

EITN Issue 17 Book Reviews

Edited by Sarah Cornelius and Claire Molloy, November 2009

The Autistic Spectrum: Characteristics, Causes and Practical Issues

J. Boucher

London: Sage (2008), pp. 424, Pbk., £24.99, ISBN 9780761962120

Reviewed by Jackie Ravet, School of Education, University of Aberdeen

Media and public interest in autism has soared over the past five years, and publishers have responded with a flood of new titles. In such a burgeoning niche, it is difficult for new books to stand out and, at first glance, Jill Boucher's book is not especially distinctive. In common with a plethora of other, similar works, it explores the characteristics, causes and practical issues associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In Part 1, Boucher deals with characteristics and provides an historical overview; an analysis and critique of the 'subtypes' and 'spectrum' models of autism; an examination of the additional characteristics of the condition; and an exploration of rising prevalence rates. In Part II, Boucher moves on to the causes of autism, such as they are understood at this time, and critically explores the etiological, neurobiological and psychological processes that give rise to manifest behaviours. In Part III the focus is on the more practical issues of assessment, intervention and care. The scope of the book is therefore broad and valuable, but very much as expected. However, Boucher has sought to make her book distinctive in two ways. Firstly, it is specifically designed to be comprehensive and authoritative yet user-friendly and accessible, thus appealing to the widest possible range of readers from newly diagnosed individuals on the spectrum and parents, to practitioners and specialists working and researching in the field. This is a difficult range to negotiate, but Boucher seeks to achieve it by engaging fully with the complexity of the subject matter and drawing on a very wide range of up-to-date research, whilst also providing regular boxed examples, tables, diagrams and summaries to illuminate and simplify the content. The result is an exceptionally well argued, thorough and detailed exposition of key themes, issues and controversies in autism. However, I am not convinced that this is a text for those completely new to the field. The writing is dense in places, and the lay reader would have to work hard to understand much of the

technical jargon in Part II despite the inclusion of a thirty page glossary and noble efforts to 'translate' difficult scientific concepts into everyday language. This is very much a 'text book', not a 'beginner's guide'.

Secondly, Boucher's book is unusual in that it aims to provide objective and critical accounts of the most up-to-date thinking on autism supplemented with personal commentaries based upon her professional experience and research. For example, Boucher devotes Chapter 5 to her own model of autism. In this chapter, she quite rightly questions the current triadic model that continues to dominate the literature, and makes a powerful case for a dyad of core impairments. The idea that social interaction and communication impairments might be combined to form one grouping on the logical basis that they are 'not dissociable' is a compelling one. However, Boucher does not explain how underlying problems with social understanding could be explained within this logic. One would surely have to revert to more traditional psychological explanations to account for this. It also comes as a surprise that Boucher gives very little space to discussion of sensory-perceptual issues in this chapter and, unlike many other researchers and individuals on the spectrum, does not at least consider it as a possible core impairment. Nonetheless, Boucher's combination of research overview and personal commentary makes for a stimulating and novel mix.

Overall, there is no doubt that Boucher's book makes a significant and original contribution to the literature on autism within a rapidly changing and complex field. Her work is rich and penetrating, and is extremely well researched. Though she may not have succeeded in her aim of producing an introductory text, she has certainly been successful in producing a comprehensive compendium for the more informed reader. Anyone seeking authoritative insights into the characteristics, causes and practical issues associated with this little understood condition would be well advised to consult her book.