



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 30
Issue 2 June

Article 13

June 2003

Review of *The Environment: Its Role in Psychosocial Functioning and Psychotherapy*. Carolyn Saari. Reviewed by Timothy Page.

Timothy Page
Louisiana State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Clinical and Medical Social Work Commons, Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Page, Timothy (2003) "Review of *The Environment: Its Role in Psychosocial Functioning and Psychotherapy*. Carolyn Saari. Reviewed by Timothy Page.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 30 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol30/iss2/13>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



book. However, this is an accessible and articulate presentation of important research that is part of a large body of scholarship with which more social workers, social scientists, policymakers and media professionals should be familiar. On a practical level, those of us in the social sciences and human services should actively seek out journalists and provide them with more accurate information on issues, convince them of the value of presenting different viewpoints, and alert them to the consequences of always using the problem frame. Altheide admits that this is easier said than done, since fear sells and the existing formats are familiar, effective, and profitable. However, it is a responsibility that we can ill afford to ignore.

Allan Brawley
Arizona State University West

Carolyn Saari, *The Environment: Its Role in Psychosocial Functioning and Psychotherapy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. \$49.50 hardcover, \$22.00 papercover.

In her new book, Carolyn Saari sets out to integrate developmental and clinical social work practice theories to address, as she sees it, shortcomings in current thinking in sufficiently accounting for the influence of the social environment on human functioning. The problem, she writes, has been that:

“Clinical social work, as a profession, has always believed in the importance of the environment and has regarded theories of the “person-in-situation” or the “person-environment configuration” as necessary in order to understand human needs . . . Yet because paradigms of Western thought separated the individual and the environment into two quite different frameworks, it has been extremely difficult to find a viable bridge between these inner and outer aspects. Thus social work theories have espoused either an intrapsychic approach or a more social approach, with the advocates of each both criticizing and competing with those of the other . . .”
(p. 2)

For Saari, it is the limited attention to environmental influences in psychoanalytic theory, specifically, that she seeks to address. Her approach to this problem is a novel one: to answer these

limitations through an integration of psychoanalytic theory with post-modernist philosophies. Saari proposes that post-modern thought, particularly social constructivism, can supply a view of the significance of social context that could in effect move psychoanalytic theory into the 21st century.

Saari organizes the nine chapters of her book into three sections, each aimed primarily toward building an integrated theory of both perspectives. In the first three chapters, she discusses the foundational views of Freudian theory, and integrates more recent ideas from developmental theory and research and post-modern concepts, such as language and meaning, and culture and identity. In this section, among other contributors, she refers to the cognitive psychologist Katherine Nelson's tri-partite theory of the development of meaning and relies on this viewpoint as a major organizing framework for the book, consistent, as she sees it, with the post-modern emphasis on meaning-making as a central human activity. In the second set of three chapters, Saari explores Michel Foucault's ideas about psychotherapy, particularly his assertion that psychoanalytic psychotherapy is an instrument of social control and oppression, as a backdrop for framing the discussion of the contemporary role of psychotherapy. In the final three chapters, the author expresses her views about a theoretical basis for psychotherapy that integrates the influence of the environment from the perspective of social constructivism. The case illustrations, found in eight of the nine chapters of the book, are particularly well-written (most have appeared in other publications of the author) and work well as illustrations of her major points.

It isn't hard to see why post-modern thought has become a major influence in our profession in recent years. Consistent with many of our core professional values, and our discomfort with the medicalized role of the expert, post-modern thought calls attention to the problems of biases in social science that favor the world views of socially dominant groups and exclude the experiences of oppressed populations. However, the use of post-modernism to address deficiencies in psychoanalytic theory strikes me alternately as curious and ironic. To begin with, because most social work practitioners are not as concerned about Freudian theory as Saari is, and operate on the basis of more

holistic models, I doubt that her view of a rift between intrapsychic and social theories is widely shared. Ironically, Freudian and social constructivist views share one important characteristic: isolation from the scientific community. While the isolation of Freudian theory is a result of obsolescence, the isolation of social constructivists from positivist scientific inquiry is self-imposed. In their view, any attempt at so-called objective observation is misguided and a violation of the subject's true experience.

I am among those who believe that post-modernist views cannot provide our profession with a strong practice theory base. Pursuing such a path will present the same sort of intellectual dead-end that befell our Freudian-inspired colleagues. Contrary to post-modern views, it is indeed possible to discover truths about the human condition that translate into viable practice interventions, as a myriad of examples of evidence-based practice can demonstrate. The contradiction between social constructivism and evidence-based practice is illustrated, but not acknowledged, in what Saari calls her 'Guidelines for the Construction of New Meaning' [in psychotherapy]. Guideline number one reads: "The absence of known universal truth requires the clinician to pay careful attention to the ethics and values of the mental health professions . . ." In contrast, guideline number four asserts, "Newly created meaning should be informed by and consonant with the best available understanding of human development and functioning" (p. 117). How can the best available understanding of human functioning be recognized as such in the face of the absence of known universal truths? It seems that we are being told that empirical inquiry into human functioning is ok as long as we don't conclude that our findings may be applicable to all people. If we were to take this apparent message seriously, we would have to abandon a considerable portion of our knowledge base.

Our response to the inadequacies of our theory base and social science should not be a blind embracing of an idea that leads to what is in effect nihilism in our practice theories and science. We social workers are dedicated to fostering understanding of human diversity in its many facets, and in doing so we should also dedicate ourselves to making our scientific systems better,

more inclusive, and more accountable, not abandoning the ever-growing scientific base of our profession.

Timothy Page

Louisiana State University

Todd Nelson (Ed). *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002. \$45.95 hardcover.

Todd Nelson's edited book, *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice Against Older Persons* is the first comprehensive approach to addressing the complexity and multidimensional nature of ageism. Although Robert Butler first coined the term in 1980, few researchers subsequently have grappled with the insidious nature of ageism in our society and among professionals. Not surprisingly, given the relative invisibility of older adults in our society, research on ageism (or the third "ism") in the behavioral and social sciences is comparatively limited, especially when compared to the other isms of racism and sexism. This edited volume makes a significant contribution to advancing knowledge regarding ageism by bringing a range of theoretical perspectives on the causes, functions and consequences of our ageist culture and society. Several themes, which underlie the chapters as whole and challenge the reader to examine their own beliefs about aging and older adults, are highlighted in this review.

Ageism occurs across the lifespan and is not limited to any particular age group or population. In fact, age is one of the earliest characteristics we notice about other people, whether young and old. From an individual's perceived age, we infer their competencies, beliefs and abilities. Accordingly, younger persons are also categorized by age (e.g., "you are not old enough to stay out that late" or "you are not responsible enough to have the car."). And some older adults may fear and avoid interactions with youth, associating them with greater risks of violence, crime, or other types of antisocial behavior. Nevertheless, the authors emphasize that to note a person's age in our social interactions is not inherently offensive. It is the consequences of such differentiating that can be harmful; ageism is most invidious when it is