Book review


Reviewed by: Blythe Shepard, University of Victoria

SocioDynamic Counselling: A practical approach to meaning making is written for professionals in the helping field. Completed by Dr. R. Vance Peavy prior to his sudden death in 2002, the text provides a philosophical and practical guide for helpers based on the “principles of compassion, cultural attunement, respect, authenticity, and disciplined mindfulness” (xv). SocioDynamic Counselling is “a way of thinking about people, what they are trying to create in life, and what either impedes or supports their efforts” (p. 44). It is a learning process rather than a therapy that invites the helper and help-seeker to engage in a participatory, constructive, and creative endeavour.

Dr. R. Vance Peavy, an international leader in the counselling profession, has publications in Finnish, Danish, Swedish, and English on constructivist counselling approaches, career development, and human science research. In 2000, he received the Distinguished Senior Contributor Award from the Division of Counselling Psychology of the American Psychological Association for his lifetime contributions to the discipline. In 2001, he was awarded the Stu Conger Award for leadership in Career Counselling and Career Development by the Canadian Career Development Foundation. The week before his death, he received an outstanding achievement award for his contributions to qualitative research by the Planning committee for the International Human Science Research Conference, 2002.

The book contains four chapters in addition to an Introduction by Dr. Marie Hoskins and (Auto)Biographical Reflections on Life and Theory by Dr. Denise Larsen. The text is made up of two main sections. The first portion is devoted to the philosophical and psychological underpinnings of SocioDynamic Counselling, while the second portion focuses on counselling practice.
SocioDynamic Counselling is both a philosophy and a method of helping. Based on the teachings of a variety of theorists, including Charles Taylor, Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, Anthony Giddens, Carl Rogers, Thomas Kuhn, Martin Buber, Abraham Maslow, and others, Vance Peavy outlines thirteen ideas that are central to the SocioDynamic philosophy of helping. In addition he distills insightful ideas from the work of two Danish philosophers, Kirkegaard and Logstrup, as well as from Russian theorist, Mikhail Bakhtin and German philosopher, Karl Jaspers. In his promotion of a holistic approach to helping, his point is made clear. It is time to move from positivist vocabularies to a new “language game.” When ideas, metaphors, and figurative language are borrowed from a range of disciplines, counselling practice is more likely to keep in touch with the uncertainty and fluidity of contemporary society. When counsellors creatively use ideas and language in the process of interaction, clients are assisted in moving forward along “capacity-developing pathways” (p. 9). As Vance Peavy points out, “Words are tools for constructing and authoring a life. It makes a difference what vocabulary you choose your tools from” (p. 11).

The second half of the book moves the reader to practice. Here lies the strength of the book. Peavy weaves the importance of the counsellor’s attitude or way-of-being-in-the-world into the “game of counselling.” Counselling practice is viewed as a cooperative activity or game where counsellors and help-seekers are the players, the moves are the functions and methods (e.g. mapping or listening) that are used, and tools are what the counsellor uses to accomplish moves (e.g. use of a particular type of question or use of a metaphor). In response to the question, “How should I fashion my life?” the counsellor and help-seeker engage in a joint activity using dialogue and other helpful moves, tools and strategies that encourage new perspectives and solutions, a wider range of choices, critical thinking, capacity building, clarification of self-in-relation to context and others, and strengthened self-identity.

While emphasizing that improvisation and creativity are important principles and that counsellors must adjust for specific cultural contexts, Vance describes twelve SocioDynamic counselling strategies. The first strategy is a template to guide the counselling relationship and is based on reflective dialogical feedback processes. Vance then proceeds to describe in detail the basis of all helping strategies, dialogical listening, which rests upon three conditions: peace of mind, harmonious relations, and an orientation toward transformative learning. Other strategies outlined include mindful problem solving, intelligent conversation, visualization and life-space mapping, per-