

Reflections on organising the power, interest and psychology conference

Midlands Psychology Group

And then there were six...

It was mostly with feelings of relief that members of the Midlands Psychology Group (MPG) reached the end of the two-day Power, Interest and Psychology Conference. As conference co-organisers, it seemed we had achieved the overall aims and that much time had been spent paying tribute, remembering and celebrating David Smail's ideas. At the same time, individual members of the group, to varying degrees, experienced mixed feelings about the two days. We continue to think and talk together about these and about the continued influence of David's ideas on the profession of clinical psychology.

Inspired by oversight and people outside of clinical psychology

ASOURCE OF CONSIDERABLE inspiration for us was the way that all speakers referred explicitly to David's work, often quoting particular phrases and ideas which captured important meanings for them in their own work. This was perhaps one reason for what seemed like the overall success of the conference, with the focus on David's work meaning that ideas from a diverse range of speakers were brought together in a thoughtful and coherent way. It was particularly heartening to hear of the continuing relevance of his ideas to so many different disciplines and struggles for justice on the part of local communities and their representatives. David would surely have been gratified to know this.

A unifying theme of the conference was the notion of 'oversight', the call again and again to look beyond the individual for the sources of, and also solutions to, distress in our societies. It therefore seemed particularly apt that this message was evident in the presentations of many of the speakers. In fact, where presentations had a particularly critical edge, they were often from people outside of psychology such as Richard Wilkinson, Mark Fisher, Lisa Mckenzie, Kate Morris and Brid Featherstone. This reminded us that David's work spoke often to how the web of power and interest we are all ensnared within might constrain our abilities to voice more candid critiques of the profession.

Comforted and encouraged from being with like-minded people

One of the main reasons the Midlands Psychology Group (MPG) got together in the first place was due to 'a feeling among its founding members that the workplace no longer offered opportunities to think honestly about theory and practice in psychology, whether academic or clinical/counselling. This may not be everyone's experience of course, but in our case not only did there seem to be no time to get together with others to discuss and reflect upon what we are doing, and trying to do, in our work, but also the dominance of business practices in the

management of both the NHS and the universities meant that when people did get together, it was to compete rather than co-operate' (MPG, 2006). Latterly it seems to us that these inhospitable circumstances may have evolved further towards expecting compliance without questions, let alone offering any kind of thoughtful critique. Many presentations emphasised the importance of friendship to psychological wellbeing both in our personal lives and in the workplace. Whilst we have developed that friendship with each other in the MPG, it was comforting to witness the sense of solidarity and support that can be achieved when we come together to share experiences of ideas and practices that are troubling. So for some of us, hearing that David's ideas are continuing to reach and influence people, and leading to small pieces of action, helped to give a sense of the many possibilities that his work can inspire. Essentially, in our opinion, that experience of solidarity is important for us all in giving us the confidence, energy and encouragement to continue challenging dubious theories and practices within psychology – such as the use of psychology in the return to work agenda of the DWP. As we have said previously: 'the group (and David's work) has continually given us the comfort of having our clinical and intellectual realities acknowledged (making it less likely that we end up feeling deficient ourselves); the clarification that comes with finding more accurate explanations for the trials and tribulations we sometimes face; and the encouragement to struggle, in whatever small way, to address our concerns. In this, at least, we are no different to many of the people referred to us' (MPG, 2015).

If most people left the conference feeling satisfied and comfortable, then in some ways this is surely a good thing. But does it truly reflect the more radical challenges of David's work? Starting out as a thoughtful defender of psychological therapy, David gradually became one of the most trenchant critics of his own field. Far from developing the scientific theories and tools to explicate the truths that confronted it, clinical psychology had opted

instead for the rhetoric of treatment; sacrificing integrity to expediency in its bid to win the approval of state funding agencies keen to adjust people to their situation, rather than help them to question it. Though David approved on ethical and scientific grounds of the viewpoint of community psychology, focused upon social power as the key to distress and to wellbeing, he nevertheless warned against hubris. He doubted that troubled communities, any more than unhappy individuals, could be fixed to order by self-appointed experts, however well intentioned they might be (Smail, 2005).

Within the conference, it was this questioning spirit that occasionally seemed to be muted, or lacking. Perhaps people were not always challenged enough. As a group, our feelings were mixed when hearing about ideas and practices which seemed closely aligned with mainstream clinical psychology. We wondered about the possibility of introducing a greater degree of challenge and critique.

Demystified and mystified

A central aim of all our writing in the MPG is that of clarification and demystification, of highlighting why certain ideas and ways of thinking gain purchase, and in whose interests this is. We were therefore pleased to hear some powerful presentations exposing the toxic effects of inequality, of the privatisation of stress, of unrestrained capitalism and of the damaging effects on families of massive cuts in social security (welfare) and support services. Those services that remain are turning increasingly toward the punitive surveillance of the poor and the vulnerable (Clark & Heath, 2015; Lansley & Mack, 2015). In exposing realities like these, the speakers helped to clarify and demystify issues around work, housing, health including public health and child protection where, so often, the political is individualised and detached from the social and material world it operates within and through.

David Smail's work was not necessarily welcome within the mainstream of the psychology profession. As we said in the recent CPF tribute issue: 'Being part of MPG became increasingly important to David in later years, as his ideas sometimes received a lukewarm reception and he was seemingly marginalised by the mainstream of the profession in the UK. In this context, he felt strongly that acting and writing collectively was one way of countering responses of cultivated professional deafness to his work.' (MPG, 2015). Hence, what felt like the unanticipated hailing of David's work from the establishment of clinical psychology was difficult to make sense of. We were to some degree surprised and mystified by the level of enthusiasm of the Division of Clinical Psychology (DCP), including a subsequent offer to produce a special issue of *Clinical Psychology Forum* to represent the event. We wondered whether this shows a genuine commitment to taking David's criticisms of the profession seriously or a tendency by the mainstream to co-opt

dissent through subsuming it within its borders. Has virtue signalling arrived in clinical psychology?

