“Power, Interest & Psychology: developing David Smail’s ideas”

Conference paper titles and abstracts

Thursday 12th November

1 Richard Wilkinson

Inequality: the enemy between us

Using research from around the world published since ‘The Spirit Level’, Richard Wilkinson will suggest the psychosocial pathways through which inequality reduces the subjective quality of life for a large majority of the population. He will show how it damages the social fabric, increases social anxiety and contributes to mental illness.

2 Mark Fisher

It's not your fault: consciousness raising and the deprivatisation of stress

Neoliberalism has privatised stress. While working conditions, pay and social security have declined, the therapeutic culture which has aided and abetted neoliberalism has encouraged us not to see these as political problems which can be addressed by collective action, but as forms of individualised stress which must be managed by drugs, positive thinking or mindfulness. In order to overcome this, we need to reverse neoliberalism's project of responsibilization. Instead of 'taking ownership' of distress that has been imposed upon us, we need to find ways of linking individual suffering to the distal causes which have produced it. The best strategy for doing this is a practice developed by socialist-feminism: consciousness raising. Consciousness raising worked by encouraging people to talk together about their feelings - which precisely had the effect of depersonalising suffering, and directing attention to the power structures which actually produced it. How can we revive consciousness raising in the 21st century?

3 Lisa McKenzie

The rich, the rich, we've got to get rid of the rich

This is the chant of 1,500 protesters marching across Tower Bridge in London on a very wet and very cold Saturday afternoon in January. This was the very boisterous and loud section of the 'March for Homes', which started in Shoreditch in east London and led by the FocusE15 campaign. A group of young mothers and their children which were forcibly evicted out of a homeless hostel in 2013; the hostel sits in the shadow of the billion pound developments of the Olympic Park and the Westfield Shopping Centre. The campaign and fight of the Focus E15 mothers is just one example of the terrible and cruel ways that working class families and young mothers in particular are being treated in austerity Britain. This is the consequence of inequality gone mad, unrestrained markets, and a lack of empathy for those who struggle to survive in a rampant neo-liberal campaign for wealth and more wealth to be redistributed upwards. This is my current research examining what is happening to working class families, and how precarious their lives have become because of the structuring forces of the open market. Drawing upon my previous research in St Ann’s in Nottingham I will show how working class people and their communities have been de-valued to such an extent the land that they live is worth more than them.
4 Jan Bostock

Understanding power in order to share hope

The psychological consequences of poverty, abuse and discrimination are palpable and debilitating, and Clinical and Community Psychologists are in a position to represent this in our research and practice. We can account for how economic, social and organisational inequalities and deprivation influence communities and individuals, and understand how social processes can be undermining and also how they can generate resilience. We can also use our resources to work with others actively and publicly.

While inherently challenging and problematic, I would like to suggest psychological practices that share hopeful ways forward with individuals, organisations and communities. Acknowledging and understanding the overwhelming physical and emotional consequences of the misuse of power can be a validating process that generates collaborative alliances. We can draw on David Smail’s framework for analysing people’s proximal powers in the context of distal forces to consider the scope people have to act individually or collectively, and to be open about the limitations and potential of psychological interventions.

5 Midlands Psychology Group

IAPT: Interest, Austerity, Psychological Therapy

In his work, David increasing referred to the notion of 'interest' as a fundamental influence on all human behaviour. In his final book, 'Power, Interest, and Psychology' he referred to interest as the way that "we need always and everywhere to struggle with and adjust to the material demands of our existence" (p. 3). The aim of this talk is to discuss some of the implications of this struggle including how it has profoundly affected the theories and practices of therapeutic psychology. David located some of the most damaging effects of interests in the context of the neo-liberal onslaught from the early 1980's. He encouraged the replacement of therapeutic 'insight with social 'outsight' in order that the interests of those in power become more visible and explicitly linked to psychological distress rather than obscured by idealist / individualist psychotherapy. It is hoped that this talk will contribute to such outsight as we seek to trace the growing intensification of neoliberalism and its relationship, via the concept of interest, to current levels of psychological distress.

