BOOK REVIEW

Who are we? by Ron Dultz

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Who are we? seeks to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding human beings and our behaviour through an examination of the mental and emotional essence of human nature. An advocate of the humanistic-existential perspective, the author takes a philosophical stance towards interpreting and providing guidelines for the human experience.

The first chapter starts by stressing the importance of the ‘Self’ – our psychological identity and blueprint of our potential – in directing and guiding our thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. When our needs are met and when we have a keen sense of self-understanding and congruence in our life experiences, happiness and a full appreciation of the human experience prevails. The pre-eminence of the individual and of the individual’s rights is emphasised as the primary building blocks and foundation of each person’s life. To overcome the ‘self defeating tendencies of compromise, self sacrifice, authoritarianism and unrealistic expectations that currently determine all kinds of relationships between people’, we must be true to the Self and our to unique natures, and live with integrity in order to be free.

The author then examines two competing theories of human nature – namely, the ‘scientific/industrial/robotic/military’ model and the ‘natural/creative/individualistic/humanistic’ model. The humanistic model espoused by the author emphasises the legitimacy of human feelings and the individualistic nature of people, as well as the significance of personal harmony in our engagements with others and with the world. The need to learn how to interpret our own unique, human nature and the importance of being more sensitive towards our own needs is underscored as a necessity to prosper as individuals and as societies.

Chapter 4 starts out by emphasising the lack of a comprehensive model of mental health as opposed to the dominant models of modern psychology, which rather accentuate mental ill-health. Maslow’s theory of a hierarchy of needs serves as a theoretical framework linking mental health to the satisfaction of our psychological needs. The author points out, however, that the complexity of human needs is not
quite adequately captured by the limited categories identified by Maslow, and in the following chapter a more extensive list is proposed to describe a much wider range of human psychological needs. The list includes, amongst others, the need for self-development, the need for self-expression and the need for significance, meaning, and purpose in life. A brief discussion of the implications of this need-based approach towards conceptualising human behaviour is given, after which particular manifestations and characteristics of mental health are discussed.

The author also gives consideration to the environmental conditions (personal, community, societal, and world environments) that form a crucial part of a person’s mental and emotional well being. A well-developed conscience and a character of goodness is deemed important for a healthy human existence and harmony in life.

The book concludes with a discussion of the author’s conceptualisation of psychotherapy, based on the model provided in the book. The author holds that traditional forms of psychotherapy lack comprehensiveness as most approaches emphasise mental ill-health and do not focus enough on the person’s potentials, the environments that contribute towards their mental health, and the attributes of the fully functioning person. Need replenishment therapy is proposed as a means to evaluate to what extent an individual’s mental and emotional needs are being met in relation to their potentials and Environment enrichment therapy provides the opportunity for the therapist and client to explore the different environments making up a person’s overall living environment. Both therapeutic approaches focus on, and are geared towards ‘health-giving processes’ by exploring what is best for an individual in the present moment and in the long term.

Well written and an easy read, Dultz’s book provides a rationale for a shift away from deficit-based thinking in psychology towards a holistic, healthy conceptualisation of people and their behaviour, drawing on ideas from different personality theorists including Maslow, Fromm, Murray, and Frankl. Emphasising the inner mental and emotional essence of human beings and the importance of healthy, nurturing environments, Who are we? is an important resource in the advancement of modern psychology and appropriate for both teachers and students of psychology, as well as for people who are not in the psychology profession. Although the author notes the need for empirical validation of the ideas presented in the book, its content is widely applicable – especially in the South African context.
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