

Book Review

Book Title: *The Professional Helper: The Fundamentals of Being a Helping Professional*

Author: Bryan, Willie V.

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Reviewer: Mari Ono

Willie V. Bryan reflects in the preface of his book, "...every human being needs help, and every human has the capacity to be a helper" (p. vii). With this premise in mind, the author casts a wide net in his effort to capture and define a range of helping roles as well as the qualities, characteristics, and skills requisite to be an effective helper. The book is divided into 10 short chapters, nine of these concluding with review questions, "mental exercises," references, and suggested readings.

The chapters include introducing the author's list of characteristics of an effective helper, an overview of processes within helping relationships, and touching upon issues relevant to human behavior, cultural differences, disabilities, resources, and advocacy. The last chapters focus on brief descriptions of classic counseling models for individual and family practice. Generally, it appears the author's material is gleaned from standard social work and counseling models. For example, the processes of the helping relationship reflect the Generalist Intervention Model commonly used in social work. This model consists of engagement, assessment, planning/goal setting, intervention, evaluation, termination and follow-up (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2006). Within each of these areas, the writer provides his thoughts on how the helping professional can collaborate and assist the helpee.

Interestingly, this book is written in the first person with scant citations or references. This leads to an impression that the material is not intended as a reference tool but more as the author's personal collection of helpful tips and reflections. The chapter on "Understanding Disabilities" reads somewhat like a lecture session. The author broadly sweeps through definitions, prevalence, historical and current perspectives, policies regarding those with disabilities, advocacy needs, and counseling tips. While these topic areas could be considered fundamental in building a base of knowledge for those considering a helping profession, the chapter's content appears fairly sketchy and at times, dogmatic.

The brief subsection that offers strategies to assist persons with disabilities is embedded in a list of "things not to do." While these tips can be useful in checking one's assumptions and communications, it would have been beneficial to organize a basic framework for positive and effective ways to dialogue and formulate a plan of assistance with the client. Instead, under the subheading of "Additional Tips for Effectively Assisting Persons with Disabilities" (pp. 119-120), the author essentially provides three quoted paragraphs from different authors to address assessment of individuals with disabilities; needs of families of children with disabilities; and identifying goals of helping professionals. These paragraphs could have better served as supportive excerpts within a fuller discussion and outline for interviewing and developing an effective assessment plan. Unfortunately, they are left as detached bits and pieces of information.

The following chapter on “Understanding Resources” was equally broad and unevenly written. While the author begins promisingly with introducing a strengths-based perspective in determining appropriate resources for a client, the following material soon fragments into a random list of resources interjected with personal warnings to the helper. The author further offers his perspective on possible resources for the elderly, persons with disabilities and their families, women, and ethnic/racial minorities in this piecemeal fashion.

In this chapter, the author’s spare, unreferenced segment on women begins with global gender inequality and then veers quickly into physical and mental abuse of women in the U.S., and ends with women with disabilities who are victims of abuse. The simplistic advice the author offers is for the helping professional to be familiar on where and how to access resources that can “protect women from abuse” (p. 141). Moreover, the author describes why many women may choose not to seek help or accept services but does not offer guidance on what the helping professional should consider in these circumstances. The end result is an awkward discourse with rough descriptions of needs and issues within each population and within a discussion of resources. The overall content provides little in the way of articulating an effective paradigm for identifying and prioritizing resources with and on behalf of the client.

Unfortunately, I found his suggestions far more confusing than clarifying from an instructor perspective. As a guideline for students in social work, there is an emphasis placed upon differentiating personal opinion from validated evidence and practice. Perhaps for these reasons, the utility of this book may be insufficient for a classroom setting. While it presents snippets of useful information and history, the parts appear disjointed and too often, unsubstantiated.

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Reference

Kirst-Ashman, K, & Hull. G. H., Jr. (2002) *Understanding generalist practice* (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.