

COMPTE RENDU/Reviews

Roberto BENEDEUCE – *Breve Dizionario di Etnopsichiatria*. Roma, Carocci, 2008, 143 p. (“Le bussole”). ISBN: 8843044575. 10 €.

In *Breve Dizionario di Etnopsichiatria* by Roberto Beneduce, the author provides an introduction to the broad field of ethnopsychiatry. Incorporating a wide understanding of the discipline, Beneduce defines ethno-psychiatry as the systematic investigation of the different forms of subjectivity born during social-cultural and historical transformations, exploring the relationship between culture and psyche, mental illness and cure. Beneduce’s approach ensures that this ‘short dictionary’ will appeal to health workers, medical and humanity students and more generally individuals with an interest in cross-cultural therapeutic health systems. The accessible, yet atypical format provides lay individuals, students and experienced professionals with a valuable reference tool that will act to stimulate the reader’s subjective interest in related domains of inquiry, and fuel the desire for further research.

At the core of the *Short Dictionary of Ethnopsychiatry* is a diverse collection of terms which encompasses the large spectrum of theoretical ideas that defines ethno-psychiatry, and the ethnographic practices that the discipline is concerned with. The dictionary therefore guides the reader through the most relevant concepts, terminology, and contributions (both classical and innovative) to ethnopsychiatry. Each term appears to be defined according to the Beneduce’s academic interest, with some definitions being just a few lines, while others are pages long. This form creates an uneven presentation, which is somewhat understandable given the fact that certain terms require greater explanation to convey their full meaning. The author has also included an informative introduction, which acts as a preliminary account of the historical development of ethnopsychiatry, contextualising for the reader both the origin of ethnopsychiatry and its current trajectory.

Within the introduction, Beneduce clarifies how ethnopsychiatry has evolved and how its content has been shaped, revealing the influence of major historical events, the impact of leading scholars and their theoretical approaches. Throughout the dictionary, both colonial and post-colonial scholarly contributions are equally presented and their theoretical relevance to ethnopsychiatry explored, although Beneduce’s criticism of the colonial mentality is evident through his language. The strong relevance the author gives to the historical components of the discipline affords the reader an insight into the importance of understanding the evolving culture of ethno-psychiatry.

Beneduce details how colonial expansion created the ideal setting in which the main themes of interest of ethnopsychiatry began to emerge. The circumstances of the colonial period made it necessary to investigate the relationship between mental health and culture. Concerns for colonial officers’ health and the effect of new social and climatic environments on their mental stability, as well as an interest in how different religions affected the outset of mental illness among colonised communities, led to the birth of what is now termed ethnopsychiatry. The infancy of the discipline was characterised by a disregard for indigenous beliefs and practices and an imposition of ‘western’ religious and therapeutic cosmologies. Beneduce then traces the trajectory of ethnopsychiatry through its maturation into a culturally sensitive academic and clinical discipline. The author illustrates how ethnopsychiatry evolved into a field that stimulated research into health issues of indigenous communities and minority ethnic groups with close attention to the importance of understanding *their* conceptualisation of illness categories, as showed in the activities of the George Devereux Centre. Positive clinical applications of ethnopsychiatry were pursued by attempts to fuse “western” medical approaches with indigenous ethnic therapeutic traditions, as practiced in the Dakar-Fann School. Through Beneduce’s introduction the reader gains the understanding that despite the importance of colonisation in the birth of the discipline, the founding theories were based on ethno-centric ideals, and that the growing necessity for ethno-psychiatry to have practical applications in multicultural societies required a culturally sensitive approach. This contextualisation prepares the mind of the reader to explore the terms and ideas held within the dictionary, and to approach mental health concepts in a flexible manner.

The web of terminology and definitions, one hundred and twenty-seven in total, provided by Beneduce, reinforces the useful introduction. However, the vast array of topics that Beneduce attempts to cover ensures that this short dictionary cannot be comprehensive or exhaustive. Beneduce touches upon some of the diverse range of health care behaviours, illness categories, cultural syndromes and their indigenous categorisations, as well as introducing the reader to major theoretical contributions and their consequences for the development of the discipline. Exploring some of the controversial debates that emerge from ethnopsychiatry’s critical approach to health, Beneduce offers the reader a broad yet introductory understanding of the field. He also dedicates multiple definitions to some of the leading scholars who have helped to conceive and mould the discipline of ethno-psychiatry, including the founding father Devereux. Beneduce highlights

classical contributions from Foucault and Gramsci and more recent developments within British, French and Italian traditions.

