Book reviews

Edited by Allan Beveridge, Femi Oyebode and Rosalind Ramsay

The Director of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University, Simon Baron-Cohen is a well-known expert on autism. He has appeared in the media arguing for the place in society of people with autism and against any attempt to remove autism-spectrum disorder genes, once discovered, from the population. This book is in part an extension of that argument. It is short – only six chapters – and written in an accessible style. But it lays claim to a much bigger achievement – the explication of human cruelty and, possibly, evil.

The argument goes like this. The capacity for empathy can be measured – it is normally distributed in the population. People with a lot of empathy might be good therapists. People with ‘zero empathy’ are likely to be good at treating others roughly or instrumentally, as objects, and can reasonably be assumed to be responsible for most of the human cruelty in the world. The remainder is likely to be committed by those of us who experience temporary lapses of empathy. Baron-Cohen believes that people with autism-spectrum disorder lack empathy, but have a redeeming feature, namely their ability to systematise. They are thus ‘zero empathy positive’ – positive because there are advantages to their condition. They also tend not to be implicated in cruelty to others, or where they are, their actions do not appear to be calculated to cause harm. He compares them to another group of people who lack empathy, who may well understand the consequences of their actions, but do not really care. Their condition lacks any redeeming features, thus they are ‘zero empathy negative’. Baron-Cohen subdivides this group into types B, N and P: borderline, narcissistic and psychopathic. He is referring to people with personality disorder, whom he wants to reclassify, along with those with autism-spectrum disorder. He is attempting to explain such events through ignorance of the purpose of the activity (‘I only loaded the trains’) and diffusion of responsibility (‘I was following orders’), but in doing so only describes them. He allows no room for personal choice (‘knowing what the consequences of my actions might be, and retaining the ability to empathise, I remain able to commit them’).

This is a moving book, with examples of cruelty that are at times difficult to read. It is also a compassionate book in its plea to understand people who can appear cruel without meaning to be so. Baron-Cohen has highlighted a role for empathy in the capacity for evil, which seems correct; and he has provided an account of recent neurobiological research into empathy. But in attempting to engender sympathy – or empathy – for one group he has performed a disservice to another, already stigmatised, group. And if a satisfactory scientific account of evil is possible, we will have to wait for it.

Challenging Behaviour
(3rd edn)

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‘Challenging behaviour’ is an umbrella term used to describe any behaviour that puts the person and those around them at risk. These behaviours range from verbal or physical aggression to self-injurious acts to obsessional or ritualistic conduct and are commonly found in people with intellectual disability. Emerson is a well-known researcher in the field of intellectual disabilities and has made valuable contributions in the field of challenging behaviour. The definition of challenging behaviour he proposed is widely used and commonly cited in the literature.
This book focuses primarily on people with severe intellectual disabilities, although the broad principles outlined are applicable to individuals with all degrees of intellectual disability. The first section aims to improve the reader’s understanding of challenging behaviours. In the opening chapter, Emerson and Einfeld emphasise the importance of the social context in defining challenging behaviour. Then, the prevalence and risk factors associated with challenging behaviour are described. Chapter 4 summarises various behavioural phenotypes in specific genetic disorders, such as fragile X syndrome, psychiatric disorders and general health conditions associated with challenging behaviour. The behavioural models used for analyses of challenging behaviour are described in detail.

In the second section of the book, Emerson and Einfeld examine the design and implementation of interventions and support for people with intellectual disability and challenging behaviour. In the absence of a robust literature on the use of psychotropic medication for challenging behaviour, the authors provide a comprehensive account of behavioural interventions, which will be very useful for psychologists, psychiatrists and other professionals involved in the care of people with intellectual disabilities. Towards the end, the situational management of challenging behaviour is explored. The authors propose a range of specific strategies, from active listening and use of restraints to the use of psychotropic medication.

I feel that the authors could have explored the psychodynamic approach in the assessment and management of challenging behaviour. Similarly, their comments on the use of complementary and alternative therapies in people with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviour would have been interesting to examine further. However, the book provides a good mix of theoretical knowledge and clinical examples. It contains up-to-date information on this important topic, relevant not only to psychiatrists, but also to other professionals working with people who have intellectual disabilities.

The introduction acknowledges OCD’s ‘chameleon like’ presentation and gives useful case examples, helping to demystify common issues that may contribute to misdiagnosis. The first chapter, however, propels the reader into a comprehensive account of psychosurgery for the disorder. Even with an initial account of the neurobiology and neurocircuitry, this comes as a bit of a shock and sets the scene for the book to be more biological than psychological in its overview of the condition.

Subsequent chapters are less controversial and are clinically relevant. They vary in the nature of their content, from straightforward reviews of the relevant evidence to more discursive accounts, and cover a wide range of topic areas, including pharmacological treatment, exposure and response prevention and common comorbid conditions. The book deals with more social topics, including community supports and implications for the family in treatment, before reviewing related disorders, body dysmorphic disorder and trichotillomania. There are separate chapters on pharmacological and psychological treatment of children with OCD. Personally, the chapter on compulsive hoarding was particularly clinically relevant and interesting. It acknowledges that, despite not being a diagnosis in itself, compulsive hoarding is highly associated with various axis I and axis II disorders, and the authors describe the maladaptive cognitive and behavioural patterns that appear to be common in this syndrome across disorders.

In conclusion, this comprehensive and informative book is a welcome addition to the psychiatrist’s bookshelf. My only criticism is that it is disproportionately light on the psychological formulation and treatment of OCD. On the other hand, given the number of readily available publications on cognitive–behavioural therapy, this book could easily be supplemented with another guide relevant to the reader’s needs. 

