

Dusan Kecmanovic:
CONTROVERSIES AND DILEMMAS IN CONTEMPORARY PSYCHIATRY
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Reading Kecmanovic's book *Controversies and Dilemmas in Contemporary Psychiatry* reminded me of the times when psychiatry appeared attractive because and not despite of its ambiguities and inherent controversies. Today it seems that many psychiatrists prefer to be oblivious about this aspect of their profession; if so, Kecmanovic's book is timely, as it does a very good job of highlighting some of the key issues confronting psychiatry. After all, Kecmanovic himself states that his book is a "defence of psychiatry against both critics of psychiatry and those who are short of a critical view of the job they do".

Indeed, critique and polemic are written all over this book, which represents its major strength. Not for a moment is it a dull reading.

Kecmanovic takes the reader on a journey through four sections. In the first and largest part, Kecmanovic discusses a definition of mental disorder; in the second, he pursues another elusive concept – that of mental health; in the third part, Kecmanovic addresses the relationship between mental disorders and physical diseases; the final section of the book looks at various models in psychiatry and critically examines attempts to integrate them.

Kecmanovic rightly argues that a lack of an adequate concept of mental disorder is at the core of the contemporary problems in psychiatry. If psychiatrists do not have a clear idea as to what constitutes a mental disorder, how can they claim to be specialists for mental disorders? Kecmanovic presents and critically reviews the prominent contemporary definitions of mental disorder and he does not shy away from formulating his own concept of mental disorder. Admittedly, this concept has many components and is perhaps a little unwieldy, but Kecmanovic discusses its foundations extensively and in a convincing manner. He regards his endeavour as one of several attempts to "come closer to a definition of mental disorder that would include characteristics that are specific only and exclusively to mental disorder". The next step would be to test both the validity and clinical utility of Kecmanovic's definition of mental disorder, and the psychiatric establishment would do well to take a lead in this process.

In the second part of the book, Kecmanovic reviews three dominant concepts of mental health, paying most attention to the concept espoused and promoted by the positive psychology movement. He provides a powerful

critique of the positive psychology views, which is very timely and relevant for the globalised society in which we live. Although it may seem that here Kecmanovic is not on the grounds that firmly belong to psychiatry, he shows convincingly why psychiatry and psychiatrists should care about the concept of mental health. Finally, as with mental disorder, he provides his own definition of mental health – which is complex and multifaceted, as the mental health itself is.

The next section of the book may be the most controversial. In arguing that mental disorders and physical diseases are essentially different, Kecmanovic might run a risk of being perceived as perpetuating the mind-body dualism. He seems to be aware of that, but makes no apology when elaborating on the distinctions between mental disorders and physical diseases. One might ask, however, whether their differences are more important than the commonalities that they have. There are far-ranging implications of Kecmanovic's view, not only in terms of the issue of "mind versus matter" but also with regards to how mental disorders should be conceptualised vis-à-vis diseases encountered in clinical medicine. Indeed, if there is something unique and "special" about mental disorders, should they still belong to the realm of medicine?

In the last part of the book, Kecmanovic does not appear to be optimistic as he discusses the "conceptual cacophony" (a multitude of competing and antagonistic models) in psychiatry and largely failed attempts to make psychiatry speak with one "voice". It would be very hard to disagree with Kecmanovic's assessment that psychiatry is "at a dead-end" when it comes to creating conceptual unity and making itself more coherent internally. Having made a strong case that conceptual cacophony is hugely detrimental to psychiatry, Kecmanovic stops short of suggesting how the sectarian divides within psychiatry might be bridged. Perhaps he is weary of proposing yet another approach to reconciling the irreconcilable. If so, this may further reflect the depth of the crisis of contemporary psychiatry.

Apart from the question of whether one agrees with Kecmanovic's views or not, are there any problems with this book? Perhaps its material could have been presented in a more reader-friendly format, using more tables and other visual aids. At times, the text is somewhat dense and convoluted. Lines of arguments are sometimes overlapping. However, for the most part

Kecmanovic presents his arguments clearly and with admirable academic rigour.

In summary, this is a brave and ambitious book. It will not appeal to those who seek quick, recipe-style solutions to psychiatry's problems, but will be immensely rewarding for readers who want to hear a critical, but well-balanced voice of one of psychiatry's insiders. The book not only successfully challenges the

established views and concepts, but attempts to provide alternative ways of approaching difficult and controversial subjects. Therefore, Kecmanovic's book is important and should be read by every psychiatrist and mental health professional with a curious and open mind who cares about the status of contemporary psychiatry and direction in which it is going.

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