

Book Reviews

Edited by Sidney Crown and Alan Lee

Self-Esteem: Paradoxes and Innovations in Clinical Theory and Practice. By RICHARD L. BEDNAR. London: Eurospan Group. 1993. £35.95 (hb) £22.50 (pb).

The authors of this book are much preoccupied with a 'pivotal paradox' (their term). The paradox to which they attach so much importance, comes from the observation that many apparently highly successful people are lacking in self-esteem. My difficulty with this book arises out of my problem in accepting this 'pivotal paradox'. Indeed, I do not accept that it is a paradox at all. It may well be their lack of self-esteem that drives such people to be successful. Any attempt, therefore, to raise their self-esteem would be therapeutically ill-advised. A further problem is that the authors have an idea of self-esteem as a constant, rather than a feeling which may oscillate from one extreme to another. Winston Churchill, a high achiever if ever there were one, lost all self-esteem when his 'black dog' was upon him. At other times he gave the appearance of overflowing with self-esteem.

A further important concept for the authors is that of avoidance. They emphasise that people with low self-esteem cope by avoidance, and they see avoidance as entirely negative: "The act of avoidance virtually precludes the possibility of new learning. Avoidance does not provide a basis for learning new or more adaptive response patterns . . . nor does it provide any hope for personal growth and development . . ." (p. 119). The possibility that avoidance, in some circumstances, may be "a more adaptive response pattern" itself, is not considered.

I acknowledge that I am uncomfortable with statements that do not include, explicitly or implicitly, 'both/and' and 'more/less'. This book has helped me, however, to be clearer about the certainty/uncertainty paradigm in therapy. The therapies may be classified according to the certainty/uncertainty they hold in relation, firstly, to their theoretical constructs, and, secondly, to the interventions which follow. Thus, psychoanalysis may be described as certain-uncertain (theory-practice), and behaviour therapy as certain-certain. Psychopharmacological approaches would be uncertain-certain, as would ECT.

The essence of this book is in the certain-certain camp, and since my own approach is in the uncertain-uncertain camp, it would be wise to ignore this review.

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Beyond Mid-Life Crisis. A Psychodynamic Approach to Ageing. By PETER HILDEBRAND. London: Sheldon Press. 1995. 114 pp. £12.99 (pb).

One of the continuing challenges of old age psychiatry is the need to integrate a biological understanding of the disorders of later life, in which organic processes often play a central role, with the personal context of the patient. It was with hopeful anticipation that I began reading this book, wanting to find a clinically relevant psychodynamic perspective on the challenges of growing old which would be intelligible to the non-specialist. To a large extent this expectation was fulfilled.

As the author points out in his introduction, psychotherapists have not until recently (with a few notable exceptions) been noted for their therapeutic enthusiasm for work with older clients. His stated intention is to redress the balance somewhat, indicating the ways in which the psychodynamic perspective can contribute to our theoretical and therapeutic understanding of ageing and its problems. At the beginning of the book he elaborates a developmental model of ageing identifying the psychological tasks appropriate for each stage of life. This helpfully locates the topic within a broader context of post-adolescent adjustment, emphasising the inappropriateness of a 'static' view of adult life beyond the period usually associated with the major stages of personal development.

Subsequent chapters concentrate on specific areas of life such as work, marriage, sexuality and intellectual performance. For each of these Hildebrand identifies the particular challenges and adjustments associated with ageing. This is an approach which has been adopted in other introductory texts covering the psychology of ageing: the difference here is the effective