Changing Our Minds: Lesbian Feminism and Psychology

Celia Kitzinger and Rachel Perkins
Onlywomen Press, 1993, £7.95 pb, 201pp

How ironic that this review is appearing in The Association for Humanistic Psychology's journal *Self & Society*. 'Psychology' fails to theorise the relationship between these very two concepts, according to this stimulating and infuriating book, and as such 'psychology' is bad. I use inverted commas because the word is used in the book as shorthand for elements of psychological theory, counselling, psychotherapy, the self-help genre and new age trappings.

The authors' central argument is that the necessary struggle for social change has been superseded by a movement towards self-realisation, and that this is damaging to lesbians. Psychology has replaced feminism as a way of understanding the world, and as a result our energy is not going where it should — into building lesbian communities, lesbian ethics, and lesbian politics. Basically lesbians don't need psychology, they say, because it has lots of bad effects, and any good ones could and should result from interactions between lesbians in non-commercial relationships. We need to bring our woes to our friends as well as our joys.

Of course this is not a new argument and there are other writers currently conveying a similar message in different ways (James Hillman and Michael Ventura's *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse* being a notable example). One of the reasons I found Kitzinger and Perkins' book well worth reading is the way it nudged me to revisit and review my thoughts on the inward-looking vs. outward-acting axis. Actually, 'bludgeon' might be a more appropriate word than 'nudge'. I think Kitzinger and Perkins do their argument a disservice by generalising, employing sophistry to dismiss any potential criticism or counter-argument, and citing examples to prove their point that tended to elicit from me either a dismissive sneer or a 'yes, but . . .'.

Whether or not the authors have tongue lodged firmly in cheek (they are experienced professional psychologists), their argument matters. It does seem very important to me that psychotherapists and counsellors pay attention to criticisms of what we're about, particularly when the arguments come from a well-informed and well-documented source such as this one. And the fact that this particular book focuses on the impact of psychology on lesbians certainly doesn't mean that it contains no lessons for heterosexual practitioners or practitioners with no lesbian clients.

I found the chapter on language very useful. The authors say that psychological language is increasingly replacing political language, and remind us that language matters in terms of naming our

experience and describing our reality; as such it has political implications. For instance the way we talk about lesbian experience defines lesbian politics — calling ourselves 'lesbians' is saying something very different from 'gay women' or 'female homosexuals'. The phrase 'father-daughter rape' carries one set of political implications, 'incest' or 'intergenerational sex' carry others. What were once political terms such as 'power', 'liberation' and 'freedom of choice', in their therapeutic reformulation refer to individual, internal psychic phenomena instead of social and political transformation. They also take the piss out of psychobabble, with serious intent.

An important section covers the distinctions between the kind of power that psychology claims to offer women and lesbians and the real out-there-in-the world (heteropatriarchal) power that is to do with governments, laws and institutions. The distinctions do need pointing out, otherwise we're back to the 'making women happy in order to accept the status quo' syndrome.

Psychology also gets coshed because it presents itself as value-free, according to Kitzinger and Perkins; allowing clients to define their own moral position means that practitioners can avoid making moral judgements. 'This is particularly the case with humanist (sic) psychologists and it is also very common amongst lesbian and feminist psychologists.' But in order to develop lesbian morality (or any other kind), we need to be able to talk about 'right' and 'wrong', about what we and others 'should' do. According to psychology, they say, 'all "should"s and "shouldn't"s are equally bad and all to be discarded altogether. Further, in therapy the worst thing you can do is to make a moral judgement — that's called "being judgemental"'.

A chapter called 'Therapeutic Lifestyles' questions why so many lesbians seek therapy, and discusses the effect of the 'therapy industry' on lesbian ethics and lesbian politics. Therapy, they say, has persuaded us that 'feeling bad' has to be got rid of, that if we're unhappy there must be something wrong. This is one of many instances where my response is that that may be true of some new agers and therapies/therapists, but by no means all. However Kitzinger and Perkins, with elegant but specious logic, explicitly dismiss as irrelevant the differences between different types of psychology and therapy. It's therapy itself that's wrong. Thus feminist therapists by no means escape a roasting, no matter how honourable their intentions and how real the distress of their clients.

A section on power relations between therapist and client cites several examples of abuse which demonstrate the kind of unethical practice that surely most of us abhor and that I want to believe is rare. There are also some interesting points that I mostly disagree with about the 'prosthetic friendship' that the relationship provides. There is a refreshing look at madness from a feminist perspective, as 'social disability'.

