Nearly one in five Americans live with mental illness. The Diagnostic And Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) defines and legitimates what counts as mental disorder, while informing reimbursement practices for treatment. Understanding how mental health professionals use the DSM is crucial given the economic, social and individual repercussions of mental illness. To understand the impact of the DSM, I document how mental health professionals use the DSM in their research and clinical work, while also detailing how the DSM operates as an institutional tool.

I conducted ethnographic observations at a large neuroscientific laboratory, documenting the data collection and analysis practices of researchers engaged in a longitudinal study on psychiatric symptoms and mental disorders. I also observed DSM-5 workshops, webinars, and the annual meetings of both the American Psychiatric Association and Society for Biological Psychiatry. Additionally, in-depth interviews were completed with 27 mental health professionals (psychologists and psychiatrists) who were engaged in both clinical and research work. Participants were institutionally based, working in public hospitals, veterans’ administration hospitals, academic medical centers, or outpatient mental health clinics. Analysis was informed by both grounded theory and actor–network theory.

**KEY FINDINGS**

- The DSM influences research by informing how mental disorders are operationalized and how research participants are selected. The DSM influences clinical work by impacting how disorders are conceptualized, how disorders are formally diagnosed, and how diagnoses evolve throughout treatment.
- The DSM connects professionals to insurance interests through reimbursement pressures and bureaucratic policies. The DSM connects professionals to pharmaceutical companies through companies’ influence on research and diagnostic categories.
- Professionals critiqued the DSM’s impact on treatment and research. Participants endorsed numerous social scientific and popular critiques of the DSM (e.g., the DSM defines some normal behaviors as psychiatric disorder).

**Figure 1. DSM Influence on Research and Clinical Work.**

**Figure 2. DSM Linking Insurance and Pharmaceutical Companies to Professionals.**

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