

## Book Review

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*Personal Struggles – Oppression, healing and liberation*. Dr S. Ruth (2019; 136pp ISBN 978-1-78205-348-4) Atrium/Cork University Press

*Personal Struggles – Oppression, healing and liberation* is a recent addition to the *Mind Your Self* series by Dr Sean Ruth. Against the backdrop of the assumption that as humans we are implicitly able to completely understand each other, Sean Ruth interprets our social identity and the attitudes and prejudices of wider society, which conspire to undermine the intrinsic sense of self-worth of individuals and marginalized social groupings. Ruth is an Organizational Psychologist who has expertise in the psychology of leadership development, conflict resolution, liberation, and diversity. He is a noted contributor to the field of leadership refinement, having previously authored 'Leadership and Liberation: A Psychological Approach' (Routledge, 2006) and 'High Quality Leadership: A Self-Assessment Guide for individuals and Teams' (Veritas, 2006). If it is true to say that we frequently have very little awareness of the motivations and meanings for our own actions, let alone others, and that we may struggle to throw off personal insecurities, it may be liberating to realize that many of our burdens are related to external adversity and the cumulative legacy of oppression. Implicitly, this is not a reflection of personal inadequacy or incapacity. Such oppression is personal and it hurts – deeply in many cases – and this book presents a model for understanding people's feelings and behavior in a social as opposed to an individual context.

Sean Ruth divides his book into six chapters, charting the acquisition of hurts often through the operation of oppression, leading to consequent struggle and the moulding of an identity, be that of an oppressor or someone who is oppressed. He describes how oppression has hurt us, has become internalized, acted out, and distorted the human capacity to be kind. There is an overt admission and acknowledgment, however, of the existence of a blend of oppressed and oppressor identities in most of us. The covert and subtle nature of oppression is especially important to highlight in a world dominated by political correctness and a mainstream avoidance of directly insensitive language. Micro-assaults in the form of condescension or unnatural niceness can be just as confusing and damaging for people who originate from oppressed backgrounds. The book usefully exposes the process of internalizing of prejudices and oppressive behavior, which is part of the subconscious conditioning

of the dominant oppressor group. Yet despite these forces, there is an imperative to heal the hurt of oppression, to liberate ourselves and take charge of our struggles as we seek to build closer, more respectful connections with people around us. The publication therefore contains themes that will be of interest to a general readership, but its relevance to those of a professional background in the areas of mental health, social policy, education, and psychology should not be understated. The book aims to bridge the gap between academic/professional knowledge and the general reader, a genre of writing that is becoming increasingly popular, for academic publishing houses to develop.

This book is highly relevant, because the fundamentals of understanding conflict and discrimination, which is frequently rooted in oppression, are also essential for individuals and communities and especially holders of political office and positions of social leadership to grasp. The characteristics and concepts of internalized domination and oppression are coherently and usefully explained to a lay audience, which may find great solace in formulating negative and self-destructive behaviors as societally induced, rather than as inherent personal failings. The concept of leadership itself is demystified and broadened in a redefinition, to be underpinned by a skill set that largely consists of natural human abilities and people skills. The development of ideas and arguments are carefully and persuasively crafted, repeated when necessary, and expanded as the book moves to an optimistic conclusion that it is possible to take charge of our struggles. This liberation is against a backdrop of other urgent global challenges in terms of economic sustainability, care of our natural environment, and opportunity and equality for all citizens irrespective of social categorization. Reflective questions, at the conclusion of each chapter, render the publication suitable as a training manual for academic disciplines, such as the social sciences and clinicians from mental health backgrounds.

I found Sean Ruth's book to be concise and succinct, with an easy flow and gentle building of argument and a fluid use of language, without a preponderance of jargon or technical terms. His personal experience of group dynamics in the context of the coming together of diverse social groupings with the aim of healing hurt and building dialog was especially useful, as were his guidelines for building group safety, trust, and cohesion. The exposition of the ideal leadership skill set was novel and illuminative, leadership being recast in fundamentally human terms and exemplified by the lived experience of many who act intuitively in their roles as parents, mentors, and example setters in many areas of society.

A perpetual and indiscriminate deployment of the term 'oppressed identity' and acting out of associated

grievances may be the ultimate means by which people of oppressed background collude in the imprisonment of past oppression, yet the need to avoid a perpetual sense of unending victimhood is implicitly acknowledged in this book by the strategies in the concluding chapter 'Taking charge of our struggles'. While it is empowering for us to learn that rejection, failure and unfairness are part of a universal struggle and everyday life, Ruth argues for positive action to 'contradict internalized oppression . . . and reclaim power'. He could have explored the dynamics of the learned behavior associated with perpetual victim status in greater depth, but perhaps this is the scope of another book. Mental health professionals may not take kindly to Ruth's reference to 'mental health oppression' when he fears they see mental health problems only through a narrow lens of biological factors or genetics, ignoring the social dimension or personal oppression. This is a danger however in psychiatric practice that surely cannot be ignored, despite the present emphasis on and awareness of the need for holistic, person-centered and multidisciplinary care. Psychiatric care is not invalidated by such

observations but rather 'the system' needs to be vigilant and receptive in receiving accounts of personal distress and oppression and offer appropriate remediation.

*Personal Struggles* is a book that is relevant to a wide audience both lay and professional in Ireland – a nation that prides itself on having endured 700 years of oppression – but I suspect it will do well internationally too. I will definitely re-read it to more fully absorb its key messages and valuable learnings. In an era where many traumas and examples of personal and societal oppression are paraded, yet have a short statute of limitations when it comes to understanding and healing their impact, this book is especially timely.

#### **Conflict of Interest**

S Naqvi and D Lyons have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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