



Madness and historical reality of peripheral voices

Book Review: Laine-Frigren, Tuomas, Jari Eilola & Markku Hokkanen eds.
Encountering Crises of the Mind. Madness, Culture and Society, 1200s–1900s.
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Encountering Crises of the Mind is a collection of articles exploring “madness” in culture and society from a long historical perspective. Originating from the seminar *Crises of Mind* at the University of Jyväskylä in 2013, the book (published in 2018) deals with “*diagnoses, treatments, experiences, and institutions which are outside of the (largely Anglophone) mainstream historiography of madness and mental illness*”(p. 2). The authors of the collection are painfully aware of the emphasis of the medical progress and professionalization in the field and instead want to focus on narratives on patients. Perhaps most important of all, madness and mental health, as authors’ analyses show, belong to the experience of the suffering ‘patient’, families and communities, before being diagnosed and treated in medical encounters. The book, in this sense, argues that “*the history of explaining, defining, and treating mental problems should be complemented with local, ‘peripheral’, and marginalised perspectives*”(p. 3).

The book consists of an introductory chapter and ten articles which are divided into three thematic sections. The introductory chapter, written by the editors of the book Tuomas Laine-Frigren (University of Jyväskylä), Markku Hokkanen (University of Oulu), and Jari Eilola (University of Jyväskylä), makes the book reader-friendly and gives a detailed overview of each chapter of the book. Interestingly, the articles in each part cover different times and spaces including medieval Europe, early modern Finland, twentieth-century Denmark, post-war Hungary, and colonial sites such as princely states of British India, Angola, Brazil, and Central Africa. Also, varying themes, for example, from medieval terms of insanity to child psychology, present specific research questions in each chapter. The discussion of the book, however, revolves around the main question of the ‘historical reality’ of various encounters and crises of the mind. Indeed, each chapter addresses “*particular situations of encounters and crisis in which mental illness, suffering, or madness became acute concern*”(p. 2). It thus examines crises of the mind, whether experienced, perceived, or imagined.



With the notion of ‘crisis’, the concept of ‘peripheries and borderlands’ is also an important consideration for the book as a whole. As Tuomas Laine-Frigren aptly points out in his analysis, one of the central aims in this book is “*to examine narratives and experiences of madness and mental health as spatially situated phenomena*”(p. 248). The questions raised through the book, therefore, emphasise both spatial complexity and relational perspective for a better understanding of past crises of the mind.

What is remarkable about this collection is its diverse source materials which support and complement the comprehensive approaches. The authors of the articles base their analysis on different types of material such as court records, reports, newspapers and letters, archival materials, and patient records. By integrating these rich sources, the book illuminates the (dis)continuities of treating mental suffering in line with the topics of the centrality of emotions, the constructions of national narratives of progress, and the importance of laypeople. In his article, Jari Eilola explores the “*language of madness*”(p. 78) by examining court case histories in early modern Finland, for example. Considering social perception of madness, Eilola highlights that diagnoses and treatment are “*multivoiced and flexible*” which shows “*the collective nature of lay medicine*”(p. 84).

Peripheral voices

One of the issues that I encountered in several chapters is about giving a ‘voice’ to people who have been marginalised in the context of mental health and illness. From my understanding, the ‘voice’ in this book regarding the mentally ill and madness is considered a very important point along with the issue of ‘gaze’. It is thus worth reviewing the chapters that deal with it.

As the chapter’s title suggests, Kirsi Tuohela (University of Turku) examines the “patients’ voice” in Finnish Newspapers, for example. In her article, Tuohela considers the ‘asylum narratives’ of patients to the extent that the patient’s ‘voice’ itself comes to the fore. According to Tuohela, ‘the voice of the patient’ was “*religious and kind, bodily and brutal, but also scientific and humane.*”(p. 136) With Tuohela’s insightful analysis, we can understand that the meanings attached to the ‘voice’ are entangled in ‘patient’s own perspective’, ‘patient rights’, and what might be called ‘protest narrative’. In this respect, Tuohela highlights that “*we can not write the history of psychiatry without paying due attention to its critics that in some cases include sufferers themselves and their kin*”(p. 21).

