



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## You Think Too Much, That's Your Problem!

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### Abstract

Since my teens, I have been told that if I didn't think so much, I would be fine. But I wasn't fine. It's been a long journey from reading psychology textbooks in the local library, through mental health services, activism, education and Mad Studies to where I am now.

In this paper, I look back on a life of "thinking too much" and see that trying to make sense of myself and of the world I live in was not the problem. It was and still is the means through which I continue to live. In short "thinking too much" has been and continues to be my main "coping mechanism" or as hooks puts it "a location for healing".

I finish with a list of what I consider to be conditions necessary for fruitful thinking too much.

### Keywords

Hermeneutical justice, autoethnography, Mad Studies, activism

### History

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From early childhood, I was accused of thinking too much. I am going to explore this accusation and reframe it as a 'coping mechanism' that helped me cope with, and to some degree overcome, the experiences that later led me to a mental health diagnosis. However, a coping mechanism has its limitations. I want to be clear about when thinking too much worked for me and when it wasn't helpful.

What does it mean to think too much? I think the adults in my life meant a number of things. Sometimes they meant I sat around thinking and not actually doing the things they wanted me to do. Sometimes they were fed up with the questions I asked and the things I thought about.

I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing.

(hooks, 1991, p. 1)

What hooks calls theory is what I see as thinking to make sense of the pain and powerlessness of being a child. I was trying to make sense of my life, other people and myself because life was painful. However, the adults in my life didn't understand this.

## **1. Beginning**

I was born in 1966 in the Republic of Ireland. That same year, the minister for education announced free secondary education. Unlike my parents, I grew up in a society where staying on at school after the age of 14 was expected. Ireland was a country where we knew and we didn't know about the widespread abuse of children and women incarcerated in the various church-run institutions. Human experiences such as pregnancy, sex, menopause, cancer and madness were only talked about in whispers, if at all. I remember hiding behind a sofa spying on a conversation about my father's cousin's cancer and he showing the scars from his many operations. I went to ask my mother about cancer and why this man had such large scars. Her answer was to tell me off for eavesdropping and not to talk about it to anyone.

There was a particular secret in my family that I only found out about by chance in my mid-teens. The year before I was born, something awful happened in my family, and it had an immense impact on me as an infant onwards. I would say more but I am still caught up in this and need to not go into details here. This is too public and I still feel too vulnerable. So this family trauma and the silence around it shaped me into the contrary child, the attention seeking child, the child with an emptiness that grew up to the adult writing this, still with that emptiness that will never be filled, but can be lived with. Though it sometimes overwhelms me and makes life feel unliveable, it has also been why I continue with thinking too much - what this special issue calls 'coping mechanisms'.

## **2. Reading**

I learnt to read at the age of 4 – I think I can still remember the delight when letters became words! One of my favourite memories was bouncing around in the back of my father's car, chanting B.A.R. and rushing to my mother when I got home, asking "what does B.A.R. mean?" and delighted with the answer, bar, a word I knew! And I could now read a word! A very Irish learning to read story!

Reading gave me new worlds but the new worlds were foreign worlds – middle-class England and America – where I felt 'othered', as a girl and as an Irish person. I struggled to understand these other worlds and to understand my own world in relationship to them. I realised when Enid Blyton wrote so disparagingly of foreign people, that she would have included me. I read about Irish children in an American encyclopaedia and felt misrepresented. All I could have said at the time was that it was wrong and unfair.

But I kept on reading. I realised printed words could tell you interesting things that adults wouldn't. Books and newspapers didn't tell you to mind your own business. And some of the worlds books opened up were full of wonder. Our local library had a large collection of children's books in translation. Fiction from Europe didn't mention Ireland and girls weren't less than boys, and I was fascinated by the differences from Irish life. I also loved mythology and legends and, most of all, science fiction. I was thinking hard about what I read and the questions they raised about my own life and my society. And a lot of these questions were met with annoyance and boredom.

"Stop thinking too much!"

"None of your business!"

"How should I know?!"

"Oh for God's sake!"

"Haven't you anything better to do?"

### 3. Rumination and intellectualisation

What I got from my parents, my school and my community was keep your head down, don't ask questions, do what you're told and what everyone else does, and, whatever else, don't think too much

So when I struggled with lack of hope, with low moods that came out of nowhere, the non-stop tears, my sudden bursts of energy and irritability, I was told "no wonder you are miserable and crazy, you think too much". I thought too much about myself and too much about what was wrong with the world, when I should pray more and work more and think more about other people (*life is hard, what made you think it wouldn't be?*).

