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Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Anthropocene

Jamie Mcphie

Mental Health and Wellbeing in the Anthropocene

A Posthuman Inquiry

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Prelude

There is no such thing as mental health. Someone somewhere decided the thing they were trying to describe needed a name—and there it was. *Mental*. Any illness described as mental health is really physical health. This is not *merely* semantics. The word ‘mental’ *matters*—literally. Like other hegemonic concepts—such as capitalism or nature—its effects perform ecologically and often have very negative connotations and consequences, even though it’s not *really* real. It’s in the title of this book because I want you to read it if you’re interested in it. The same could be said for the word *Anthropocene*. It’s a problem word. I use it in the title, again, because I want you to read it if you’re curious. But like the word mental, it’s been invented and appropriated.

If you’ve picked up this book hoping for a discussion about bipolar disorder, PTSD, PNPTSD, claustrophobia, agoraphobia or social anxiety, for example, you won’t get it. Although all the illnesses I just stated are in this book—due to the volunteers’ medical diagnoses from the inquiry I example in the *preludes*, *postludes* and *interludes* between chapters—it is not a book of classifications or labels (even though I claim that Liverpool ONE has OCD).

If you’ve picked up this book hoping for a discussion about the impacts of climate change and mass extinction on mental health and wellbeing in a linear, cause-and-effect trajectory, you won’t get it. This book does involve climate change, mass extinction and other anthropogenic

mayhem, as they are implicated in the immanent version of mental health that I espouse in this book, but it also involves tattoos, graffiti, emoji, the cultural constructions of a romanticised ‘nature’, laptops, inorganic skin, Liverpool (UK), the Lake District (UK), rainbows, bat monitors, concepts and so on. It involves all these ‘things’ because the *Extended Body Hypothesis* (EBH) that I put forward in this book claims that mental health and wellbeing is not bounded solely within a brain or even within a body. ‘It’ is not merely a *thing* that can be isolated, categorised or essentialised within a subjective self in order to fix, mend or normalise. Mental health and wellbeing is introduced in this book as a process spread in the environment—an emic-etic process that weaves through a permeable, a-centred self—hence the need to create a new concept: *environ(mental) health*. If mental health and wellbeing is conceived in this way, it begs the question, *where* should we look for it? Or indeed *when*? It has ethical ramifications if we begin to conceive of our mental health as immanently placed *of* environments as opposed to transcendently placed *from* or *in* static ones. It becomes political, cultural, social, racial, ecological, post-human and most definitely *physical*.

To understand mental health and wellbeing in the Anthropocene you have to get to know a little social science and ecology as a minimum. You could argue that you also need to know geology or quantum physics or philosophy. Art, history, music, drama and poetry would be handy too. This book contains all those things and more. It has to if we want a more contextual account of mental health and wellbeing, especially if we make the claim that it is actually something physical we are talking about.

My initial interest in this project was imagining a biophilic ‘re-connection to nature’ in order to prevent the wider mental malaise of anthropogenic destruction, until I realised the gullibility in thinking *nature* was an objective ‘thing’ that we could ever possibly be detached from (or ‘connected’ to) in the first place. I soon moved on to geographical accounts of ‘health and place’ but these accounts over-emphasised the symbolic, the social, the individual, the intersubjective and human experience as a central tenet and I soon became weary of the subjective anthropocentricity that these notions seemed to espouse. Eventually, I engaged with old and new philosophies that took me out of the human head and distributed me around posthuman deconstructions of ‘nature’, ‘the

medicalised body' and the 'Cartesian mind', a place I began to settle a lot more (un)comfortably into. In particular, I have thought *with* Deleuze and Guattari quite a lot as some of their concepts have been particularly helpful to ruminate with.

This book also contains many versions of inquiries: an inquiry I conducted over a year with a small group of people diagnosed with a variety of mental health issues (briefly exemplified in the *ludes*); an inquiry I conducted over a number of years that explored phenomena such as mental ill-health and environmental ethics more generally; an inquiry I conducted over a number of years that explored the relationships between cultural paradigm shifts in thought (*zeitgeists*) and *perceptions* of phenomena such as mental ill-health and environmental degradation; as well as the book itself performing as an inquiry. It is a murmur of inquiries to co-produce yet another murmur, one that you as a reader will inevitably co-produce (after all, it is your voice you are hearing right now, not mine). It *becomes* posthuman as you read.

Ambleside, Cumbria, UK

Jamie McPhie

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Portions of Chap. 7 (including the *prelude* 'Inorganic Skins') have been published previously as one chapter—'Embodied Walls and Extended Skins: Exploring Mental Health Through Tataus and Graffiti' (Mcphie, 2017)—in the book, *Street Art of Resistance* (edited by Sarah H. Awad

and Brady Wagoner, pp. 223–250) and as such is reprinted here with kind permission by the publishers Palgrave Macmillan.

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