

The Ability to Evaluate Disability

A review of



Evaluating Mental Health Disability in the Workplace: Model, Process, and Analysis

by Liza H. Gold and Daniel W. Shuman

New York, NY: Springer Science+Business Media, 2009. 322 pp. ISBN 978-1-4419-0151-4 (hardcover); ISBN 978-1-4419-0152-1 (e-book). \$79.95, hardcover



Reviewed by

[David M. Reiss](#)

Liza H. Gold and Daniel W. Shuman have written an extremely comprehensive and detailed volume addressing all aspects of the complex and often controversial field of evaluating claims of mental health disability. The work serves as a treatise, a textbook, and a manual.

Evaluating Mental Health Disability in the Workplace: Model, Process, and Analysis begins with an extensive discussion of the nature and purpose of disability evaluations. Both obvious and subtle differences between different types of disability evaluations are described, and the varying purposes for which such evaluations are requested are explored. Included is an excellent summary of the philosophical issues that underlie our understanding of mental health disability—and our understanding of the importance and meaning of work to the individual, both practically and psychologically.

The authors speak to the multifaceted issues of clinical ethics, honesty, and objectivity, describing both the optimal situation and the pitfalls and errors that can be made.

Gold and Shuman do not shy away from exploring the evaluator's conscious and unconscious reactions to the claimant, to the requesting party, to the source of compensation, and to the overall medical-legal process—the potential for complicated and multidimensional projections and countertransference reactions that can affect the evaluation process.

Issues that are often overlooked or that (in my opinion) become the object of denial on the part of the evaluator are described in detail, in a manner that is comprehensive but not polemic or dogmatic. The writing is very evenhanded in describing how persons from different schools of psychological philosophy may understand and perceive mental health disability in divergent fashions.

The authors address the implications of the philosophical perspective of the evaluator regarding the general nature and etiology of mental illnesses, with educative descriptions of the strengths and weaknesses of different points of view, while maintaining a nonjudgmental position regarding opposing philosophies. There is significant explication of the interrelatedness of Axis I and Axis II considerations, which at times integrate in a complementary manner but at times can seem paradoxically inconsistent.

Gold and Shuman confront issues that can be problematic due to misunderstanding, carelessness, or disingenuousness. The question of differentiating between nonpathological emotional discomfort due to job burnout versus psychological illness/symptomatology is discussed in a very direct manner. The authors go to great length in addressing the importance of distinguishing between *symptomatology* and *impairment*. There is a willingness to openly describe the limitations of psychological evaluators to provide definitive opinions, even when those opinions are being requested by the administrative/legal referral source.

For example, regarding the question of reasonable accommodation they write, “Mental health experts do not ordinarily have the authority or the expertise to determine whether an accommodation is reasonable or whether it creates an undue hardship for an employer” (p. 227). While one may find some of these discussions repetitive, considering the frequency with which (in my experience) these very significant questions are mishandled, I must empathize with the intent of the authors, even if some streamlining of the text may have been possible.

While the book does not hesitate to make direct statements regarding proper and improper procedures, all of the proposals presented are not only explained logically and effectively but also accompanied by voluminous citations of other literature and legal rulings. The appendix includes 22 pages (in small font) listing individual references and legal citations. The citations are so voluminous and all-encompassing that I am hard pressed to find a reference I can cite for the purpose of this review that has not already been included by the authors.

In fact, the most significant fault I find with this book is the formatting by which the many citations are embedded within the text rather than footnoted. I found the reading

“flow” of many sentences and paragraphs to be distracted by parenthetical inclusion of the names and dates of the literature citations. The book would be more user-friendly if citations were indicated by superscripts.

Exploration of philosophical concerns is accompanied by discussion of clinical issues. There is a detailed discussion of how descriptions of symptomatology and diagnostic considerations need to be integrated with the nature and purpose of various types of disability evaluations—for example, straightforward evaluations of disability and impairment, Workers’ Compensation and similar evaluations in which causation of disability must be considered as well as the extent and duration of impairment, and Fitness for Duty evaluations (in which the patient may be intent on continuing to work without disruption rather than seeking disability status). The influence of those practical factors upon the clinical presentation and in-office behaviors of the patient; upon the psychological and practical well-being of the patient; and upon the position, mind-set, and subtle biases of the evaluator are all addressed in an extremely comprehensive fashion.

Gold and Shuman provide very practical advice regarding the performance of a disability interview and evaluation. I note specifically the frank discussion of the role of administering psychological testing. The authors describe in straightforward terms why symptom inventories actually serve little if any useful purpose in the context of a full clinical evaluation—despite the fact that (at least in my experience) these tests are almost universally used (and invoiced) by evaluators. For example, it is described that

self-administered tests and inventories, such as the Beck Depression Inventory, may be of value in research and treatment settings, but they are of limited usefulness in a forensic mental health or disability evaluation. . . . These self-report lists of symptoms are not reliable indicators or evidence that the individual’s complaints and perceptions are valid . . . [and] do little more than to confirm high complaint levels. (p. 142)

Evaluating Mental Health Disability in the Workplace is a tour-de-force. This is not a book that can be used as a guide for producing a quick and simplistic disability evaluation report. This is a work that deserves careful and prolonged consideration.

The neophyte evaluator will need to take time to develop an adequate understanding of the complexity of the issues discussed. It may require both clinical experience and a familiarity with the vagaries of medical–legal systems to fully comprehend the importance and significance of the authors’ work.

For a practitioner new to this field, this is a text to be read—and then reread, as well as referred to for advice regarding specific questions and issues. The discussion is in such depth that the experienced evaluator is going to be both reassured and challenged and is going to find issues to ponder and reflect upon, which should aid in improving the quality of disability evaluations conducted.

After almost two decades of performing disability evaluations—and having read thousands of reports offered by other professionals—I still found this book to be interesting and useful, and at the same time sobering: At least in my experience working within the California Workers Compensation system, I would estimate that a good 70 percent of the evaluation reports I have read in significant ways would not live up to the standards of excellence that are proposed and described by the work of Gold and Shuman.