Looking back, I think that my key survival skill – thinking too much – can be seen as me challenging epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice, a term coined by philosopher Miranda Fricker,<sup>1</sup> explores the experiences of people who are discounted as knowers because of their subservient status. She describes two kinds of epistemic injustice. The first is testimonial injustice, where the less powerful person is not believed or listened to by more powerful people. As a child, I was not taken seriously by adults, who dismissed me as being ignorant or disobedient or contrary. The second kind is hermeneutical injustice, when less powerful knowers are denied the resources to make sense of their experiences. As a child, I was expected to accept the adults' understandings of life. But through thinking too much, I was trying to overcome this injustice.

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<sup>1</sup> See Fricker 2007 and Kidd, Spencer, and Carel (2022)

I can see now that my thinking too much - my contrariness, persistence, and perseverance – kept me going. I was not backing down – I don't think I could have! Why not? Because not knowing and not understanding hurt. I was already hurting within, though I didn't yet understand what was going on. Like so many other children, I blamed myself for how I was seen in my family. I didn't know anything about attachment theory, which though I have some issues with as a theory, does help me understand the difficult emotional situation that I was born into, following on from the event that happened the year before I was born. However, I also take issue with the focus on the mother in attachment theory, or at least how it is applied. The attachment between my infant self and my mother was in a particular familial, social and political context. We were not isolated individuals. I think one of the main reasons for how attachment theory blames mothers has to do with its basis in research into white western nuclear families and yet applied almost universally.<sup>2</sup>

And it wasn't just at home or in the wider family. My experiences of school were similar. I was told I was too smart and too lazy. I was told off for reading too far ahead in the English book. A teacher sneered at me for being a "walking encyclopaedia" – which I took for a compliment until my friends told me she didn't mean it that way. In secondary school, a tiny group of us were studying honours maths, physics and chemistry, and a senior teacher called us the "intelligentsia" and meant it as an insult! My school was about getting us through exams and into a 'good' job with a pension, or into university to do a degree that would also get us a 'good' job.

A couple of teachers stood out as more encouraging – but I didn't meet them till near the end of my schooling. And by then, the pain of my childhood had developed into low mood, anxiety, and self-hatred. The adults in my life dismissed it as hormones. Looking back, the lack of willingness to help me figure out what was going on was another experience of epistemic injustice.

#### **4. Mental Health Services**

I didn't come into contact with mental health services until I was 28. I had gone to university where I experienced more periods of low mood and hypomania. I lived with an almost continuous sense of anxiety and dread. I studied for a science degree but I was pretty sure it was the wrong degree. *But it would lead to a 'good job'*, I thought. I sat in on some English literature lectures and one philosophy lecture, which asked 'How do we know this table is real?' This was not a good experience for someone in the amount of distress that I was. Doubting my perception of the physical world was too frightening for me and I never went back to philosophy.

I emigrated to England after I graduated. I was told by someone close to me to seek help and I saw a Gestalt therapist for a few years. I think it helped but I still struggled. I dropped

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<sup>2</sup> See Keller 2021.

out of a master's degree, left my job and claimed unemployment benefits. I walked miles every day, thinking and listening to the same few cassettes on my cheap brand Walkman. I moved to Edinburgh thinking a new city would mean a new Anne. It didn't.

I fell apart on my 28<sup>th</sup> birthday and a friend encouraged me to see a GP. I had no idea why a GP could help someone as awful as me. But she did. She listened and told me to come back and listened again. A prescription for fluoxetine and a referral to a psychiatrist followed. I was also referred to a homelessness hostel as my flatmate in a manic state decided she was selling her flat and I needed to leave as soon as possible. A few months later, I was offered a flat with a housing association. A secure tenancy and living on my own was one of the most positive mental health interventions I have had.

My experience of mental health services was not as awful as many other people's. I don't think I had any really bad experiences, but I had plenty of mediocre responses to my pain and to my many questions. I felt invalidated and patronised. I've been told many times by 'professionals' that I live too much in my head, and that is why I am depressed. I've been told I am too intelligent to be depressed, that I am smart enough to figure things out on my own so I don't need support. It was actually better to appear more stupid and less aware, to focus on the pain than on my understanding. But that didn't help either. It seemed to me that they didn't respect me either way.