The picture of psychology that Kitzin-

ger and Perkins paint is small and mean. One of their articles of faith is that there is no such thing as the authentic self — in which case there's little point in striving to uncover it. We start from a different place because they don't think we have an unconscious to find out about, whereas I do. They also ignore the less 'applied' aspects of therapy such as the spiritual perspective that some humanistic and transpersonal psychotherapies encompass. I wouldn't mind betting the word 'soul' doesn't appear in the book. It doesn't have an index so I couldn't check.

In answer to their argument, the question I keep returning to is 'Why can't we do both?' Where appropriate, both individual and political perspectives on a client's issues help to fill in a fuller picture than either one alone would do. 'Therapeutic' shouldn't mean 'privatised' in the way Kitzinger and Perkins state; in my experience the consulting room is a place to rehearse, and the therapist someone to practise with before the client goes out into the world. I don't know of any reasons why a client who is working through some of her most pressing issues in therapy can't go out into the world and help change it — and I know as a client and as a therapist that it does happen this way. I think the authors greatly undermine their case by explicitly underlining the either/or-ness of it.

Despite my reservations about Kitzinger and Perkins' overstatement, I'm left with a nice point that represents their argument well: how can lesbians talking to cushions — or to therapists — bring heteropatriarchy to its knees?

Ruth Finer

Ring of Power — The Abandoned Child, the Authoritarian Father, and the Disempowered Feminine

Jean Shinoda Bolen
Harper Collins, 1992, £7.99, 245pp.

Following on from the excellent *Goddesses in Everywoman* (1984) and the slightly less successful *Gods in Everyman* (1989), Bolen's *Ring of Power* is a book about love and truth and their relationship to power and unawareness. Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is graphically retold and interpreted from a Jungian perspective, exemplifying the range of dysfunctional family dynamics. As she states in her introduction, 'There are no good marriages or happy families in classical mythology'.

This is a book about patriarchal authority, the disempowered feminine and abandonment — both physical and emotional ('a child who is not cared for or cared about is abandoned', p.203). The writing compels us to recognise ourselves through these archetypes, and reminds and inspires us towards consciousness and choice.

The book is divided into six chapters.

The first four deal with the four operas of the *Ring Cycle*. Chapter five is an interesting piece on inner work, called 'freeing ourselves', that is written with a fine clarity. In chapter six she speculates upon the possibility of a post-patriarchal era and the individual contribution we can each make to that possibility (probability?).

She has an uneven style of writing. Some paragraphs take me, inspired and wondering, into deep contemplation of their depth and succinct density of meaning, while the following passage may be presented in an easy flowing familiar pop psychology style. But sometimes the effort required to penetrate the deeper meanings of myths demand light relief.

Occasionally the retelling of the myth, followed by its detailed analysis leads to too much repetition of the story, but the sheer breadth of vision of Wagner's *Ring Cycle* comes over as quite breathtaking and reflects a sense of generation following generation. Bolen concludes that discovering the truth of our situation, and ceasing to play our part in the cycle of unawareness, frees us to discover the inner depths of wisdom, healing and love. In this book she goes some way to helping us do this.

Richard Harvey

Handbook for the Emerging Woman

Mary Elizabeth Marlow
Element Books, 1994

In the preface Mary Elizabeth Marlow describes the structure of the book as a handbook designed to be used individually, with close friends or in a support group, with each chapter relating to an essential step, an initiation through which every woman moves in her emerging process. So I anticipated just that, bearing in mind the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* definition of 'handbook' as 'a literary composition dealing more or less formally and methodically with a definite subject, a short manual or guidebook'. Instead I found a confusing mixture of experiences within the following pages.

While there were clear exercises, steps and stages, and charts to follow, I felt that the overpowering element of the book was of Mary Elizabeth Marlow herself. It seemed a vehicle for expressing her own emergence, an outlet for her experiences and awakening, and was executed in a way in which her personal issues became overwhelming at times and detracted from what the title and preface promised.

In saying that, she starts the book with a whoomph, discussing the Bitch within us, choosing this term because it is unattractive and is surrounded by preconceived stereotypical ideas. She draws the reader into acknowledging the shadow self, and offers that by owning the Bitch in its many forms (20 in all) we can then recognise our part in perpetuating

the Bitch roles and release them in order to own real power. By going into the dark green forest of our unconscious to meet the shadow self women can begin travelling the path to wholeness.

