

Societal case formulation

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This is in the form of a teaching example but should also be helpful in working in psychological consultations as a corrective to the individualistic assumptions of orthodox 'clinical case formulation'. The approach is based directly on the framework in Peter Leonard's 1984 book, *Personality and Ideology: Towards a Materialist Understanding of the Individual* London: Macmillan.

This version departs from (the elegant simplicity of) Leonard's formulation, adding in some additional categories. Less elegant in that categories like community could be theoretically subsumed under the others, but it does make for a more comprehensive exploration on how a person has got to be the way they are.



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Choose a person with whom you have recently been working. Try to answer the following questions. For each section make a note of any difficulties you had in providing the information requested.

1. The individual in the economy.

- What paid work does the person do? How has this changed over the life span?

- What unpaid work does the person do? How has this changed over the life span?

- How well off / poor is the person materially? How has this changed over the life span?

- What level of debt does this person have? How does their understanding of debt link to the past and frame how they think of themselves now?

- How pressured is the person in terms of their time - to what extent do they have time of their own? How has this changed over the life span?
- What are the person's patterns of commodity consumption: in what ways does the person construct their own identity through consumption of goods from the market? How has this changed over the life span?

Summary: *the economy* structures this person's experiences, actions, and identity in these ways:

Difficulties in completing this section.

2. The person in the family

- What has been this person's experience of family life?

- What is the person's position in terms of gender and age hierarchies? What is their relative power at home? How has this changed over the life span?

- How has the person's socialisation within the family contributed to their expectations, beliefs, values, skills, actions? How has this changed over the life span (e.g. have they accepted this or rebelled against it)?

- How does the person's past and present experience of family life affect their beliefs about the desirability and inevitability of present social arrangements, their view of the (just / unjust) world?

Summary: experience of *the family* structures this person's experiences, actions, and identity in these ways:

Difficulties in completing this section.

3. The person and the state.

- How does the person relate to dominant definitions of what is 'normal' and what is 'deviant'? Has this led to significant experiences in relation to mental health, social services, criminal justice, or educational systems?

- How has the person been treated by the educational system in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, or impairments?

- How has the person been treated by the workplace, welfare, criminal justice, and health systems in relation to gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality, or impairments?

- Has, or does, the person experience any particular dependence on the state or its agencies (e.g. through social security)? Does this impose a low level of resources or otherwise limit autonomy?

- How does the person see the state, its agencies, and its officials? (e.g. is

the person awed by professionals and other functionaries, or cynical, disrespectful?) How are they treated by officials?

- Does this person vote in local and national elections? Do they know the name and function of their local councillor?

Summary: experience of *the state* structures this person's experiences, actions, and identity in these ways:

Difficulties in completing this section.

4. The person in the community

- How long has this person lived in her current locality? How does this person understand (her/his) community?

- How many names of neighbours does she know? What help or support does she give to neighbours? What understanding does she have about extending her connection with neighbours?

- What has been the person's relationship with their community in the past? What has been good and what has been not so good?
- What membership of community groups has this person had? What are the groups and what has her role been?
- What does this person know about the different community groups in her locality?
- What community groups, interest groups or community events does this person take part in at this point in time? With what frequency and what role? What impact does this activity have on her?
- What roles does this person occupy outside the family and work? How many of these are socially valued?
- What time has this person given up for the benefit of others? (family, neighbours, campaigns, Charities donations etc)

- How does this person see her connections with others? Does she experience any particular dependence on others and does this impose a limit on her autonomy?

Summary: experience of *community and networks* structures this person's experiences, actions, identity in these ways.....

Difficulties in completing this section

5. Cultural and historical context

- What cultural stories does this person know? Where did she learn them?
- What religious stories does this person know? Where did she learn them?
- What family legends is this person able to relate? Do they apply to each side of the family? How did she learn them?
- Does this person know where her great grandfathers and mothers were from and what their names were? Does she know what their childhood lives were like?

- Does this person know any folk songs, traditional dances, nursery rhymes, childhood games, local stories etc? Where does this knowledge come from?
- Does this person know about foods traditionally eaten or grown? Can they cook traditional meals? Where did they learn these things?
- Does this person engage in any creative activity or traditional craft activity (e.g painting, creative writing, photography, sewing, knitting, carpentry, growing own food, etc). How did they learn to do these things?

Summary: experience of *historical and cultural memories* structures this person's experiences, actions, identity in these ways.....

Difficulties completing this section:

Now consider how the above factors combine. Consider how the person has incorporated and resisted the various societal determinants. How has this created them as a unique individual? Consider how you have previously understood the determination of the person's presenting problems. Consider to what extent you might modify (reject, amend, transform, qualify, explain) that psychological formulation in societal - psychological terms.

Difficulties in completing this section: