The many faces of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder: Unruly behaviour in secondary school and diagnostic solutions

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Abstract

In society today, there is a tendency towards over-diagnosing. This tendency in society at large seems to reflect the normalisation of a diagnostic culture. Some researchers have claimed that this normalisation could be defined as the ‘medicalization of childhood’. There would seem to be a need for a sociocultural analysis of this phenomenon in schools – and it is in relation to this background that the present study hopes to generate new knowledge for the research field. This article explores how professionals in student welfare teams relate to and use neuropsychiatric diagnoses. The study draws on interviews with key officials working in student welfare teams in three urban secondary schools in southern Sweden. The main aim has been to investigate how the school officials talk about diagnoses such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder, and what kind of explanatory value is awarded to these diagnoses. The results indicate that the professional culture in schools plays a key role in how diagnoses are integrated or not integrated into the schools’ work with students’ behavioural problems. The results also show that the narratives about diagnoses were framed by ideas related to the students’ social-class background and gender.