

Book Review

Gundula Gahlen, Volker Hess, Marianna Scarfone and Henriette Voelker (eds), *Doing Psychiatry in Postwar Europe: Practices, Routines and Experiences*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2024. Pp. xiv + 343. 25 English pound. Hbk. ISBN 978-1-5261-7346-1.

This collection addresses developments in psychiatry in 11 European countries after the Second World War. Introduced by editors Volker Hess and Marianna Scarfone, each article provides a detailed case-study based on the so called ‘practice turn’ (p. 1), as promoted in the sociology and history of science by Bruno Latour and others. The authors, who collaborated in an international project, focus on how specific psychiatric knowledge and treatment-regimes in Europe have emerged in local everyday practices, routines and habits. They thereby emphasise that these are all much less orderly than perhaps suggested by psychiatry’s public image. Underlying practices in psychiatry will often remain invisible, also in the available historical studies, according to the editors. As they argue, a host of everyday activities are not mentioned in psychiatric publications and rhetoric, or they can only be reconstrued from fragmentary or poorly accessible source materials, such as patient-records and logs, which require reading between the lines. Still, the ambition of this volume’s editors is all but modest: their presumably innovative ‘praxeological approach’ (p. 5) will lead to historical understandings of psychiatry that are more precise, nuanced and varied than the ones offered in historical accounts so far.

The 12 empirical contributions reflect trends similar to the ones put forward in historical studies. The post-war urge towards revitalisation translated in psychiatry in a treatment optimism following in part from the development of new psychopharmaceuticals and—partly due to such medication—a wider application of different modes of psychotherapy and social psychiatry. The new modes of treatment were closely tied to emancipation and democratisation pursuits, which gained ground in particular in the 1960s and 1970s. These developments and relationships feature prominently in several contributions. Despo Kritsotaki addresses the introduction of group therapy and the therapeutic community in 1980s’ Greece against the backdrop of the dictatorship’s demise; Marica Setaro deals with the internationally renowned efforts towards de-institutionalisation in the psychiatric hospital of Gorizia led by Franco Basaglia during the 1960s; Gundula Gahlen focuses on the implementation of a social-psychiatric approach in a Heidelberg clinic in the 1960s and 1970s; and Katariina Parhi studies new forms of care to drug addicts in 1970s’ Helsinki, whereby psychiatrists made way for psychologists and social workers, partly stimulated by the social-democratic welfare state. These four authors make clear that usually such innovations took shape through improvising and trial and error experiments, while the results were frequently more ambiguous than projected by the initial ideals and ambitions.

Other articles reveal a similar picture. Florent Serina traces the rise and fall of psycho-surgical operations in the university psychiatry clinic of Strasburg during the 1950s, whereby she concludes that the physicians were guided not so much by established scientific insights and methods but by 'risky speculations' and 'tinkering' (p. 179). A comparable conclusion is drawn by Gábor Csikós in his contribution on innovations in child psychiatry in post-1956 Hungary. Despite the partly ideologically guided preference for a somatic and Pavlovian approach, psychiatrists were open to all that seemed useful to them in any given situation, while actual practice was heterogeneous. Eclecticism and pragmatism also characterised the early 1950s' introduction of psychotherapy in the Zürich Burghölzi clinic, as argued by Marietta Maier, often in combination with somatic treatments such as medication, insulin treatment and electroshock. Maier also shows that psychotherapy soon ran up against a lack of financial means, as well as the issue of whether it was ethical to invest so much time in only a tiny number of patients.

Innovation hardly meant that prevailing views were discarded; rather, old and new insights and practices existed side by side or were combined. For example, Henriette Voelker explains that the introduction of dynamic group therapy in an East-Berlin clinic in the 1970s was geared to stimulating patients' assertiveness and self-reflection, but that the existing hierarchy between medical professionals and patients was left in place while the underlying communist orientation on a return to a 'useful' work life remained unaffected. In her contribution on the role of critical sociology in the social-democratically motivated aspiration to reform Viennese institution psychiatry, Monika Ankele argues that the advocated institutional transformation eventually failed to materialise and that sociological insights were adopted selectively to alter the hospital system in place. Benoît Majerus and David Niget describe how older disciplining and newer therapeutic practices existed side by side in a Belgian facility for 'troubled girls' during the years 1959–1975. Psychopharmaceuticals were tacitly administered as replacement of disciplinary measures, but the new empathic therapeutic approach did not automatically imply the demise of the older behaviourist re-education ethos. Ketil Slagstad shows that innovative multidisciplinary care to transsexuals in 1970s' Oslo—with input from psychologists, sexologists and social workers—resulted in a more empathic approach, yet this did not challenge the strictly medical-psychiatric selection criteria for surgical interventions based on the traditional binary gender paradigm. The role of architecture in ambiguous psychiatric modernisation is revealed by Christina Malathouni in her contribution on Fair Mile Hospital in Oxfordshire, built in the 1950s, where innovation included the effort to integrate hospital psychiatry fully into general (somatic) healthcare.

Without wanting to discount the quality of the individual articles, this collection unfortunately lacks a more comprehensive discussion of the interactions among the detailed and largely factual case-studies about different countries (the selection of which seems rather random) and their place in the wider historiography. Although the editors suggest that this volume fills a gap, references to prior historical work and explanations of how this would fall short remain cursory or vague. That everyday practice is more unruly and messier than the world of theories and good intentions, which is true all the more for an eclectic and often controversial field like psychiatry, is hardly a new insight: historians have all but left the practical dimensions of psychiatry in post-war Europe undiscussed. The editors also claim that historians have paid too little attention to the expansion and

growing diversity of psychiatric practices and the interrelated professions and patient groups outside of institutions, hospitals and clinics. Yet in recent decades, countless more or less detailed publications have appeared on psychotherapy, social psychiatry, outpatient mental healthcare, addiction care and forensic psychiatry, to mention just a few domains.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hkae085>

Harry Oosterhuis
Maastricht University,
The Netherlands
harry.oosterhuis@maastrichtuniversity.nl