

~ BOOK REVIEW ~

Culture and mental health - A Southern African view

By Leslie Swartz

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Leslie Swartz is Professor of Psychology at the University of Cape Town and a leading clinician-teacher in the field of mental health.

This is a long awaited text within the field of mental health in South Africa, as there is very little written about culture and mental health within the specific context of South Africa. This book is very useful for students in any field of mental health like psychology, nursing, social work and medicine.

Culture and mental health demonstrates how mental health workers think culturally, interpreting human experience by asking how individuals negotiate their lives in a rapidly changing world and South Africa.

Each chapter explores the complex issues involved in understanding people within their own culture and context, but is clearly written in a way that most health professionals can benefit from it. It is, however, written with a great deal of emphasis on the medical model as frame of reference.

The book is divided into four sections, each containing relevant information and the use of relevant case studies to demonstrate what the author is saying:

Part I: In this part some of the questions that are explored includes the relationship between culture and mental health, ways of dealing with mental illness in different cultures and the different systems that exist and the way they work.

Part II: Part II explores the complex role of language and takes an in-depth look at the empiricist and the hermeneutic approach to language. This part also views the different ways of diagnosing mental illness across the cultural barriers, the focus being on the DSM IV (Western medicine) and relating it to the more African practices.

Part III: In part III special areas of interest are discussed, such as depression, somatization, stress, serious mental disorders, brief psychotic orders and the role of alcohol and drugs in culture.

Part IV: In this concluding chapter some of the implications for how to improve mental health and to reduce the burden of mental illness are considered.

This book is written in a lively, engaging style and I do recommend this text for any health worker in the field of mental health.

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