



Psychiatric illness and the politics of blame

Madness on the couch:

blaming the victim in the heyday of psychoanalysis

Edward Dolnick

Simon & Schuster, New York; 1998

352 pp. \$35. ISBN 0-684-82497-3

Blaming the brain:

the real truth about drugs and mental health

Elliot Valenstein

The Free Press, New York; 1998

320 pp. \$35. ISBN 0-684-84964-X



I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now. — Bob Dylan

The shape of blame is round. It seeks its target with an arrogant certainty that often as not turns on itself.

Psychiatric problems are played out within the labyrinth of human volition and shame. Perhaps that is why the quest for their etiology raises the spectre of a witch-hunt. It is no coincidence that two recent books addressing the causality of psychiatric disorders use the word blame in their titles: *Madness on the Couch: Blaming the Victim in the Heyday of Psychoanalysis*, by Edward Dolnick, and *Blaming the Brain: The Real Truth about Drugs and Mental Health*, by Elliot Valenstein.

Both writers take to task the theorists and institutions who were or are prepared to reduce the mysteries of psychiatric illness to a dogmatic cause. In a mirrored symmetry, each challenges the opposing side of the mind-brain divide.

Dolnick's *Madness on the Couch* chastises post-Freudian psychoanalysts for their characterization and treatment of mental disorders, particularly schizophrenia. Dolnick sees Freud as a victim of his own theoretical parsimony, by which his ideas were drawn exclusively from his interpreta-

tions of patients' narrative recollections of childhood. However, he does acknowledge Freud's own reservations about the application of psychoanalysis to schizophrenia. It is more with Freud's heirs that he takes issue.

Using a journalistic approach, Dolnick, a science writer by trade, brings to life the personalities, therapeutic methods and aspirations of some of the most important figures in psychoanalysis during the 20 or so years that followed World War II. He presents these practitioners — the boundlessly optimistic Karl Menniger; Freda Fromm-Reichmann, the intense inventor of the "schizophrenic mother"; and the bird-like and charismatic R. D. Laing, among others — as well-meaning but ultimately misguided. More tragically, Dolnick asserts, theories of schizophrenogenic mothers and families, together with the treatment approaches that such explanations demanded, only served to rub salt in the wounds of patients and their loved ones. John Rosen, the founder of "direct analysis," which took its name from the technique of relating psychotic utterances directly to the unconscious, wrote in a 1953 paper entitled "The Perverse Mother": "A schizophrenic is always one who is reared by a woman who suffers from a perversion of the ma-

ternal instinct." R.D. Laing, a decade later, widened the ring from the mother to the family system: "Without exception the experience and behavior that gets labeled schizophrenic is a special strategy that a person invents in order to live in an unlivable situation." This view led Laing to a treatment that revelled in, rather than contained, the unfettered rambling word salads of schizophrenic thought disorder. With the advent of chlorpromazine therapy and of genetic studies, Dolnick claims, the walls collapsed around the psychoanalytic treatment of this disorder.

Valenstein begins where Dolnick takes leave. His account begins with the sentence "American psychiatry is said to have changed from blaming the mother to blaming the brain." Professor emeritus of psychology and neuroscience at the University of Michigan, Valenstein argues that the current biochemical models of depletions and imbalances of a few specific neurotransmitters in schizophrenia, depression and anxiety do not begin to fathom the complexities of a brain comprising 20 billion interconnecting cells communicating by means of more than a hundred different neurotransmitters. The biochemical case is overstated, he believes, primarily as a result of economic forces which, in the US, take shape in the profit dictates of HMOs and the relentless consolidation of the pharmaceutical industry. Pharmaceutical companies require a readily accessible but authoritative explanation of mental illness to support the marketing of their drugs both to physicians and, increasingly, to patients themselves. Similarly, HMOs are driven to restrict treatment to those options that appear, at least in the short run, to be the most expedient. Valenstein is con-



cerned about the impact of these trends on the teaching and practice of psychiatry. A growing number of psychiatric residency programs, he laments, are providing inadequate psychotherapy training, and HMOs are reducing the role of the psychiatrist to that of drug dispenser. The net result is that patients become merely pieces of flawed chemistry to be put in order by the appropriate agent or combination of agents. No attempt is made to understand the problem or to offer treatment in a broader context.

These are cautionary tales. They tell us that today's gospel could well be tomorrow's lie, that the pendulum of opinion in the mind-brain debate, left unchecked, swings in extremes.

Why should this be so? The answer may lie in the nature of psychiatric and psychological problems themselves. Understanding difficulties and disorders in this domain goes

to the existential core of what it is to be human. Are we agents of our own destiny, or are we driven by biology and fate? Are fear, depression and even madness within our control, or beyond it? What is our right mind? Where is the fault? Who is to blame?

Our sense of our humanity is always evolving, bound by the conflicting cultural currents within a society at a given point in time. Dolnick speculates that perhaps one of the reasons the post-war era so readily embraced the totality of psychoanalytical thought was a need to understand the evils that had been unleashed by World War II, which provided more than enough evidence of the death instinct that Freud had conceptualized. If *thanatos* could be understood, could it perhaps be tamed? Valenstein, for his part, examines the economic imperative. The resources and influences of large corporate structures within a consum-

erist culture are capable of moulding accepted opinion and determining what is valued.

The lesson is that societal context not insignificantly informs the illusory impartiality of science and medical practice. They do not sit in some rarefied, pristine atmosphere dealing with an absolute and constant truth. Rather, they are embedded in the fabric and history of the societies that generate them.

These books call on us to see beyond our own immediate period and locate ourselves on the trajectory drawn by the shifting coordinates of the mind-brain debate. These perspectives can only help us in advocating the most humane and balanced treatment possible for our patients.

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Room for a view

It's a dog's life: opening day

I always wanted to be a bird dog. Not just any hunting dog, but a retriever.

I had it all: a sensitive nose, balanced webbed feet and a wonderfully full tail for a rudder. Some of the other pups may have been stronger or faster, but rarely did they outperform me. Not with my determination.

I didn't always have a hunting master to train me, so I prepared for my chance when master was away at work by practising with slippers I'd steal and hide. I'd chase and wade through the thickest and deepest imaginary swamps. Finally, I'd find the scent, make the retrieve and perfectly present to the waiting hand of an imaginary master. Sometimes my real master would punish me for stealing when he got home, but I al-

ways forgave him. He didn't know I was preparing to be the best retriever I could be.

Eventually I found a dedicated master. We worked long hours together. He didn't believe in treats and wasn't really into petting or scratching ears. Still, I was happy since he was always ready for another retrieve. He ended the sessions by securing me in the garage with my cage locked. Bird dogs aren't allowed in the house. He really cared about me.

The big day finally came. Opening day! We had trained hard and I was tired but in good shape. I hadn't slept much the night before. Actually, I was exhausted since the neighbours

had a pup that barked all night. This had been going on for so long that I was sure master knew. Or maybe he didn't, since his bedroom is on the other side of the house. It didn't really matter. It was opening day.

It was very cold, and ice had formed on the water. There was a great swamp with sticky black muck.

The kind that stays on your fur and smells for a couple of days. Over its scent you could almost touch the thick but fine aroma of birds and hunters. This was opening day!

Set in the blind, master drank something warm from a steel cup. I didn't mind sitting on the wet grass because from there I could get a glimpse of the birds. A good dog doesn't need to see where the birds fall, but I wanted that extra edge so I could prove I was the best.

