

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Mental Health – Affect and the individual

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Abstract: Mental health is a dominant discourse in UK Higher Education and Society. The Economic and Social Research Council's 2019 Delivery Plan cited the need for Mental Health Research in relation to: Productivity, Prosperity and Growth; Living with Technology; Changing Populations; and in relation to positioning the UK in a Changing World. Mazzarella (2009) argues that society is inscribed on our nervous system and in our flesh before it appears in our consciousness. What is the affect that this pervasive discourse is creating? Are individuals rather than social structures being targeted? Drawing on a mixed methods systematic review on the mental health of PGRs and reflections on work of the University of Sussex's Research England and Office for Students PGR Catalyst project, this paper explores the extent to which the mental health 'tsunami' is manipulated and integrated into the machinations of the 'happy' neoliberalised global knowledge economy (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2014).

Paper: Mental Health – Affect and the individual

Discourses are powerful, encompassing not just the language that is used to constitute knowledge about a particular topic, but also the practices that are associated with it (Dunne, Pryor & Yates, 2005). They position and shape what and how we experience the world and we are constituted in the language of the discourse (Usher, 1996). In short, they shape what it is possible to do and say. The future of higher education is frequently theorised using disaster and crisis metaphors to justify reform: Ruins (Readings 1996), Tsunamis (Popenici 2014) and Avalanches (Barber et al, 2013). Is the discourse and depiction of mental health just another crisis narrative (Baron, 2017)? Yet this discourse is not limited to higher education, but identified as a challenge for contemporary society to address. The UK's Economic and Social Research Council's Delivery Plan (2019) cited the need for Mental Health Research in relation to: Productivity, Prosperity and Growth; Living with Technology; Changing Populations; and in relation to positioning the UK in a Changing World. If we accept that this discourse is powerful to the extent that society is being inscribed on our nervous system and in our flesh before it appears in our consciousness (Mazzarella, 2009), what affect is this having? In this

presentation, I will argue that the discourse of a mental health crisis further intensifies the emotional geography (Kenway and Youdell, 2011) of the neoliberalised knowledge economy. Within the knowledge economy all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized (Brown, 2015:10). Yet, whilst it is driven by the materialities of financialisation, there is also a powerful psychic and affective economy of shame, pride, humiliation, anger, disappointment, despair and anxiety (Morley, 2016). Affect is a phenomenon, neither appearing before or after a given point but as part of the whole. Affect is the emotions, responses, reactions and feelings that are cultural practices, not individual psychological states (Wetherall, 2012).

Drawing on data from the University of Sussex's Research England and Office for Students Postgraduate Research Catalyst project, we found that doctoral study is saturated in affect. One male postgraduate research student commented that, "pain and suffering have become normalised in the life of academics", whilst another female doctoral researcher questioned, "So does that mean if I stay academia I'm basically signing up to a life of poor mental health? I really feel that and that's terrifying, and not—even just saying that makes me really anxious". Gender your participants?

With the neoliberal knowledge economy project calling for the individuals to see the various parts of their life (health, education, employment) as investments in themselves for which they are entirely responsible and, through their investment, will make them better market competitors (Bowser 2015), there is a danger of reductionism. For example, in seeking to 'fix' the problem counselling services and mental health support providers focus excessively on the individual e.g. promoting the idea that "Resilience and Wellbeing IT STARTS WITH YOU, I can, I will: End of story". In short, individual agency to address the crisis of mental health is being privileged. Wider socio-political concerns including student debt, employment precarity, Brexit and fears about the future funding of intellectual work are overlooked. The emphasis on approaches that simply seek to 'fix the individual' without addressing some of the organisation or professional cultures or recognising dominant higher education discourses risk beginning to treat mental health as 'just another metric', a bean counting exercise. Regulatory authorities are increasingly looking to capture metrics on mental health. For example, recent data demonstrates an increase in the prevalence of mental health difficulties amongst students. In 2013, 1 in 5 students reported having a mental health problem (National Union of Students, 2013). Only 3 years later, however, this figure has increased to 1 in 4 (YouGov, 2016). Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) shows a 210% increase in the number of students terminating their studies, citing poor mental health as the reason (The Guardian, 2017). This would allow mental health to be integrated into the machinations of the 'happy' global knowledge economy (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2014). We need to challenge this individualisation of the political.

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to hyper - and pessimistic – activism. I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (Foucault 1983: 231/2)

The dual discourses on mental health and the knowledge economy, whilst not inherently liberating or oppressive, are dangerous.

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