



DIALOGUES

ADHD, Truth, and the Limits of Scientific Method

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This paper makes an important contribution to the ongoing debate over the validity of the psychological construct, ADHD. While not ruling out the possibility that something of value may lie at the core of this diagnosis, the authors articulate a clear set of problems with the research logic that forms the foundation of the disorder itself, reaching the conclusion that there appears to be insufficient, valid scientific evidence for the demarcation of a coherent and independent disease entity. Foremost among these problems is, arguably, the inability of the ADHD advocates to structure their investigative studies around the possibility of hypothesis refutation, rather than simply constant confirmation. As such, the dominant model of ADHD research largely seems to involve finding data that corroborates a pre-existing belief in the disorder's legitimacy. The authors make their case effectively and thoughtfully.

As a way of articulating some of the epistemological flaws in ADHD reasoning, the production of truth is dichotomised within the paper into two contrasting approaches, a 'top down' model, one that locates truth within the utterances of the powerful (eg. the dictates of scientific experts), and a 'bottom up' approach, as characterised by rigorous scientific observation and testing, followed by the formulation of empirically valid and replicable psychological entities (eg. a proper use of the scientific method). While recognizing the utility of this artifice within the logic of this paper, it does raise two

fundamental questions about such a description of the production of truth. The first is whether this somewhat reductionist model of truth production masks more than it elucidates, after all, as Foucault (1980) points out, truth is linked in a circular relation between the systems of power that produce it, and the effects of power which it induces. So, whereas the authority/truth binary of the 'top down' model certainly has currency within modernist discourses, particularly those surrounding constructs such as ADHD, it may be counter-productive to view this in opposition to truths produced through the practical, mundane mechanics of data collection and analysis.

Linked to this concern, the second question involves the apparent faith placed by the authors in the scientific method, the implication being that the 'bottom up' approach, as guided by a idealised version of that method, produces a form of truth stripped of the flaws of the 'top down' model—vested interest, bias, truth by committee—perhaps even *the* truth ('eventual empirical verification'). Setting aside questions of what this latter objective might actually encompass, the issue here is it has been argued, often convincingly, that what is being asked of the scientific method is actually beyond its scope. As Feyerabend (1978) notes, the 'rigorous' scientific method is, in practical terms, simply a generally nebulous collection of rules and procedures, applied unevenly and pragmatically, and supplemented by other equally unscientific methods, results, biases, and presuppositions. Certainly, not the promised land of truth-detection.

These relatively minor quibbles aside, the two high points of an already-excellent paper involve, first, the observation that all attempts to place ADHD on a sound epistemological footing may well be a waste of time, and that perhaps a return to first principles is in order. Second, the authors should be congratulated for the wonderfully articulate, and appropriate, way they con-

clude their paper. These two sentences should be a mandatory ending for all academic articles, scientific or otherwise. If only some researchers into ADHD possessed a similar grasp of the limits of their own truth claims.

REFERENCES

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- Foucault M. Truth and power. In: Gordon C. (Ed) Selected interviews and other writings 1972–1977 by Michel Foucault. Brighton, Harvester Press, 1980.