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The Fiction Clinic: How psychology informs character and story development.

Dr Jennie Dayes and Dr Catherine Wilcox

“Fool,’ said my Muse to me, ‘look in thy heart and write.’” - Philip Sidney

This idea came from a chance meeting in the busyness of our teaching jobs. This is where writing happens - in the context of lived experience. We found ourselves at the same table during a training session at Manchester Metropolitan University and introduced ourselves as Senior Lecturers in Psychology and Creative Writing. We soon found we had a shared passion for the inner workings of characters - both real and fictional - and that our different areas of expertise could talk to one another. We could see that by looking into human hearts and minds, including our own, we could extrapolate from what we learn there and apply it to our imaginary friends.

At the center of therapeutic psychological working is formulation. It is the process by which we understand a person’s distress. What their difficulty looks like in the day to day. How this developed. What keeps this going. Crucially, formulation tells us what needs to be in place for the person to move forwards. Formulation has a wealth to offer the creative writer. It can help writers develop characters which act credibly, and whose actions make sense in the context of their personality or life. Further, formulation can help writers create scenes and situations where their characters move plausibly forward on their character arc. What we know from decades of psychological study and research, we can apply in the literary setting.

We focus here on cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) theory, one of the most common therapeutic approaches used in the West. The CBT approach understands distress to be caused not by events directly, but by how humans perceive and interpret those events. In CBT, the focus is less about what happens to us, and more about how we think about things. Why would one person perceive an event in one way, and another in a different way? CBT theory explains this is because we each have a unique understanding of ourselves, others, and the world which is shaped by early or significant experiences, and acts as a lens through which we view our daily lives.

In our early life, as babies, children, or adolescents, we experience events which shape our belief systems. We add to and develop these as life continues when something significant happens, an accident, a break-up, or an illness, for example. These core beliefs about ourselves (e.g., I am unloveable), others (e.g., others will treat me cruelly) and the world (e.g., the world is a dangerous place) feed into rules we hold for ourselves, or assumptions we make about how we, others, and the world work. They are designed to stop the core beliefs being activated or becoming true. For example, we might assume that if we hide the “real me” from others then they won’t reject us. To keep ourselves safe, we live to the rule of *“don’t share thoughts and feelings”*.

Most fiction writers will have come across the “character questionnaire” tool, but this can end up feeling like a tick-box exercise. CBT theory offers an imaginative way into the inner life of a character that feels more organic and holistic. When we apply it to our characters it encourages us to think about what early and significant experiences shaped their belief systems, and what these belief systems might look like. This is useful for writing backstory and to show readers how our characters came to navigate the world as they do. At a scene level, when we’re thinking about what is happening in that moment and why, there is a further part to the CBT model which is useful for writers. In CBT terms, we call this the “hot cross bun”. It is named because of the four interlinked areas which this part of the model consists of; thoughts, feelings, behaviours, and physiology (see figure 1).

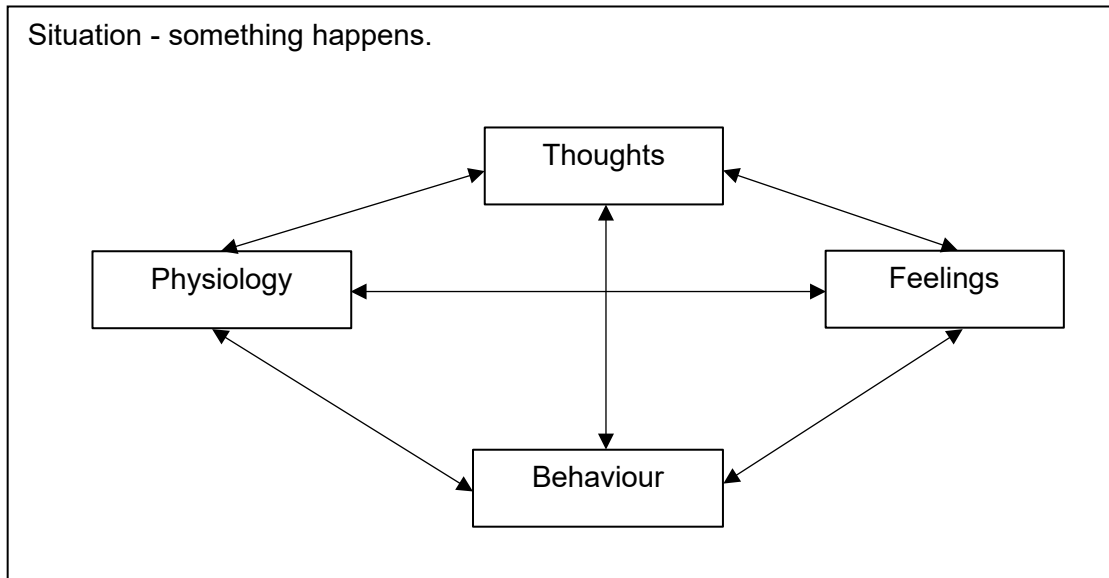


Figure 1: The hot cross bun model, first proposed by Padesky and Mooney (1990), with slight amendments to the terminology.