6 Steve Melluish

A different world is possible

David Smail, in his book Power, Interest and Psychology suggests that, ‘We are not bound to accept the ‘real world’ as one in which the ‘bottom line’ defines right and wrong’. We do not have to acquiesce in the impoverished vocabulary and banal ideological apparatus of institutional business’. He proposes that that the kind of world we want is an ethical choice; one founded on the notion of compassionate solidarity with others and therefore, perhaps, ‘a better world is possible’.

‘Un mundo mayor es posible’ (‘A better world is possible’) is a slogan seen on billboards throughout Cuba and encapsulates the idea that a fairer, more egalitarian way of organising the way we live is a possibility and an alternative to the one offered by the existing neoliberal capitalist system. This ethical idea of compassionate solidarity is something that, I argue, is the foundation of the Cuban approach to healthcare and its model of psychology. Since the Cuban revolution in 1959, Cuba has existed uniquely isolated from the globalised world and the dominant neoliberal ideology of individualism and consumerism. While this isolation has meant the Cuban people have suffered
many privations, it has created a unique social experiment, in which a different model of society has been constructed founded on ethical principles and solidarity. In this paper I focus on Cuba’s health system, its approach to internationalism and its model of psychology to illustrate how a socially situated psychological practice indicates that another psychology is possible.

7 Dave Harper

From the individual to the social: The promise (and problems) of a public health approach to distress

David Smail’s work provided an excellent example of how one might view individual distress within its social context, a context which ranged from the level of interpersonal relationships to the forces of global capital. In this presentation, I will review how individualised solutions to emotional distress are increasingly preferred over collective or structural approaches. Within medicine the discipline of public health has proved to be a useful counter-balance to this tendency. I will discuss some of the benefits offered by adopting such an approach in mental health whilst also acknowledging the need to address some of its problems (e.g. the rather uncritical use of heterogeneous diagnostic categories of varied validity and reliability).

8 Dave Pilgrim

Necessary ambivalence in the work of David Smail: a critical realist reflection

Certain trends and seeming contradictions can be spotted in the work of David Smail. His early work focused heavily upon justifying and offering a humanistic form of psychotherapy. Later he began to question whether therapy was over-valued and possibly largely futile. Eventually he located mental health status firmly in proximal and distal material social conditions. In this presentation that ambivalence will be summarised as an example of a collective dilemma about psycho-social complexity. That dilemma was not David’s alone but was, and is, present for anyone in the mental health industry, whether we are therapists, researchers or service users. My presentation draws upon the philosophy of critical realism to illuminate that shared ambivalence for us all.

EVENING BUFFET MEAL (OPTIONAL)
Friday 13th November

9 Kate Morris and Brid Featherstone

Supporting Families: towards a social model of child protection

Nationally we have seen a growth in the numbers of children entering the care system and in the number of child protection investigations, including a growth in unfounded investigations, where no risk of harm is identified but families experience an often traumatic encounter with social workers and the child protection systems. Research shows the rates of care and protection interventions are directly linked to levels of poverty and deprivation. Alongside this model of child and family social work preoccupied with risk management and assessment, families are increasingly experiencing limited access to informal support services as a result of reduced funding and the changing landscape for child welfare provision. This potent mix of reduced family support and interventionist child protection practice has particular consequences for families and with the rise of discourses focused on 'troubled and troublesome' families we can see real challenges for families and for practitioners in building supportive working relationships. The argument will be made for a fresh approach to protecting and supporting children and families, one that engages with inequality, poverty and their consequences and offers a model building on strengths, capabilities and capacities.

10 Julia Faulconbridge

Schools, Wellbeing and Clinical Psychology

Working in a consultation role in a large secondary school over the last few years has provided me with a window into that world. I will discuss my observations on the impact of political and social changes on students and staff and how the culture within a school can have both positive and negative impacts on psychological well-being. I will consider the opportunities for whole school community engagement in making change happen.

