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REVIEW

Valerie Harwood, *Diagnosing 'Disorderly' Children: A Critique of Behaviour Disorders Discourses* (London: Routledge, 2006). ISBN: 0415342872.

Dr. Valerie Harwood, a lecturer in Education at the University of Wollongong, Australia, has written a worthwhile book that uses three Foucauldian categories to deal with the trend in schools and mental health clinics to diagnose children as “disorderly.” In psychiatric jargon, these are the children with so-called “conduct disorder” (but also, for example, with Attention Deficit Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder). “Conduct disorder,” at least according to the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual put out by the American Psychiatric Association, is a “disruptive behavior disorder of childhood” characterized by repetitive violation of the rights of others or of age-appropriate social norms or rules. Symptoms may include bullying others, truancy or work absences, staying out at night despite parental prohibition before the age of thirteen, using alcohol or other illegal substances before the age of thirteen, breaking into another’s house or car, setting fires with the motive of causing serious damage, physical cruelty to people or animals, stealing, or use more than once of a weapon (e.g., brick, broken bottle or gun) that could cause harm to others. To be sure, at least from my twenty years of clinical experience as a psychoanalyst who specializes in working with such “difficult-to-treat” teenagers, such children who act in the ways just described are very troubled and in great pain. Sometimes, they are “mean bastards,” as one teenager described himself, correctly in my view.

What Harwood has done for us, and this is a much needed service to the mental health and educational community, is to offer a searching and credible critique of today’s diagnosing practices as they pertain to so called “conduct disordered” children. In particular, using Foucault’s “three elements of experience,” she shows how the notion of “disorderly” children is constructed (i.e., “subjectivization”): by the influence of “expert knowledge” on behavioral disorders and its strong impact on schools, teachers and communities, by the effects of discourses of mental disorder on children and young

people, and by the increasing medicalization of young children by treatment with such drugs as Ritalin in order to bring them “under control” and to make them “better functioning” individuals.

Harwood focuses her analysis on Foucault’s “three elements of experience” as they relate to what we take to be conduct disorders: first, “games of truth,” how the concepts of disorderly children and conduct disorder have garnered the status of the scientific discourse through the fields of psychiatry and education; second, “relations of power,” how “conduct disorder” can function as authoritative knowledge of children and young people, using the prestige of psychiatry and education to enable the diagnosing of conduct disorder; third, how the concept of ‘technologies of the self’ can show us how mentally disordered subjectivity is constituted. Harwood notes that her analysis, derived from games of truth and relations of power, provides an understanding of how they influence and animate the relations of the self. That is, how the child is implicated in the constitution of himself as disordered. “The primary question of this book is: ‘how is it that a young person can state with certitude that they are disordered?’”

Harwood’s book is based on her 1990’s doctoral dissertation, which included fieldwork material drawn from interviews with young Australians diagnosed or described as disorderly. Her book includes several quotations from her interviews of children who have experienced being subjected to discourses on disorderliness. This makes for interesting reading, though the author does not go nearly far enough in her analysis of this rich material. She does not adequately indicate how terrible being told one has a “conduct disorder” or other such psychiatric designation feels to the youngster so designated. Harwood’s study would have been more robust if she provided more and better nuanced phenomenological description, “dense description,” of what it feels like to be viewed as conduct disordered by the experts and, consequently, by oneself. Or as one teenager who stole cars told me, “I am a fuck up, and always will be a fuck up, you don’t want to meet me at night in the street wearing a Rolex.” How does a sixteen-year-old boy come to see his life as so hopeless, to see himself as a force to be reckoned with only when he is robbing and mugging? Harwood, an educator, not a clinician, offers us very little illumination as to how games of truth, relations of power, and technologies of the self interact and produce such an anti-social identity.

Likewise, Harwood’s book would be improved if she used her case material to give us a better sense of how the children she interviewed actually deconstructed their conduct disorder identities and became better people, more able to respect, even love others. While Harwood does discuss how some of the children interrogated the “truth-telling” that identified them as disorderly, her descriptions and analysis mainly deal with cognitive restructuring and willful behavioral change. Though such an approach,

a kind of cognitive behavioral therapy applied to oneself, can be useful, the fact is that to transform one's identity, on the level that counts, requires working through the affective elements that often motivate people to behave disrespectfully and violently towards others, that is the rage, emptiness and, following Emmanuel Levinas, the truncated ties to the kind of empathy that would allow one instinctively to put the needs and rights of others before those of oneself. Foucault had a lot to say about the technologies of the self that permit the individual to perform "certain operations" on himself. Thus, when considering the possibilities of reconfiguring one's subjectivity, the self needs to be considered in relation to the effects of truth and power, no easy matter. It requires the capacity for courageous, honest self-critique, "thinking differently," risk-taking, and other practices of freedom. It also requires, and this should be emphasized, facing tough emotions. Moreover, in many instances, it is through the help of others, including Foucauldian-inspired "enlightened" psychotherapists that the conduct disordered youngster can get his life on track.

Overall then, I am grateful to Harwood for writing a thought-provoking, accessible and timely critical analysis of some of the key issues facing schools and the mental health community. After reading this Foucauldian-animating book, the mainstream educator and psychotherapist will never again look at "conduct disorder" and other such psychiatric/educational diagnostic categories and procedures, with a sense of comfort, acceptance and authority. Rather, as Foucault said, and Harwood aptly shows, such categories and procedures are divisive and dangerous, especially for the person so designated. The fact that Harwood has so successfully "disrupted" her reader, made her think and feel different about disorderly children, is no small accomplishment.

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