

### Medicating the Side-Effects of Compulsory Education in a Competitive Global Economy

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Stephen P. Hinshaw & Richard M. Scheffler: *The ADHD Explosion. Myths, Medication, Money, and Today's Push for Performance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 254 pp. ISBN 978-0-19-979055-5.

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It seems the letter combination ADHD (Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) has transformed from a diagnostic noun to a descriptive personal char-

acterization used in everyday life. Somebody “*is a bit ADHD*”, instead of having ADHD, a neuropsychiatric disorder affecting an increasing amount of people globally. The rising diagnostic rates are already apparent in the title of Stephen P. Hinshaw & Richard M. Scheffler’s book *The ADHD Explosion*. Hinshaw, a professor of psychology, and Scheffler, a professor of health economics and public policy, combine their own new research on ADHD with a thorough review of current scientific and media portrayals of a disorder that is deeply embedded in today’s information society. Our environment is full of competing stimuli in the form of instant messages, e-mails and social media updates fighting for our attention in the classroom, at work and leisure.

The authors state four core messages that they aim to deliver: 1) ADHD is a genuine medical condition with huge direct and indirect economic costs; 2) hasty diagnostic practices have caused both over- and under-diagnosis of the disorder; 3) medication can be an effective treatment in the short term but needs to be complemented with psycho-social approaches which are often unavailable; and 4) there is great geographical variation in diagnosis and treatment due to socio-cultural factors. The ten chapters of the

book address different aspects of these themes, each chapter beginning with a description of a real-life case of an individual or a family affected by ADHD.

As ADHD has mainly been discussed in sociology as an example of the medicalization thesis, *The ADHD Explosion* offers fresh perspectives. The most sociologically interesting claim is that “the fast-escalating rates of diagnosis and treatment we now see are linked to intense pressures for achievement and performance in the context of an increasingly competitive world economy” (p. xxviii). Historically, the establishment of compulsory education in the late 19th century in most parts of the Western world was the initial trigger for the realization that some children have difficulties sustaining attention in the school environment – an environment that requires cognitive traits most of us did not have the need for previously. As the book shows, the first medical descriptions of children’s attention problems date back to this era.

The authors state that “ADHD reveals itself in cultures and nations that place a premium on performance” (p. xxviii). However, the relation between increasing “performance pressures” and diagnosis rates remains unclear. One of the chapters showcases how the

socio-cultural context of ADHD varies across nine different nations. The authors portray an increasing “Americanization” of ADHD models of treatment, with an emphasis on medication as a primary intervention” (p. 135). This would however rather suggest a process often depicted as pharmaceuticalization, which is not exclusively an American phenomenon. It is also disputable how much less of a premium countries like the United Kingdom, China or Germany place on performance, compared to the United States. The authors also point out that in countries without wide-scale compulsory education and limited resources for healthcare, medicating attention problems remains marginal. Again, suggesting that these countries just do not emphasize performance to the same extent is debatable.

The preference for medication as a first, and often the only line of treatment for ADHD, has nonetheless caused an exponential growth of prescription stimulant use across the globe. Chapter 4 deals with whether stimulant medication improves individual cognitive performance or just makes dull tasks seem more interesting, since the pills tinker with the brain’s reward system by increasing the amount of the neurotransmitter dopamine. The authors point out that stim-

ulant medication can aid ADHD children to perform according to their expected or “normal” development level. Controversy remains, however, over whether these same substances can be used to go *beyond* normal levels of cognitive performance, as a form of neuroenhancement. The authors caution against this by emphasizing the addictive potential of stimulants and the unknown long-term effects. In the high-demanding and competitive labour market, giving your brain a stimulating boost with a pill might nevertheless seem tempting. Whether there has been a global increase in stimulant diversion for neuroenhancement purposes is not fully known, but the use of stimulants without a medical condition has still already raised ethical questions about academic doping and fairness.

In the conclusive chapter, the authors attempt to predict future trajectories for ADHD and its treatment. By summarizing several points made throughout the book, they project that ADHD diagnoses and medication will continue to become more common, especially as countries with growing populations like China and India invest more and more in higher education. If, however, current clinical guidelines are met and educational curricula modified to recognize different learn-

ing styles, eventually the rise should level off.

In short, stimulants seem to help people with attention problems to perform “normally” and cope with increasing achievement pressures. However, in a world where normalcy is constantly negotiated, the increasing pressure to perform on a “normal” level might eventually require of most of us to enhance ourselves with pills. Sociologists would benefit from studying the issues raised by *The ADHD Explosion*, however keeping in mind that many of the chapters are written from a North American perspective. The social context of ADHD entails differences in the experience of illness, different medical and educational practices and beliefs across nations as well as within them, and a global political economy that emphasizes high-level cognitive processing in an environment full of information. Thus, *The ADHD Explosion* touches upon such sociological topics as the social history of disorders, the nature–nurture divide, normality, stigma, the power of media and a capitalist political economy. The authors view ADHD as part of the processes of globalization, industrialization and modernization, which have received a great deal of attention in other sociological contexts.

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