

BOOK REVIEW

The Metamorphosis of Autism: A History of Child Development in Britain by Bonnie Evans

Hardback, 514 pages
Manchester University Press
February 2017

This weighty tome describes how clinicians in England changed the conceptualisation of autism and made it what it is today.

Starting with Eugen Bleuler's concept of autism as a feature of adult schizophrenia, the book describes how between the world wars autism became viewed as a psychotic feature in children, with a psychodynamic model of its aetiology and emotional development. The child psychiatry clinics emerging in this period reinforced the idea of psychotic children living in a world of fantasy, but these clinics did not see the severely affected children living in mental deficiency colonies.

Following Leo Kanner in the US, childhood autism continued to be seen as a psychosis until the work from London and the Maudsley Hospital, led by Michael Rutter, using epidemiological observation methods, turned the concept of autism into that of a neuro-developmental disorder without psychosis and without the hallucinations previously imputed to it.

Part of the turn-around in thinking is put down to the transfer of responsibility for mentally defective children to the education system, bringing the full range of developmental phenomena into the experience of the new child psychiatrists. There is then an interesting look at how the British concept of autism went global and how legislation and national policy has affected its increasing prevalence.

The Metamorphosis of Autism reads like a thesis with eight dense chapters covering well over 400 pages and a further 50 pages or so of bibliography. At its core is a study of the historical papers of the Maudsley Hospital, which are said to have not been examined in this way before. It is a rich source of further reading as a review of work on autism over the years.

The book contains some errors: it appears to ignore Kanner's 1956 declaration that autism and autistic regression were clearly separated from childhood schizophrenia; it declares that mental deficiency "*required institutionalisation by law*"; and it describes John and Elizabeth Newson as sociologists rather than psychologists. Overall, however, this is a worthwhile resource for anyone looking at the evolution of the syndrome of autism spectrum disorder from the original use of the term autism within psychiatry.

Peter Carpenter
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