Psychotherapy


Reviewer rating: Good

Review by Paul Ian Steinberg, MD, FRCPC Edmonton, Alberta

This book reviews progress in psychoanalytic developmental psychology from the point of view of how developments in psychoanalytic theory can be used to form listening perspectives appropriate to an individual patient’s level of development. The author presents a reasonably precise and accurate review of the development of psychoanalytic personality theory. Unfortunately, however, this otherwise useful and easily read book is marred by more editorial errors than I have ever seen in any text, professional or not. The first half of the text, especially, is strewn with grammatical and typographical errors, as well as mistakes in spelling and punctuation. I wish that the author and editor had taken more care with this 20th-anniversary edition.

The first 2 chapters introduce the notion of listening perspectives as clinical frames of reference. They describe 4 phases of human experience corresponding to psychotic, borderline, narcissistic, and neurotic levels of personality organization, in terms of experiences of the self and the other. Four sections follow, each with between 1 and 3 chapters on each listening perspective. These perspectives include the constant self and the constant object (neurotic level); the self-object (narcissistic level); and the part-self and part-object, that is, inconstancy (psychotic level). The author advocates adopting one of these 4 listening perspectives according to the current needs of the patient and acknowledges that patients who are at one level may function at times at a different level. This appears generally to be good advice, but it may at times be difficult to follow because clinicians are not equally comfortable with, or well informed about, all theories and approaches. For example, many clinicians who do not subscribe to Kohutian self-psychology may not feel comfortable applying it to patients considered to be functioning at the level of the self-object. This impression of discomfort is supported by the author’s including a contribution by another author in this section. Part of my difficulty with this book stems from the fact that the author describes not only listening perspectives but also theoretical approaches, which in the case of self-psychology, appear incompatible with other theories. It does not appear possible to jump from one theory to another, as the author seems to suggest, without having a split in one’s mind. It seemed to me that the chapter on the self-object listening perspective included an interpretation of a Hans Christian Anderson tale that was somewhat forced along self-psychology lines.

Conversely, the chapter on borderline personality organization included an excellent and clear application of Margaret Mahler’s work, although some of the vignettes raised questions regarding countertransference difficulties and boundary crossings on the part of the therapist. These were not commented on, which concerned me.

In contrast to all the other summaries, which were excellent, I could not comprehend the summary of Lacan’s work: it appeared too condensed to be understandable. As well, a chapter on the developmental points of view applied to clinical interactions included a description of play therapy for a child that was lengthy, tedious, and speculative; it did not serve the author’s goals well. Other vignettes in this chapter were more effective. Overall, it described several treatments from a developmental point of view and relied heavily on Mahler’s work.

Apart from these comments, I thought that there was much of value in this book. The author is generally clear and writes well (excepting the above-mentioned errors). He appears to be an expert on the subject. Its price seemed somewhat high for a paperbound edition.

Sexual Disorders


Reviewer rating: Excellent

Review by Paul Fedoroff, MD Ottawa, Ontario

In the interest of full disclosure, I first acknowledge that Dr Fagan was one of my esteemed teachers when I had the privilege and honour of working as a psychiatry resident and then fellow at Johns Hopkins. During those years, I had frequent contact with Dr Fagan and fondly recall the hours of spirited discussions we had about the ideas appearing in this book.

Like many landmark books, Sexual Disorders is at first glance deceptive. It is short and has a modest reference section. Its thesis is that people with sexual disorders require treatment from multiple perspectives—nothing too earth-shaking here.

Dr Fagan proceeds to describe 4 specific perspectives, with beautiful rigour. The disease perspective rests on the premise that patients with sexual disorders have a known or presumed pathophysiological abnormality. The
dimensional perspective rests on the premise that troubled individuals all possess strengths and vulnerabilities that can be analyzed on continuous, as opposed to categorical, scales. The behavioural perspective rests on the premise that dysfunctional acts arise from preceding experience. The life-story perspective rests on the observation that people assign meaning to what they experience. Anyone familiar with biopsychosocial or sociopsychobiological formulations should be comfortable so far.

Next, Dr Fagan argues that specialists who assess or treat troubled individuals have not only the option but the obligation to employ all 4 perspectives both at the beginning and relentlessly throughout their work. This is not easy, and he recommends that specialists become expert in at least 2 of the 4 paradigms and consult, consult, consult. Frankly, to read a book by a world authority in such an exclusive area as sexual disorders, one that pays more than lip service to being multidisciplinary, is alone worth the price of the book.

Sexual Disorders goes further, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each perspective, the difference between description and understanding(social constructionism and essentialism), and ways in which multiple perspectives can be simultaneously brought to bear on therapeutic impasses. The few graphics in the book are delightful in their simple summarization of the complex perspectives they define.

My only criticism of the book is to wish there were more. The Johns Hopkins Sexual Behaviors Consultation Clinic has a history that exemplifies the very paradigm shift the book espouses. Prior to 1979, the Clinic was world-famous for its work in sex reassignment surgery. However, the index of Sexual Disorders does not have a single reference to gender identity disorders (GIDs), to transsexualism, or to the highly influential investigators preceding and following the decision to abandon sex reassignment surgery at Johns Hopkins. This book makes only a passing reference to GIDs during a discussion of “over-valued ideas.”

I am also sorry the Forward by Professor Paul McHugh, former chair of the department, is so brief. His uncharacteristic pessimism about the area of psychiatry dealing with sexual disorders, in which, “despite past interest and effort, little fundamental service to patients has emerged,” invites dispute. But perhaps this highlights the greatest strength of Sexual Disorders. It encourages reevaluation of the way all clinicians work. It is not a manual for treating specific sexual problems, and it is not a comprehensive review of the literature. There are brief case reports but not much data: it is not a tome. Instead, it is a rallying cry for specialists from all disciplines to reexamine their ideas and practices with the aid of a model of Kuhnian proportions. This book encourages debate and argument. I predict Sexual Disorders will become a classic.

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Books Received

The following books have been received; the courtesy of the sender is acknowledged by this listing. Books of particular interest to readers of the Journal will be reviewed by selected individuals. Not all books are available for review.


**Deuil normal deuil pathologique : Clinique et psychopathologie.** Marc-Louis Bourgeois. Rueil-Malmaison: doin éditeurs; 2003. 149 p. 61.95 SCAN.


