

## MADNESS AND SOCIETY

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### Book review

Hook, D & Eagle, G (eds) (2002) **Psychopathology and social prejudice**. Cape Town: UCT Press. ISBN 1 919 71367 0 pbk. Pages vi + 274.

Certain ideas are reified within the purview of a discipline and evolve to become the discipline's cornerstone concepts. For psychology, "psychopathology" is one such central concept. Arguably, the normality/ abnormality divide, which forms the abyss across which the bridge of psychopathology soars, is psychology's cardinal organizer. Within the orthodoxy, psychopathology is assumed to be primarily intrapsychic, essential, de-contextualized and organic. Social factors are considered to be merely influential upon, or indirectly related to, its manifestation.

**Psychopathology and social prejudice** (hereafter – **PSP**) makes the claim that these essentialist formulations are lacking in that they take no account of the socio-political contexts within which the pathologies occur. As an alternative to this, **PSP** grants a privileged station to *social* factors in its conceptualization of psychopathology. As such, **PSP** might be understood as being a critical work and, more specifically, a work of critical psychology.

The most noteworthy corollary of this reformulation is that socio-political contexts have the potential to create their own unique pathologies. It is conceivable, therefore, that there are as many pathologies as there are social contexts – or at least that there are as many variations in the constitution of what was taken to be a relatively essential phenomenon. The consideration of socio-political context in this light should be a priority for therapists when considering the etiology, maintenance and treatment of psychopathology. The critical engagement of **PSP** with orthodox psychology's internalism is effected via the destabilization of the accepted taxonomy of "mental disorders" as exemplified in diagnostic manuals such as the APA's DSM. In so doing, the text appears to be questioning not so much the boundedness of psychopathology as the specific quality of these boundaries. By insisting upon these boundaries as being socio-political, the text allows the admission of a range of well documented socio-political divisions to be admitted as candidates for pathogenesis. Most notably, various forms of social prejudice become implicated in psychopathology.

The adoption of an alternative vision of the mechanics of psychopathology means that the text embarks on a journey of discovery. Perhaps this is where it makes its most

valuable contribution: new bridges are built between previously separate domains within the social sciences, most notably, those of psychology, politics and sociology. The influx of new forms of theory and criticism into the discipline of psychology is facilitated, promoting the emergence of inspirational and exciting research agendas.

The text is divided into four sections, each contributing to the overall aim. While the sections are well appointed, there seems to be a lack of flow from chapter to chapter within each section and, to a certain degree, a limited relevance of the chapters to their particular section. One cannot help but get the feeling that some of the chapters were written without this text in mind and then herded – a little uncomfortably – into **Psychopathology and social prejudice**.

The first section, “clinical problematics”, sets out to investigate “clinical technologies”, i.e., “ ... those psychological treatment modalities at the interface of client/ patient/ community and the mental health professional.” (p3). The first two chapters lay out broader theoretical issues and will have something valuable to say to the majority of readers. The second half of the section focuses on PTSD and will be of value to those readers who take an interest in this topic.

The second section, “psychopathology as politics” sets out to investigate psychopathology “...as a form and domain of politics” (p4). The chapters in this section take “the political” to mean the exertion of certain knowledges upon the body. There is, as such, a strong Foucauldian influence in this section – a bias which is, of course, well suited to the project as hand. Those readers who are dedicated to the teachings of Foucault will, as a result, find this section reassuring; while those who place themselves in opposition to Foucauldianism will find the section - challenging.

The third section, “South African pathologies” makes some inroads into the seemingly indigenous strains of psychopathology unique or largely specific to South Africa. This section has the flavor of a “brainstorm session”, in which a wide range of topics are explored with a range of methods. The chapters are engaging and topical.

The final section, “philosophies of psychopathology” deals with a number of broadly philosophical engagements with psychopathology. The section examines discursive sources of psychopathology, namely images of popular culture in the mass media.

The major structural weakness in the text must be its “edited feel” – in which chapters do not seem to flow into one another but appear rather to be gathered up as one would gather up groceries into a shopping bag. While chapters bear at least *some* relevance to the section aims, there is little to no inter-relatedness of chapters to each other within each section. As with so many texts and discussions emanating from South Africa in these times, the focus was often on race and race-related phenomena within society. With the end of apartheid South Africa found itself immersed in a global capitalist order and it would have been interesting to see some consideration being given to the prejudices and pathologies surrounding the novel (for South Africa) discourses of neo-liberalism.

A final critique is the use of “socio-political context” as the antecedent of psychopathology. What was required – and not adequately provided – was a description

of what exactly a “socio-political context” *is*. While this is a fundamental concern, it is not necessarily a negative point since once again it does inspire debate about the orthodox view. **Psychopathology and social prejudice** should be prescribed reading for experts within the psy disciplines practicing in South Africa. It is alive with creative thought and any psy expert who turns its last page without having at least one firmly held belief challenged is, in all likelihood, deceased. Postgraduate psychology students would benefit from its messages for much the same reasons and it is quite possible to imagine at least some of its chapters appearing on reading lists.

While critique is easy and always possible it is necessary to deliver the critical theorists from the taste of their own medicine and focus on the positive and productive side of their project. In the whole **Psychopathology and social prejudice** is an inspiring read not so much for laying the foundations of a new agenda as for enthusing others to pick up the ball and run with it.