

Disability Studies at lunch lecture – June 12, 2014

“Autism: a social and medical history” by dr. Mitzi Waltz

Report by Karin van den Bosch

On Thursday June 12 Disability Studies in the Netherlands (DSiN) organized the first “Disability Studies at lunch” meeting at VU University, Amsterdam. Guest lecturer was dr. Mitzi Waltz, associate lecturer in Autism Studies at Sheffield Halam University and researcher for DSiN. Mitzi Waltz is author of the book *Autism: a social and medical history* (2013), which was also the theme for this lecture.

Waltz used in both her book and her lecture a social history approach within a disability studies framework. The content of the lecture stayed close to the book. The two main lines were 1) picturing important individuals and events in history and 2) demonstrating that how we see autism as a condition has as much to do with narratives about normalcy, disability and difference as it does with medical knowledge.

Waltz presented herself as a mother of a son with autism and referred to other experiences in her family within the “autistic spectrum”.

The question Waltz raised was: “What is normal?” With autism, we should ask ourselves why we have decided that certain traits are abnormal, and how society may disable people who have autistic traits. According to Waltz, the diagnosis of autism is extremely subjective. People at the wrong side of the line (i.e. abnormal or autistic) are considered and treated as ‘damaged goods’. The result of this devaluation is, amongst others, a whole autism “pharmaceutical and treatment industry” which wants to cure or normalize autistic people. Often the problems addressed, are identified by others. Research is rarely aimed at identifying people’s *own* difficulties that ask for solutions.

For people with autism, autistic behaviors *are* normal. Forced normalization damages and devalues people, and it doesn’t work. Waltz told about the concept of neurodiversity. Neurodiversity holds that there is more than one kind of ‘normal’ brain. Neurological diversity is simply a part of being human, not necessarily a problem.

She also told about the social model of autism. In this model disability is defined as a form of social oppression: society limits or excludes people who e.g. are autistic. What disables people with autism is not as much the atypical traits or behaviors, but social attitudes that do not accept and value difference.

Discussion:

* One person highlights the work of Martine Delfos. Delfos uses a developmental perspective on autism.

* In history autism was related to madness or intellectual disabilities. Nowadays autism seems to be related to genius. Waltz: intelligence is also related to ideas of normalcy. It’s difficult to test the IQ in children.

*The idea of refrigerator mothers as a cause for autism is discussed. What is normal mother behavior? If the behavior between a mother and child looks different on the outside, there can be many reasons for this. Maybe the mother has autism herself. Maybe the child doesn’t want to be

touched. Maybe mother and child have developed a way of behaving that works perfectly fine for them.

*How would autism care or research look 10 years from now? Waltz, who defended a social view on autism during her lecture, gives a biomedical view for the future. Our general understanding of the brain will improve. Autism will be seen as a cognitive style, which needs more neurocognitive knowledge of the brain (how the brain works). We will understand better why autistic people have more seizures, or respond different to medication compared to non-autistic people. Different causes for autistic behavior will have been identified (e.g. Fragile X syndrome), which leads to different trajectories for different people.