This is followed by chapters on other theories of emergence: 'Healing the Dragon Fight' — an understanding and acceptance of our parents; 'Betrayal' — moving it to self empowerment; 'Earth, Wind, Fire and Water' — using the elements to discover the feminine power; 'Goddesses' — to associate with the powerful archetype goddesses who will return to help us on our journey; and 'Love' — the only way to have all the love we need is to love ourselves and move away from the misconceptions that love is what someone or something else is supposed to give us. When we cease allowing others to determine how, when, or even whether, we will have love, then the healing process will have begun.

I particularly liked the references to classic fairy tales and Greek and Indian mythology, and Mary Elizabeth Marlow's interpretation of them in the context of self-awareness was thought-provoking. It also raised the question again, just what kind of book was I reading? It was not solely a handbook, more a mixture of autobiography, self-awareness manual, personal diary and experiences of clients; the combination did not rest easy with me. Her own personal growth has evolved over many years, and has come about through several cathartic experiences and usually through involvement with men, or out-of-body experiences. The book felt to me like someone saying that by reading this book you too could reach the fulfilment that had taken a lifetime for Mary Elizabeth Marlow to reach, and I emerged from the handbook confused and unclear, and feeling slightly patronised.

Sandra Booth

Living and Relating: An Introduction to Phenomenology

Carol S. Becker
Sage, 1992, £5.50 pb, 289pp.

Carol Becker has set out 'to show the phenomenological viewpoint as it has been most alive, meaningful, and useful to me in my work as a teacher and psychotherapist'. She does indeed state the basic tenets of phenomenology and show the approach through numerous detailed expositions of actual life examples: the 'lifeworld'. She draws on her own experience and that of her students, clients and friends. She demonstrates the phenomenological approach, putting herself into the moment and being as transparent as the printed word and the confines of the task allow. Her language is smooth, her jargon defined.

The stated aim of the book is for the discussions of human nature, life span de-

velopment, intimate relationships, and helping relationships to touch upon, dwell within, and open up fundamental dimensions of living and relating. My difficulty with the way this is done is its unevenness which leads to a confusion of purpose.

For example, the chapter 'Adults' in the section on 'Human Development' chooses a selection of topics because there happen to be dissertations or papers available, rather than giving a balanced view of the important areas of adult life.

The section 'Helping Relationships' consists of chapters on: Psychotherapy; Helping the Physically Ill Person; and Relational Aspects of College Teaching. That on psychotherapy surveys the existential-phenomenological approach and shows how it suits our times in dealing with the loneliness of our non-cohesive society and its lack of community feeling. This is a brief coverage of a topic on which much more comprehensive treatments are readily available.

The book offers an excellent introduction to phenomenological research, illustrating technique and giving a way in to the literature. The technique is simple and direct: if you want to know something ask the person and listen to the reply. We see how to enter into another's experience through the authentic presence of the researcher. Although I like the concern to treat people with the respect due to unique and intentional beings, and I enjoyed some of the topics, the book was not helpful to me in my work as a therapist. It might be of value to students and to the general reader — clients perhaps who want to know how to live the here-and-now, how to be-in-the-world.

Gina Lomac

The Psychology of Interpersonal Perception

Perry R. Hinton
Routledge, 1993, 205pp.

This is a valuable social psychology textbook with oodles of research citations and clear language despite the jargon. The book is aimed at students and those interested in interpersonal perception at work in areas such as personnel, business and management. The book explores the cognitive level, and constantly extracts the logical bases of behaviour only to regret that people aren't like that and do actually behave irrationally most of the time.

'Interpersonal perception is all about how we decide what other people are like and the meanings we give their actions.' As such it must be relevant to the humanistic practitioner . . . and yet . . . I wonder if it is. Although the topic is impeccably researched and presented, I ended the book knowing a lot more about behaviour but not a lot more about people. The chapter on non-verbal communication gives useful examples of how a person's physical characteristics and image presentation

can be misinterpreted.

The chapter on stereotyping is valuable in the analysis of differences essential in any political consideration of the individual and the group. Other areas where the book touches humanistic practice are those of impression formation which is seen as a gestalt process and implicit personality theory — what people go on to make individual judgements of others — where Kelly's personal construct theory and repertory grid tests are featured.

