

British Sociological Association Sociology of Mental Health Study Group symposium

***A Difficult Alliance? Making Connections between Mental Health and
Domestic Violence Research and Practice Agendas***

7th June 2011, Edge Hill University.

Report for the Foundation for the Sociology of Health and Illness

Angela Cotton and Lydia Lewis (BSA Mental Health Study Group co-convenors)

The symposium aimed to strengthen the dialogue and reinforce important connections between critical sociological research around domestic violence and mental health research. It presented an opportunity for cross-disciplinary fertilisation of ideas and provided a discursive space within which to disseminate theoretically informed, conceptual and empirical sociological work which needs to inform mental health policy and practice.

The symposium brought together researchers, practitioners and people who had experiences of the distress associated with domestic violence. The audience of nearly 100 academic sociologists and mental health researchers, students, and users and providers of domestic violence services and mental health services within the statutory and third sectors, alongside representatives from the police and probation service as well as local government presented a rich opportunity to explore the symposium theme of 'making connections' with the aim of making some impact upon mental health practice.

The format of the event was a combination of plenary, 'key note' presentations, workshops and a closing plenary feedback and discussion session, with the overall objective of facilitating meaningful engagement for all participants. The programme is outlined below. In addition, we were lucky enough to include a local singer songwriter, Claire Mooney in the days' proceedings. She provided music inspired by feminist thinking about violence and performed an original composition based on the days' proceedings at the end of the day.

The event drew upon a range of sociological research and theory and reflected the important influence of feminist praxis (understanding in order to act) in researching experiences of mental health and domestic violence and in supporting women. It also engaged with debates about the appropriate and effective definition of 'violence' and its context and concerns about recognising and responding to diversity among those affected. It provided an important opportunity to consider what these bodies of knowledge, influences, concerns and debates mean for mainstream health, and particularly mental health policy and practice.

The juxtaposition of sociological (including feminist sociological) and medical discourses of domestic violence and mental health during the proceedings of the symposium illustrated the complexities and politics of this area. The operation and influence of these potentially conflicting narratives within health and justice discourses provided a worthy topic of exploration and opportunity for consideration of these complex tensions. One which received considerable attention on the day was the existence, on the one hand, of the very real need for women to be listened to, and heard, and receive sensitive mental health care, and on the other of the continual danger within the current service context of disclosure and help-

seeking serving to pathologise women's distress, and the concomitant loss of focus upon justice and depoliticising of domestic violence by individualising and personalizing experience. The shape services need to take in order to guard against this was a significant point within the closing discussions.

A briefing paper arising from the event has been produced and disseminated within academic and practice circles. A draft of it was presented at the BSA Medical Sociology Group conference in Chester on 15th September 2011. In addition to the briefing paper, presentations from the event and a longer report of the workshop on Gender and Mental Health Services have been made available on the BSA Sociology of Mental Health Study Group web site. We have explored the possibility of publishing a themed section of the journal *Social Policy and Society* based on the event but unfortunately this idea has attracted only limited interest from contributors to the event. We will nevertheless be offering on-going guidance and support to presenters from the third sector who expressed a desire to publish their papers and will be considering other alternatives for publication of the event's proceedings.

We would like to thank the Foundation for the Sociology of Health and Illness for supporting this important initiative. Our thanks also go to Elaine Forrester and Gillian Mason at the BSA and Suzanne Farrall and Vicky Hall at Edgehill University for administrative help. Thanks as well to the University of Leicester and Edgehill University for supporting us to organize the event and to the other organizing committee members, who are listed below. We would also like to extend our appreciation to all those who presented, facilitated and participated on the day and who made it such a worthwhile and successful event.

