

**MARION NAO**

The Open University

marion.nao@open.ac.uk

Bonnin, J. E. (2019). *Discourse and Mental Health: Voice, Inequality and Resistance in Medical Settings*. Routledge. 192 pages; ISBN: 9781138572652; £120 (hbk), £36.99 (pbk), £33.29 (e-book).

Adopting an ethnographic perspective rooted in Argentina and the mental healthcare context of a public hospital, this book presents the author's insights into the factors and forces defining and limiting access to its provisions, as informed by years of intensive fieldwork. It is both deep and broad in its sourcing and interpretation of discourse analytic data, which mainly comprise transcripts of doctor-patient interactions, along with an assemblage of multimodal observations on things taken to illuminate their cultural situatedness. These range from a semiotics of signage and space, both within and beyond the physical boundaries of the hospital, to the contended politics of mental health as played out in the public arena of its streets and law-making institutions.

As common to various cultural contexts of mental healthcare, the problematics of diagnosis and treatment are intertwined with, and teased out from, the professional tensions of psychiatry and psychology. Nevertheless, the book sets out from a place of difference, laying claim to both a cultural and methodological specificity yet undergoing exploration and definition that is in keeping with the 'locally grounded' and anti-'ethno-centric', or 'West-centric', mission of the 'Cultural Discourse Studies Series' (Shi-xu, 2019) to which it belongs. It is within such a prescribed emerging landscape, which lacks clearly defined contours of theoretical and methodological territory, that the topic is explored by the author. As with any exploration that charts new or revised territory, thereby also seeking to lay its own claim to it, it may be both energised and hampered by the attempt to forge its own path.

Throughout the book, the author conveys the cultural context with nuance and the detail necessary to furnish unfamiliar readers with enough of a backdrop to keep up with the challenges and complexities of access to mental healthcare through an inpatient interview process, which is where the fundamental issue of inequality lies. The challenges are many and the complexities great, particularly with respect to members of immigrant communities. These complexities are also undoubtedly 'locally grounded' in

the context of public healthcare in Argentina. However, other than its ethnographic perspective which privileges biographical factors, it may at times be a little less clear in what way the methodological approach to discourse analysis is locally grounded, were it not for the agenda of the book series.

The author does not clearly adopt or align with a particular pre-existing framework of analysis, although he provides a brief overview of the Latin American discourse scene towards the beginning of the book. Rather, his approach might be said to encompass a loosely configured collection of analytic foci that bring to the fore the recurrent themes of ‘inequality and resistance’, as specified in the book’s title. These highlight the constrained affordances of those manoeuvring their way through the system. Foregrounding the individual’s experience and biography, the author argues that it is the very regularity of interaction that affords them and the event ‘singularity’. While this may be a somewhat fresh take on things, it arguably remains theoretically undeveloped within the confines of the book itself. As such, the reader may be unable to appreciate, in more precise terms, how the author’s approach differs from the more typical concerns of discourse analysts around the globe such as the way in which context both shapes and is shaped by each instance of communication. The author’s methodological disalignment further involves some over-simplification of the diverse traits and traditions of discourse analytic and sociological research in his theoretical overview, whereby their nuances and complexities are rather glossed over.

The book therefore lays itself open to possible criticism of overstating difference for its own ends, or rather that of the book series. As the claim to methodological distinctiveness may overshadow the topic, the book may not always appear to put itself first and foremostly on the side of those with mental health issues who are seeking access to treatment while navigating the pitfalls of inequality. The author critically implicates the psychiatrists and psychologists who are charged with classifying those seeking support in a way that either allows or disallows diagnosis and access to the mental healthcare provisions of the public healthcare system. On the other hand, he seems somewhat less critical of himself as ethnographer, despite engaging reflexively with his role in the research process as attendant at interviews. The description based on field notes of the very first patient to be discussed in the book as having ‘something odd about him’ (p. 12) seems somewhat unfavourably *uncategorical* while at the same time, perhaps, over privileging the impressions of the ethnographer.

The book’s claim, highlighted in the blurb, that the research ‘helped change communicative practices’ at the hospital likely raises the expectation in the reader of some elucidation of how it might have done so — something which is largely lacking. It does not appear to be given any special consideration in any clearly allocated space. That being said, the practical implications of the research may not be the particular concern of the book series to which it belongs. For readership with less applied critical leanings, moreover, this is unlikely to pose an issue. Nevertheless, there is some mismatch between statements in the book blurb to such effect, including a mention of ‘outcomes’, and the actual content.

The progression of the book may further leave the reader somewhat adrift at times. From the outset, the author approaches its organisation as a ‘proposition’ (p. 7), the meaning of which remains rather abstruse. The lack of a conclusion that would serve to pull together the main strands of argument

may also weaken its impact, particularly in the case of a reader less familiar with the cultural context, who could consequently benefit from some reinforcement. Its overriding concerns are only very briefly touched upon in one of the three paragraphs constituting the epilogue. This does not, moreover, do justice to the substantial and intricate ethnographic and analytic work of the author. Despite any such possible shortcomings, however, the book successfully conveys a richness of insight into the cultural complexity and inequalities of the Argentinian context of mental healthcare provision that is its particular focus. It is likely to stimulate and hold the interest of ethnographers and discourse analysts, including a student readership, who concern themselves with either mental healthcare more generally or the specific context of Argentina.

## ***References***

Shi-xu. (2019). Series foreword. In J. E. Bonnin (Ed.), *Discourse and Mental Health: Voice, Inequality and Resistance in Medical Settings*. Routledge.