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A Habitable Madness: Inclusion of Feminist Thought in the Development of Mad Theory

2014 Portland State University
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I am in recovery from bipolar disorder with psychosis and substance abuse. I am mad identified. I was raised in poverty in a mixed race family and have a childhood trauma history. I struggled as a youth with how to express my gender and at times presented as male. My extreme states of consciousness have featured sleep difficulties, mood swings, fear, social isolation, voices that told me I was a bad person and should be dead, and suicidal ideation. My recovery included help from family and friends, spirituality, psychotherapy, support from mad ones, education and work, exercise and yoga, and omega-3 supplements. I have worked in community mental health since 1994. I am currently pursuing a PhD in social work through Portland State University.

Objective and Method

Mad theory is in the early stages of development. This paper draws on disability studies and feminist thought in theorizing madness by exploring the available literature.

Social Disability Theory



- Disability has been defined as a problem of inherent individual deficit or incapacity, not as a social phenomenon or construct.
- Disability culture emerged from disability arts and the positive portrayal of disabled people. The culture values difference.
- The social model of disability theory locates disability at the intersection of the person and the environment. The theory does not deny difficulties but approaches issues in terms of the effects of social exclusion and oppression. This type of oppression has been termed ableism or sanism. The theory originated in the 1970s in England in the midst of other civil rights efforts.



- Disability studies have challenged hegemonic concepts of normality. Disability becomes framed as a social construction involving power relations.
- In order to understand the social production of disability, it is necessary to locate individual experiences within the broader social context. Difficulties associated with disability can be viewed as a collective history of ideas and practices.
- Disablement can be seen as a communal trauma, not a personal tragedy.
- Disability as a form of difference is a feature of global diversity. It is part of the human experience. Disabled individuals expose the illusions of complete autonomy and absolute able bodiedness.
- The point of agreement found in disability theories is the need to avoid biological reductionism.

Human Diversity and Feminist Thought

- Feminism looks at limitations faced by groups of individuals and investigates the contributing social arrangements.
- Feminism challenges ideals of autonomy and detached rationality and values interdependence and emotional connection. Feminism challenges mind-body dualism and affirms the value of bodily experiences.
- Different ways of being are valued and people are recognized as equals in terms of human rights.
- Citizenship is relational and identity is fluid and involves multiple positions and subjectivities. Feminism calls for a politics of difference and relation.

Mental Diversity and Feminism

- Feminist scholars who are extending the theory to mental distress assert that the personal and bodily experiences of individuals should be incorporated into the theory along with the social and political aspects. Disability is an embodied, lived experience with multiple dimensions. Ableism and sanism operate in both the personal and political realms.
- Feminist perspectives on disability honor lived experience and human variation. Madness experiences can be understood as alternative ways of knowing.
- Oppressions do not stand alone. Feminist intersectionality frameworks allow for exploration of multiple identities and the interconnectedness of various systems of oppression. The process of psychiatric categorization is gendered, raced, etc.
- Identities within the psychiatric disability population are diverse and contain relative power and privilege. The differences and inequalities among the mad should be recognized in theory development.

Accommodate or Incorporate

- Valuing diversity moves us beyond accommodation to incorporation of different lived experiences into general knowledge and society.
- Feminist valuing of bodily experiences and the non-rational can assist with valuing the mad experience.
- Feminism has challenged gender essentialism and the gender binary. Gender is socially constructed and performed. Madness is also a social construction. A person should not be defined by madness experiences. There is more than the “sane” and the “insane.” Individuals move around on a continuum of mental experiences.
- There can be no one mad perspective. Perspectives of the mad are multiple and reflect different lived experiences.

Conclusion

Feminism allows us to appreciate that identity is socially constructed, multiple, and fluid.

Feminist intersectionality places lived experience at the center of theory development.

Grounded in the perspectives of mad people, theory and knowledge production would incorporate the lived experiences of madness.

Mad studies must be developed to address the prevailing narratives of essential inferiority that obscure the gifts of human diversity. Such narratives act to limit the cultural imagination and obstruct the creation of inclusive societies.

The lived experience of madness can be the driving force behind the development of mad theory.

References