

PUTTING THE PERSON BACK INTO PERSONALITY DISORDER

Personality Disorder: Temperament or Trauma? An Account of an Emancipatory Research Study Carried Out by Service Users Diagnosed with Personality Disorder. By Heather Castillo. London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004. 176 pp. £18.95 pb.

This is a good book about personality disorder that is also a great book about advocacy. This should not be particularly surprising because the author was, at the time of writing, managing an advocacy service. The partisan nature of advocacy supports the ‘emancipatory’ feel of the book, even though at times it also threatens to undermine the findings of the research described. However, what the book does very vividly is to convey, in people’s own words, what it feels like to have the label ‘personality disorder’, and points us towards a new understanding of both this term and other diagnoses, which includes the personal experience, as well as the theoretical framework of ‘the helper’.

The book is one of huge contrasts in style, between expositions of the history of the idea, and discussions about its clinical basis, and the central chapters, which are devoted to people describing the experiences that have led them to be labelled, and their experience of treatment. This leads to a patchwork feel to the book, which, although it is uncomfortable for the reader, is a perfect vehicle. The traditional way professionals have thought about this issue is so different

from the way people experience it that it is hard to understand sometimes that they are talking about the same thing – and this is the real point the book has to make.

The tracing of the history of the idea in the opening chapter is a fascinating journey from Pinel’s ‘manie sans delire’ at the beginning of the nineteenth century, through such terms as ‘moral insanity’ (1835), ‘congenital delinquency’ (1852), ‘moral alienation’ (1885) and ‘psychopathic inferiority’ (1905). The ‘moral defective’ became a category enshrined in law in the Mental Deficiency Act in 1913. You have the strong sense reading this section of the conflict in our culture between the urge to blame and the desire to heal. Castillo describes this as the ‘the moral versus the healing discourse’. The concept of personality disorder sits plumb on this fault line. This section of the book is a skilful piece of writing, written in such a way to be accessible to a lay reader, even while dealing with complex (possibly unintelligible!) ideas. We learn that ‘Borderline Personality Disorder was a concept devised around the 1950s to describe patients who were considered to be on the borderline between neurosis and psychosis’ (p. 15). Castillo’s book doesn’t, but we might, speculate about the post-war world, and the political climate where such a concept could take root. Is it a coincidence that the ‘borderline’ diagnosis, defining the dangerous ‘other’ developed at the same time as that great borderline between Western civilisation and its

supposed enemy, the 'Iron Curtain', was sealing us from the threat of communism?

The heart of the book is a description of the research process, and several chapters are given over to the words of participants. This section flares into life with the vivid images of lived experience, but the raw pain makes it a hard read, and Castillo gives us little or no interpretation, preferring to allow people to speak for themselves. The result is an at times nightmarish litany of abuse and the self-loathing that accompanies it. Much of this section is very moving, but simply recording all the responses to a questionnaire does lead to repetition, and some editing might have been profitable without compromising the emancipatory intention. What is very powerful is the sense of real people engaged in a daily battle for survival. The weight of the diagnosis is a palpable force. One participant talks about receiving an additional label of schizophrenia, traditionally one of the most stigmatising labels, and this being 'easier to cope with because it is a diagnosis that is accepted because it is recognised and heard of' (p. 143).

This all contrasts strongly with the earlier chapters that dealt with what professionals have said about this condition. One of the most telling sections is when Castillo deals directly with 'the diagnostic straightjacket', and contrasts what the DSM says about personality disorder with how people experience the condition. 'Shows no remorse for their behaviour' sits a few lines away from 'I couldn't forgive myself for past events in my life', for example. 'Incapacity to feel guilt', says the DSM. 'Filled with guilt' says the respondent. Castillo successfully shows, quoting Peter Tyrer, that 'the current categorical diagnoses of personality disorder... have little evidence base' (p. 135).

We are in no doubt from the start where the author's sympathies lie in this matter.

This role of researcher as advocate sometimes led me to question whether the picture I was getting was too simplistic but Castillo tempers her critique of psychiatry in the later stages of the book when she records the reception given to the research, and what seem to be genuinely progressive trends within the profession in the treatment of personality disorder, for instance through cognitive analytic therapy, and at the Henderson Hospital.

It is hard, in any case, to imagine research that would capture the experience of 'the disliked patient', which would not at the same time be an act of advocacy. At its best advocacy has been a vehicle to help articulate the views of people who are generally not heard. This book is a perfect example of this and, in a time when advocacy is changing, we should cherish Castillo's book as an example of a kind of advocacy that may be going out of fashion. From being a grassroots movement 'speaking truth to power', advocacy has become big business, and is increasingly in the hands of ambitious organizations with conservative agendas. The proposed changes the government intends to make in the new Mental Health Bill include the extension of coercive treatment into the community and a statutory right to advocacy is included as a counterbalance to this. But it will be a type of advocacy regulated and closely monitored from above and it is unlikely that excursions into partisan research on behalf of groups like the personality disordered will be tolerated.

Castillo concludes that 'there are clear indications that the diagnosis of Personality Disorder and its subcategories represent an intellectual straitjacket that endures out of tradition rather than scientific accuracy. It is fundamentally flawed because it fails to capture the experience of the sufferer' (p. 145). Her book is an attempt to redress that failing, and despite the nightmarish descrip-

tions, the overall impression we are left with is hopeful and, yes, emancipatory – partly because Castillo has succeeded in throwing some light into a corner of the world most of us find hard to look at. The very act of asking

how people experience their world led to that world changing for some people.

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