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Madness, distress and the language of inclusion

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Perkins, R. (1999) 'Madness, distress and the language of inclusion', *Openmind*, 98, p. 6.

Lunacy, mental illness, distress, madness – the political importance of language in mental health has long been recognized. Yet many changes in the words we use seem to happen without enough political analysis of their implications. Why, and in whose interests?

At the moment I am particularly concerned about increasing use of the term ‘distress’. It seems to me that for the sake of short-term comfort and expediency we may, so to speak, be shooting ourselves in the foot.

Distress is a beautifully inclusive word. Something everyone can relate to. By adopting the term ‘distress’ we bridge the ‘them and us’, ‘mad and sane’ divide. We conjure a continuum. Everyone gets distressed, some people just get more distressed and for longer periods than others. We’re all the same really. If that which has been excluded as madness can be reclaimed under an inclusive ‘distress’ banner, then everything will be all right.

For therapists, allies, those who have not been defined as mad, notions of distress remove the discomfort of difference, create the illusion of understanding and shared experience. The sane can rest secure in the knowledge that their own distress affords them understanding and insight into madness as though it were simply an extension of their own experience. They do not have to confront their lack of knowing.

Can I be alone in my angry response to those well-worn phrases – ‘I know what you mean’, ‘I understand what you are going through’ – on the lips of people who have always enjoyed the privileges of sanity?

Like everyone else, I have experienced distress in my life. Distress following bereavement, failed relationships, violence, injustice. Distress that I and those around me could understand. But madness took me into another world. A different and frightening place which, despite my training as a psychologist, I had little idea how to navigate. Through no wish or actions of my own, I became one of ‘them’.

Numerous research studies have shown that, in our society, there are very clear dividing lines between understandable distress and apparently incomprehensible madness. Between ordinary misery and despair in response to adversity, and extraordinary thoughts, feelings and behaviour. And for those who cross the madness divide, there are the very real social disadvantages of loss of rights and personhood; of rejection and ridicule; of losing the right to define yourself because your utterances and explanations are seen as consequences of insanity.

To be mad is to be defined as ‘other’; not a cosy extension of the everyday experience of distress. A construction of madness as ‘distress’ denies the reality of difference, and therefore obviates the need for all communities to accommodate that difference. It denies the fact that madness is not always distressing. It denies the expertise of those who have experienced madness. After all, if everyone has experienced distress then everyone has that wisdom.

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When faced with the enormity of oppression it may be tempting to minimize difference via the ostensibly inclusive language of distress. But the inclusion achieved by such linguistic gymnastics is illusory. We have much to learn from black and lesbian/gay politics, where acting 'white', passing as 'straight', are recognized for what they are – perpetuating oppression. Passing as 'sane' is no different. The denial of difference – 'They're just the same as us except for the colour of their skin/who they choose to sleep with/the extent of their distress' – does not foster inclusive communities. Real inclusion can only be achieved via the celebration of difference and diversity. The problem is not that difference exists, but the value attached to that difference – when black, gay, mad means 'less than', with all the denial of rights that this entails. So let's dispense with notions of distress, and embrace mad pride.