The Future of Psychotherapy

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The Future of Psychotherapy:
A Review of the Book

Eleven Blunders that Cripple Psychotherapy in America

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Abstract

The recent book *Eleven Blunders that Cripple Psychotherapy in America* is a lively critical appraisal of how psychotherapy is practiced today. The authors describe several blunders, such as not seeing the practice of psychotherapy as a business and not integrating psychotherapy into healthcare, and offer suggestions for solving the problems. While the book makes some good points, little data is provided to support the opinions of the authors. Nevertheless, the book makes for interesting reading.
A Review of the book
Eleven Blunders that Cripple Psychotherapy in America

Reading this devastating critique of psychotherapy in America is an interesting and distressing experience. While some of the criticisms are valid, most of the solutions offered are not likely to gain approval from many practicing psychologists or mental health professionals. Nick Cummings anticipates a skeptical reaction to the book: “We apologize in advance if anyone is offended . . . “ (p. ix).

The authors pull no punches, and the criticisms may deserve serious consideration, especially since they come from psychology insiders. Nick Cummings founded the professional school movement, founded American Biodyne, served as president of the American Psychological Association in 1979, and has authored 11 books. He received the APA Award for Distinguished Contributions and the APF Gold Medal Award for Life Achievement in the Practice of Psychology. His co-author, O'Donohue, is a psychologist and professor who has authored over a hundred articles.

While they are themselves psychologists, the authors hold a low opinion of how psychotherapy is generally practiced, and they have very low expectations for any positive change in the future. “Psychology cannot proffer any comprehensive, understandable solutions that can be readily implemented” (p. 103). Psychologists are “endearing losers” (p. 323) and “if psychology does not significantly change course it will be eclipsed within two decades” (p. 326). The authors imply that psychotherapy will only survive if their recommendations are implemented.
The book describes eleven areas in which the authors think that American psychology has failed to adapt to new realities. For example, due to the lack of an empirical basis for practice, psychotherapy substituted the authority of gurus. Cummings, who describes himself as “one of the gurus, though a minor one at most” (p. 51) writes that currently too many “charlatans and kooks” practice psychology; “anything goes” and we need enforceable quality and evidential standards. According to the authors, the public does not believe that psychotherapy works; psychoanalytic and humanistic therapies “made us a laughingstock.” Among the deleterious interventions Cummings includes crisis counseling, EMDR, rebirthing, and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. He calls ACT “relabeled gestalt therapy, “ and cognitive behaviorism “has been renamed mindfulness and is turning to Buddhism rather than to needed scientific advances” (p. 102). Of course some evidence has accumulated to support the efficacy of EMDR and the integration of mindfulness into cognitive behavioral therapy.

Another blunder described in the book is the lack of business savvy among practicing psychologists. The solution offered is that psychologists should emphasize that psychotherapy is a health care profession and partner with physicians. The authors believe that “managed care worked” (p. 82) because it supposedly saved billions of dollars, but they do not seem to recognize any negative aspects of managed care. Cummings recommends that psychologists should embrace the industrialization of healthcare because, quoting the bank robber Willie Sutton, “that’s where the money is.” The authors predict that the future of psychotherapy is in “virtual interventions,” including telehealth, “web-based
solutions,” and “computer models of psychotherapy with well-researched algorithms.” The 50-minute hour is obsolete. Psychologists should become more like physicians; they should aspire to diagnose and begin treatment in 15 minutes, just like primary care physicians (p. 56). The authors believe that out-of-pocket fee-for-service practice is not a viable option, but coaching (which they call a “cash cow”) offers a lucrative alternative career for psychologists. The authors write that psychologists desperately need to obtain prescription authority to rescue the profession. Then they should “dump the DSM” and use it only for statistical reporting and reimbursement.

The authors contend that the decline of psychotherapy as a profession is because there is “an enormous glut of psychotherapists” (p. 139). However, according to the U. S. Department of Labor, the job outlook for psychologists is better than average; employment of psychologists will grow 15% over the next decade, and employment of counselors will grow 21%, which is much faster than the average for all occupations. It is true that managed care has reduced salaries for psychotherapists, but Cumming’s solution is even greater integration of psychology into healthcare, with shorter sessions and packaged treatments for specific disorders. Some physicians and mental health professionals have established fee-for-service practices in order to avoid the restrictions of managed care organizations. However, most patients will likely continue to use their insurance to pay for their health care and psychotherapy.

There is much bashing of the American Psychological Association’s proclamations on social issues, although Cummings admits that as APA president in
1979 he politicized the organization by forcing the body to take controversial political positions (p. 195). Now, however, he considers the APA’s statements on the environment, ethnic minority affairs, and gay and lesbian issues to be based on “junk science” rather than on careful, unbiased scientific research. According to the authors, everyone wants to be an American, and multiculturalism simply pits one group against another (p. 271). No amount of sensitivity training can create sensitivity, and “multiculturalism has gone too far and is doing more harm than good” (p. 271). Such politically incorrect ideas make for entertaining reading, but the authors offer little support beyond their personal beliefs and opinions.