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Clinical Obsessive–Compulsive Disorders in Adults and Children


The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001 changed the lives of many people throughout the world and resulted in further destruction and trauma. Apart from leading to wars and violence in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan, it also possibly led to the recent wave of public awakening and a drive towards democracy in the Middle East. The cycle of violence and hatred does not seem to stop, however, and religion is being used once again. Thousands have lost their lives. Millions have
be left traumatised. It is the right time that people think about the causes of the current conflict, especially those living in the Muslim world.

I therefore read with interest this book by Unaiza Niaz and co-authors, who have attempted to objectively look at the political and psychosocial causes of terrorism, insurgencies and wars in the Muslim world. They have even gone a step further and tried to clarify some of the misinterpretations of Islam in this area by quoting examples from the Quran. The book takes a balanced approach to describing the causes and consequences of terrorism. It highlights the cost of the wars and terrorism that is paid by civilians and especially the damage to more vulnerable groups, such as women and children. The book tries to answer some of the common questions, for example, why terrorism is more prevalent in Muslim societies and why most terrorists come from a Muslim background. The authors promote the thesis that the underlying cause might not be just misinterpretation of Islam, but a deep unrest in the Muslim world caused by lack of freedom and democracy and a rule of oppressive regimes that are sometimes supported by the West. The terrorist attacks might be a projection of the miserable lives of the people in these countries. The book also suggests that implementing justice and democracy, equal distribution of wealth, addressing poverty, disease and illiteracy will be more helpful in dealing with terrorism. As such I recommend this book not only to mental health professionals, but also to the lay public.

This is a book about delirium and far less about 'acute confusion states in palliative medicine'. Delirium has been and remains the Cinderella of psycho-syndromes but it is wearing finer dress as a result of studies into epidemiology and pathophysiology as well as phenomenology. These are explored and presented, which is news to clinicians, for delirium is so rarely given centre-stage for its own sake, being incidental to the main players of its aetiology.

Non-pharmacological management is given due attention, though sadly busy hospital wards can be difficult environments in which to follow calming and supportive behavioural strategies for those with delirium. There is concordance with much that is contained in the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence guidelines on delirium and its diagnosis, prevention and management. Drug management is considered in detail and reflects international practice, with some of the key aspects of the European Association for Palliative Care (EAPC) framework for the use of sedation in palliative care being appropriately highlighted.

Less gripping are the sections describing assessment scales – five are presented in full as appendices which range from 1 to 6 pages in length. In most situations only the very shortest can be justifiable in what is always a fraught and often rapidly changing scenario. Time spent with a paper and pencil or a computer screen is time taken away from providing skilled and humane, well-informed interventions. Yet the messages are well taken: when individuals are known to be dying from an irreversible progressive pathology, they may nevertheless become temporarily less well because of intercurrent problems which can be reversed. These must be identified and then treated effectively. However, delirium is for many the gateway to death and not to be fought as something which can be avoided, but anticipated, acknowledged and managed with calm and acceptance. Judgement on response comes from a close and comprehensive clinical understanding rather than scores on a check-list.

The final chapter returns, most appropriately, to family experiences and the loss of contact before death which is the essence of terminal delirium. Although this brings a welcome emphasis on holistic palliative approaches to end-of-life care, other texts have covered this ground in greater detail, and there is much included that is not specifically concerned with the issues encountered in caring for the delirious dying patient.

This is an unexpected book. It offers more than the title suggests. It is probably too expensive for most personal collections but should find a place in bench libraries in hospices, general hospitals and larger health centres. It should become essential reading for the psychiatrist working with the physically ill including those in palliative care.
recommendations for practice seem odd to those of us working in the UK National Health Service – for example, that all patients with suspected dementia should have an MRI scan!

The book is rather idiosyncratically divided into sections of ‘Introduction’, ‘Cognitive impairment, not demented’, ‘Slowly progressive dementias’ and ‘Rapidly progressive dementias’, and not all chapters are where they might be expected – ‘dementia treatment’ can be found in the ‘Cognitive impairment, not demented’ section. Given the variety of voices, it comes as no surprise that there is some repetition of basic information, particularly epidemiology. There is also variation in the referencing style used in different chapters, which is unhelpful when chasing references.

Many of the ‘big names’ in dementia research have contributed to this publication. This means that it is generally well informed and readable. On the other hand, it also results in some concepts which are surrounded by debate being inaccurately portrayed as uncontroversial. For example, mild cognitive impairment is hypothesised to represent the prodromal phase of dementia but has an extremely heterogeneous prognosis, probably due to its lack of conceptual clarity. The chapter by Kelley and Petersen cites evidence that 5–16% of patients with mild cognitive impairment progress to dementia each year (though estimates range from 1–29%) compared with 1–2% of the ‘normal’ population. However, they downplay the fact that a significant proportion of those labelled with mild cognitive impairment return to normal cognitive function. They suggest that this is the case for approximately 5% per year but estimates of the proportion returning to normal have been as high as 44% (this and previous estimates from K. Ritchie, Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience 2004; 6: 401–8).

More concerning, the book minimises the well-accepted effect of increased mortality associated with antipsychotic medications in older adults with dementia. In the light of guidance from numerous bodies, and recent reports that these drugs have limited efficacy and are too often used as the first response to behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia, the book’s coverage of this topic seems inadequate. However, the authors do make appropriate recommendations about the judicious use of these medications in a small proportion of highly symptomatic patients where other approaches have failed.

This book frustrated me slightly and left me crying out for a stronger editorial hand. Although it remains an interesting and valuable collection of rather disparate, varied chapters on this fascinating subject, it definitely remains one for reference in the library rather than your personal collection.
Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty
Steve Pearce
BJP 2011, 199:520.
Access the most recent version at DOI: 10.1192/bjp.bp.111.098434

References
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