Someone once told me that, after surviving suicide, they talked to a psychiatric nurse about trying to find the point of living. She was told "Don't think about things like that, it will make you ill again". Thinking "too much" was of course me trying to make sense of my experiences and of myself. I experienced it as an attempt to heal. But I was told directly and indirectly that this was why I was 'ill'. Cognitive behavioural therapy was becoming very popular in the late 90s, and when I first heard of it, it appalled me. It sounded to me that it pathologised and blamed people for incorrect thinking. I have a more nuanced take on it now, but I am still suspicious of it. I don't think it will ever be something I would consider.

My best experience of mental health services was my 5 years in group analysis. Here, my thinking was never seen as too much but appropriate. Sometimes, I was told that I was thinking to avoid feeling, but it rarely felt like an accusation. It seemed to be an encouragement to allow feelings which I feared would overwhelm me. The few times the therapist mentioned theory, they were speaking to me. I felt affirmed and validated in my capacity for thinking. I left the group after 5 years because the analyst left to work elsewhere and the NHS no longer ran long-term groups. The emphasis in mental health services is now on short-term work with people. Yet it took me a year to feel safe enough in that group to open up. I decided then to stop trying to get help through formal NHS services.

I have some other positive experiences from different people and groups. The common themes here are:

- respect for how I am, that thinking too much is on the whole a positive aspect in my life
- an understanding of the political, social and cultural context that I/we are living in, and a willingness to explore it
- support in connecting emotions with my thoughts and my body in deep ways

After my mother's death, I decided to see a therapist. It was over 9 years since I had left group analysis and during that time, despite recurrent episodes, I didn't feel the need for any formal support. We got on well and I found being back in therapy made me both anxious and excited. I tried to explain this – that I spent a lot of time thinking about it all and wondering about it. I felt a reawakening of a part of me that had been dormant for a while. So when he asked one day something like “do you still ruminate?”, I was not happy! Ruminates sounds like I was going around in unproductive circles, and I just needed to change how I was thinking! Old buttons being pressed. I don't think I was ruminating, it was productive and exciting!

But I recognise there have been many times when I just circled around the same thoughts, getting caught up in them. Psychoanalytic theory talks about defences, unconscious ways of defending us from intense emotional pain – intellectualisation is one of them. It is a way of moving away from emotions by focusing on the rational. And yes, I have often used thinking to get away from feeling – which is often necessary. Sometimes my feelings are so overwhelming that it is good that I can detach from them. What I need is not to be told off or blamed for that. But I also come to understanding and accepting my emotions through thinking about them.

I was hurting - life was and still is painful - but not knowing, not understanding is also painful in itself. I still struggle to understand and I always will, but I'm OK with that now. I can't imagine not wanting to understand more, and the world is too much for one person to understand in one lifetime. It hurts a lot less now because I know it's impossible to fully understand anything and that's fine.

The things that helped me most included reading about gay people, about writers and their lives, about feminism, about socialism, and about different cultures and possibilities and different ways of living. Science fiction in particular opened my mind up – the world didn't have to be like it was now. Music was also part of this – music and lyrics and dancing and sleeve notes and interviews and reviews – getting the New Musical Express every week and the Face every month from the one newsagent in town which stocked them.

The things that didn't help me included the psychology dictionary which told me I was a pervert; the novels that I read to find out about sex which were so misogynistic and damaging; the stories that insisted that the only future for me was marriage and children OR misery and loneliness; the newspaper articles that described my country as backward and miserable (though it was!); and the lack of any representation of my own life and community.

It was exhausting, all this reading and searching for information about sex, looking for hope that my life didn't need to be like my mother's, trying to understand what was really wrong with me and wondering would I ever be happy? But it has been important for me and has enriched my life.

## 5. Activism

I stumbled into mad activism.<sup>3</sup> A couple of months after being told I was mentally ill, I came across *Beyond Diagnosis*, a creative magazine edited by and for people with mental health problems and that led me to hear about activism and advocacy.<sup>4</sup> Here I found community and new ways of thinking. Within a year, I no longer thought of myself as mentally ill but as 'having mental health problems' and as disabled. We thought of disability, not as an individual impairment, but as society disabling us through attitudes and barriers – disabled in the social model sense<sup>5</sup>, whereby society disabled us because of our 'impairment'.

Moving from seeing myself as ill and situating how I was treated in the social world, not the individual brain or psyche, was liberating. Through formal discussions and informal chats, without realising it, I was learning so much. My fellow Madpeople had so many different experiences – of madness, of services, of treatments as well as broader life experience.

