



Not So Abnormal Psychology: A Pragmatic View of Mental Illness

Ronald B. Miller

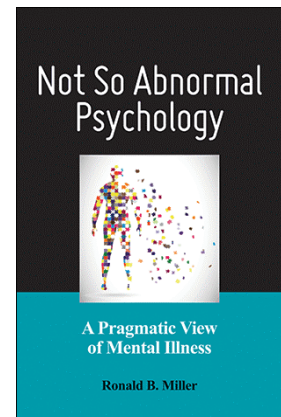
American Psychological Association ISBN: 9781433820212

2015 Softcover 247 pages \$34.95

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Received on: July 7, 2018 Accepted on: August 31, 2018



The stated purpose of the text *Not So Abnormal Psychology: A Pragmatic View of Mental Illness* (Miller, 2015), is to introduce abnormal psychology to undergraduate students in a way that is twofold: grounded in theory and history, and promotes the understanding of one's self and those around them. The author works to criticize academics, and their contribution to the gap between research and practice; chiefly that "...individuals teaching such courses have a purely theoretical interest in understanding such disorders and little knowledge or interest in the practice task of actually being therapeutic when working with such clients (patients)" (p.65). The goal of this text is to draw attention to, and remedy, such an issue by encouraging readers to reflect on their own experiences alongside a historical and theoretical overview of mental illness. Using personal narratives, the author sheds light on his struggles with his own self-understanding, and how this has impacted his professional competence and experiences. The text does achieve a unique method for presenting a comprehensive overview of abnormal psychology both in its coverage of the subdiscipline itself, and the content of the subdiscipline (e.g., common psychological ailments). As a referential text for a practiced professional who is already quite familiar with the various editions of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

Disorders (DSM), and has a grasp on their personal theoretical orientation, the text has utility. This includes the in-depth history provided, which is often difficult to find. However, as an introductory text to be used in a psychology undergraduate course (or even early in a master's program), it appears difficult to identify how one would guide students to navigate the abundance of information, and moreover, how one might craft a class discussion around it (which is the lens through which this review has been written).

Although this text states that it is intended to be read by undergraduates, or people who are new to the field of abnormal psychology, it is written at a level which would not encourage interest by this particular group. The language is appropriate, however the writing is wordy and lengthy, often requiring two or three passes before reaching the intended point. This is accompanied by content inserted that is, at most, tangentially related to the information needed in an introductory text. To that end, the content of the text is both broad and deep, perhaps to a point of excess. While a strength of the text is the volume of information contained within a reasonable length, that serves to its detriment as well. In order to truly be an accessible text for an undergraduate, or new student in psychology, information extraneous to a basic understanding of abnormal psychology just appears to as confusing and distracting.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of Miller's entrance to the field of psychology, as well as an overview of the field of psychology and its "subdiscipline", abnormal psychology. While all-inclusive, these chapters are rife with mention of internal strife in the profession of psychology, especially Miller's personal opinions of the pitfalls within the field. This information is superfluous, especially for an entry-level student

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Cite as: Levine, A. (2018). Not So Abnormal Psychology: A Pragmatic View of Mental Illness. *Journal Disability Studies*. 4(1), 30-31.



©IS Publications ISSN: 2454-6623 <http://pubs.iscience.in/jds>

in this field, and may potentially discourage the pursuit of such a career. However, as mentioned above, the depth of the history provided regarding the development of abnormal psychology as a subdiscipline of psychology is possibly information that one would not find elsewhere, and might have utility for very specific purposes.

Chapter 3 provides information about Miller's chosen five theoretical models "...of how to understand psychological suffering and what can be done to reduce it..." (p.1246). These models include biomedical, psychodynamic, humanistic-existential, cognitive-behavioral, and social and family systems. While certainly a necessary component of any text regarding abnormal psychology, the organization of this chapter is very confusing. Following the overview of the biomedical model is a section: "psychiatric diagnosis according to the biomedical model: *DSM-5*". What follows is a lengthy discussion of the origins of the DSM texts, including a litany of complaints about the newest edition (*DSM-5*). It is quite unclear how this list of complaints relates to the chapter in which it has been placed, or even to the stated goals of the text. This opposition to the current DSM pops up throughout the remainder of the chapter, within the overview of each theoretical framework, taking away from the comprehensiveness of the content. If one were able to put aside these distracting points, this chapter would be very helpful in developing course materials regarding theoretical models and abnormal psychology.

Chapters 4 through 8 each cover a particular area of abnormal psychology: Psychological Suffering in Childhood; Anxiety and Related Forms of Suffering; Depression, Suicide, and Anorexia; Personality Patterns that Engender Suffering, and Schizophrenia: Psychiatry's Poster Child. Taken apart from the remainder of the text, this section would make a useful standalone text. Each chapter includes a well-rounded overview of the stated topics, including historical contexts, current research, applicable medications, and subtypes. Furthermore, Miller includes case studies within these chapters, describing an individual living with one of these ailments, providing a mechanism for readers to digest the knowledge provided. While this section is certainly the strength of the text, these chapters are also inclusive of extraneous information that can be, in some ways, confusing for novices using the text.

A key takeaway from reviewing this book is the language that is used in discussing mental illnesses. The word suffering is used extensively, which feels ironic given that the author would like his readers to engage in self-understanding while learning about psychological conditions, in order to potentially better serve future clients. While he is quite critical of psychology, there is but one brief note in Chapter 1 regarding some of the beneficial information that could be contributed to this topic from other disciplines. It is disheartening that this would be recognized, yet research, data, and perspective from other such disciplines is absent. Furthermore, the author claims to desire to be different from other texts on this topic, yet he does not speak of individuals living with these diagnoses, rather speaks of the illnesses in a sterile way, lacking the humanity and empathy one seeks out in a discussion of disability.

This book does fall a bit short of the anticipation brought about by simply reading the title; it takes a step towards humanizing mental illnesses, but spends far more time criticizing and explicating the author's various grievances. The information provided in the second half of the book (chapters 4 through 8), would be useful in the development of some course materials, although may be very confusing to assign as individual readings for undergraduate students. The text would also have been strengthened by a more complete review of literature about mental illnesses, and the variety of disciplines involved in working with people living with them. Ultimately, if reviewed by a practiced individual for very specific pieces of information for research or course development, the text has a few excellent insights that would be helpful, but in its entirety, the text would be complicated and difficult to digest for many.

REFERENCE

Miller, R. B. (2015). *Not So Abnormal Psychology: A Pragmatic View of Mental Illness*. American Psychological Association: Washington, DC.

Source of Funding: None

Conflict of interest: None