11 Iyabo Fatimilehim

Working across boundaries in services for children, young people and families

My experience of working with children, young people and families has been one of crossing "boundaries". These boundaries are multi-faceted and impacted by cultural contexts, service contexts, economic and political imperatives, organisational structures and personal and professional values. This talk will take a brief look at the implications of these boundaries for working with children and families in contemporary British society.

12 MAC-UK

Co-producing services with excluded young people in the community

MAC-UK is a charity which was founded in 2008 to radically change the way in which mental health services are delivered to our most excluded young people. In this session, Youth Trainers and practitioners from MAC-UK, will share our ways of working with excluded young people in the community that are based on our 'Integrate model'. The Integrate model is a set of service design and practice principles that have been co-produced with young people to reach out to, and effectively support, multiply excluded young people who otherwise find it difficult to access services.

In this model, mental health, understood using the Ecological Systems framework, is at the heart of the approach. Because of this framework, MAC-UK projects seek to change the systems and services around young people, building community cohesion, access to resources and services, as well as
support young people to create change for themselves and improve their emotional well-being and resilience. The Integrate model encourages youth-led practice and co-production across all aspects of service development and design, from employing those with lived experience in our projects to asking for young people's help to plan youth-led activities. We hope by the end of the session, attendees will come away with further understanding about the needs of this group and a different way of conceptualising mental health services that we hope move us a step closer towards David Smail's ideas.

13 Mary Boyle

The Continuing Dangers of Vulnerability

I wrote about the dangers of ‘vulnerability’ about 10 years ago in a collection of tribute essays to David. The increasing popularity of the notion of vulnerability, then, seemed to illustrate one of the major themes of David’s writing – how psychological ideas both operate within an implicit framework of power and function to make this framework, and its impact on people’s lives and identities, invisible. Since then, the idea of vulnerability has become even more popular. This presentation will revisit some of the issues raised in the earlier paper, examine why ‘vulnerability’ might now be more popular than ever and more difficult to challenge, and suggest some alternatives.

14 Lucy Johnstone

Speaking our minds as clinical psychologists

A combination of international debates about psychiatric diagnosis, failure to find biomarkers to validate the ‘illness’ model, and emerging evidence on the role of trauma, abuse and social inequality in mental distress, is creating the possibility of fundamental change in mental health systems. However, despite the recent ‘Position Statement on Classification’, clinical psychologists have always had an ambivalent attitude to challenging psychiatric power and influence. This tension will be explored in relation to key areas of theory and practice.

15 Andre Brühka

Relational Commons: de-commodifying the power of relationships

Andre is a psychiatric survivor. He will engage the audience in a lively discussion about our “Relational Commons” and the need to liberate them from the shackles of “therapeutic” mystification. Invoking David Smail by exposing the professional models of understanding which obscure our shared experience of wholeness.

He will challenge the commodification of relationships and describe how these models legitimise hierarchical patterns of relating, which individualize the “problems” they seek to define, decontextualizing them from their true origins.

He will show how political & market forces maintain their ostensible ownership of the knowable by marketing institutionally accredited “science” as the only true path to understanding. This assault on self knowing has created a global industry of false consciousness, which both manufactures and deploys numerous methods of social control, that weaken the power of our everyday interactions and pacify resistance.

He will relate this to self-authorship – our inalienable right to be authors of our own experience & how this correlates with integrity, authenticity and personal authority. Setting it against the “mental
health system” which colonises experience with its own currencies of language, imposing psyempreacist interpretations and pseudo narratives, which are often internalised as an “architecture of otherness”.

16 Craig Newnes

What Then Must We Do?

The world is dominated by doing – from doing therapy to doing up shoe laces. This paper briefly examines some of what continues to be done by Psy experts. Doing less seems never an option and a systems theorist might suggest that doing anything will be met by opposing forces to maintain the homeostasis. A few tentative suggestions are made for a more cautious praxis within the Psy industry.

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