Contribution to Review Symposium:

Harry Daniels, Maggie MacLure & Deborah Youdell (2015) Psychopathology at school: theorizing mental disorders in school (Harwood & Youdell)

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MacLure's contribution to the symposium

The book tells a depressing story forcefully – that of the diagnosis and treatment of children and young people in schools and other educational institutions as mentally ill. Although, as the authors show, psychopathology is about much more than medication and the administration of drugs such as Ritalin, the book hits a blackly comic note early on, with a quote from a *Times* article reporting a jump in pharmaceutical sales as a result of 'an unusually strong "back to school" season' (3). There's something about the crassness of the article's celebration of market forces that neatly underscores the point that there is a lot at stake here.

The concern driving the book is the way in which mental disorder has become 'the default explanation' of educational failure (21). Challenging or perplexing behavior is interpreted as evidence of mental illness - ADD, ADHD, ODD, OCD, depression, bipolar disorder, autism, attachment disorder and so on. The authors document the intensification of psychopathology and the extension of its reach ever deeper into schooling. They use 'intensification' in Foucault's sense of a lateral 'smearing or saturation of efforts over a wide field' (12). Though the book mentions it only in passing, this intensification has a global reach, with the increasing imposition of 'psychotropic citizenship' on populations of the Global South (Mills, 2014, 151). The book tracks the differential nature and effects of this intensification in four central chapters that focus on the key 'periods' in the educational careers of children and young people: 'the cradle to the creche', primary school, secondary school, and college and university. Two preliminary chapters deal with the history of mental disorders in school and with the putative 'risk factors' associated with ethnicity, class and gender. The penultimate chapter discusses 'interruptions' of psychopathology by professionals, and this is followed by the Conclusion.

To an extent, the book recapitulates arguments that have been advanced in previous research. Diagnosis and prescription are increasing. Disorders are proliferating and being identified in ever younger populations. Children are being calibrated with increasing exactitude against developmental models that penalise those who fail to conform to the norm. The pathologising of a minority serves to consolidate the subjectivity and the social obligations of the 'normal' majority. Children and young people from certain groups are more likely than others to be judged mentally ill (the poor, some minority ethnic communities, boys). Schools are centrally implicated in the production and ascription of mental illness though the gaze (and the blame) is directed elsewhere.

The book acknowledges and discusses some of this previous research. Its particular contribution however is to assemble and articulate these arguments within a wider theoretical framework. (The book is part of a series on the role of theory in educational research and practice.) The authors draw primarily on Foucault's work on power and madness, although recourse is also made to Arendt's notion of critique as political action, and to the concept of deterritorialization in Deleuze and Guattari. The Foucauldian framework is used to demonstrate how children and young people are 'constituted as psychopathologised subjects' (11), how the truths of mental illness are produced, and how therapeutic and educational practices are legitimated, in circuits of power-knowledge that modify the actions, bodies and potential of others. The authors construct an 'analytic grid' from Foucault's work which they apply to each of the four 'periods' of schooling addressed in the central chapters. Each period is interrogated according to five key questions: Who is aroused to concern? What are the relations or networks of power? What are the disorders of interest? What are the modes of practice? What are the desired consequences/outcomes in respect of the people who are the focus of concern? (13). This theoretical grid accounts for differences in psychopathological practices and subjectivations at different ages and stages of education. For instance the 'disorders of interest' shift from ADHD at secondary school to depression at university/college level. Perhaps the grid is a little formulaic in places, rendering the periods more discrete and discontinuous than one might expect. For instance differences between the pre-school and primary school periods in terms of psychopathology may be diminishing, in England at least, as early years education extends 'backwards' to catch up younger children via policies such as the '2 year old offer' of free places for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. I was also surprised to see that Foucault's notion of 'biopower' seemed to be operationalised mainly in the chapters on primary and secondary schools. As the minute calibration of 'life itself', one would expect to find biopower also at work in the psychopathologising of university and college students - particularly since the authors link depression as the 'disorder of interest' to threat assessment and the panicked search for explanation in the wake of catastrophic events such as the Virginia Tech killings. It is precisely in such contexts of perceived threats to security that biopower has been detected, operating by a logic of 'preemption' and 'soft tyranny' (Massumi, 2008, 9) to inscribe fear into the very fabric of the body (see also Protevi, 2009).