According to CBT theory, in a given situation, we respond from these four areas. Our initial **thoughts** influence our **feelings** at that moment, prompt a bodily response (**physiology**), and lead to specific **behaviours**. For example, if a character believes that being assertive will make people reject her, she is likely to panic in a situation where her boss has asked her to do something she doesn't want to. She's likely to think, "oh no, I can't say no". She's likely to feel anxious. Her heart will beat faster. She'll blush. Perhaps she'll excuse herself for the bathroom or fake a phone call. Perhaps she'll just agree to do it, whatever it is, because it's easier than the turmoil which comes with saying no.

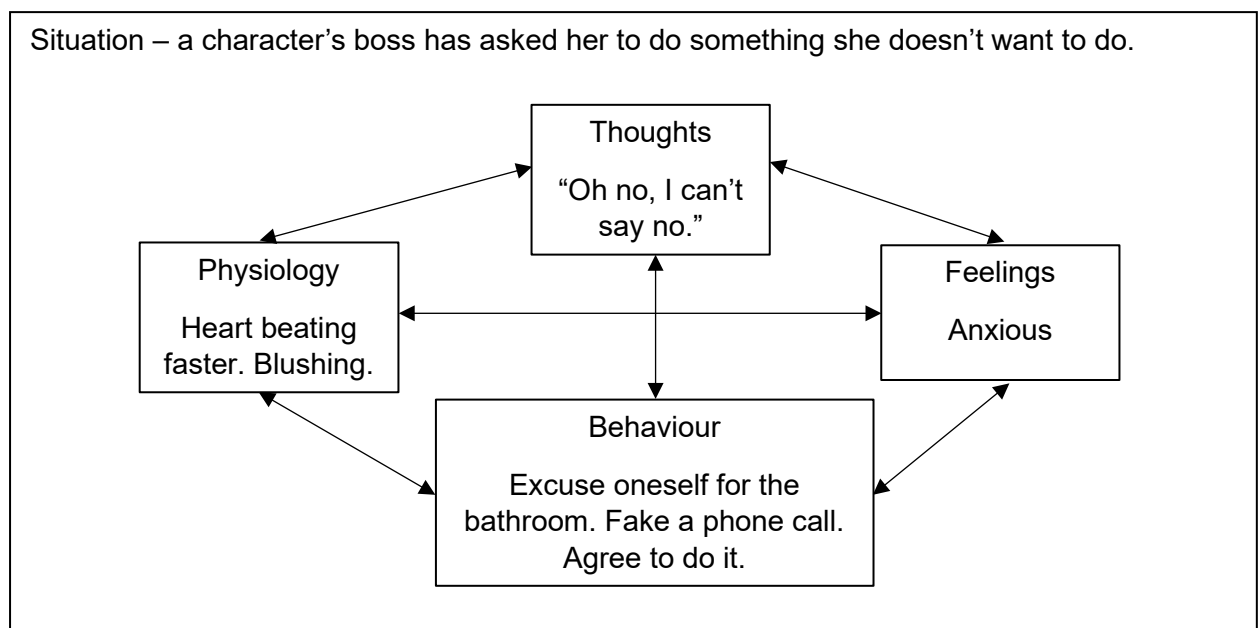


Figure 2: Our character's dilemma extrapolated into the hot cross bun model.

Most novelists are keen people—watchers. We like to sit in coffee shops and eavesdrop on conversations. But let's not overlook the role of introspection. We ourselves are the raw material most readily to hand and if we can examine our minds with a friendly curiosity we can write out of that. So, before we apply this formulation model directly to our characters, we might find it illuminating to apply it to ourselves. For example, consider a situation you've experienced recently, specifically, a particular moment of that situation. That moment when you realise you hit "Reply all" by mistake, maybe. Or the instant you remember you've failed to renew your passport, and the flight is tomorrow. What were your thought, feeling, behaviour and physiological responses?

Writing exercise: consider a situation you've experienced recently, specifically, a particular moment of that situation. What were your thought, feeling, behaviour and physiological responses?

The next stage is to fictionalise the raw material of your own experience. You know how you reacted to that stressful situation. Now you start to bring a friendly curiosity to your character. What would they feel? What thought flashes through their head? What's going on for them physically? And how do they act in response to all this? It will have some similarities to your own experience, but it won't be identical.

Our own experiences yield a rich harvest, especially with an established therapeutic model to help us till the soil. The hot cross buns of our lives can be fictionalised, transforming the experience into a range of different aspects of fiction writing. Thoughts, those sentences like "*oh no, I can't say no*", translate well into internal monologue, for example. Noticing the physiology, the present awareness of what is happening in a person's body, helps to show and not tell emotion when it is written. The way you or your character behaves, this translates nicely into action.

Writing exercise: write a scene or a section of a scene which fictionalises the hot cross bun from the previous exercise.

Writing is done by real people in the busyness of life, in the middle of work and caring responsibilities, against the wider backdrop of politics, geography and the climate emergency. We cannot talk meaningfully about "craft" without acknowledging that it always has a cultural context. Likewise, we cannot apply CBT theory as a panacea to all individuals when it was developed in a Western context, predominantly by White men. For this reason, we don't offer CBT theory as a kind of craft tool that can be universally applied to all fictional projects to produce "good" writing. Not all kinds of story are interested in fully rounded and realistic (realistic to whom?) characters. But for those of you engaged in the kind of novel writing that *does* delight in exploring the human condition in all its nuance and contradiction, with all its quirks and qualia, here's one way of setting out on a new adventure. Start with yourself, explore your mind, and follow this into the world of your character.

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Biographical notes.

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