara and Michael Rutter. “Individual development and social change” in Rutter and Smith (1990).

Gillian Baird

References


Where does paediatric neuropsychiatry begin and where does it end? Clearly, the emotional and behavioural problems associated with epilepsy and other forms of brain dysfunction are central to the field. Life becomes more complicated when one asks oneself whether conduct disorders should be included because of the autonomic nervous system findings found in this condition, or anorexia nervosa because of the interesting neuro-imaging findings recently reported. Are these really neuropsychiatric disorders?

The editors of this massive textbook have taken a broad definition. The book is divided into five sections. In the first there is an overview of normal and abnormal brain development. This is followed by chapters on neuropsychiatric assessment, including numerous chapters on advanced brain imaging technologies. Sections Three and Four focus on the neuropsychiatric aspects of virtually all types of psychiatric disorder in children and adolescents, and the final section deals with treatment issues.

The chapters are generally competently written and provide state-of-the-art accounts of the various topics they address. The book will be found useful for reference especially by clinicians faced with psychiatric disorders in children with low-frequency organic syndromes with which they are unfamiliar. Nevertheless there are important lacunae, surprising in a book stretching to 1566 pages. There are, for example, no chapters on behavioural genetics or epidemiological studies. The epidemiological evidence is perhaps the most important reason for suggesting that knowledge of brain function and dysfunction is essential for all child and adolescent psychiatrists. The lack of a chapter on this subject is aggravated by the fact that epidemiological data are only rarely mentioned in the sections where they are relevant.

For example, the section on hemiplegia carries no reference to the classical studies of Robert Goodman on this topic, showing enormously high rates of psychiatric disorder, especially attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, in this condition.

One might have thought that conversion disorders would be substantially covered. Yet, apart from an account of pseudo-seizures in the section on epilepsy, there is no mention of these disorders. If one turned to this book for information how to understand or manage a child with a so-called hysterical paralysis (surely a neuropsychiatric disorder if ever there was one), one would turn in vain. Further, the chapters on treatment are often only weakly linked to the subject of the book. For
example, the chapter on behavioural treatments contains no account of biofeedback techniques in the management of epilepsy. My attempts to fill gaps in my knowledge met with disappointing results. For example, I wanted to learn more about normal brain development in adolescence, a subject of contemporary interest because of new developmental theories of the origin of schizophrenia, but found the book unrewarding in this respect.

It is really bad luck on editors if one of their contributors happens to have attacked the practice of a reviewer of their book. Yet this has happened here! In the chapter on ECT, I am publicly taken to task, as it happens for the third time by this particular contributor, whom I shall charitably not name, for having failed to give ECT to an 8-year-old child he considers, on the basis of my published case description, to have had catatonia. As it happens, the child did not have catatonia, but a conversion disorder, a treatment for which most would agree ECT is not a useful treatment. Fortunately, most of this book is of a much higher standard, with the chapters on neuroimaging especially helpful, than this solcism might suggest.

I think libraries would get better value for money if they purchased Christopher Gillberg’s Clinical Child Neuropsychiatry, which is generally more focused. However, the book under review here contains many authoritative chapters, and is more up to date, a relevant consideration as the child neuropsychiatric field is changing particularly rapidly.

Philip Graham


“Knowledge of the origin of gender typicality and atypicality is still woefully incomplete”, John Money contends, in his introduction to this ambitious collection, which aims to bring us up to the minute in our understanding of the matter. Acclaimed as the founder of scientific “gender” research three decades ago, Money remains confident that there is only one way forward: “It is time to approach gender identity in the non-judgmental way of science” (p. xvii). The contributors to this collection mostly agree with him, despite their diverse disciplinary backgrounds ranging from the psychodynamic to the strictly medical or endocrinological. However, given the complexities of the notion of gender (many of which are explored in the book), not to mention the noisy controversies currently surrounding the founding views and practices of Money himself, and his professional lineage (which are largely ignored or muffled here), it may not be quite so simple.

Selecting from papers delivered at an international, interdisciplinary conference of researchers, clinicians, and other professionals working with gender problems in children and young adolescents, the collection is another example of the recent rapprochement between a number of perennial adversaries: psychologists and psychoanalysts; physical scientists and clinical practitioners. This makes it particularly welcome in a broader intellectual climate that still delights in promoting such antagonisms. The collection is also salutary in its predominant awareness of the genuine complexity and indisputable anxiety currently surrounding the topic of gender instability: an anxiety shared, although till recently disavowed, by those who study it—the mental health professionals.

Displaying exemplary caution and compassion, many of the articles stress that there are no straightforward answers for people who feel persistently unhappy with their own bodies and presumed gender identifications. Whether or not their ongoing distress might seem to justify serious medical intervention, many of the essays stress that a key cultural task when facing such issues is the attempt to enlarge everybody’s acceptance of greater gender fluidity. For this reviewer, the strongest pieces, like that of child psychotherapist Peter Wilson, stress the normality of gender unease and uncertainty in all young people. Similarly Domenico Di Ceglie wants to replace earlier, fixed notions of “core gender identity” (as elaborated by Money, or Robert Stoller a few decades ago) with what he sees as an alternative, multidimensional understanding of “typicality” and “atypicality” in gender identity organisation. Arguing even more forcefully for more flexible gender categories, the anthropologist Allison James highlights the research of Gilbert Herdt and others to suggest that anatomical, sexual, and gender-related ambiguities are only marked as troubling “in a two-sex cultural category system like ours” (p. 87).

Dealing as it does with troubled children, this book is able to omit the arguments of those today who self-consciously flaunt “gender dissidence” as a way of underlining existing sexual and gender binaries. Thus, while it does indeed reflect new dialogues and a new openness in its reflections on “disorders” of gender identity, it is not quite as open as some might wish. The recent theoretical impact of Judith Butler, Eve Sedgwick, and other “queer theorists” and “transgender” voices are not mentioned in these pages. However, the case studies it carries of young people suffering the miseries of a personal sense of gender “defectiveness” helps to explain why. We may be able to envisage a future world where gender is less marked, and certainly less polarised, in human development and mental health than it is today. But, at present young people still find themselves in barely tolerable situations if, with whatever hesitations, they cannot strike some balance with their allotted gender. Most of the essays here help us to understand their plight. Yet Money is surely wrong to suggest that it is simply “the ways of science” that will eventually teach us how best to lessen, if not eliminate, the problems they face. For gender to become a less troubling aspect of our identities it would need to be one that, though marked in diverse and shifting ways, no longer separates us so rigidly between supposedly polarised sexes. Ultimately, that is a normative or cultural goal, rather than a scientific solution.

Lynne Segal


Those of us who regularly recommend Philip Graham’s book as standard reading for trainees in child psychiatry felt deprived when the 2nd edition went out of print. This new edition is most welcome. It retains the strengths of earlier editions: the comprehensive, well-informed coverage of the subject, the clarity in the representation, the special emphasis on the paediatric/psychiatric interface. This edition provides a more extensive coverage of neuro-developmental disorders and new sections on maltreatment in the family and psychiatric problems of adolescence. The description of treatment modalities, like the rest of chapters, is systematic and clear. It is also extensive and uses vignettes, which should greatly help clinicians. The general layout is traditional but easy to read. I wondered about the first chapter being on maltreatment in the family in a book with a primary focus on child psychopathology and the chapter on child–adult continuities feels too short. However, these are minor points. The book can continue to be recommended for psychiatric and paediatric trainees as an excellent extended introduction to the subject.

Elena Garralda