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Petri, Gabor (2016) Book review of Mitzi Waltz : Autism. A social and medical history. Review of: Mitzi Waltz : Autism. A social and medical history by UNSPECIFIED. Tizard Learning Disability Review, 21 (4). pp. 228-230. ISSN 1359-5474.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1108/TLDR-01-2016-0005>

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Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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Book review of Mitzi Waltz: Autism. A social and medical history

Journal:	<i>Tizard Learning Disability Review</i>
Manuscript ID	TLDR-01-2016-0005
Manuscript Type:	Book Review

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Book Review

Autism. A social and medical history

Mitzi Waltz

Palgrave Macmillan, 2013

ISBN 978 0230 527 208

Autism. A social and medical history is a chronological overview of the history of autism spectrum conditions, mostly from the social and medical perspective. Although many other books have attempted to present readers with 'a history' of autism, Waltz's book stands out in many its qualities. It is richly referenced but uses an accessible language, and its concise size makes it ideal for those interested in the topic but not willing to start longer volumes. Also, books on autism often focus on therapies, interventions or they claim to give us a new and 'evidence-based' perspective, using the disciplines of psychology, psychiatry or neurology. Most of these books put societal issues on the margin. Mitzi Waltz's book is different: it sees autism in a socio-cultural perspective and attempts to develop a narrative that understands changes in diagnoses, medical categories and trends in services provisions as integral parts to wider societal contexts.

The book starts with the story of Ralph Sedgwick, a two-and-a-half-year-old boy, whose family brought him to the Great Ormond Street Hospital in London, in 1877. The story of Ralph is not only captivatingly interesting, but also a real one: the details are based on data obtained from the Great Ormond Street Hospital's archives. This chapter catches the reader's attention with colourful details about the Victorian age and how working class families lived in London. We get information about the wards of the hospital as well as available treatments, medical notes and the staff.

Chapter 2 is the start of the chronological presentation: it takes us through the eras prior and after the Enlightenment. We learn about how disease and impairment were seen in ancient Greek and Roman societies. Religious notions of illness are presented along with relevant notes from available sources: Christianity, Islam and Judaism are all referred to here. The story of "changelings" featured in literature, for example in tales by the Brothers Grimm, is put into the context of medieval societies. Waltz discusses preindustrial notions of disability and madness, based on authors like 20th century philosopher Michel Foucault and enlightenment thinker Jean-Marc Gaspard Itard.

In Chapter 3 we read about the rise of psychiatry but we get more details than just pure data on the history of a medical profession. Waltz manages to connect the spread of asylums and other forms of early institutions to the changes in production in 19th century societies. The evolving industrial capitalism required more workforce, while technological advancement resulted in urbanisation and changes in trade and food production alike – and all these impacted families' lives seriously. This important detail – the power of wider societal and economic issues over disabled people's lives – is often missing from autism studies, and it is this book's real merit to bring this issue back to the discussion.

The following two chapters are particularly interesting for clinical practitioners. The groundbreaking work of Leo Kanner is discussed in detail, and the author gives a critical analysis of Kanner's case studies. Waltz claims: it is all about the narrative. Kanner's clinical case studies were taken at face value for decades by influential experts in the field of autism, but the book presents us with literary theories that shed light on weaknesses in Kanner's work. These thought-provoking chapters feature

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3 Waltz's ability to remain critical even when approaching fundamental works in the history of autism.
4 Autism was not only established as a medical diagnosis, but was also socially constructed. The social
5 construction of the diagnostic label made an important impact on the lived realities of families, for
6 example through the prevalent parent-blaming for decades: refrigerator mothers were believed to
7 be the cause of their child's autism (Chapter 5). The roots of scientific mother-blaming of the early
8 20th century are found in the Victorian era which shows how outdated views of previous periods are
9 often recycled by societies, including by professionals and academics throughout history.
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12 Chapter 6 on 'bedlam and behaviourism' – similarly to chapter 1 – begins with a detailed case study:
13 Jimmy Jones, a severely disabled man living in the Ely Hospital in the U.S. in the 1960s, is a composite
14 of different real-life cases. Details of Jimmy's life are not surprising to those who know institutional
15 culture, but the story can be touching for readers who have never seen a residential hospital. Later in
16 this chapter Ivar Lovaas's work and the ABA, later Eric Schopler and the TEACCH methods are
17 presented. Waltz uses rich literature and interviews to add colour to this chapter. The reader feels
18 that insightful bits of information are given about the early works and backgrounds of well-known
19 researchers, for example when Gary Mesibov is quoted: "With Eric [Schopler] and [Ivar] Lovaas, it
20 was hate at first sight".
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24 In the following chapter, Waltz describes how parent-blaming lead to parent activism, and then later
25 to important research led by Lorna Wing and Bernard Rimland. Waltz devotes significant parts to
26 parents' narratives where quotations give voice to mothers and fathers of autistic children. Grief, the
27 struggle for diagnosis and services, and fights with professionals are all featured topics in these
28 narratives. The author uses social identity theories of Wolfensberger to highlight the importance of
29 belonging to an advocacy group and to demonstrate the importance of parents' transformed
30 identities when facing their child's diagnosis.
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34 In the final chapter we read about the rise of autistic self-advocacy, neurodiversity and the social
35 model of disability. It is Waltz's clear intention to illuminate the overwhelming importance of the
36 movement established by autistic people. In this historical perspective, self-advocates like Jim Sinclair
37 or Michelle Dawson appear similarly significant as any of the previously mentioned professionals in
38 the history of autism. In this chapter, identity politics meet parents' attempts to "cure autism", and
39 first-person narratives are confronted with medical interventions rooted in the medical model of
40 disability. The part on media representations of autism, including the examination of autism as it was
41 featured in groundbreaking movies like Rain Man, is particularly fascinating as it sheds light on the
42 significance of popular culture in our age and how it shapes common notions of disability.
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46 Waltz's book uses an accessible language, is richly referenced and its length makes it ideal for those
47 who are interested in shorter introductions into the topic. The author uses a host of verbatim
48 quotations by important figures and available literature, which works well within the text: the history
49 of autism is not a single narrative, but a multiple one, where voices of professionals, parents and self-
50 advocates complement and often contradict each other. By giving importance to all these three
51 parties in the construction of autism as we see it, the book would be an ideal introduction into the
52 topic for students.
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