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BOOK REVIEW

Dynamic Pathways to Recovery from Alcohol Use Disorder: Meaning and Methods

Edited by Jalie A. Tucker and Katie Witkiewitz

Cambridge University Press, 2022.

ISBN 978-1-108-83871-9 Hardback/ 978-1-108-97226-0 Paperback

A few years after I had first developed an interest in the science of alcohol problems, I attended a conference at the Institute of Psychiatry in London in 1979 [1]. Towards the end of the proceedings, an American participant stood up and announced: “Alcoholism is dead”. He was referring, of course, to the model of alcohol problems originally developed and promoted by the triumvirate of the Yale Center for Alcohol Studies, the National Council on Alcoholism and the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous in the late 1930’s and early 1940’s, collectively known as ‘the alcoholism movement’. I was pleasantly surprised to hear this announcement because, based on my reading of the evidence available even at that time, I had already formed serious misgivings about the alcoholism model. In subsequent decades, however, it became clear that, with a nod to Mark Twain, reports of the death of alcoholism had been greatly exaggerated. This applied most obviously to popular understanding of alcohol problems conveyed by the media but to scientific understanding too.

Despite this reluctance to expire, the book edited by Jalie Tucker and Katie Witkiewitz [2] is a sure sign of the terminal decline of ‘alcoholism’, at least in scientific circles. The editors themselves do not make this claim; they are too careful and considered in their style to make such a sweeping assertion; I make the claim on their behalf. Notwithstanding the explicit focus of the book on recovery from alcohol problems, all strands of theory and evidence embarrassing to the alcoholism model are well described here: the disaggregation of alcohol problems, the move away from viewing problems as chronic and as having an intractable course, the corresponding shift of attention from those in treatment to the entire population of those harmed by their drinking in the community, and the abandonment of an exclusive preoccupation with total abstinence as the solution to alcohol problems. As Tucker and Witkiewitz write: “Scientific work on AUD (alcohol use disorder) recovery is maturing and has propelled a shift from a monolithic abstinence-oriented view of alcohol problems, treatment approaches, and recovery pathways to a pluralistic view that recognizes the heterogeneous, multidimensional nature of these central features of AUD” (p.3).

Influenced by previous definitions and by empirical work, the editors define recovery as “a dynamic process of behavior change in which improvements in biopsychosocial functioning and life

satisfaction are fundamental” (p.14). Following this definition, the book is divided into three parts: Micro Level – the individual as change agent; Meso Level – understanding and promoting individual behavior change within natural environments; Macro Level - creating environments, resources, and policies to promote harm reduction and recovery. This works very well and enables the book to cover the full range of individual, environmental and sociopolitical perspectives relevant to recovery. Another commendable feature is that each part contains at least two methodological chapters which will be of great assistance to those contemplating doing research in this area.

Chapters in this book are of a uniformly high standard but, in addition to the excellent contributions of the two editors themselves, I found the following particularly useful: Chapter 2 by Witkiewitz and Maisto on ‘Biopsychosocial process of change in alcohol use disorder recovery; Chapter 3 by Roos et al. on ‘The role of self-regulation strategies in recovery from alcohol use disorder; Chapter 10 by Murphy et al. on ‘Individual behavioral interventions to incentivize sobriety and enrich the natural environment with appealing alternative to drinking; and Chapter 16 by Best et al. on ‘Recovery communities: resources and settings’. These are just a few selections from an outstanding collection.

My only cavil with this book concerns the geographical restriction of authors’ affiliations. The only exceptions to authors from the USA are a few from the UK. I cannot believe that there were no researchers from continental Europe who could have made valuable contributions to the book, not to mention those from Australasia and other parts of the world. It is high time that research and scholarship in the alcohol and wider addiction fields became truly international.

Nevertheless, this is an important book in the history of our understanding of and response to alcohol problems. I recommend it highly to anyone who wishes to be at the forefront of scientific endeavour in this area of work.

Nick Heather

Department of Psychology, Northumbria University

Email: nick.heather@unn.ac.uk

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