If David wasn't always popular within the profession, there are obvious reasons for this. Bostock, Fatamilehin and Godsi (2015) describe how: 'David's remarkable legacy to those who knew and worked with him was both professional and personal. With a sharp intellectual rigour, he was uncompromisingly frank as well as gently compassionate in the way that he analysed how self-serving power and the market affect both the providers and users of services. That vision alerted us to fake doctrine and the self-delusion that clinical psychology could be a cure-all. It ensured we kept our professional claims modest and at the same time offered some comfort about our own limited personal and professional potency, and an insight into the impact of more benign environments' (p.17).

Clearly, it is against the interests of many clinical psychologists to question the effectiveness of their wares. In health services now dominated by business models that have overtaken medical models, this is ever more important. Bostock, Fatamilehin and Godsi go on to discuss how David Smail pioneered community psychology but ultimately the market for psychological therapies has hugely overridden this; there are no recommendations for community psychology in the NICE guidelines. It does not fit with care clusters and payment by results and the exhortation to 'recover', assuming you take the view that you have something to recover from of course.

The MPG believes 'that psychology – particularly but not only clinical psychology – has served ideologically to detach people from the world we live in, to make us individually responsible for our own misery and to discourage us from trying to change the world rather than just 'understanding' ourselves. What are too often seen as private predicaments are in fact best understood as arising out of the public structures of society' (www.midpsy.org).

But this is not always a popular way of thinking. It challenges the presumed divisions between mind and body and self and world that have long been taken for granted within Western culture and in the field of psychotherapy, in particular (Cromby, 2015; Epstein, 2006; Throop, 2009). It exposes the hollowness of the UK government's ideologically chosen programme of 'economic austerity', which conceals its destructive effects behind a specious nostalgia for bygone days of stoicism and self-sufficiency (Hatherley, 2016). This is of course the same neoliberal government that is intent upon destabilising, cutting and ultimately privatising the health and care services that employ many psychologists (see David & Tallis, 2013; Mendoza, 2015). In circumstances like these, especially, it is not surprising that many of us would rather not ask too many troubling questions about the scientific and political basis of our work. This is not simply because such questions seem to threaten our personal and professional interests. It is also because most of us want to fit in to our profession, few of us like to be wrong about ideas

that are fundamental to how we earn our living, and perhaps sometimes simply because we have heard arguments like these before, are bored of hearing them because we feel we can't do anything about them, and so don't want to hear them again. Like all creatures we move away from sources of discomfort.

Resolved?

Throughout history, stories are told again and again, of things people would rather not know. The hope is that the stories will somehow stop whatever it is from happening, or from happening yet again. Yet happen they do. Many different and terrible things are happening to many people, right now – in Guantanamo Bay, in Syria, on the beaches of Kos, on the deprived estates of Britain – yet our knowing this does not necessarily lead to change. It is not so much that we don't care. It is perhaps more that we both intentionally and unintentionally cut off from such knowledge in order to go on with our own lives. It is perhaps that we are living comfortably ourselves and have no need to face problems which seem far away from us, problems which don't directly or even indirectly affect our lives that much. And yet these distal powers continue to have very real embodied effects in peoples' lives. To borrow from Pink Floyd, has the profession of clinical psychology become comfortably numb?

David Smail believed that clinical psychology, as an intellectually based discipline, should be critical to its core: constantly prepared to examine its own assumptions and whose interests they ultimately serve. Despite our lingering questions, we feel that this conference represented an important opportunity to pay tribute to the work of our friend and colleague. David has left us with an invaluable body of work and memories that will continue to provide us with the inspiration and courage to speak out against injustice both within our profession and in wider society.

The Author

Midlands Psychology Group

www.midpsy.org

References

- Bostock, J., Fatamilehin, I. & Godsi, E. (2015). A tribute to David Smail: From Nottingham and beyond. *Clinical Psychology Forum, A Tribute to David Smail*, February 2015.
- Cromby, J. (2015). *Feeling bodies: Embodying psychology*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Clark, T. & Heath, A. (2015). *Hard times: Inequality, recession and aftermath*. Hampshire: Yale University.
- Davis, J. & Tallis, R. (2013). *NHS SOS: How the NHS was betrayed – and how we can save it*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Epstein, W. (2006). *The civil divine: Psychotherapy as religion in America*. Reno: University of Nevada.
- Hatherley, O. (2016). *The ministry of nostalgia*. London: Verso.
- Lansley, S. & Mack, J. (2015). *Breadline Britain: The rise of mass poverty*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Mendoza, K. (2015). *Austerity: The demolition of the Welfare State and the rise of the Zombie Economy*. Oxford: New Internationalist Publications Ltd.
- Midlands Psychology Group (2006). The Midlands Group – Introduction. *Clinical Psychology Forum*, 162.
- Midlands Psychology Group (2015). Comfort, clarification, encouragement...and solidarity. *Clinical Psychology Forum, A Tribute to David Smail*, February 2015.
- Smail, D. (2005). *Power, interest and psychology: Elements of a social-materialist understanding of distress*. Ross-on-Wye: PCCS Books.
- Throop, E. (2009). *Psychotherapy, American culture and social policy: Immoral individualism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.