Understanding ADHD through entification

Abstract
What explanations are we drawing upon in order to understand ourselves as morally acting individuals? In this presentation, I will focus on how we live with, accept, and work on parts of ourselves that we find less desirable or even pathological. Based on interviews with adults diagnosed with ADHD, I will illustrate how the process of entification (transforming a trait, temperament, emotion, or some other psychological phenomenon into a thing or agent) can be a way to understand, accept and handle the symptoms of ADHD. In this context, ADHD is perceived on the one hand as a part of the self, a kind of quirk, and on the other hand as separated from the self, a foreign agent. By making a parallel to phenomena as spirit possession, I will discuss how the entification process can be understood as 1) a distancing to what is perceived as amoral actions and a liberating process of acknowledging that some actions are beyond control; and 2) a way of concretising problematic actions and parts of oneself in order to work on and subdue these traits and reactions.

Keywords: morality, ADHD, entification, agency, spirit possession

Introduction
Me: An anthropologist and Ph.D.-fellow in the department of communication and psychology at Aalborg University where I’m a part of the research group called Diagnostic Culture. The group examines the rise of psychiatric disorders and my specific project examines adults’ experiences of getting an ADHD-diagnosis and what it means to have one’s experience filtered through a diagnostic category.

ADHD is defined by symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, and patterns of behaviour are characterized by failure to pay attention to details, difficulty organizing tasks and activities, and excessive talking. The disorder is conventionally seen as a neurobiological disorder that is to be treated with drugs or more specifically with central nervous stimulants as e.g. Ritalin.
My empirical research is primarily based on interviews. So far I have interviewed 9 adults diagnosed with ADHD about their experience of living with ADHD – and by that I mean both living with the diagnostic category and living with the symptoms of ADHD.

Whenever I attend conferences or information meetings about ADHD I am repeatedly informed by psychiatrists that people have ADHD they are not ADHD. This way of talking about illness as something you suffer from and not something you are is a widespread political correct way of talking about illness as something that does not define the person. However, when I talk to my informants about the nature of ADHD and their daily struggles with ADHD, their stories are more complex and ambiguous. Sometimes, they describe ADHD as a part of the self, a kind of quirk. Like being short-legged or having a savage temper. In this way, ADHD is like a kind of being in the world, a perspective and a way of being human. But at other times, my informants talk about ADHD in quite a different way: as separated from the self and a kind of foreign agent.

I’m becoming more and more curious about the bodily experience of ADHD and the way my informants at times speak of ADHD as an agent or a ‘thing’ that takes control over them and this is exactly what I want to talk about today. I will focus on how my informants live with, accept, and work on the difficulties they experience with ADHD and I will illustrate how the process of entification, which means transforming a psychological phenomenon into an entity, a thing or an agent, can be a way to understand, accept and handle the symptoms of ADHD. By making a parallel to the phenomena of spirit possession, I will discuss how the entification process can be understood as a distancing to what is perceived as amoral actions and a liberating process of acknowledging that some actions are beyond control; but also a way of concretising problematic actions and parts of oneself in order to work on and subdue these traits and reactions relative to moral frameworks and ideals.

**ADHD and morality**

If we look back in history and address how ADHD was considered when the symptoms of inattention and hyperactivity were first clinically identified, the question of morality was explicitly a part of the diagnostic category. Doctor George F. Still is known as the first doctor who described children with an abnormal incapacity for sustained attention and a distinctive
restlessness. Still concluded from his study in 1902 that these children were suffering from "immorality" or a "defect of moral control" which was not a matter of an individual shortcoming, but rather a biological defect caused by a failure in development. This moral defect or the inability to act morally was seen as the core definition or comprehension of what we today call ADHD.

Doctor Still located the moral deficit in the individual – in the individual's brain to be specific. This was somewhat a way of liberating the individual from guilt – since the difficulties were explained as a biological defect and not a personal trait. What I want to examine in my presentation is not the neural processes and the question of mental illness as a demarcation of morality, but how my informants understand themselves as morally acting individuals in spite of their experiences of sometimes loosing control and acting contrary to what they perceive as morally correct. When we read the doctor's descriptions of people suffering from a moral defect our toes curl, but the link between morality and mental illness is still relevant to discuss and something my informants reflect upon in regards to moral responsibility.

