Book Review

A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis

By Lucy Johnstone

PCCS Books

Reviewed by David Pilgrim

Why would anyone in clinical psychology use a psychiatric diagnosis about a client? The answer to this depends on motives and beliefs. Some of us know that the application of medical labels to variations in human conduct and experience is neither morally nor scientifically defensible. So if we use diagnosis selectively and episodically in that knowledge, it might be for understandable and excusable pragmatic purposes. However, some of us, either unreflectively or very deliberately, work against the flow of analogue or ‘more or less’ reasoning of psychology and seem to enjoy playing doctor. We simply diagnose and enter a digital binary world of ‘them and us’.

The track record of clinical psychology certainly reflects that collective ambivalence in both research and report writing. For example, we find books on cognitive behavioural therapy for ‘depression’, ‘schizophrenia’, ‘anxiety disorders’ and the like, which show a certain shameless clinginess to the coat tails of diagnostic psychiatry. At this point we see the perils of positivism, as its medical and psychological variants marry up seamlessly.

Thus, some basic arguments about the shortcomings of psychiatric diagnosis are worth putting to all psychologists, not just a general lay audience. Lucy Johnstone is the perfect ‘go to’ expert for that task. Not only has she been at the forefront within the British Psychological Society of working groups examining diagnosis and classification, she has written more elaborately elsewhere about them.

This book, though intentionally short, covers all the main points that any of us need to know about psychiatric diagnosis and its shortcomings. At the outset Johnstone promises to help readers who have been the recipient of a psychiatric diagnosis to answer key main questions:

(i) What are the problems with psychiatric diagnosis?
(ii) How has that diagnosis been helpful or unhelpful to me?
(iii) Do I want to accept my diagnosis?
(iv) If I do not then how else can I understand my difficulties?
(v) If I don’t want to accept my diagnosis then where else can I find support with that decision?

By putting these user-focused questions at the centre of the book Johnstone has provided us with a clear professional rationale for dropping diagnoses. She offers service users choice in the matter. For both audiences the offers are made in a clear and engaging style. An excellent read.

David Pilgrim