

## Book review

Persaud, R. (2003) *From the Edge of the Couch: Bizarre psychiatric cases and what they teach us about ourselves*. London: Bantam Press. 492pp, ISBN 0-593-04696-X, £12.99 (pbk)

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### *Reference as:*

Bell, V. (2004) Book review: *From the Edge of the Couch: Bizarre psychiatric cases and what they teach us about ourselves* by R. Persaud. *Cognitive Neuropsychiatry*, 9, 315-318.

Despite its best efforts to look otherwise, 'From the Edge of the Couch' is a competent overview of current thinking on the science, medicine and philosophy of delusions. This is all the more surprising as from the moment I bought a copy to the moment I started reading it, I found little to recommend it. The presentation is such that it looks like a self-help best seller, with Dr Persaud's photo cutting quite a dash over the larger part of the front cover and the praise on the back so gushing as to make me wonder if there was some sort of motivational video to accompany the book's publication.

This is perhaps where part of the surprise lies, as ostensibly Persaud is writing about cognitive neuropsychiatry as he aims to communicate how delusions "represent a vital key to understanding how the normal brain and mind work" (p2). Although obviously packaged for the High Street, Persaud manages to tackle this potentially complex subject matter not only lucidly enough to pique the interest of a non-specialist, but also competently enough that even the most embedded of professionals should learn much of interest. The book also benefits from being extensively referenced so case studies and other supporting information can be followed up by academic study.

Indeed, it is case studies which are the bedrock upon which the book rests, Persaud himself claiming to prefer them to reductionist studies that obscure the meaning of individual lives and experience. That is not to say that such studies have no place in this book. The typical format is an individual history (many of which are well known studies you may recognise from the scientific literature) followed by a summary of scientific findings on the nature of the disorder such as prevalence or associated features, all glued together by a fairly robust and well structured narrative.

It is perhaps this robust approach that pushes Persaud a little into overconfidence at times. On one occasion the invocation of Jaspers' 'unintelligibility theorem' of delusions shortly after a paragraph describing 'determinant factors' and 'clear connections' involved in a case of delusional formation seems to be an example of Persaud having his cake and eating it. On another occasion the nasogenital reflex theory (that proposes a functional link between nasal and genital erectile tissue) is offhandedly discarded despite evidence from 'Viagra nosebleed' and 'honeymoon rhinitis' studies that suggest otherwise (Hicklin et al, 2002; Monteseirin et al, 2001).

However, this last example (used to illustrate the historical link between sexual jealousy and nasal mutilation) serves at least to portray something of the breadth of scholarship in this book. If you wanted to know about how eating dirt, genital self mutilation, lycanthropy, compulsive key

handling, transsexualism (or indeed any number of other colours on the spectrum of human experience) that can be related to delusional beliefs, Persaud has probably unearthed some relevant historical reference or contemporary source of research. If nothing else this book will be a mine of information for anyone wishing to present talks on belief or delusions with an array of examples available that would make even the most weary of audiences prick up their ears.

Freudophobes may find more to dislike than other readers as psychodynamic explanations are often given, although it must be said as an accompaniment rather than a substitute to more empirical theories. While most readers of this review are likely to be able to separate out explanation from conjecture in these passages, I was left a little concerned that the non-specialist reader might take many of these conjectures to be scientific orthodoxy when most researchers in the field give them little credence.

Although the book is over 400 pages long, it is not technically heavy. Most of the major theories of delusion formation, whilst usually covered, are done so in summary rather than in any great depth, although it must be said often more comprehensively than some academic books which seek to chart the same territory (see Ellis' (2003) review of Enoch et al's 'Uncommon Psychiatric Syndromes'). There were however a few theories notable by their absence. A mention of Stone and Young's (1997) influential paper which proposes a normal model of belief formation as well as proposing a pathological mechanism for delusions would seem to be a must for any modern review. Similarly any recent discussion of Cotard's delusion should hardly exclude Gerrans' (2000) careful reanalysis. Most surprisingly for a book on delusions (especially one written by a psychiatrist), is a complete lack of any sort of neurobiological explanation. Dopamine doesn't even warrant an index entry ! Perhaps the complexity of this explanation and the current accusations of drug-company theory marketing (Healey and Thase, 2003) might have meant a full explanation would have seriously detracted from the book's pace. Maybe this is even a sign that the vastly oversimplified 'dopamine hypothesis' of psychosis is finally starting to wane as a credible explanation for delusional phenomena.

In contrast, some areas were refreshingly up to date. In particular I was impressed by the discussion of the Koro phenomenon that avoided the shaky medical orthodoxy of the 'culture bound syndrome' approach and I was pleased to see the liberal references to Robert Bartholomew's pioneering work (Bartholomew, 2001) on the sociology of mass psychogenic illness. The final chapter is also a pleasant surprise as Persaud tackles many of the deeper issues related to delusional beliefs, including diagnostic issues, evolutionary explanations and implications for philosophical theories of belief fixation (from the likes of Popper and Kuhn) and philosophy of mind (including Ryle and surprisingly, Nietzsche). However, I couldn't help but smile to myself when, in a book largely about belief content, Persaud plumps for a firmly Jaspersian view of delusions, arguing for diagnosis on the basis of form rather than content. From my experience this is something which psychiatrists seem to preach more than they practise.

In summary, 'From the Edge of the Couch' is certainly a compelling read, although people seeking technical overviews giving a full academic account of current psychological and neuroscientific work in this area might need to go elsewhere. Nevertheless, Persaud never pretends to be presenting an academic text and despite this manages to produce book full of interesting information for the scientist and clinician alike. Readers wanting to focus purely on delusions might find some of the asides a little distracting, although the chapters are structured in such a way that they work equally well when read alone, or within the context of the wider narrative. The book even manages to include many of the developments from cognitive neuropsychiatry (although often in summary form) and certainly keeps to the emerging spirit of eclecticism. The most notable aspect is probably

the breadth of the phenomenology presented and this book will be useful as an enjoyable reference for anyone wishing to have a wide range of case studies at their fingertips. And at the very least, this is probably the only book on cognitive neuropsychiatry you are ever likely to buy at the train station.

## References

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