

BOOK REVIEW

Risking Everything for the Common Good: A Review of *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era*

Elena Mustakova-Possardt, Mikhail Lyubansky, Michael Basseches, and Julie Oxenberg (Eds.).
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Reviewed by Miki Kashtan

This remarkable book rests on a clear and challenging premise: “There can be no such thing as adequate mental health on a planet whose core eco-systems and primary social relations are unsustainably deteriorating” (p. 76). What is unusual about both quote and book is that this kind of critique, which has been leveled at the field of psychology for decades, is coming from within the field itself. This book is a call by psychologists for psychologists to entirely revamp everything from the theoretical foundations of the field to its research agenda, educational mission, and clinical and social practice. The purpose of this revision is clear as a bell: It is what is needed for psychology to actually deliver on its promise of supporting human well-being.

As someone from outside the field who is committed to “a passionate investment in the future well-being of the world’s people and our planet” (p. 62), both through individual liberation and through social transformation, I have found it an ongoing breath of fresh air to discover people within the field who share similar commitments. I am so heartened to know that

the editors and authors of this book believe in a socially responsible psychology that is attuned to and engages with the social and structural context of our very individual modern lives.

If, as the authors suggest, “a systematic rethinking of the role of psychology needs to occur” (p. viii), then, as a reader, I want to understand both what the change would entail and what it is that is keeping psychologists from embracing it.

To my mind, the book addresses the first question quite fully by asking enough questions and offering enough preliminary paths of theory, practice, and research, that the invitation is issued in full to all psychologists and interested citizens to continue what has been started here. I’d like to believe that anyone reading this volume will emerge with at least some unease about continuing to engage in psychological practice or research without taking into account the existing systems and forces of global capitalism in all its forms and their effects on billions of people on the planet, including clients, students, and fellow practitioners.

Similar critiques challenging psychological theory and practice to the core have been made before, including by internal critics. Have they been successful? To some extent, the field of psychology can point to specific accomplishments. Three examples can illustrate the possibilities that exist for those who want to question the complicity that the authors call attention to. Multicultural awareness and the depathologizing of LGBT people by psychologists have affected clinical practice and helped broaden mainstream thinking. American Psychological Association (APA) members’ protests about psychologists’ participation in George W. Bush-era torture did eventually lead the APA to condemn it, although this year the APA failed to discipline a member who had assisted in torture

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at Guantanamo. In Australia this year, psychologists have led the way in protesting human rights violations of refugees. And yet it took some digging to uncover these examples, and they fall far short of the challenge that the idea of a socially responsible psychology represents.

Given all this, I also want to address the second question I raised above: Why is it that this call has not been taken up on a large scale before, and what, if anything, can be done to increase the chances that this book will succeed in unsettling the field sufficiently to make it effective in addressing the global crisis we are facing as a species? Toward this dual end, I focus on a few key points rather than a comprehensive summary of all that this rich volume presents.

Starting From Vision

As a student of nonviolence who also has significant clinical experience, I welcome the call to all of us to develop “a vision of what constitutes a healthy society” (p. ix) as the foundation of all that we do—“a holding environment for individual and collective health” (p. 9). Otherwise, we can easily fall into accepting *what is* as the only reality possible, and engage in theory, research, and practice that serve to reinforce the assumptions and habits that sustain systems that undermine life. Although I do not particularly find the foundations the authors offer personally exciting (they are not radical enough for my own sensibilities), I am deeply grateful that the authors found globally accepted blueprints—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Earth Charter—and are proposing them and engaging with them in this book. We’ve got to start somewhere if we are to effectively part ways from accepting the continued “inevitability” of industrial growth societies.

From the Individual to Systems

One of the repeating themes in this book is a call to change the way the field of psychology has constituted itself through an almost exclusive focus on the individual as a unit of theory, research, and intervention. The absence of analysis and practice that engage with the way each of us are embedded within cultural and economic systems has also resulted in a subtle betrayal: “despite its core commitment to human wellbeing, psychology as it stands does not adequately serve social justice and the wellbe-

ing of communities worldwide” (p. 7). Changing this would require psychologists to consider “the collective, systemic, and ontological roots of the core personal and professional challenges that individuals face” (p. 33). This, among other things, means changing the assumption underlying clinical practice so that problems and solutions are no longer seen as primarily residing within individuals and relationships, and the systemic determinants can be addressed for everyone’s well-being, reweaving the web of interdependence that is the foundation of all life.

As a chilling example, one of the chapters demonstrates how the current use of labels ignores the social context that creates individual experiences. When a woman’s experience after violence directed against her is named “depression” rather than “violence-induced depression,” this practice “directs attention away from the social context” (p. 211).

Proactive Commitment to Liberation

This book proposes a significant departure from the notion of healing as a form of adjusting to social life as it exists, to liberation as the process of empowerment to create a life that works for the individual within the context of a commitment to “finding a role in caring for the commons” (p. 10). Although liberation from internalization of oppressive norms and concepts “can be won *only* by the individual herself, . . . it cannot be done in isolation” (p. 135). Rather, it requires community and enough distance to be able to reflect critically. For example, women who reject culturally based gender norms have less psychological distress following violence against them than women who agree with such norms (p. 222).

Explicit Normative Context

One of the aspects of this book that I found most refreshing is the complete willingness on the part of the authors to adopt a moral position rather than remaining committed to objectivity and neutrality. Specifically, they call all of us, practitioners and citizens alike, to recognize that “it is a *profound form of moral dysfunction* to perpetuate the assumption that we have no other option but to collectively live in a manner centered upon limiting beliefs and values reflecting the interests of the wealthy and powerful at the

expense of the needs of all” (p. 15). Instead, they urge us to lean in the direction of assuming that we can, as a species, create societies based on voluntary cooperation and balancing the needs of individuals and collectives: “Every act we perform as psychologists is a moral act and has moral implications” (p. 45).

