Book Review


The title of this superb book may cause some confusion for American readers. Specifically, in the United Kingdom the term learning disabilities refers to mental retardation, and not to dyslexia or related cognitive problems, as it does in the United States. The occasional use of British terminology, together with descriptions of clinical services as they exist in the United Kingdom, might initially suggest that the material presented represents a perspective that is metaphorically as well as literally foreign. Nothing could be further from the truth. American readers will be impressed, time and again, with how similar the issues, problems, and solutions in the United Kingdom are to what exists in the United States. To put it in other terms, this book conveys universal themes in the area of challenging behavior. Further, it succeeds in doing so because the contributed chapters are written by thinkers, scholars, and clinicians who are as cleverly insightful as they are knowledgeable—the best among the best.

The first section of the book consists of four chapters that elaborate upon the nature of the challenge. In Chapter 1, Emerson, Felce, McGill, and Mansell establish that the aim of the book is to provide planners, managers, and professionals with resource material, gleaned from experience, that can be used to advocate for and design better services relevant to dealing with serious challenging behavior. Immediately, the reader will note that the aim is much broader than simply providing a list of procedures for assessment and intervention, as is typical of many American texts. Instead, the aim is to analyze and redesign the systems of support that pertain to challenging behavior, and these systems include molar administrative, social policy, and values perspectives in addition to the traditional focus on more molecular clinical factors. The authors eloquently summarize their progressive viewpoint by noting that high quality services not only remedi-
ate challenging behavior but also make possible community living, relationship formation, choice, personal competence, and respect from others.

In Chapter 2, Qureshi presents a detailed, and well-organized analysis of the epidemiology of challenging behavior. She raises an interesting and frequently overlooked point, namely, that labeling someone as challenging is the result of a complicated social process rather than an a priori decision. Thus, we typically think of challenging behavior as involving aggression and self-injury. Yet, as many parents have said over the years, the less dramatic behaviors such as nagging, dependency, and compulsive rituals often prove to be the most taxing and frustrating for caregivers. These behaviors, of course, are seldom discussed in the literature on intervention for challenging behavior.

Murphy, in Chapter 3, presents a scholarly, comprehensive, and sophisticated approach to understanding challenging behavior. An analysis of biological and operant factors is accompanied by a discussion of ecological factors that are representative of the molar, systems-oriented approach that is the key feature of this book. Broad ecological factors include parental social isolation, poverty, depression, and a host of other variables that need to be considered in gaining a more complete understanding of challenging behavior. The multiplicity of factors discussed leads logically to a series of integrated models for severe problem behavior that the author presents to illustrate how much more complex the control of such behavior is than is typically presented in the literature.

Chapter 4, by Mansell, McGill, and Emerson, conceptualizes service provision along several critical dimensions. First, engagement and meaningful activity is more important than simply amassing skills. The focus is on group participation (lifestyle change), and not simply on modifying individual behavior. Second, staff set goals in collaboration with management. That is, one avoids having an “expert” come in from the outside and tell staff what they must do without assessing and incorporating valid and meaningful staff suggestions. Third, intervention efficacy is the result of smoothly coordinating various elements of the service system, and is not simply the result of “picking the right procedure.” Thus, prevention, early detection, crisis management, and long-term support must be integrated; and a breakdown in any one of these elements of the system may well jeopardize the success of the entire effort.

The second section of the book consists of four chapters that describe and analyze service options. Chapter 5 by Felce, Lowe, and dePaiva is a fascinating account of one attempt to move people with severe challenging behavior from institutions to ordinary housing in the community. A major finding was that the move did not produce a decrease in the level of challenging behavior. In other words, to think that deinstitutionalization per se