



Exchanges: the Warwick Research Journal

Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2014

<http://exchanges.warwick.ac.uk>

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History, University of Warwick, 25th October
2013

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Abstract

The overarching theme of this one-day conference was to situate labelling theory, as conceptualised by Professor Hacking, in the study of post-war history. The post-war period witnessed the emergence of numerous new categories and classifications of people, through the development of labels including ‘schizophrenic’, ‘gambler’, and ‘adolescent’. This conference drew together speakers and delegates from a range of disciplines in order to raise a set of questions about these ‘made up people’. The conference aimed to facilitate a workshop-style atmosphere, with a keynote speech by Professor Hacking, several panel sessions, and a roundtable discussion.

Keywords: Making Up People, Ian Hacking, labelling theory, post-war Britain, postwar history

The principal goal of this one-day conference was to situate labelling theory—a concept developed by philosopher Ian Hacking—in the study of post-war history. The post-war period witnessed the emergence of a number of new categories and classifications of people, through the development of “labels” such as ‘schizophrenic’, ‘gambler’, and ‘adolescent’. This conference drew together speakers and delegates from a range of disciplines in order to explore a set of questions about what Hacking termed ‘made up people’. Hacking gave a keynote speech at the conference.

Just under thirty years ago, Hacking first introduced his theory of “making up people”. Hacking’s concept was inspired by the work of philosopher Michel Foucault, sociologists within the Chicago School—including Erving Goffman and Howard Becker—and by the anthropologist Mary Douglas. Hacking outlined his new approach to labelling theory during a 1986 conference entitled ”Reconstructing Individualism”, held at University of Stanford. A key component of Hacking’s theory was the idea of ‘dynamic nominalism.’ Hacking explained this term as follows:

The claim of dynamic nominalism is not that there was a kind of person who came increasingly to be recognised by bureaucrats or by students of human nature, but rather that a kind of person came into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented. In some cases, that is, our classifications and our classes conspire to emerge hand in hand, each egging the other on. (Hacking, 1986: 228)

Following his paper at the 1986 conference, Hacking embarked on what he calls his ‘making up people project’. Through this project, Hacking has analysed the emergence of a number of different types of “made up people”, including child abusers and people with split-personality disorder and autism.

Over the thirty years since he began the ”making up people” project, Hacking has developed and expanded upon his theories with the addition of the concepts of ‘moving targets’ and ‘looping’ (Hacking, 2007: 285-318). Hacking argues that “made up people” become ”moving targets“ as they change in reaction to politically, medically, and socially imposed categories and classifications. The process is cyclical: as “made up

people” change, this in turn changes the nature of the category itself. ‘Names interact with the named’ in a process that Hacking refers to as a “looping effect” (Hacking, 2006: 23-26). As he developed and expanded his theory in a body of publications, Hacking has persuasively argued that the application of labels fundamentally changes how those who are labelled are understood, how they behave, and how they live. The concepts which emerged within Hacking’s “making up people” project have influenced the work of scholars from a wide range of disciplines, often in ways that Hacking himself did not originally anticipate or intend.

In his keynote speech at the “made up people” conference, Hacking gave an overview of over forty of his publications relating to the “making up people” project. Hacking’s overview illustrated the extent to which the project has changed and developed since its inception. The project was shaped by Hacking’s interest in the new categories of people that he saw emerging—each in a unique way. Indeed, Hacking remarked that he saw ‘no reason to suppose that we shall ever tell two identical stories of two different instances of making up people’ (Madsen, 2013: 36). Hacking’s reiteration of this point at the close of his key note resonated with the aim of the conference: to interrogate whether Hacking’s concept of “making up people” can usefully be applied to an ostensibly disparate range of medical, social, and political categories, studied by scholars who apply this theoretical tool in many different ways.

Following the keynote, Claire Sewell (University of Warwick) presented a paper entitled “‘A Vital Role’: The Emergence of the Carer for Mental Disorder in 1960s and 1970s Britain.” Sewell demonstrated that Hacking’s theory of dynamic nominalism offered a

route into an area of study previously overlooked by historians: the place of the family in post-war British mental health care (Thomson, 1998: 2). Whilst families have provided care for relatives with mental illnesses and disabilities for centuries, Sewell argued that the category of the family carer for mental disorder did not emerge in Britain until the 1960s-1970s. In the context of the closure of long-stay mental hospitals, and moves towards a policy of community care, the category of the family carer became more visible. At the same time as the prevalence of familial care of mental disorder was seen to increase, various interested parties--including social scientific researchers, social policy makers, and non-governmental organisations--debated the category of the family carer. As a result, the category of the carer become more formally acknowledged and negotiated. By 1989, the white paper *Caring for People* identified family carers as the main providers of community care (Department of Health and Social Security, 1989: 83). Thus, Sewell's paper demonstrated how Hacking's theory of dynamic nominalism could offer new insight into the histories of the post-war family and community care.

