

TOWARDS A CRITICAL PSYCHIATRY. EXCESSES AND ALTERNATIVES IN MENTAL HEALTH

Ortiz Lobo, A.

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The street where I live is on the Road to Santiago, so it is no wonder that every day dozens of pilgrims pass through – even hundreds in the summer. I have always liked to watch these migratory birds in the early morning. We greet each other with a renewed friendliness and I bid them a good journey: may you have bread and wine to help you on your way!

I say this because a few years ago at a congress of psychiatry a syndrome called the "Road to Santiago syndrome" was presented, which surprised me greatly, for I had always regarded pilgrims as healthy people who were aiming, though their efforts, to achieve a personal, cultural, spiritual or religious goal. Since then, however, I have not seen pilgrims in the same light, and I often wonder if those who pass by my house are ill or not. And if they are, I keep wondering, will they be well cared for psychosocially? Do those who make the journey on horseback have a worse prognosis? And I myself, who completed the pilgrim route in my day, might I be suffering from this syndrome too? Anyway...

This vignette is merely intended to express the concern that my colleagues and I share for the increase in diagnoses and pseudo-diagnoses. Currently we assume too many uncertainties regarding when to give treatment and when not to, since the threshold of what is considered to be an illness continues to be lowered, and therefore one does not really know what to expect when "almost everything" is presented as a problem that needs solving or a deficiency that must be treated.

Not long ago I heard on Radio Nacional de España [Spanish National Radio] a clinician who said that nail biting is due to a neurotic "personality disorder". This

situation has resulted, for example, in jokes being made about these evaluative excesses of psychology and psychiatry, because society is very sensitive to anything that stands out and therefore defends itself any way it can.

In my hands I hold a book, with a yellow cover, that offers valuable interpretations of this increase in mental illnesses. Within the undeniable expansion that is occurring, it explains why we have moved from the four diseases classified by Philippe Pinel (1745-1826) in his *Traité Médico-Philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale* (1801) to the 357 "disorders" in the DSM-IV (1994).

Throughout its entertaining pages the author of the work, the Madrilenian psychiatrist Alberto Ortiz Lobo, reflects –with admirable conciseness and critical zest– on the pharmaceutical industries and their interests, and on the increasingly corseted welfare model and its implications. Ortiz Lobo demonstrates great courage in pointing out that many professionals must accept the responsibility for pushing the limits of diagnosis to invent syndromes and pseudo-disorders, driven by the sheer desire for eminence. The creation of a new syndrome, no doubt, confers prestige upon the health worker who initiates it, and also offers the possibility to deliver a large number of conferences, make regular media appearances, and, consequently, obtain vast financial rewards.

Unfortunately it is not common to find well-informed self-criticism regarding this phenomenon that occurs so often today, which is why this book is so imperative for psychologists and psychiatrists. I venture to guess that in the coming years there will be more and more talk of the damage that our work can cause and, therefore, the importance of quaternary prevention in mental health (quaternary prevention is the set of health activities that mitigate or avoid the consequences of unnecessary or excessive interventions in the health system).

Among many other things, this book teaches us

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something that, perhaps because it is not in the university curriculum, is more novel than it should be; it teaches us to know when not to treat a patient. Furthermore, the author has had the wisdom and intelligence to add texts from leading specialists that contribute significantly to the book's excellence. To conclude, it must be said that this is not a work in which the author is content to simply criticise and rest on his laurels. Rather, in the final section, it includes an invitation to go beyond the biomedical model and the

author shows a firm commitment to the convenience and importance of narratives and case formulation, highlighting in this regard the later chapters, where he stresses the de-medicalising alternatives and care models, the indication of non-treatment and a critical form of psychiatry, which is people-centred and which seeks to redress the balance of power between the practitioner and the patient.

In short, it is a breath of fresh air in the singular times in which we live.



WE ARE OUR BRAINS

Swaab, D. F.

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When the Dutch version of this book, entitled "Wij zijn ons brein" was published in 2010, I was in Holland carrying out experiments in the author's laboratory as a postdoctoral student in his team. The social uproar was significant: everywhere people were discussing this book in one way or another, because its content is extremely explanatory and lucid on the highly complex issues of neuroscience. Posters appeared in many streets in Holland announcing the sale of the book. I thought I would have to access the content by reading it in English or learning Dutch but, to my surprise and as a wonderful gift to all of us Spanish speakers, it has been translated into Spanish this year (2014), and it was presented in Madrid and Barcelona in February.

This book is the result of a lifetime of conscientious and disciplined work in neurobiology and research on the human brain. Its structure is as simple as it is effective: it follows the development of the brain from the foetus to old age, from bench to bedside. How an embryonic brain develops, how Alzheimer's disease

disintegrates it and everything that happens in between. The author, Professor Dick F. Swaab, is Professor Emeritus of Neurobiology at the University of Amsterdam and was the director of the Netherlands Institute of Brain Research for 30 years. Currently he is research team leader in the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience. To disseminate his work, Prof. Swaab has published in journals of the highest scientific impact (e.g., *Nature*) but he has also brought his knowledge to all interested readers with his daily column in the newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in an explanatory style that is accessible to non-experts in science as well.

Neuroscience is rather an elusive discipline for us psychologists, because it sometimes seems like a field that is restricted to physicians or biologists. However, the entire subject matter of this book, written by one of the most important neuroscientists of our time, is of utmost interest to psychologists and our clinical practice. Topics such as the development of the individual (developmental or evolutionary psychology), the emotions (emotional intelligence), metabolism and homeostasis (motivations and attention), addiction, aggression, autism, schizophrenia, Alzheimer's, memory, sleep disorders, sport psychology, geriatric psychology, etc., etc., are daily and current issues for

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psychologists. These questions are explained in this book with the rigour and detail of the existing scientific research on the subject, and the eminent teaching of this great neuroscience researcher is now accessible to all Spanish readers, even non-specialists in the field. Fortunately for everyone, this knowledge is now available to all who are interested in these topics through reading the book *Somos nuestro cerebro* [*We are our brains*] (editorial Plataforma Actual). Not only does it cover issues of a clinical nature, but also ones pertaining to everyday life or basic research, such as the brain during puberty, during adolescence, the brain in love or the homosexual brain: all of these subjects are explained systematically and in detail in the book *Somos nuestro cerebro*. Prof. Swaab also describes, from the clinical perspective, cases such as brain damage and diseases.

Other traditional issues of interest to psychologists and originally philosophers are also covered, such as the complex issues of the human mind and consciousness. From a comprehensible perspective, manageable for any reader who is not a specialist in the subject, but using scientific arguments and empirically tested

experiments, Prof. Swaab analyses the reality of the most relevant aspects of our brain activity; from our thoughts, decision-making or behaviours, through research, for example, on the mysteries of the workings of the autistic brain, to the most advanced and challenging cognitive processes. After a comprehensive and detailed study of these issues, over a number of years, painstakingly gathering the existing scientific data and conducting his own research on the subject, Prof. Swaab explains in his book the cognitive functions and the current and most pioneering treatments of some diseases or some of the mental disorders in the DSM-5, so his readers are fortunate enough to be his students whilst they read the book.

After reading this engaging and enjoyable compilation work, you will have a clearer picture of why you are the way you are. And all this in a pleasant, readable and understandable discourse, masterfully directed and expertly explaining the complex details of the contemporary issues upon which humanity has always pondered - and still does in the field of neuroscience. Research on this subject will no doubt continue, and this book will be an essential reference.



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