The authors neglect to mention the large literature that supports the idea that much of the effectiveness of psychotherapy and counseling can be attributed to the common elements that all or most therapies share. Instead, they recommend that practitioners use specific therapeutic techniques and approaches that have been empirically supported. While it is true that evidence-based approaches should be used when they are available, there are many client problems and diagnoses for which there are no clear empirically supported treatments. In addition, the uniqueness of humans requires that therapeutic techniques not be applied mechanically or in cookbook fashion. The authors of Eleven Blunders place too much stock in the medical model. They go even further, bemoaning the fact that psychology is not as practical and quantifiable as the profession of engineering (p. 132).

The authors denigrate the contribution of master’s-level counselors, implying that they infringe on the turf of psychologists. “The patchwork of state licenses and
certifications is baffling to the public” (p. 11). According to the authors, one main reason that psychology is in crisis (from their point of view) is that too many non-psychologists are allowed to practice psychotherapy. They assert (without any citations) that “the majority of psychotherapy conducted in the United States is by social workers” (p. 14). The problem is that, since master’s-level providers are willing to work for less, fees for therapy have declined and psychologists have to accept lower fees. Managed care organizations hire whoever is willing to work for the least money. It is ironic that Cummings blames managed care for the decline of psychology, since he promoted managed care more than any other psychologist, and even founded his own managed care organization.

The book would have benefitted from more stringent editing to reduce the repetition of ideas and quotations, and to correct numerous grammatical errors. For example, Barlow’s distinction between psychological treatments and psychotherapy is described three different places in the book. The book has some endnotes and a bibliography, but no references, and many extreme statements are made without any citation of research support. For example, in line with the authors’ assertion that psychology is a health care business, they simply state that alcoholism is a disease, without any consideration of the vast literature on this question. Another extreme statement in line with the authors’ support for the medical model is that “the only breakthrough in mental health has been in the newer psychotropic medications” (p. 104). They say psychology “has not offered any solutions to ameliorate the growing individual and social disorganization” (p. 160). The authors seem to have physician-envy when they write that psychology has no
accomplishments of any significance compared to those of medicine (p. 177). Considering the innumerable effective psychotherapies and programs developed by mental health professionals, it is truly remarkable that these prominent psychologists see nothing of value in psychology.

The authors’ motivation for writing such a scathing critique of their own field and their fellow psychotherapists becomes clear when they describe their failed efforts to make psychotherapy more business-like. They developed a master’s degree curriculum in behavioral health administration which was offered through the Forrest Institute of Professional Psychology, but they did not receive any serious inquiries from prospective students. Then they developed an online certification program and advertised it extensively, but “Results could not be more disappointing . . . . The ads did not generate a single response” (p. 159-160). The authors concluded that no one was interested in their programs because practitioners are “frightened” and have an anti-business bias. They neglect to consider an alternative hypothesis: that mental health professionals see their work as a valuable human service rather than simply as a way to make money, and that they are busy every day providing effective services to clients in need. Readers may also be put off by Cummings’ assertion that therapists are simply “providers” who are selling a “product” to “customers” (p. 59).

Readers who know that Cummings made a fortune when he sold Biodyne, his psychological managed care organization, may feel he is disingenuous when he says Biodyne was “swallowed up” by Magellan Health Services. After all, if he did not want it to be swallowed up, he did not have to sell it. Cummings admits that
although he had promised to cap the company at half a million covered lives, he 
broke his promise and allowed Biodyne to explode to 14.5 million covered lives (p. 
75-76). Cummings seems to feel some bitterness that the mental health profession 
was reluctant to embrace his vision of “the industrialization of health care;” he says 
“I was demonized” (p. 77), and not one psychologist came to study the Biodyne 
model (p. 76).

Cummings’ overall message seems to be that if mental health professionals 
do not get more business training, move their practices to medical clinics and 
hospitals, and see themselves as providing a product to customers, the profession is 
doomed to wither and die. Most readers will probably see this prediction as 
exaggerated, self-serving, and pessimistic. The book is recommended more for 
readers who are looking for an entertaining and provocative critique of the 
profession of psychology, than for readers who prefer a serious analysis grounded 
in factual research. The book is valuable in that it provokes psychotherapists and 
counselors to think about how they can stay focused on providing high quality 
services to their clients rather than emphasizing making money. If counselors and 
psychologists really did “industrialize” the practice of therapy, as the authors of the 
book advise, many caring therapists would leave, and the profession really would be 
in trouble.

Reference