The book also refers to three empirical studies with which the authors were involved. Two were conducted primarily in Australia, involving disadvantaged young people and youth professionals respectively, with two interviewees in Cambridge added to 'broaden' the latter study. The third study involved ten professionals working with children with behavioural problems in Scotland. I found the use of the empirical data the least satisfactory aspect of the book. Interview excerpts are introduced intermittently and seem to serve mainly to endorse arguments drawn from the theoretical and substantive literature. The views represented are predominantly those of the UK professionals. It is hard to get a handle therefore on the coherence and the robustness of the empirical basis for the arguments – though the knowledge and insight that the authors gained from working on those projects must undoubtedly have shaped their assured grasp of the issues.

The penultimate chapter is an exception in terms of the use of empirical data, being structured entirely around the Scottish interview study involving professionals from educational psychology, child mental health and educational support. Here the analysis shifts from Foucault to Deleuze and Guattari and the concept of deterritorialization. The authors argue that the professionals, from their accounts of their practice, are actively disrupting the 'striated spaces' of psychopathology by employing a range of linguistic, visual and affective strategies to undermine or impede medicalized interpretations of children's behaviour, and slow the flows of referral and diagnosis. They call this *medicus interruptus*, and they offer it as a sign of hope for the possibility of a 'privileging of pedagogy over pathology' (145).

The trouble is, I just don't buy it. I do not at all want to belittle the sensitivity and the commitment to care that is expressed by the interviewees, nor to devalue their determination to find alternatives to medicalization. But I am sceptical about the idea that this work represents a serious threat to the edifice of psychopathology. I am not convinced that the interviews testify to a radical shake-up of the 'order-words' that assign social obligations and subjectivities to children, parents and professionals; or that they point to an ethics that is fashioning 'a people to come' (155). In the interview quotes I still see the urge to explain: to render children's behaviour comprehensible in terms of hidden factors, even if these are no longer pertain to mental disorder but to 'unmet need' (153). I still see the exercise of 'majoritarian' logic that stands outside the domain that it surveys – occupying the position of the 'central point or third eye' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, 292) that structures, classifies, diagnoses and dispenses. These professionals still see their role as one of 'educating the community' (153) and they speak with a familiar confidence about what families, children and practitioners need. It still feels molar rather than molecular, to use the Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology.

I wonder if the greater pathology is the very urge to *explain* – a possibility that the authors themselves contemplate with respect to the diagnosis of depression in university students. Indeed they go on to state that diagnosis 'may well be motivated by the understandable desire to render the world comprehensible' (142). For Barthes, this desire to render everything explicable, to know what it *means*, runs deep: 'the West moistens everything with meaning, like an authoritarian religion which imposes baptism on entire peoples' (1982: 70). Stewart, in her study of a former coal-mining community in West Virginia, saw a troubling affinity between the 'code' used by social workers and health professionals to diagnose and classify their clients and the 'ethnographic code'. Both involve 'practices of classifying, mapping, and interpreting meaning to imagine [their] object as a bounded symbolic whole with readable meanings and discoverable causes and explanations'. Both are, she argues, manifestations of a 'decontaminated mode of critique that inhabits a stable center of certitude by imagining itself above or outside its "objects"' (1996, 69).

Restoring criticality to initial teacher education, which the authors recommend (162), will not therefore be enough in itself to interrupt the pathologising of difference which drives explanation/diagnosis, and to which children, professionals and researchers alike are subject, albeit with drastically different outcomes. It will also be necessary, as they suggest, to provide new teachers with 'the opportunity to be excited about difference (as opposed to being scared about behaviour)' (171-2). The authors do not give much idea of how this might be done; but they do close by repeating an

observation that perhaps deserved more detailed attention in the book: that we should remember that schools are 'strange places'. (172). This seems to point towards experimental rather than critical practices, such as Stewart's practice of 'unforgetting'. This would involve attending to that which always escapes explanation: the excess and resistance of 'the anecdotal, the accidental, the contingent, and the fragmentary' (1996, 11).

References

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