

Anna Brzeska

University of Wrocław

***Uczenie się – Doświadczenie – Imersja. Poradnictwo zaangażowane* [Learning, experiencing, immersion: Engaged counseling]. Edited by E. Siarkiewicz and B. Wojtasik, Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Dolnośląskiej Szkoły Wyższej, 2016, pp. 273**

Elżbieta Siarkiewicz and Bożena Wojtasik have co-edited a volume titled *Uczenie się – Doświadczenie – Imersja. Poradnictwo zaangażowane* [Learning, experiencing, immersion: Engaged counseling] comprising papers by fifteen other authors who tackle a range of contemporary (formal and informal) counselling issues. All the contributors have dedicated their works to their teachers and mentors – Professors Alicja Kargulowa and Józef Kargul – in celebration of their 80th birthday. In their introduction titled “The mentors’ presence,” the editors observe that in the course of life we encounter many people, however, “only those dear to our hearts and important to us, those whose presence leaves an indelible mark on our biography, those who give our lives momentum, afford a pause to reflect on it, and, perhaps, change its trajectory become our mentors” (pp. 5-6). Corroborating this claim, the book features the works of “authors who have been profoundly inspired by the research efforts of both Professor Alicja Kargulowa and Professor Józef Kargul” (p. 8).

The book is composed of three parts. The first part is devoted to informal counseling, carried out in social projects that stem from the need of the moment, from the hopes they promise to fulfill, and from the help they pledge to deliver to those who need it most. The second part is concerned with the praxis of counselling and related educational efforts. The contributions in this part demonstrate that the researchers have been agents of “many changes (experienced both directly and indirectly) that rendered contexts, practice, and language equally important in guiding [one’s] actions” (p. 9). The third part addresses the noticeably increasing significance of narratives in both the humanities and day-to-day life, that is, of communicating with others and telling them about one’s experience. The contributions represent a joint effort of “researchers steeped in physical, symbolic and metaphorical

realms, the boundaries of which are set exactly by counseling.” For this reason, the editors found “engaged counseling” a fitting subtitle.

The book’s first part titled “Hope and beyond” begins with Elżbieta Siarkiewicz’s article titled “Counseling as a performative project: Participation and action.” Siarkiewicz describes the “conceptual framework of a research project,” defines counseling, explains what counseling-provision means, and, finally, calls for “a deep insight into the processes that bring about the act of counseling and help forge counseling networks” (p. 17). She observes that counseling can take different forms, being more formal (institutional) or informal (provided by non-professional actors), depending on the circumstances. Both forms are an exercise in aid when an individual finds him- or herself in need of assistance. In some cases, support-provision becomes an interminable process, such as counseling of families whose relatives have been abducted in Columbia.

The latter issue is discussed by Joanna Kłodkowska in her text “Counseling as a means of bringing hope.” Kłodkowska describes how local communities adapt to struggles faced by their members. She also delineates individuals’ coping with critical situations and traumatic events in their lives. She cites a Radio Caracol program which ushers hope into the lives of people whose loved ones have been kidnapped in Columbia and perhaps even the abductees themselves. The affected families are also actively engaged in producing the broadcast. Hope drives their actions beyond airtime: through mutual support they learn to wait patiently for their loved ones, and, if that possibility is taken away from them, they adapt to a harrowing and unwelcome change in their lives. Arguably, they take on the role of informal counselors instead of accepting the victim label.

Because of the unimaginable scale of abductions in Columbia, the demand for such programs remains high. Alicja Czerkawska in “Forced separation from the loved ones: In the labyrinth of hope” presents this problem as an intricate and seemingly unresolvable one. Czerkawska recounts a broadcast whose primary aim was to console those who had lost their relatives in abductions and the abductees still held by their kidnappers. She describes this broadcast as “a loud cry and a silent sigh” with a potential for “building bridges between worlds forcefully torn apart, even if it is to be attempted through words only” (p. 78). It would certainly not be an overstatement to say that a transition from “insufficient help to a counseling network” had taken place, because the medium would not have “come into being if it hadn’t been for the abducted themselves” (p. 85). The program catalyzed actions such as meetings with other families whose relatives had been abducted and mutual support. Also, it inadvertently laid the groundwork for publicly engaged counseling.

“Help(lessness): Networks in counseling” written by Aneta Słowik, deals with such actions in more detail. She reveals how spontaneous efforts morph into publicly engaged counseling, reaching beyond national borders, and spread internationally, because they result from the needs intrinsic to a given community and from a common biographical experience.

It is hard to remain unmoved when reading this book. Each text engages the reader, making him/her pause for a moment and ponder about what he/she has just read. "Of hope in rehabilitative counseling" by Małgorzata Oleniacz, discussing the case of Monika Kuszyńska, is a prime example of such engaging writing. Beyond giving an account of the car accident that the former Various Manx lead vocalist had been involved in – an accident which resulted in an almost fatal spinal cord injury – Oleniacz describes the psychological and spiritual resources without which no one can recover and return to health and well-being after an incident of such severity. She underscores the significance of hope during treatment and recovery. "Hope gives strength to persevere even when anticipating the future becomes an act of delusion," she adds after Tony Halik (p. 106). According to Olenicz, a lack of hope is a "terminal disease" (p. 114) as without it no one is well equipped to deal with critical life events; especially when one lives a solitary life, one should look for a source of hope through establishing and maintaining relationships.

