From “Crazy” to Traumatized: Diagnosis, Identity, and Epistemic Justice in Mental Health Care

There is a growing tendency to interpret complex behavioral and emotional patterns through trauma-based frameworks. I find in child protection, children previously diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder are increasingly diagnosed with PTSD. Also adults previously labeled with Borderline Personality Disorder are now diagnosed with PTSD.

This paper examines these shifts in diagnostics as profound changes in patients understanding themselves and recognized by others. Drawing on philosophical perspectives on psychiatric classification (e.g. Hacking), and on the concept of epistemic justice (e.g. Fricker), I argue that trauma-based frameworks transform self-image: from being “crazy” to being a victim of experiences, fostering relational self-worth by enabling patients to be understood, not demonized. In practice, trauma diagnoses can attract engagement and help, whereas personality-based labels can provoke resistance and pushback.

These shifts introduce tensions in clinical contexts, including how narratives of trauma shape responsibility, interpersonal conflict, and interpretation of harm. These developments occur alongside societal emphasis on agency and control, raising questions about balancing recognition of harm with fostering autonomy. I conclude that diagnostic categories function as ethically and epistemically significant, shaping identity, self-understanding, and relationships, requiring ongoing conceptual and clinical reflection.