Through the diverse definitions held within the dictionary, Beneduce emphasises the importance of rejecting deterministic categorisations of psychological and cultural phenomena along with the need to approach the individual and socio-collective experiences of illness with an open mind. Paying close attention to the influences of the socio-cultural context in which scholars worked and theories were applied to mental illnesses and therapeutic rituals, Beneduce occasionally charts the change in attitude towards specific indigenous health categories. He declares that whilst historical delimitations and distinctions between various fields of study of ethnopsychiatry may be useful tools to identify generic differences of the discipline, although they risk rejecting the subjectivity of illness experiences and the appropriateness of indigenous therapeutic methods.

The utility of the dictionary could primarily appeal to individuals directly concerned with providing health care in multicultural societies. In order to provide sensitive medical and psychological assistance to individuals that belong to different therapeutic traditions, such as migrants and minority ethnic communities, health care workers must have some understanding of the diverse health beliefs that exist. Thus, Beneduce stresses the importance of the most recent development of the discipline, ethnopsychiatry at home, or ethnopsychiatry of migration, which is concerned with the social, cultural, psychological and political issues surrounding migrant individuals. Providing support to people from diverse communities can be greatly improved by having some knowledge of *their* therapeutic traditions and cultural beliefs in relation to health and illness.

The dictionary could perhaps have been enhanced by paying greater attention to the etymology of each term defined. Beneduce offers a detailed description of such analysis for certain terms. It is unquestionable that finding etymological meaning of terms originated in colonised communities with oral tradition would be an arduous task, however, by doing so Beneduce would have added a deeper context for the reader to explore each term. This is especially important due to the historical relationship between colonialism and the transcription of oral languages, as colonial officers spelt foreign sounds through their own phonology. The legacy of this is multiple spellings of rituals and practices, the colonial transcriptions and revised indigenous forms. In some cases this has led to competing spellings of words for rituals and practices studied by different scholars. One example is that of the Lebu ritual defined within dictionary, referred by Beneduce as *Ndoep*, a colonial spelling for what has been revised to *Ndèpp*. Beneduce's use of the colonial spelling of *Ndèpp* shows how, despite the positive intent to advocate for local traditions empowerment, the legacy of colonialism remains within the discipline to a certain degree.

The purpose of the dictionary, as expressed by Beneduce himself, is enabling the user to familiarise themselves with fundamental terms which health workers and students are called to face in culturally diverse societies. Due to the increasing number of migrants and minorities groups in multicultural societies, health officers are often required to have a cultural sensitive approach. Despite Beneduce being aware of the limitations of the dictionary, mainly due to the inevitable obsolescence to which time condemns dictionaries, he provides a useful introductory working tool. Giving suggestions for further readings and a general introduction to the main topics related to ethno-psychiatry, the dictionary invites the expansion of knowledge on each subject and concept according to the readers' interests and attitudes.

Beneduce's broad approach suggests that this short dictionary would perhaps be better described as an introductory encyclopaedia to ethno-psychiatry, due to the wide range of topics that it covers. The almost borderless nature of ethnopsychiatry and the vast array of illness categories, rituals, practices, theories and authors that could have been included by Beneduce may leave academic readers disappointed. Despite this the book is a good overview of an intricate and complex subject, whose margins are often blurred with other field of studies. Beneduce presents however general categorisations and discourages their rigid application, especially as the boundaries between ethno-psychiatry, transcultural psychiatry, ethno-psychoanalysis, and medical anthropology are often confused. The concepts included contribute to unfold the various aspects of ethnopsychiatry, guiding the reader through the evolution of the discipline and disclosure of its multi faceted nature, revealing the epistemological hybridisation that constitutes, as Beneduce argues, "the most original and fructuous nucleus of ethnopsychiatry".

Annarita IMBUCCI.

annarita_imbucci@hotmail.com