

# Introduction

**D**AVID SMAIL (1938–2014) authored more than 50 journal articles and book chapters. His last book, *Power, Interest and Psychology*, was published in 2005. His other books include *How To Survive Without Psychotherapy* (1996), *The Origins of Unhappiness* (1993), *Taking Care* (1987) and *Illusion and Reality: The Meaning of Anxiety* (1984). David was appointed Head of Clinical Psychology Services in Nottingham in 1969, a post he held until his retirement in 1998. He was also Special Professor in Clinical Psychology at the University of Nottingham.

David's writings were consistently informed by his clinical practice, and place distress firmly in its material context, and recognising how feelings, thoughts and behaviour are shaped by economic and social circumstances. David proposed that to understand why we are unhappy, rather than insight, we must cultivate 'outsight' into the world around us. This perspective – which encourages personal modesty, appreciation of luck, compassion, and recognition of our common humanity – is today more relevant than ever.

This exciting interdisciplinary event, inspired by David Smail's work, was put on for anyone wanting to understand the connections between psychology and disciplines such as sociology, epidemiology, philosophy and cultural studies. In addition, it was a demonstration of the continuing relevance of Smail's ideas and of the traditions upon which they draw. Our expert speakers informed, enthused and inspired, pointing the way to a sophisticated psychological understanding of clinical distress that is fit for the many challenges facing us today.

What does 'austerity' have to do with poor mental health? When psychotherapy is offered, just what is occurring, and how does it work?

How can we understand and work with the meanings of clinical distress across the age range? And how might psychology contribute to efforts to improve the everyday lives of us all?

The two-day conference explored questions such as these with reference to the important writings of David Smail. A series of eminent speakers from psychology and related disciplines discussed some of the issues and concerns raised in David's work. Their talks showed how his work points to difficult challenges, but also to exciting opportunities. Their contributions demonstrated the significance of David's work, in psychology and beyond, while also showing how psychology can be greatly enriched by knowledge from other fields.

From outside of psychology, high-profile speakers included Professor Richard Wilkinson (author with Kate Pickett of *The Spirit Level*); Professor Kate Morris and Professor Brid Featherstone (authors with Susan White of *Re-Imagining Child Protection*); Dr Mark Fisher (author, *Capitalist Realism*); and Dr Lisa McKenzie (author, *Getting By: Estates, Class and Culture in Austerity Britain*). And from within psychology, well-known speakers included Professor Dave Pilgrim, Professor Mary Boyle, Dr Lucy Johnstone and Dr Dave Harper. One of the conference sessions was a free public lecture, open to all. In this presentation, Professor David Pilgrim of the University of Liverpool talked about what he calls 'necessary ambivalence' in the work of David Smail. Using ideas drawn from critical realist philosophy, Professor Pilgrim explored how David Smail's ideas about psychological therapy changed over time, and then argued that these changes are in fact reflective of a wider dilemma facing all who work in mental health. Professor Pilgrim is both an accomplished speaker and the author of many highly regarded books and papers, including *Understanding Mental Health: A Critical Realist Exploration*.

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