Questioning Theoretical Assumptions

One of the areas that this book explores in depth is the significance of theoretical assumptions, and, in particular, how theories of human nature can either reinforce or challenge existing social arrangements. Instead of normalizing competitiveness, for example, “psychologists and other scientists” can “question its basis” (p. 26). Repeatedly, throughout the book, the authors demonstrate how the core assumptions of psychology—its theories of human nature as well as its prescriptions for healing—are remarkably aligned with those of modern capitalism, and thus contribute to the perpetuation of that system despite its enormous costs to life, both human and otherwise. Unless psychology deliberately questions such assumptions, including the foundations of its research (such as value neutrality and objectivity), the authors doubt its ability to serve the goal of human well-being.

Building a Healthy Society

I was particularly struck by the discovery, articulated by the authors, that no existing society in the world has “yet been purposefully structured around the ultimate goals of social health” (p. 102). This is their ultimate challenge to the field of psychology: to articulate and explicitly work toward creating a global social order that is designed to create social health by focusing on interdependence, love, dignity, and making sufficient resources available for all of us to thrive. One of the ways that psychology could do this is by creating frameworks and practices for cultivating “a ‘big-picture’ worldview and to seek cooperative solutions to our shared global problems” (p. 121). In other words, rather than intensifying the focus on self and personal satisfaction, the authors remind us that we have an innate capacity to care for the whole.

Willingness to Risk

Given the extent of the changes advocated by the authors in this volume, I found it moving to read their explicit naming of the risks they are taking by naming these trends, by putting personal observations in print, and by engaging with these materials. The founder of the psychoanalytic field started his work by taking a comparable risk when he believed his clients’ stories about their experiences of sexual abuse as children in Vienna—the “Seduction Theory” he abandoned after only a few years. Might we all stand to learn something about why psychologists are reluctant to embrace the radical changes proposed in this volume by seeking to understand Freud’s failure to stand by his initial findings? The entire field of psychology as we know it emerged from this 180-degree turn. To stand up to Viennese society, to identify with children against the authority of adults, was a position Freud ultimately could not sustain. Was this because of his deep commitments to Enlightenment ideals of rationality? His own unconscious unwillingness to face potential sexual trauma from his own childhood? The intensity of isolation, both internal and external, that he would have to face? (Jeffrey Masson, 1984, wrote *The Assault on Truth* to explore deeply this complex and rich episode at the foundation of psychoanalysis.)

Whether or not we can ever know with assurance what the reasons were for this abandonment of his initial findings, the consequences were clearly far-reaching. One of them that is directly relevant to the critique presented in this book is that Freud ultimately justified the suffering of children as necessary given his belief about the inherent conflict between id wishes and the possibility of social life. He assumed there was no escape from the increasing level of suffering humans experience. The focus on adjusting to the existing, and inevitable, social order directly emerged from this frame.¹ In addition, it took until the 1970s for

¹ Ferenczi, one of Freud’s most esteemed students and friends until he started believing his patients’ stories, had a different perspective that could integrate the reality of trauma with that of fantasy. In a diary entry from July 24, 1932, he proposed that fantasy such as the Oedipus complex may be “the result of real acts on the part of adults, namely violent passions directed towards the child, who then develops a fixation, not from desire, but from fear.” (Masson, 1984, p. 147)

society to squarely face the overwhelming incidence of childhood sexual trauma given the decades-long suppression of such facts by the psychoanalytic establishment.

The risks that Freud faced are likely inevitable in the process of freeing our consciousness from its complicity with the existing order of things. To actually change our understanding of the world requires emotional capacity and a community of support. We risk rejection, loss of community, or even loss of economic survival. We risk the pain and anguish attendant on uncovering and coming to terms with a history of devastation. Some of the time, in some places, some of us even risk imprisonment or even death when we stand up for what we believe in.

Taking such risks, I have come to believe, is essential for any kind of capacity to act as free agents working for the betterment of all, not only of the select few who have the resources, external and internal, to access psychological support. It is particularly necessary in the pursuit of new theory and research, because, as the authors remind us, accusations of being politicized and violating scientific objectivity are usually leveled only at “research pursuits and theoretical claims that challenge the status quo” (p. 36). Whatever the risks are, this kind of courage is necessary to shift psychology from inadvertently supporting “the accumulation of wealth by global corporations at all costs” to becoming “a leading moral and intellectual force for progressive social transformation toward social justice” (p. 38).

It is, perhaps, the faith that our human nature includes the capacity for care, plus the willingness to take risks for our integrity, that allow the authors of this volume to take on some of the biggest challenges of our time—poverty and climate change—and the premise of endless growth that underlies our collective actions. Because they see “a deep tension between our actual choices and the possibility for a sustainable future” (p. vii), the authors call us to the deepest moral and spiritual courage: the willingness to endure “retributive personal consequences” (p. 262) in order to live in integrity. They themselves choose to speak publicly about what they see, what meaning they assign to it, and what recommendations they have for solutions. In that way, their personal practice is aligned with their prescription. This book strikes me as unusually courageous, remarkably honest and caring, and rigorous in its attention to the ramifications of everything that happens. It is the kind of rare book that demands change in its readers while modeling what the change could lead to: free and caring individuals working collaboratively to contribute to fundamental structural change. Nothing short of such a deep transformation is likely to support a livable future.

Reference

- Masson, J. M. (1984). *The assault on truth: Freud's suppression of the seduction theory*. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.