

BOOK REVIEW

Counseling the Person Beyond the Alcohol Problem

Richard Bryant-Jeffries

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Those who train person-centered counselors are often criticized for not offering modules on working with drug addiction, or alcoholism, or eating disorders or a hundred and one other 'specialist' problems. Such a criticism is a typical reaction of those conditioned by a culture to believe that specific problems require specialized knowledge and specially trained 'experts' to deal with them. This 'specificity myth' as it has been called by the American person-centered scholar, Jerold Bozarth, is not supported by research and yet it has had profound effect on mental health policy and the training of professional practitioners.

The person-centered approach, because it focuses upon the personhood of the client and on the therapeutic relationship, refuses to be seduced by this problem-centered obsession. This is no way to deny the usefulness and sometimes the necessity of knowing certain facts about certain conditions especially when they concern life-threatening processes. For the person-centered counselor, however, the primary remains with the person and not with his or her problem however severe or bizarre, and the counselor's task, as always, is the creation of a relationship where the client can feel respected, understood and trusted to find his or her own way forward.

In no area is such an approach more called into question than that of alcohol abuse. Most of the currently favored 'treatments' involve forceful interventions and often vigorously imposed regimens of behavior and cognitive control. In his new book, Richard Bryant-Jeffries acknowledges that for some clients such approaches can have value and he is particularly respectful of the work of AA and of the supportive power of the AA group meeting. His theme, however, is the central importance of the unique person who is suffering and his belief that in the vast majority of cases, the abuse of alcohol is the outcome of unsatisfactory, damaging or disrupted relationships. The person-centered approach, with its emphasis on relationship and the restoration of self-worth, is ideally suited to working with those who, because of their alcohol abuse, have often lost all self-respect and alienated those whose love they have forfeited by their behavior.

This is at one and the same time, a practical, informative and deeply moving book. Bryant-Jeffries writes with authority about the world of alcohol abuse and especially of the calamitous effect on family life of the alcoholic life-style in its various forms. He also conveys, succinctly and clearly, the heart of person-centered theory and practice. He then

goes on to show that the 'Cycle of Change' model can provide a framework for understanding alcohol abuse and the process of recovery which is wholly compatible with person-centered practice and can be invaluable in helping the client to understand his or her own state of being. Bryant-Jefferies is no person-centered 'purist' and believes that respect for the client will sometimes involve direct guidance based on sound information. He is also thoroughly convincing in his emphasis on the ability of the counselor to be fully congruent in the expression of doubts, cautions or warnings when they are prominent and pressing in the counselor's consciousness. Equally important is the counselor's willingness to be patient, encouraging and acceptant when lapses occur. The quality of the relationship will often ensure that a lapse does not result in a total relapse but, should this happen, Bryant-Jefferies demonstrates the importance of the counselor's steadfastness in holding hope for the client and not losing respect.

Much use is made of excerpts from counseling interactions with a variety of clients and here the firm but tender presence of the counselor is constantly apparent. This is someone who is clearly a faithful and effective companion to those whom society will often have written off as hopeless cases. The quality of the person springs off the page and there are times when the gentleness of the accompaniment, underpinned as it is by a disciplined use of the self, gives as inspirational power to the writing. This is person-centered work at its best and my only regret is that Bryant-Jefferies merely touches on the spiritual dimension to his practice which, for this reader at least, permeates so much of what he writes and gives the book its immensely hopeful tone.

I commend this book to those person-centered practitioners who have not ventured into this area of counseling before because they have considered it too 'specialist'. They will, I believe, be encouraged and emboldened. I commend it, too, to practitioners from other traditions who continue to entertain the false notion that person-centered counseling is not suitable for really serious problems. They may glimpse in its pages the self-evident but often neglected truth that it is persons who have problems and persons who demand our respect and professional commitment.

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