

BOOK REVIEWS

SPACE, PLACE AND MENTAL HEALTH, by Sarah Curtis. Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2010.

There is great concern about the increasing mental health epidemic around the world. *Space, Place and Mental Health* is therefore a valuable and timely publication. In this book, Curtis brings together a research agenda that integrates different conceptualizations of the geographical perspectives of mental health from a wide range of fields, while emphasizing the role of space and place on mental health variations. Curtis points out how changing socio-economic conditions and physical environments in different contexts across the world are bringing mental health issues to the forefront of public health agendas. Anchored on the central thesis of Complexity Theory, Curtis demonstrates how multidisciplinary sources play a role in fashioning the "relational spaces" of mental health. She details how mental health is associated with material, social and physical aspects of our environments and with symbolic and imagined spaces. Space and place are essential embodiments of the way people conceptualize and perceive the different and complex environments that may be enabling or harmful to their mental health. Curtis indicates that "places and health have mutual effects on each other, in that states of mind and mental illness can also influence the ways that places are identified and interpreted" (p. 6).

Curtis writes with exceptional clarity, focusing on the basic issues and questions any student needs to consider if contemplating to tackle mental health research. Using extensive case studies and examples from around the world, Curtis provides an in-depth analysis of the contributing factors to the geographies of mental health. These and especially the vignettes, which run through all the chapters, will provide students and readers with context-specific examples that ground some of the key arguments Curtis addresses in this book. The reader is provided with conceptual tools necessary to understand the material and social relationships and processes that underlie the spatial patterning of mental health. The key learning objectives and summaries of each chapter along with introductory reading lists are provided at the end of each chapter to assist readers in thinking about what they have read reflexively. She puts forward brilliant and relevant policy arguments not only for those undertaking courses or interdisciplinary health researchers, but also for readers in psychology, sociology and related disciplines.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter focuses on a research theme within mental health and provides a detailed exposition of work on the theme, the

questions frequently tackled, the different and complementary perspectives, and how these themes are interrelated in complex social and physical environments. The empirical case studies provide a logical progression from one chapter to the next. The book begins with a clear introduction of the scope of the content under discussion, and an overview of a rich body of theory and research from different disciplines to emphasize the 'mind-body dualism'. Important concepts, issues, perspectives and methods relevant to studies at the interface of geography and mental health are introduced.

In chapter two, Curtis discusses how mental health is influenced by the 'therapeutic' nature of the material environment. Theories such as biophilia, attention restoration theory and topophilia and how they can inform our understandings of the geographies of mental health are explored in this chapter. The varying characteristics of the landscapes and architectures of happiness are also discussed. This chapter is an excellent overview for any student in human geography interested in the built environment and health.

Curtis examines how material hazards from the environment can negatively impact mental illness or psychosocial health in chapter three. Such health impacts are often a result of people being dispossessed from benign or therapeutic landscapes (e.g., Richmond and Ross, 2009), either through human activity or natural disasters, which may also interact with individual vulnerabilities such as genetic makeup, family resources, and social conditions to produce varying mental health outcomes. In chapter four, Curtis turns her attention to conceptualising the relationship between social capital and mental health, emphasizing that various attributes of the social environment can impact the psychological states and wellbeing of people. The challenge remains how "to measure the relevant attributes of the social environment, since there are few routine sources of information that can provide suitable indicators" (p. 101). Chapter five highlights the connections between the degradation of the material environment, social incivility and mental health. Curtis argues that the psychosocial significance of material deprivation at the community level, including poverty, 'misery' and inequality, requires more attention from policy makers. In chapter six, she provides a nuanced discussion of the role of human perceptions, spiritual and mental imaginations of spaces and how these spaces may elicit emotional responses such as fear from community members or groups. In chapter 7, the post-asylum geographies of mental health care and the associated spaces for therapy and treatment are discussed. Curtis draws on the literature of the 'geographies of care' to explain how geographical conceptualisations have been used to understand the symbolic aspects of environments, setting the context in which mental health treatment and other therapies are provided. The last chapter of the book addresses the key question of how mental health issues can be improved at the population level in recognition of the fact that population mental health has become a global priority.

The book has put forward an argument that focuses on the wider determinants of mental health made up of complex and interrelated material, social and symbolic dimensions, which comprise the relationships linking individuals to their environment. These interconnected aspects of the environment relate to individual experience in ways that may shape mental health. There is a strong case today for a specific focus on mental public health and its relation to material, social and physical environments. From a public health perspective, we now appreciate the enormous significance of mental distress and illness as causes of disability and impairment. Stress, anxiety, and other mental illnesses are linked to risks in the wider environment. Curtis has addressed and raised contemporarily relevant research questions on the geographic perspective of mental health. The book sets an agenda for a geographical perspective on mental health that considers space and place as important for mental health variations and construes ideas about risks for mental health in terms of material, social and symbolic aspects of the human experience.

The interdisciplinary approach of the book makes it useful not only to health geographers, but also provides a relevant reading on the role of place in the understanding of mental health for others working in related disciplines. With the case studies of specific research ideas and methods, chapter summaries and suggestions for introductory reading, this book is comprehensive. It also provides an interdisciplinary review of the literature, which can provide the basis to frame a discussion of issues that challenge more advanced researchers in the area of mental health. If I have any complaints about the book, it is asking for more rather than a critique. Specifically, from work by Curtis on landscapes of consumption, I was hoping to see a discussion of how landscapes of consumption (e.g., drinking spaces) may be related to mental health. Also, a discussion on the geographical perspectives of emerging epidemics and mental health would have been interesting. These suggestions, however, do not take anything away from what is already an excellent book that will give guidance to recent transformations of the field of mental health geography. Health geographers need to focus on how changes in the environment and mental health are related, and how these dynamic processes are manifested through the life course.

References

Richmond, C. A. M. and Ross, N. A. (2009) The determinants of First Nation and Inuit health: A critical population health approach. *Health and Place*, 15(2): 403–411.

Isaac N. Luginaah
The University of Western Ontario