

Book Review: Psychology in the Bathroom by Nick Haslam

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The toilet is a focus of intense emotions, unseemly interests, strange afflictions and earthy humour.

Psychology in the Bathroom looks to survey a variety of embarrassing processes, shameful disorders and disgusting habits. **Elizabeth Cotton** recommends this book to anyone curious about the politics and psychology of 'dirty protests' and 'defensive flatulence'.



Psychology in the Bathroom. Nick Haslam. Palgrave Macmillan. 2012 / 2014.

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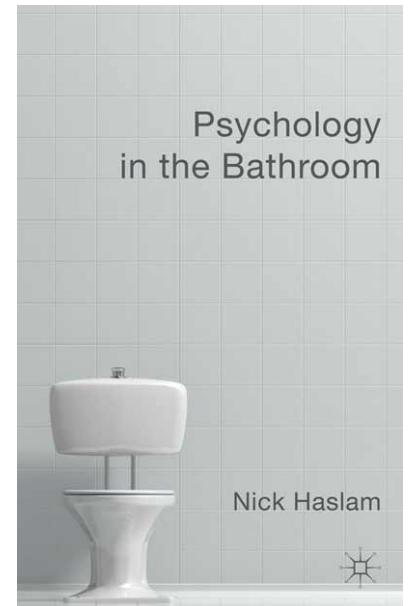
It doesn't get better than this. A book that unlocks the door into the rich material of what goes on in the bathroom.

For anyone attracted to the title, this book is important because, much like sex, there continues to be a remarkable inhibition even in psychological and therapeutic circles to talk about our attitudes to excretion.

Those of us working in mental health will have had the opportunity to reflect on the importance of the physical process of digestion and expulsion in understanding our psychic realities. The experience of taking stuff in and getting rid of waste, and the meaning and symbolism of this process is profound. Our communications in the bathroom are heavy with meaning, such as the phenomenon of the '[dump and run](#)', or the ground floor ladies' loos in the Tavistock Clinic – the site of a powerful 'dirty protest' against the 'toilet therapist', and against hope and progress in the UK's mental health system. This book is wanted.

The seven main chapters are divided into the concrete stuff of bowels, bladders and flatulence, moving on to the symbolism of potty mouths, latrinalia (toilet graffiti) and the ethics of the toilet seat. There are some informative sections on different physical disorders such as IBS and incontinence, and how we might understand them psychologically and symbolically. Each chapter analyses the gender differences in our attitudes towards phenomena such as toilet seats and farting – a 'different-but-equal' framework that because of lack of space is something of a broad stroke.

The section on scatological swearing explains the pure joy of adopting a fruity vocabulary. From "shit-for-brains" to the boastful "crapper", this is a brilliantly dry run through some potty mouth articulations. However, by this stage the book starts to lose pace and enthusiasm, with the section on the culture of the potty mouth only three paragraphs long. This is followed by five pages on coprophagia – the compulsion to 'eat shit' – at which point the book starts to go wrong and left me feeling, well, a bit dirty and lost. The section on latrinalia is a dry analysis – none of the chuckle of actually sitting on the lav and reading graffiti. Instead some bizarre selections of miscellaneous mots as 'practice makes pervert', which feels like the experience of when someone says 'I'm a really funny person'; unnecessary to say if true.





Envirolloo dry toilet top part of the composting system at public toilet in Norderstedt, Germany. Credit: SuSanA Secretariat CC BY 2.0

I thoroughly enjoyed the sections on the psychoanalysis of ‘defensive flatulence’, with case studies from a Jungian psychoanalyst which may cut close to the bone for some of us sharing an open plan office. There are some wonderfully condensed sections on really juicy topics such as inhibitions – paruresis and psychogenic urinary retention – and scatological swearing and the compulsion of coprolalia.

Finishing this book, though, was a strangely sanitising experience. This is maybe because without a psychology through which to understand the phenomena in the book, it becomes stripped of meaning. In the first chapter, Haslam proposes a ‘post-Freudian’ psychology to frame his ideas – claiming that psychology needs to re-address the emotions around excretion, following the ‘discrediting of psychoanalysis’. He states there is a renewed interest amongst psychologists in the content of mental life and emotions and that the “time is ripe for psychologists to take a second look at excretion”. I could not at any point understand why he would need to do that or where this left us. I felt intellectually stranded and thinking that when it comes to the murky stuff of sex, piss, and shit, surely Freud is the biggest show in town?

Freud took our experiences of evacuation very seriously as a primary developmental process – linking our sensual experience with early relationships and our symbolic understanding of the world around us: his psychology and sociology of excretion, an important basis for social organisation and exclusion, and fundamental to our dependency on others. In Freud’s Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality he shockingly presents his ideas on component instincts – our sexual drives developed out of erotogenic zones including what we can politely call the ‘anal’: the satisfaction of learning to control and communicate through excretion and his ideas on how they shape neurotic and perverse aspects of our internal worlds. A gripping read over 100 years on.

Haslam’s argument for a post-Freudian perspective seems to be in the chapter on the Anal Character, which is the focus of his critique of Freud. Although Freud does indeed have some views about the anal, developed in the ‘neo-Freudian’ work of Erich Fromm, this is not a fair critique of Freud. Freud’s thinking is much broader, taking as primary human experience in understanding and finding meaning. Psychoanalytic ideas evolve – but this insistence on going past their meaning doesn’t take us forward, rather a strong desire to move backwards when ideas could be understood in the context of ordinary human life.

I was unbearably excited in the anticipation of the book’s arrival. The perverse pleasure of coming to mind as a reviewer for a book of this content, and uncontrollable joy at having a legitimate reason to ‘talk shit’. The book works well on social media, is a joy to quote, and is full of statements that generate delightfully excited reactions. For example, Haslam shares that Darwin suffered from flatulence and Alfred Kinsey liked ‘urethral perversions’, and

includes dry statements like “Acquiring control over exertion is a major landmark in human development”. Worked for me.

I have genuinely enjoyed this book but Haslam is right when he says that we try to put great psychological distance between ourselves and our shit. I cannot recommend this book highly enough if you want to have a good Christmas but if you want to understand the psychology of the bathroom then you could do worse than go back to Freud. A psychoanalytic perspective on shit, an important perspective on contagion and projective identification which are live in this age of austerity and the super-virus.

Elizabeth Cotton is the founding director of The Resilience Space and the Surviving Work Library www.survivingwork.org.

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