Book Reviews

A Gift of Stories

gathered by Julie Leibrich

Dunedin: University of Otago Press in association with the Mental Health Commission 1999.

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A Gift of Stories offers a reader twenty-one personal stories about experiencing and living with serious mental illness. Those telling the stories are quite diverse and, while the accounts include some horror stories about mental health services and professionals, the tellers do not dwell on these. Rather the stories provide access to, the means each person presents as central to their discovery of and growth into a way of living with their mental illness. These are not *cases* or *case studies*, in which others report on what happened and what was done to the sufferer; each individual tells their own story in their own way. This means that there is no attempt to identify commonalties in the means by which the people come to terms with and make their life with, a serious mental illness. However, I did identify one such thread in the stories, the importance placed on a particular relationship. Some of these relationships were with a mental health professional but the key element in the relationship, which individuals name in different ways, was the knowledge that they were taken seriously, were addressed and heard as a competent adult.

While working on this review I re-read an article by Steven Sabat and others (1999) in which they contrast *interacting* with a person and *managing* a patient. They argued that professional relations, as demonstrated in the Alzheimer's services on which they report, give priority to management of the condition implicitly defining the person in terms of that (neuropathological) condition. Sabat and his co-writers emphasise the importance of enabling the sufferer to interact with others who hear their truth and treat it with respect. That strongly theorised position is entirely compatible with Julie Leibrich's argument that stories are how people attempt to make sense of their world – expressing the truth as that storyteller sees it.

> But wisdom comes through understanding – standing *under* knowledge and allowing the insight we gain from our own experience to illuminate knowledge. (Leibrich, 1999;183)

What Sabat et al make explicit is that such insight may require a hearer, a person who respects and seeks to engage seriously with, the story teller's truth. Many of these stories testify to the truth that such interactions enable the discoveries on which successful recovering or coping depends. Proponents of narrative therapy will have no difficulty with these ideas. They have rediscovered that stories make ideas real, filling them with meaning, while concurrently showing how the storyteller makes sense of their world (Rosen, 1996). They have also confirmed that effective therapy requires a listener who is committed to a respectful response to the story.

I don't come to this book with experience of clinical practice but from extensive research on media depictions of mental illness. In the various media, mass and professional, it is very rare for those who have a mental illness to be heard. It is even rarer for them to be accorded the space to tell of their experience in the ways that make sense to them – to tell their story. A predictable consequence of this selectivity or censorship is that most people's understanding of mental illnesses comes from what experts and observers say about those who suffer from these conditions (Kalafetalis & Dowden, 1997). While the experts and observers may accurately report what they saw or knew, they do not, indeed cannot, convey what it is like to be inside the experience of a mental illness. Further, because mass media need to attract audiences and readers whom they can sell to advertisers, they emphasise the newsworthy actions and events, those involving danger, unpredictability, conflict and human fragility – creating a very distorted picture of what mental illness is and how sufferers live with their condition. *A Gift of Stories* provides an antidote to that distortion because it shares with the reader triumphs and discoveries that underpin each person's ability to live with a seriously disabling condition.

I would like to see a copy of this book on each psychologist's bedside table. As I have said this is not a collection of cases, it is not an analysis of successful therapies, nor is it an analysis of the necessary components of successful therapies. Much more valuably, it provides an opportunity to step out of the professional role of 'helper' and meet some people who needed help, to hear what they understand helped them and how they build on those discoveries in their daily lives. It is an opportunity to make new friends and to learn from them. They have some pretty pungent things to say about some practitioners, and psychologists, individually and collectively, should take time to reflect on such criticism.

Two things that I keep coming back to in thinking about these stories are language and spirituality. The storytellers use a wide range of terms and concepts in making sense of their experience. I suspect that some of these will irritate psychologists, I know some irritate me, but because we can hear, and re-hear the story we have time to appreciate why that term, rather than another we might favour, is used. And in many of the stories those reasons centre on the way the person positions themselves spiritually. As a discipline psychology eschews consideration of the spiritual, it is in the too hard basket epistemologically. Yet, as a discipline, we have recently been challenged to consider how we address 'wounds of the soul' caused in the colonisation of this country (Turia, 2001). Accepting *A Gift of Stories* may help us and our profession respond respectfully to these challenges.

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Handbook of Applied Cognition

Edited by Francis T. Durso

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One of the advantages of teaching a class dedicated to the applications, real and potential, of cognitive psychology is that there is never a lack of new material. The newspaper, be it ever so humble, nonetheless offers an observant student daily reminders that what people perceive, believe, think, remember, forget, reason, figure out, decide, create, and physically do, are what makes the world go around. It is not difficult to persuade students that interesting, deeper questions lie behind these stories. What really caused that underground train disaster in London, or the plane crash on Mt Erebus? What did the jurors in the Marlborough Sounds murder trial think, or remember, or forget, or infer that lead them to return a guilty verdict against Scott Watson? Why do Murray Webb's caricatures of public figures look, paradoxically, more truthful than their photographs?

If cognitive psychology has not provided universally accepted answers to such questions, it most certainly has, 45 years after its birth, a far firmer grip on the precise nature of the questions, and what is more, it comprises a growing cadre of researchers working on answering them and the myriad others that real life throws up.

This volume, edited by Francis Durso (Professor of psychology and Director of the Human-Technology Interaction Center at the University of Oklahoma, USA) with editorial assistance from a first rate group of cognitive scientists, is the first major volume dedicated to a wide-angle view of the applications and the applicabilities of cognitive psychology. As a teaching resource, it is excellent. Although it is expensive in hardcover, a paperback edition would make a formidable textbook for advanced undergraduates or graduate students. It represents, moreover, one of the best sourcebooks for researchers in cognitive science. This book's coverage is far broader than other recent contributions to the literature, such as Hutchins's excellent *Cognition in the Wild* (1995) or Norman's delightfully idiosyncratic books, beginning with *The Psychology of Everyday Things* (1988) through *The Invisible Computer* (1998). It is far more contemporary than Smyth et al.'s *Cognition in Action* (1994) which was always theoretically biased but has now become dated as well.