We were cynical, naïve, hopeful, despairing, political, distrusting, inspired, amazed, well-informed, educated, innocent, strategic, ignorant. A blind activist told us about the social model of disability. We shared the latest books and articles on mental health. We learnt about how local government and the NHS worked; about how to respond to policy changes; about how to insert ourselves in spaces where we weren't expected to show up; about how to speak and when to withdraw tactically; about what was happening in other places in Scotland, in the UK, across the Atlantic - we didn't know much else and not much of the other places; about how to run groups and chair meetings and encourage quiet people to talk and chatty people to listen. Often by failing! I learnt most of my group work skills in these often very heated debates. It was an education! Emotional, intellectual, political, relational! It was hard and demanding and supportive and interesting! That collective learning continues to be my focus – through my research and through my teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> See O'Donnell 2007.

<sup>4</sup> See CAPS 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See Spandler, Anderson, and Sapey 2015.

## 6. Critical pedagogy/community education

I hadn't been in work for a few years but had been very active as a service user rep – a couple of people I respected suggested I do a community education course. Community education is a Scottish field of practice that encompasses adult education, youth work and community work and is now usually called Community Learning and Development.<sup>6</sup>

I applied for, and was accepted onto, the MSc in Community Education at the University of Edinburgh. I wasn't too sure that I wanted to do it until I went to the interview. I enjoyed the conversation with the lecturer and the field worker so much that I left excited to get a place. It was even better than I had hoped. The course was criticised by many as too theoretical; but I loved it. I drank it all in. I loved the readings, the discussions, the whole atmosphere of thinking mattered and affected what we did as community educators and as people. I was introduced to Freire who wrote about praxis which he defined as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970, 52). He talked about education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination.

Through doing the master's, I developed a sense of myself as a community educator as well as an activist. I was able to connect mad people's oppressions with those of other groups. For example, the cause of solving homelessness was mad people's business too. I had been homeless myself, which had led me to psychiatry, and I was not the only one. But we had always seemed to be in silos so we didn't engage with homelessness activism or anything else, just mental health. This was partly to do with capacity and that we were funded by mental health. But it was also because of our lack of thinking beyond our particular concerns with psychiatry.

The course brought me into a community of workers and I continued to engage with academia through talking to students about my activism and community education journey. When I finally got a job where I could, I supervised students on placement which I loved. And it led me to my current research – looking at the experience of collective advocacy in Scotland in the 1990s and 2000s.

## 7. Mad Studies

Mad Studies is an area of study informed by the experiences, activism and advocacy of people who have been on the receiving end of services and/or incarcerated in a psychiatric facility. Mad Studies is born from the perspectives, writings, art and cultural work of academics and non-academic service user/survivors.

(Costa & Ross 2022, p. 1)

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<sup>6</sup> See Tett 2010.

My involvement with Mad Studies came through the user group's connections with David Reville and Kathryn Church in Toronto.<sup>7</sup> I was excited to find a space to bring thought and action together, ideas and politics. It opened up new conversations and possibilities. Because of Mad Studies, I found a way to do research about my experience of activism. I even became a lecturer for a couple of years, teaching Mad Studies scholars and learning so much from them. Here, thinking too much was a good thing!

### **8. Fruitful thinking too much**

So I would say to those who told me that I think too much, that your idea of what that means is not mine. That *thinking too much actually means thinking in a way that you do not understand or cannot tolerate*. That it is about questioning the taken for granted and connecting thoughts and feelings and beliefs. That it is not selfish or self-indulgent or daydreaming but an opening up to the world and to others. So this desire to know and to understand is a type of healing for me. It led me to activism, to the mad community, to mad studies, to community education, to research, to teaching, and to writing this article. I often feel quite lonely at times in this endeavour to make sense much as I also feel connected to so many others who are doing similar work.

In no particular order - the conditions necessary for fruitful thinking too much:

- other people to talk about all this with
- openness and curiosity
- access to ideas – through books and the internet and conversation
- and a commitment to action

We need all our thinking and our loving and our feeling – we need to nurture our own and each other's curiosity and courage and commitment to a better world.

### **Integrity statement**

I declare that this manuscript is my original work, has not been published before and is not currently being considered for publication elsewhere.

### **Conflict of interest statement**

I declare that I have no known competing financial or personal relationships that could be viewed as influencing the work reported in this paper.

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<sup>7</sup> See O'Donnell 2010; O'Donnell, A. and K. Maclean 2019.

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