**Spirit possession**

Analytically, I think we can gain something from research about experiences of spirit possession. The literature makes a distinction between two forms of spirit possession: as a ceremonial practice that serves to reinforce cultural morality and as an individual experience where the individual believes he is unwillingly possessed by intruding spirits as a pathological reaction to an individual conflict. Anthropological studies of spirit possession have primarily concentrated on the dramatic ceremonies and shamanistic exercises, but it is the individual experience of possession I’m interested in – the experience of being controlled by force, a spirit. Traditionally, there has been a mythological link between mental illness and supernatural powers and man as a spiritual battleground for good and evil powers. I want to be very clear that I’m not saying that the western diagnosis ADHD is parallel to spirit possession or that ADHD and spirit possession are just different cultural categories for the same experience. But I nonetheless find some similarities between the two phenomena that may help us understand ADHD.
Entification as distancing oneself from amoral actions

Firstly, there are some similarities in the narratives about the experience of spirit possession and the experience of ADHD. The experience of loosing agency, acting in unusual ways and being out of control is present in both personal descriptions of spirit possession and of ADHD.

One of my informants, Susan a 42-year old woman, explains how her ADHD sometimes takes over and controls her actions. Susan was diagnosed with ADHD 16 years ago after her son was diagnosed. And after 15 years without medication, Susan started up on Ritalin last year as a part of a work ability testing needed for an application for a flex job for people who cannot work on ordinary terms. Before she started up on Ritalin, Susan tells me, her ADHD often made her react in ways that she did not recognise as hers – reactions that she did not relate to because they did not correspond to the way she perceive herself as a person. The Ritalin helps her control what she calls her overdramatic reactions, but she still sometimes looses her temper and reacts in aggressive ways in stead of holding back and counting to ten “because I never get to ten”, as she says. Here’s a quote from my interview with Susan:

"My sense of pedagogy tells me, that you do not yell into the head of a child or push it. That was definitely my ADHD. It was also my ADHD that made me react totally exaggerated if someone accidently touched me on the bus. That is not me as a person because I am always happy and positive. Sometimes I also wonder, how I could sit and talk to somebody lalala and be happy, and then somebody just incidentally touched me, and then I was like: what the hell are you doing? And then I suddenly became like: I’m really sorry. It just came out of nowhere. I mean, that is definitely my ADHD."

As we hear in Susan’s statement, she has a concrete experience of being out of control and for a moment being controlled by her ADHD. She talks about “my ADHD” and claims that it is “my ADHD that made me react exaggerated” as if the ADHD was an entity in itself that controls her actions. This is what I call entification. By talking of her actions as an entity, Susan distances herself morally from the action by transforming it into the action of her ADHD as an agent or entity that controls her.

There is a liberating element to this disassociation to the short-tempered and inappropriate
behaviour. Susan doesn’t see herself as a person who yells at people or goes off over nothing. By transforming the actions into the actions of ADHD, she frees herself from the thought that she as a person is acting amorally. It is her ADHD and not her that acts. In that way entification is a way of accepting that some things are out of control and a way of keeping a sense of self that corresponds to Susan’s self-image.

**Entification as coping**

It might sound as if I’m saying that entification is the individual’s way of disclaiming moral responsibility. That is not my point here. Actually, it’s rather the opposite. When comprehending actions as a thing, separated from the individual, the actions become understandable and manageable and therefore possible to act on. The entification is a way of concretising problematic actions in order to work on and handling the actions. Within narrative psychological therapy, externalization is a common technique of handling problems by addressing not the person but the problem in itself and focusing on the individual’s relation to the problem. The rationale is that if the problem is expressed as a part of the person, its character, then how can the person take action against the problem without acting against the individual’s self? By externalising the problem it becomes manageable and the individual can regain its control and not work against its self but against the concrete actions.

