

Clinical Pragmatics

Many children and adults experience significant breakdown in the use of language. The resulting pragmatic disorders present a considerable barrier to effective communication. This book is the first critical examination of the current state of our knowledge of pragmatic disorders and provides a comprehensive overview of the main concepts and theories in pragmatics. It examines the full range of pragmatic disorders that occur in children and adults and discusses how they are assessed and treated by clinicians. Louise Cummings attempts to integrate the fields of pragmatics, language pathology and cognitive science by examining the ways in which pragmatics can make a useful contribution to debates about cognitive theories of autism. The reader is encouraged to think in a critical fashion about how clinicians, experimentalists and theorists deal with pragmatic issues.

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In fond memory of my grandparents
Nan & Bob Cummings
Ruby & James Stewart

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Preface

When different disciplines converge on the study of a set of phenomena, one of several things can happen. In one scenario, these disciplines can begin to embrace the concepts, theories and methodologies of those fields of enquiry that are concerned to explain the same phenomena. The result is a genuinely interdisciplinary enquiry which leads to theoretical and other gains that were not realised within any single discipline. In another scenario, the same disciplines can acknowledge shared explanatory interests and can even engage with the concepts and frameworks of neighbouring areas of enquiry. However, to all intents and purposes, there is only the appearance of interdisciplinary enquiry and research proceeds largely along disciplinary lines. In yet another scenario, individual disciplines operate alongside each other with little interest in how other fields of enquiry are attempting to explain essentially the same phenomena. For much of the thirty-year history of clinical pragmatics, the disciplines that have come together to give rise to this field of study (largely pragmatics and language pathology) have displayed the characteristics of the second and third scenarios outlined above. The result has been considerable disarray, with clinical studies undertaken more often than not because they can be done, not because they should be done. No one has gained from this situation, least of all our child and adult clients with pragmatic disorders.

This book addresses what is currently known about a range of pragmatic disorders in children and adults. Pragmatic disorders are now a significant area of clinical language study. Yet, for all their interest to clinical researchers and practitioners, there has been much in the short history of clinical pragmatics that has been problematic. While clinical studies have proceeded apace, they have often done so in a theoretical vacuum. The result has been a large, sprawling body of findings that bear little relation to each other and are not even faithful to the pragmatic concepts that they purport to explain. There have been significant clinical implications of the type of enquiry that has sought to rush ahead with repeated (and often repetitive) studies in the absence of a rationally motivated basis. At best, these studies provide an uncertain foundation upon which to devise reliable pragmatic assessments and plan effective pragmatic interventions. We must acknowledge that one inevitable consequence of this

adverse impact on assessment and intervention is that pragmatically disordered clients have for too long not been receiving the type of high-quality clinical services that we have now come to expect for clients with other language disorders (e.g. specific language impairment, aphasia, phonological disorder).

As well as surveying our current state of knowledge of developmental and acquired pragmatic disorders, this book also assumes a deeply critical purpose. Few contributions to clinical pragmatics have even attempted a rational appraisal of the phenomena that investigators have simply assumed to be pragmatic. A research programme that purports to study certain pragmatic notions, but then misrepresents those notions, is neither advancing its own theoretical ends nor revealing anything of significance about the pragmatic competence of a particular clinical population. A similar rational appraisal is necessary of theoretical developments in areas such as developmental psychopathology and cognitive science, areas which should be actively embraced by researchers who are seeking a theoretical explanation of pragmatic disorders. Interdisciplinary exchanges between these disciplines and clinical pragmatics should be facilitated wherever possible, but they must also be handled with great care. For at the same time as they have the potential to throw new light on certain problems, their mismanagement can subvert the very explanatory gains that they were intended to achieve. A further purpose of this book is thus to examine the nature of these interdisciplinary exchanges, many of which have gone unnoticed by clinical pragmatists, and to suggest ways in which these exchanges may contribute to our understanding of pragmatic disorders.

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