"About' and 'through praxis'" is the title of the second part of the book, which begins with a text titled "The role of regulatory support in coping with cancer among the Amazons" authored by Edyta Zierkiewicz. Zierkiewicz addresses the issue of self-help among female cancer survivors and shows how these women have moved from being "cancer victims" and "objects of medical treatment" to being "subjects of socio-political actions, valiant women warriors, (...) who have discovered themselves and found fulfillment in life thanks to their illness" (p. 137). The intricate and subtle links between illness, support, recovery, public trust, and counseling are delineated in a nuanced and compelling way. The multiple issues raised by Zierkiewicz can engross not only counseling students and researchers, but also readers interested in psychology and medicine, as they offer a more comprehensive understanding of the importance of social support in difficult and critical situations patients may face.

Michał Mielczarek's contribution is titled "A contemporary notion of counseling: Fundamental and not always consciously observed principles of helping, as evinced in the 'common-sense' counselor interventions." Mielczarek asks counselors to reflect on whether everyone should receive help and what should be regarded as socially just. He also notes that "the right' help and advice is crucial, and that entails examining the situation carefully" (p. 148). Interestingly, he frames counseling as a "playing field" with its own rules. The game, he repeats after Pierre Bourdieu, is based on "rarely contested beliefs about reality, i.e., the doxa."

Anna Bilon and Joanna Minta, authors of "(Career) counseling as an instrument in the politics of life-long learning," spell out the reasons why career counseling has always been perceived as instrumental by public policy officials, and provide examples of the precarious status of counseling and its social perceptions. Drawing on Gert Biesta's observations, Bilon and Minta describe the phenomenon of the "learnification of education," which designates an "excessive focus on the process

of learning as such, which leads to excluding the analysis of what people learn (the content), what the goal of learning is (...) [and] from whom people learn” (p. 161).

In “The role of intuition in professional counseling interventions,” Barbara Skałbania observes that various professionals (especially from the field of counseling) tend to rely on intuition, and vindicates it as a worthwhile exercise. At the same time, however, she warns against “overreliance on intuition, which can cause more harm than one could anticipate” (p. 175). It is hard to disagree with Skałbania, who emphasizes that the counseling profession was founded upon “two pillars: on rational and irrational thinking, the latter encompassing premonitions and predictions” (p. 176).

The third part of the book is devoted to narratives and begins with an article by Anetta Pereświet-Softan and Bożena Wojtasik titled “Dealing with challenging/crisis situations in a family: An analysis of narratives.” Due to format limitations, only four interviews with two married couples could be examined in the text. Pereświet-Softan and Wojtasik conclude surprisingly that, when faced with what they perceived as challenging situations (first in their lives), the spouses did not realize what resources they had already accumulated in their lives and, consequently, were unable either to determine strength sources for coping or understand what had shaped their self-help capabilities.

Marcin Szumigraj, Ewa Trębińska-Szumigraj and Daria Zielińska-Pękał are the authors of a text titled “Learning from experience: Three narratives.” They provide direct and personal accounts of situations related to their professional careers, to involvement in a virtual community, and to their passion – running. The reader easily believes in the candor of their narratives, because the authors not only explain the relevance of these pursuits to their lives and recount lessons learned from, but also explore emotions involved in their decisions. Their argument is aptly captured in the following insight: “[W]ho we are today and what decisions we choose to make is largely influenced by past experiences, intrinsic to which is our acquaintance with Professors Alicja Kargulowa and Józef Kargul, and achieving personal growth alongside them” (p. 225).

Eye-catching in the volume is Andrzej Ładyżyński’s text “Married to a foreigner: Obstacles to establishing and maintaining intercultural relationships.” Ładyżyński concisely describes problems experienced by intercultural married couples and their ways of overcoming stereotypes and mustering courage when confronted with racism (which appears to be on the rise in Poland). Because the number of binational relationships is increasing, the issue he raises “seems particularly pertinent and will certainly require more in-depth multidisciplinary studies. Such families may need counseling and therapeutic support” (p. 235).

Aneta Słowik wrote the final text of the volume tackling “The experience of counseling among Polish emigrants.” *Angole* [The Brits] by Ewa Winnicka is credited with being the inspiration for the article. Słowik portrays people who act as informal counselors in Great Britain, earning a living by doing various jobs, e.g.,

translator, diagnostician, croupier, reporter, analyst, broker or guide. Based on their accounts, she draws conclusions about the ways in which help is provided to their compatriots abroad. As a considerable number of Poles have emigrated for economic reasons, this type of “informal counseling, rooted in day-to-day experience of living as an economic migrant, serves as a social safety network for those who do not speak the language (sometimes the only social network they have)” (p. 267).

I believe that reading *Learning, experiencing, immersion: Engaged counseling* edited by E. Siarkiewicz and B. Wojtasik helps frame some of the issues surrounding contemporary counseling (both formal and informal) in a new way. Its authors depict areas that change rapidly in response to the shifting circumstances which affect a growing number of people. All contributors to the book sought to highlight the problems faced by help-providers and the positive role that counseling plays in the lives of people faced with difficult, even dramatic, life events. All the authors cite numerous examples to demonstrate lucidly how non-professionals, having acquired more knowledge of counseling, move from the position of advice-seekers to the position of advice-givers. The authors also thoroughly explain the role of direct counseling and mass media-mediated counseling, with the latter being sometimes the only option available to people beset with a crisis.

The book would not have been written if it had not been for the passion of the researchers who have honed their academic skills under the auspices of their mentors and guides. Professors Alicja Kargulowa and Józef Kargul can be truly proud of the team that has been forged in their research ventures – a team of engaged scholars, researchers, and educators dedicated to counseling.

Translated by Karol Maślany