

## Book Reviews

### MENTAL HEALTH CRITERIA

**The Definition and Measurement of Mental Health.** Edited by S. B. SELLS, National Centre for Health Statistics, U.S. Public Health Service Publication No. 1873, Washington: U.S. Govt. Printing Office. 1968. Pp. 280. Price \$3.

What is mental health? The bewildering array of definitions proffered in the literature indicates that there is no precise, no generally accepted, answer to this question. For some authors, mental health is merely the absence of mental illness. Other workers have proposed a variety of positive criteria, *inter alia*: self-actualization, environmental mastery, integration of the personality, a high degree of need satisfaction, a realistic attack on one's own problems with an acceptance of the inevitable, the ability to interact with others in mutually satisfying and enduring personal relationships, an accurate perception of oneself and others, personal and social responsibility, self-control, and stability. It could be argued, of course, that anybody possessing all or even most of these sterling qualities is not just mentally healthy but due for canonization. Be that as it may, in the light of such vague, immeasurable, and subjective criteria, mental health remains what Aubrey Lewis has called 'an invincibly obscure concept'.

In the present book, the concept of mental health is critically examined by workers from various disciplines. It contains a series of lectures delivered at a symposium organized by the National Centre for Health Statistics for the purpose of obtaining 'the most outstanding advice available about how to approach the measurement of the prevalence of mental ill health in the population of the United States'. The distinguished psychiatrists and social scientists who contributed to this symposium included Clausen, French, Gardner, Glidewell, Gruenberg, Loevinger, Pasamanick, Sells, Brewster Smith, Srole and Zubin. Their closely reasoned lectures reflect, broadly speaking, two differing orientations towards mental health.

The traditional psychiatric approach, based on the medical 'health-disease' model, aims to identify discrete categories of mental illness, using such criteria as changes in structure or functions (physiological and psychological), specific symptom-patterns,

and natural history. The primary concern here is not with the concept of mental health as such but with reliable and valid diagnosis of mental disorders. By contrast, behavioural scientists orientated towards 'positive mental health' seek to define the latter in terms of a 'multi-dimensional conception of human effectiveness', with separate parameters of normality for different population samples and situations. Human effectiveness is to be assessed by developing norms of behaviour (e.g. for interpersonal relationships, sexual activity, marriage, work, recreation) in various cultures for population subgroups according to age, sex, socio-economic status, education, ethnic origin and other variables. The need for accurate data of this kind is, of course, undeniable. But the crucial argument is whether or not deviations from statistical or ideal norms of social behaviour are necessary and sufficient criteria of mental morbidity. On clinical as well as ethical grounds, many psychiatrists would take their stand with Aubrey Lewis when he states: 'Though our estimate of the efficiency with which functions work must take account of the social environment which supplies stimuli and satisfies needs, the criteria of health are not primarily social: it is misconceived to equate ill-health with social deviation or maladjustment.'

Both viewpoints are cogently argued in these lectures, with only occasional lapses into jargon-laden verbosity. Once the authors turn from theoretical expositions to the practical implications for ascertaining psychosocial morbidity in the community, the two approaches—aimed at developing objective indices of psychopathology on the one hand, and at the establishment of behavioural norms on the other—become complementary avenues of enquiry. Possible ways of achieving the stated aims are explored in detail; various techniques for measuring normal and abnormal behaviour are outlined, relevant American research is critically reviewed, and major methodological problems are identified. In these respects, particularly, the present book is unusually informative and will be of considerable interest to psychiatrists and social scientists alike.

STEVEN GREER.

### REFERENCES

- LEWIS, A. (1953). 'Health as a social concept'. *Brit. J. Sociol.*, **4**, 109-24.