

Conceptualising social problems as health problems creates new markets for drugs

‘Everything seems false, superficial, meaningless.’ So said a 16-year-old recently referred to me. ‘I look around at my peers and don’t feel anything in common with them. All they talk about is girls, getting pissed and what car they’re going to drive. The teachers are no better, telling me I should study, be part of this system. What for? It feels like one big con to me, everyone for themselves.’

I have heard many versions of this in my consulting room. If we’re honest, most of us have felt that sense of meaninglessness at some time in our life.

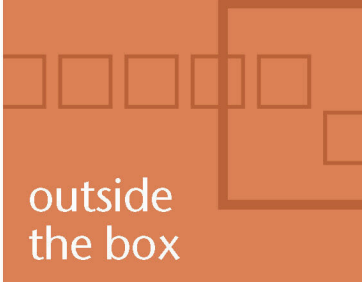
There was a time (and this still exists in some places, particularly in non-western cultures) when there was an organic, creative link between people and the places in which they lived. Places were formed over many generations by the people living in them, and were rich in local knowledge and customs that helped people form close and meaningful ties to the spaces they inhabited. Communities were connected to the products of their labour, seeing and experiencing in a concrete way what the creativity of their minds and hands could produce. Like big old trees, people felt they had roots in the parts of the earth on which they lived. Now we inhabit very different spaces, with only temporary connections to place, and there’s a proliferation of ‘non-places’ like motorway service stations and out of town shopping malls – in between places, not connected to any living space, echoing and contributing to our sense of disconnection from the world we inhabit.

As social life moves faster and ‘non-places’ grow in number, more and more demands are made on our attention and multiple identities are paraded in front of us. Capitalist market economies demand never-ending growth to keep the global economy turning. This creates and perpetuates the faster pace of life and our fractured identities. We are no longer connected in a tangible way to our labour. Multinational corporations have encroached on the spaces of daily living. Their aim is to create profit, and in that process only a few of us can enjoy the luxury of seeing, feeling and enjoying the full benefits of our own creativity. Too often we are like cogs in the machine, stops along the conveyer belt, deriving little satisfaction from tasks that feel meaningless.

Consumerism has also created a heightened awareness of appearance and style. There is an increasing invasion of images from media and advertising that is creating a dream world, a virtual reality to fantasise about, as commercials sell us images of ideal lifestyles that they attach to their products. Our culture has become so consumed by this imagery that we can now literally take off one identity and slip on another as we change our clothes, make-up, shoes etc. We even submit ourselves to long and painful surgical procedures to change the appearance of our bodies. In this modern culture where identity has become so objectified by consumerism, it is hard to believe anyone who says: ‘Beauty is on the inside.’

In the world of consumer capitalism everything becomes material for exploitation and profit. Thus children become targets for toys, foods, educational equipment, fashion, sportswear and so on, complemented by all the advertising paraphernalia. Indeed, I would argue that the dominance of the idea of mental ‘health’ (as opposed to, say, spiritual or social well-being) is a product, at least in part, of market economy consumer capitalism. Conceptualising social problems as ‘health problems’ individualises suffering (thereby absolving and mystifying the role of social factors) and creates new markets (for example, through the pharmaceutical industry). It is in this same ideological context that creates such fractured, superficial identities that we find the superficial labelling of those declared ‘mentally ill’. Anyone who has worked in the mental health system knows that the labels have that same disconnection as our fractured daily identities, with the diagnoses (mental health identities) imposed on patients frequently being changed, or added to.

Many of us are now yearning for moral certainty in this age where we feel alienated and disconnected. The growth in ‘new age’ practices that turn to eastern religions – religions whose philosophies are based on attaining a sense of harmonious balance with nature – is not surprising. Should I attach a label to the young man above’s sense of alienation, or should I try to stay alongside him while he struggles to reach his own understanding? I think you know which option I prefer.



outside
the box

The monthly column by consultant child psychiatrist Sami Timimi that tests the boundaries of mental health politics and practice

Sami Timimi’s book *Naughty Boys: Anti-Social Behaviour, ADHD and the Role of Culture* is published by Palgrave MacMillan, price £17.99 ISBN 1 4039 4511 X