



Mental Health Paradox: When Being Mentally Healthy Becomes A 'Toxic' Ideal

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Abstract

Despite growing global concern about young people's mental health, dominant research and policy approaches continue to privilege individualistic understandings of mental health, increasingly equating it with wellbeing and positive feelings. This paper introduces the concept of the **mental health paradox** to explain how the growing imperative to achieve and maintain an ideal state of mental health and subjective wellbeing can generate self-assessment and self-surveillance and, therefore, new forms of discomfort. Drawing on relational materialist approaches to childhood, the paper conceptualises the mental health paradox as a relational, emergent effect of contemporary discourses that position positive feelings as indicators of health while framing discomfort, uncertainty, confusion, and sadness as signs of individual deficiency and sub-optimal mental health. The paper explores the understandings of mental health that Ecuadorian adolescents construct. The study draws on participatory interviews, focus groups and photovoice activities conducted with adolescents aged 14–17 across three socioeconomically diverse schools in Ecuador. Findings suggest that mental health, as a concept, is constantly evolving and shaped by political and economic interests. Participants' accounts exposed how the current dominant discourse of mental health creates new interpersonal dynamics, illustrating the operation of the mental health paradox. By foregrounding adolescents' perspectives, the paper contributes to relational childhood studies by connecting young people's everyday experiences to broader sociopolitical processes, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions about mental health and wellbeing, and offering alternative conceptualisations to inform future interdisciplinary, situated, and globally engaged research and interventions that question what kind of mental health we are striving for and why.

Keywords: Children; self-care; self-optimization; self-surveillance; well-being