Likewise, Anssi Halmesvirta (University of Jyväskylä) traces the ‘voice’ of mental ailments, pains, and sufferings “*in the history of problematic everyday life as experienced by the Finnish-speaking public*”(p. 143) In his text, Halmesvirta seeks to illuminate listening ‘desperate voices’ of the afflicted, yet in fact found as ‘mediated’ voices, in letters and correspondence. By probing into the letters as a form of ‘consultation via correspondence’, Halmesvirta contextualizes the voices that talk about madness, reflecting the historical background of the time when the use of Finnish was important in letter-form dialogue.

As Kirsi Tuohela shows the layered nature of ‘voices’ in her chapter, Anssi Halmesvirta also presents the linguistic context combined with discussion of another layer that conveys ‘voices’. It is therefore easy to agree with the editors’ view that, by revealing a new perspective through the ‘voice’, both Tuohela and Halmesvirta “*challenge the psychiatric-centred approaches to the history of mental health*”(p. 20).

In addition, Waltraud Ernst (Oxford Brookes University) and Markku Hokkanen join as an illustrator of ‘peripheral’ voices with their texts. Here, peripheral voices are sketched through colonial encounters that would entail historical interpretations of ‘madness’ or crises of mental health. In her chapter, Waltraud Ernst looks at how psychiatry and mental illness were framed in the influence of political governance and its cultural provenance in the case of Princely India (1830–1900). On the topic of madness and colonial history, Markku Hokkanen explores “*the possibility, or danger, of ‘madness’, or a ‘crisis of mind’ among early colonists in Central Africa*”(p. 280). Their historical analysis reveals, as Kalle Kananoja (University of Helsinki) discussed the ‘racial interpretation of *Banzo* (mental anguish)’ in the early modern Portuguese Atlantic world through her chapter, that the tensions between the gaze of the ‘peripheral’ border and the treatment ideology, institutional control clearly exist. And with this, there exists also emotions such as anguish, fear, grief, and anger of the past crises of the mind in peripheral contexts. In terms of the use of the vocabulary of emotions, as Markku Hokkanen critically reviews in his chapter, there might be methodological challenges from the perspective of a historian to approach crises of mind only with medical language and loaded terms like ‘mad’. Nevertheless, the discussion topic for this book is very promising to readers like me who have studied the history of emotions and the history of mental illness.

Many-sided study of the history of madness

All in all, the historical background of the authors is reflected throughout the book, which convincingly reviews the history of ‘crises of the mind’. In the introductory chapter, the authors set the question of encountering madness to bring up different local, ‘peripheral’ contexts about the history of mental illness and to contemplate its significance for new research as well. As a reader myself, I see this book as an inspirational, history-making analysis and an exemplary work for future research. From a historical perspective, this book reviews mental suffering and patient's experience that go beyond psychiatric language and simply reminds us that ‘spatial, environmental factors’ are significant for describing the history of madness. In the chapters of the book, for example, Jesper Vaczy Kragh (University of Copenhagen) analyses treatment decisions and patients’ impressions in Danish mental hospitals, and Anu Rissanen (University of Jyväskylä) shows the relationship between the work treatment in Finnish mental institutions and social change. As these country-specific case studies suggest, we can approach the issue of ‘madness’ as many different crises of the mind from various angles. With this book, we could understand, as Kirsi Tuohela states, that “*attitudes towards madness differ according to the historical and geographical context, with old and progressive attitudes towards the insane often irrevocably intertwined.*”(p. 120)

Although the book deals with the case of the ‘Nordic’ or European periphery and the colonial context of princely India and Africa borderland, I think it has many implications for the understanding of ‘crises of the mind’ that have existed over the geographical boundaries, of course including Asia – from my own study of emotional discourses of mental illness in South Korea, for example, which should be looking at in conjunction with a multi-layered interpretation of crises of the mind. It thus suggests, for research in a particular area where the concept of psychiatry itself is relatively ‘new’, that attitude toward mental illness and health, folklore, religious experience, and culture-specific clinical entities are inevitably linked. Above all, it would be an excellent book for potential readers who are interested in the history of mental health illness, the history of medicine, and the possibility of new perspectives on them.

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