Book review

Formulation in Psychology and Psychotherapy: Making sense of people’s problems (2nd Edition)

Edited by Lucy Johnstone & Rudi Dallos

Reviewed by Huw Green

FORMULATION is a ‘core competency’ for clinical psychologists in the UK, and correspondingly, Johnstone and Dallos’ text, now in its second edition, has become a cornerstone of British clinical psychologist’s thinking and training.

This latest version adds chapters on ‘personal construct formulation’, and formulating in teams, and in health-care settings. These latter two will be particularly invaluable for the real-life application of psychology. What’s the use of rethinking health and mental health problems if it is only done by one professional among many? These chapters are also bracingly practical, dealing with many of the everyday essentials of helping a whole team to reach a working understanding of service users (and openly acknowledging this may not always be possible).

A final chapter deals with the controversies related to psychological formulation. Johnstone here addresses the question of whether formulation is ‘evidence based’, concluding frankly that it is not. Though she is quite right to raise the question of empirical validation (a problem which surprisingly few researchers have taken on, maybe because of the conceptual difficulty it presents), there may be other ways to skin the validity cat. Psychological formulation is (as Johnstone is careful to point out) a process for drawing inferences about a person’s psychology. Cannot such inferences be in themselves more or less valid, depending on the manner in which they are drawn and the premises from which they begin?

Johnstone approvingly cites Gillian Butler’s statement that a formulation is a set of ‘hypotheses to be tested’, but this notion needs to be further built in to the way we make our formulations. If I could change this book in one significant way, it would be by integrating more detail on the use of ‘risky prediction and refutation’ as a form of hypothesis building in formulation, consistent with the ‘local clinical scientist’ model (Stricker & Trierweiler, 1995).

Another key issue in the text is the distinction between ‘usefulness’ and ‘truth’. Johnstone suggests formulation should concern itself with the former, whereas diagnosis aspires to the latter. I think formulation can be more ambitious. Presumably there is a fact of the matter about any given individual’s
problems, which the clinician can more or less accurately capture in words. Is there some benefit to be gleaned from constructing stories that ignore veracity, or is it more likely (as this reviewer suspects) that ‘truth’ tends to bring ‘usefulness’ along with it, such that the more we know about a particular individual (and they about themselves), the more able we are to help them?

This is an immensely useful book; practical, creative and still unique in its particular coverage of psychological models. Perhaps only Tracy Eells’ *Handbook of Psychotherapy Case Formulation* (2010) covers more territory in a single volume, but that big book lacks Johnstone and Dallos’ volume’s specificity for a UK health service context.

**References**


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**Clinical Perfectionism**

**Roz Shafran** *Professor of Translational Psychology at University College London and founder of the Charlie Waller Institute of Evidence-Based Psychological Treatment*

**BPS London Office, 30 Tabernacle Street, London EC2A 4UE**

**Thursday 27 November 2014, 10.00am–4.30pm (registration from 9.30)**

‘Clinical perfectionism’ is a highly specific construct which can often pose problems in routine therapeutic practice. The core psychopathology of clinical perfectionism is an over evaluation of achievement and striving that causes significant adverse consequences. It is implicated in the maintenance of psychopathology, in particular eating disorders, anxiety disorders and depression.

Professor Roz Shafran will provide a cognitive-behavioural analysis of clinical perfectionism and the factors that contribute to its maintenance. Relevant research literature and current evidence-base for interventions will be provided. By the end of the day, participants will learn how to assess clinical perfectionism and determine when it may warrant a specific intervention. They will also be familiar with relevant cognitive-behavioural strategies. The workshop will be interactive and include both experiential and didactic teaching and videos. Participants will have a chance to discuss their own cases.

**This is a free event for DCP members only. Places are limited, so please book early.**

*This event is being financially supported by the DCP London Branch, which has invested in it for the benefit of its members.*

To register go to: https://response.questback.com/britishpsychologicalsociety/qvbq7huvz

All queries, please e-mail MemberNetworkServices@bps.org.uk with ‘Clinical Perfectionism 2014’ in the subject line.