Entification is somewhat parallel to externalisation. But the process is not only a therapeutic tool, but also a concrete experience of being separated from one’s actions. The objectification of actions and the potential for coping with the problem as an object, however, is similar.

A guy called Mark explains how he often reacts without thinking because of his ADHD. Mark is in his mid thirties and he really identifies with his ADHD diagnosis – he attends meetings in the ADHD patient’s association and has ADHD tattooed on body. In an interview with Mark, he explains how he sometimes yells at people who gets in his way and overreact towards his son if he’s not behaving well. Like Susan, Mark experiences his burst of anger and frustration as the action of his ADHD and not him. But instead of disclaiming moral responsibility, Mark has learned to identify and act on his frustrations exactly because he is aware of it as something ‘out there’, something tangible. He has learned to identify his ADHD as a warm sensation in the back of his neck that crawls up into his head. And whenever he feels the ADHD stick its
head up, he gets alert and tries to remove himself from the problematic situation. So actually, Mark claims moral responsibility and take control over the situation instead of disclaiming accountability.

While spirit possession is often handled with exorcism practices and rituals that drive out the spirit, there is no cure to ADHD but only ways to handle and treat the symptoms. However, both phenomena make use of socially acceptable ways of managing the problems. The problems are identified as something other than the individual. He or she is not an evil spirit but is possessed by one and he or she is not ADHD but has ADHD.

**Intentionality and free will**

Another thing I have met in studying both spirit possession and experiences of ADHD is the question of intentionality. Normally, we think of actions as intentional. As something we do with a certain purpose. But what about non-intentional actions – how do we explain them and how do we judge them morally? It seems to be the case that reason is generally enough to explain actions – if we understand the intention behind an action we need no further explanation to the action. Only irrational actions call for causal explanations - when we cannot find a reasonable explanation why someone or we ourselves did something. The entification of the experience offers the explanation to the irrational action as we see with Mark and Susan’s stories – it is ADHD that causes the action. And as impulsive and irrational actions are the very core symptoms of ADHD, the action is explained in a rational way.

On a more fundamental scale, the process of entification and the experience of being out of control raise the psychological and philosophical question of free will and human agency. Do we consciously cause what we do, or do our actions happen to us? In Greece, the ancients spoke of these different versions of the self as though they were distinct agents, each causing its own range of relevant behaviour. The ancients believed these agents to be gods that directed the human and their behaviour. Today, some neurologists would argue that neurological impulses always determine our actions and that there is no such thing as free will. According to that position, it would be more honest to say: my action was determined by internal forces I don’t understand! In a way, we are always possessed by some force – whether spirits or brain chemistry. But we don’t walk around thinking that everything we do
depend on neural processes. And it’s probably existentially impossible to live like that? Instead we think of our actions as products of will or self-control...or when we experience the loss of control, we interpret our actions and bodily experiences in different and more concrete ways whether we call it spirit possession, ADHD or something else. But it’s important to be aware that this sense of foreign force within does not necessarily cancel the individual’s experience of moral agency and responsibility, but can be actually a way of handling it.

**Conclusion**

So why is spirit possession a good way if thinking about ADHD? Because the phenomenon points at some central elements in the understandings of ADHD and the experience of being separated from one's actions.

Tons of studies describe ADHD as either a biological or psychological defect or take a sociological approach to the phenomena when describing ADHD as a product of social and cultural structures or an increasing tendency to comprehend behaviour and human suffering as pathological. What I wanted in this paper was to focus on the experience it self and take it seriously not as product of society or neural processes but as a concrete, bodily experience. Susan and Mark both struggles with taming their impulsive reactions and they constantly evaluate their actions and try to understand their impulsive behaviour in order to act on it. And to accept that the aggressive actions do not define them as persons but define their diagnosis is a way of maintaining a bearable self-image.

If it's morally correct of me to examine ADHD through the lens of spirit possession, I'm not sure. I hope that I have managed not to equate ADHD with spirit possession and turned my informants' experiences into an exotic thing.