The book is divided into five major sections, each of which contains a set of chapters written by well-known, active researchers. A series of seven overviews comprises

the first section. These are generally excellent reviews of the obviously important subareas of the discipline, including attention and memory, judgment and decision-making. Each offers a deep rather than cosmetic emphasis on applications. An unusual but welcome addition is a chapter on social cognition and attitudes (by Fabrigar, Smith and Brannon). The subsequent four sections, each containing at least four individual chapters, deal with applications in business and industry, computers and technology, information and instruction, and health and law.

The book's overall orientation is reflective of the zeitgeist in applied cognition. Its emphasis is on the coupling of human cognitive structures and what Gillan and Schvaneveldt, in their opening overview, refer to as "cognitive artefacts" or "cognition-aiding tools". Typically, this has implicated a focus on the human use(s) of machines, including computers, and has accounted for applied cognitive psychology often being identified (mistakenly) with ergonomics and human factors. However, the book also contains a lot material that reveals the influence of cognition in other domains, such as health psychology (in a chapter by Patel et al. on the cognitive bases of medical diagnoses, problem-solving and expertise, one by P. Wright on public healthcare advice, and one by Panzarella et al. on cognitivist approaches to mental illness). Cognitive educational psychology (Dennis and Sternberg) and cognition in graph design and comprehension (Lewandowsky and Behrens) are also given extensive treatments.

Given that the volume comprises almost 900 pages (including comprehensive indices), it may be perverse to suggest that there remain a large set of topics that might have been covered but were not. Such is the omnipresence of cognition that I imagine that a companion second volume may well have been a temptation to the editors. For me, the domains most conspicuous by their absence are applied perception and applied psycholinguistics. It might be argued that perception is not cognition, but this is not the received view in the cognitive science community, nor even of this book's contributors. Different aspects of perception make appearances in various sections and chapters, so it is plainly not the case that perception, or perceptual processing, or perceptual learning, are irrelevant. However, considering the book as a whole, rather than at the level of individual chapters, the emphasis on perceptual issues tends to be fragmented and oblique rather than sustained and direct. For example, perceptual processing is a necessary if not sufficient element of both eyewitness memory and its evaluation by others, such as jurors, as the chapters by D. Wright and Davies, on eyewitness testimony, and by Devenport, Studebaker and Penrod, on jury decision-making, make clear. The chapters by Wickens (on aviation), by Pirolli (on human-computer interaction), by Durso and Gronlund (on situated cognition), and by Herrmann and his colleagues (on "devices that remind") reveal perception's permanent centrality to applied cognitivist research.

Nonetheless, a more sustained treatment of perceptual applications might have emerged. For example, one of the issues that exercises those communities with little or no access to certain types of perceptual information is accessibility. The blind, in my experience, have been particularly insistent that computer operating systems, web pages, ATMs, library and educational resources be accessible to them. Without such access, computers and the internet are not cognition-aiding tools at all, but sources of enormous frustration, resentment, and even lawsuits. This is a single example of the effectiveness of cognitive artefacts being gauged by the designer's understanding of perceptual processing and cognitive representational systems.

There are other examples too, that support another characteristic of the applied cognition domain: that not all applied cognitive scientists are cognitive psychologists, neither by inclination nor by training. Linguists, computer scientists, teachers, economists and artists also undertake applied cognitive science research. So too do designers, architects, and engineers. As is revealed in numerous chapters in the book, needs-based understanding of cognition is one of applied cognition's driving forces. If a new system – off the top of my head, take the introduction of global positioning systems in cars as an example— is to be useful and desirable, its designers need to know a considerable amount how people's visual and spatial cognition works, what information they are likely to need and when, how it should be presented so as to maximise its utility and minimise misinterpretations, and so forth. It is doubtful that the latest textbook or journal on cognitive science could provide those answers. Hence, the practitioner is required to do his or her own research. And if that research is poor or inadequate, design flaws are inevitable.

It is also worth noting that many of the practitioners of applied cognitive psychology are not even applied cognitive psychologists. Filmmakers and cartoonists, for example, have come to define the bounds of perceptual comprehension, via equal parts trial, error and creativity more than by formal experimentation. Indeed, they have established as facts what it is now up to cognitive psychologists to explain. In film, for example, the viewer not only accepts a series of static photographs as dynamic events but finds no hurdle to comprehension in the cinematographer's various types of camera motions or the editor's cuts which can occur every few seconds, both of which abruptly hurtle a viewer around in the depicted world. Indeed, certain types of editing, which seem a priori more natural and life-like, tend to lead to unnatural interpretations by the movie viewer. Filmmakers know these things and treat them as more or less formal rules to be followed (depending on the intended effect). McCloud (1994) has also published a wonderful example of the state of comics artists' (accurate) folk wisdom as to visual cognition and comprehension. Why and how these techniques work ought to provoke curiosity among cognitive scientists.

While few people need to be persuaded of the practical importance of perception to real life (try driving deaf), many theoretically oriented cognitive scientists need to be reminded that what memory, or attention, or language, or reasoning has evolved to be for, is serving real world challenges (see, e.g., Glenberg, 1997). But, of course, it is

no straightforward matter to effectively study cognition "in the uncontrolled world of interesting people" (in editor Durso's phrase). The excellence of the research reported in this volume ought to gain for applied cognitive psychologists a respect for their capacity to combine scientific rigour and real-world relevance.

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