What is not mentioned is any discussion of a felt response to others, the deeper questions concerning meeting: how do we meet each other with genuineness, warmth and empathy, and what interferes with such meeting? Many of the experimental set-ups are so artificial that it is hard to know what is being measured. There is an admission of this criticism: 'It may well be that the specific real-life situations that people find themselves in when judging others involve a degree of accuracy that is absent in the decontextualised global assessments of many research studies.'

My criticism comes from a bias: as a psychotherapist, I am more interested in the story lived by the person or group than in an analysis of behaviour which can only be logical and statistical. However, to have the ideas so clearly presented must be of value to students and, perhaps, to those whose work involves 'judging' people's behaviour.

Gina Lomac

Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision

Roger Walsh and Frances Vaughan
Jeremy Tarcher, 1993, 293pp.

This book aroused great expectations in me. The original book by the same editors, *Beyond Ego*, appeared in 1980, and was a great light-bearer at a time when very little had appeared on the transpersonal. It had an excellent 35-page section on psychotherapy, among other things.

Now here is this new one, at a time when a lot more has appeared on the transpersonal, and where it is very much on the map. The first disquiet appeared in the Introduction, where we get a heading 'Definition and Description', giving brief accounts of transpersonal experiences, transpersonal disciplines, transpersonal psychology, transpersonal psychiatry, transpersonal anthropology, transpersonal sociology, transpersonal ecology and the transpersonal movement. What happened to transpersonal psychotherapy, and where is transpersonal management, a field which has been burgeoning all through the 1980s, and which is now very important?

When we come to look at the 24-page section on psychotherapy, it starts off in rather a peculiar way, with a four-page

condensation of Ken Wilber's account of pathology at the psychic, subtle and causal levels — this is so chopped about that I think it would be quite mystifying to most readers. Then comes a chapter by Frances Vaughan, a five-page effort which is not a patch on her excellent eight-page chapter in the original book. This is followed by a chapter by Bryan Wittine, which makes the classic mistake of adopting the 'one-two-three-infinity' notion of the transpersonal. (This is the idea that beyond the intellect there is just one great mish-mash called 'spirituality' or 'the Self'.) Finally there is a chapter by Michael Murphy, a two-page effort which really tells us very little. This seems to me very disappointing.

But the reason for this is to be found throughout the book. It is the stubborn refusal of nearly all these people to make the distinction between the subtle and the causal, between the soul and the spirit. Both of these are beyond the intellect and beyond the ego, yet they are quite different from each other. The soul level is full of symbols, myths, gods, goddesses, tales, legends, archetypal forms and so forth. It is all about multiplicity and richness. In this book the only discipline at this level which is mentioned is shamanism, though Jung gets the odd mention here and there. The level of spirit, on the other hand, is shorn of all these excrescences, and goes for the pure spirituality which has no symbols, no representations to mar its unsullied unity. This is the deep water of spirituality, where we are quite out of our depth.

Over and over again in this book this distinction is not made, and people talk of the transpersonal vision, the transpersonal outlook, and so forth. In what is otherwise quite a good discussion of ecology, for example, Warwick Fox never notices that he is talking about the level of soul, not the level of spirit. The problem is that the editors themselves do not see this distinction or use it, and the very subtitle of the book demonstrates this.

There are some good things in this book, but many of them are spoilt by being hacked about so much. It is just not possible to reduce a complex argument to very few pages — a classic example of this is the reduction of Ken Wilber's account of transpersonal development to just two pages! Ken Wilber does in fact come out as well ahead of the others in this book, but this is not the place to read him. There is no index.

John Rowan

Speaking of Sex

Antony Grey
Cassell, 1993, 144pp.

This book looks at the languages in which sex is discussed. The author is well-known as a gay stalwart of the British Association for Counselling, and he

opens the book with an account of his own experience in growing up. There follows a brief history of writing about sex.

After a discussion of metaphor and myth in the language of sex, and some brief references to power, we come to the five central chapters of the book, dealing with the contrasting languages of: the church; the law; sexperts; sexual politics; and the market place. We then get a chapter on love, in the course of which he expresses a liking for the slogan — 'Long Live Lust!' — followed by one on sex-shame and sexhate. He is a little bit ambivalent about paedophilia, and makes several rather confusing statements about it. He quotes with approval an American sex-positive manifesto which somehow manages to avoid the subject of paedophilia altogether. The next chapter is all about sex education, and the book ends with a rousing call to freedom.

I am not sure who would benefit from reading this book. Everything in it is dealt with quite briefly, and the language is sometimes chatty and sometimes a turgid. On the whole I didn't like it very much.

John Rowan