Jennifer Crane (University of Warwick) gave the next paper at the "Made up People" conference. Crane's paper was entitled the 'Changing Conceptions of Child Abusers between 1960-2013', and drew upon Hacking's article, 'The Making and Molding of Child Abuse' (Hacking 1991). In this article, which was based on research conducted in the mid-1980s, Hacking argued that 'the very idea of child abuse has been in constant flux over the past thirty years' (1991: 253). A variety of terms have been deployed to label child abusers since 1960, when the 'battered child syndrome' was first conceptualised. These terms include 'paedophile', 'stranger danger', 'child molester', 'sex offender', and 'perpetrator.' Crane's paper highlighted an apparent contradiction in

the conceptualisation of child abusers, evident from 1960 to the present day. This contradiction is that there has been a tendency for policy makers, media, and public to simultaneously view child abusers as, on the one hand, inherently inhuman and dangerous ‘others’, deserving of nothing but punishment and contempt, and, on the other hand, as troubled or even ill individuals in need of help and rehabilitation. In 1960s Britain, social policymakers and medical researchers tended to focus upon “battered families”, who they understood to be both the cause of, and the solution to, the “battered child syndrome.” In modern Britain, Crane argued, these dual conceptions persist. Child abusers are simultaneously constructed as ‘monsters’ and ‘perpetrators.’ In highlighting these contingent presentations, Crane suggested that the social construction of child abusers remains in ‘flux’, and prone to simplification and dichotomy. Therefore, Crane’s paper demonstrated that labelling theory continues to provide a useful tool for historians and policy-makers to better understand and contribute to the important--yet often emotive and politicised--debates around child abuse.

The next speaker, political scientist Christopher Browning (University of Warwick) has written that ‘over the last 15-20 years, the concept of nation branding has gained considerable currency, with various countries initiating branding campaigns’ (Browning, 2013: 1). In his conference paper, ‘Citizens: “Nation Branding, Subjectivity and Citizenship’, Browning demonstrated that Hacking’s theory of “making up people” is not only a useful tool for the study of ‘types’ of people, but can also be applied to the study of nation-branding. Browning’s paper considered how nations present themselves to foreign markets, and how this process of nation-branding reflects the changing nature of the international system and ideas about national identity. How a nation brands itself

externally also changes domestic conceptions of what it means to be a good citizen. Illustrating this, Browning noted a shift from the notion of the ‘good citizen’ as an idea based on the concept of heroism, to one rooted in consumerism. Shal Bar-Haim (Birkbeck, University of London) gave the next paper, entitled ‘Motherhood and the Emergence of the ‘Regressed’. Focusing particularly on the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi, Bar-Haim discussed the emergence of the category of ‘regressed’ in British psychoanalysis after the Second World War. In this period, the term ‘regression’ came to signify the withdrawal of an individual, usually following a mental crisis, into an early developmental stage of their childhood. In ‘Making Up People’, Hacking argued that, in the case of multiple personality disorder, ‘the category and the people in it emerged hand in hand’ (Hacking, 1986: 165). Bar-Haim argued that the inter-subjective diagnosis of regression, created between patient and doctor during psychoanalysis, could similarly be understood as a process of ‘labelling’ from above and below.

The final paper of the day, ‘Munchausen: Self-harm, Child Abuse and the Internet’, Chris Millard (QMUL) called for a reassessment of Hacking’s ‘making up people.’ Considering the case study of Munchausen syndrome, Millard pointed to the limitations of the concept of ‘making up people’ as a study of the process of identity formation. Hacking reflected in 2009, ‘I do think there is a widespread phenomenon I called “looping”. Classifying people has an effect on how they conceive of themselves, they internalize how they are classified’ (Madsen et al, 2013: 37). Munchausen syndrome is a condition ‘whereby a patient deliberately simulates symptoms of an illness in order to gain admission to hospital and gain the sick role’ (Doherty and Sheehan, 2010: 179). Millard argued that in the case of Munchausen syndrome, the very processes of identity

formation theorised in ‘making up people’ are disrupted, because patients refuse to accept their diagnosis by psychiatric and medical professionals. The theory of “making up people” therefore, cannot be uncritically applied to the study of any and every classification.

The papers presented at the conference demonstrated that the ideas which emerged from Hacking’s “making up people” project are still useful to scholars working in a range of disciplines – particularly when used as a framework through which to open up new areas of inquiry. Finally, in a roundtable discussion, the conference considered the applicability of Hacking’s concept of “making up people” to the current academic turn towards epigenetics and neuroscience. These emergent fields claim to offer new biological ways of understanding the make-up of groups of people, and even society generally. Some delegates believed these disciplines had the potential to provide a new perspectives on the questions raised by the conference. However, others cautioned against the reductive potential of these approaches to the study of the past, and emphasised the continued importance of what we might call “the social”. The conference itself demonstrated the importance of reconsidering histories of the family, medical categories, and identity. Such scholarly pursuits lend themselves particularly well to an interdisciplinary approach, of which “the social” must be an integral component.

To listen to podcasts from the Made Up People conference please visit

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/chm/events/conferences_workshops/madeup_people/podcasts/. The Made Up People conference was generously funded by the Wellcome Trust, and the Department of History and Centre for the History of Medicine at

the University of Warwick. The organisers of the conference have since established a Made Up People network. If you would like to join the mailing list, please contact c.s.l.sewell@warwick.ac.uk or j.m.crane@warwick.ac.uk.

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