Proceedings

Plenary speakers were as follows:

- Jackie Patiniotis and Lisa White, who spoke about their work with *The Joint Forum Women's Group* (a women's mental health service user group in Liverpool);
- Professor Liz Kelly CBE, who presented on, *Reasonable responses to unreasonable behaviour? Medical and sociological perspectives on the aftermaths of sexual violence;*
- Marai Larasi, Director of Imkaan (an award-winning National second-tier organisation dedicated to challenging the violence against Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee (BAMER) women and children) who discussed *Experiences within Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic and Refugee Communities;*
- Professor Linda McKie, Glasgow Caledonian University, who gave a presentation entitled, *States of Denial: Gendering Policy & Practice in Domestic Abuse and Mental Health;*
- Professor Catherine Donovan, University of Sunderland, who drew on an ESRC funded study to speak on, *Exploring Implications of the Impact of Mental Health Issues on Those Experiencing Domestic Violence in Same Sex and/or Trans Relationships.*

These key note presentations were combined with workshops on 'making connections' and 'identifying research, practice and policy agendas' within the following substantive themes:

- Gender and mental health services (facilitated by Dr Lydia Lewis, Lisa White and Jackie Patiniotis);
- Domestic Violence, Substance Misuse and Mental Health (facilitated by Jennifer Holly from Against Violence and Abuse [AVA], The Stella Project);
- Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic, Refugee (BAMER) Issues (facilitated by Marai Larasi, Imkaan);

- Motherhood, Maternity, mental health and domestic violence (facilitated by June Keeling, University of Chester); and
- Risk (facilitated by Caroline Rowsell and Michelle Moore, Sefton Council and Margaret Brown, Merseycare).

A summary of all presentations and workshops is available in the briefing paper.

Selected delegate feedback

The following evaluation is presented based upon feedback from a return from 31 delegates.

1 Overall the Study Day has been:

Excellent 12 Very Good 15 Good 5

2 The Key Note presentations were generally:

Excellent 17 Very Good 10 Good 5

3 The general standards of the workshops were:

Excellent 8 Very Good 13 Good 11

4 The setting for the Study Day was:

Excellent 16 Very Good 13 Good 3

5 The catering was:

Excellent 9 Very Good 8 Good 10 Average 5

6 The administration / organisation was:

Excellent 11 Very Good 13 Good 7

Comments:

"The conference gave us permission to speak, in a very supportive environment and we found it really encouraging. I think a lot of learning and hopefully better mental health practice will come from it."

"A welcome opportunity to discuss issues relating to mental health and domestic violence. An excellent day – Thank you."

"More of the same please – in the North and Midlands."

"Interested in any other courses, information which can be offered."

"Interested in further training and workshops."

"Great overall. The day seemed a bit rushed in terms of allowing time for discussion – few opportunities for Q & A or presentation feedback."

"Enjoyed it immensely. Thank you"

"A fantastic delivery that has had such a positive influence on my knowledge within the area. Very valuable source I can carry through my career and learning."

"Really enjoyed it – but not enough time in one day to do the subject justice."

“Thank you for the opportunity to meet and hear such invaluable views – inspirational. Particular thanks to Marai for insight into racism and blocks to services.”

“This has been a fabulous chance to make connections and re-make connections. Thank you!”

“Stimulating speakers – feel I’ll take a lot from today back to colleagues who were unable to attend. Would be helpful to have slides from all plenaries and workshops made available on study group website.”

“Very interesting, informative, engaging. Good opportunities for sharing experiences and networking with other individuals and health care / academic organizations.”

Expenditure

This is broken down in the table below. Registration fees were: BSA members £10; non BSA members £15. A limited number of funded places were made available for those without institutional support to attend and these were taken up by 19 delegates.

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| Catering at Edgehill University (£18.95 per head for 95 delegates) | £1500.00 (net cost) |
| Travel and accommodation (presenters, organisers and funded delegates) | £649.03 |
| BSA bank charges | £15.01 |
| Total | £2164.04 |
| Income from registration fees | £855.00 |
| Amount claimed | £1309.04 |

Organising committee:

Dr Angela Cotton – Edge Hill University (BSA Study Group)

Dr Lydia Lewis – University of Leicester (BSA Study Group)

Dr Helen Baker – Edge Hill University (Department of Criminology)

Margaret Brown – MerseyCare Women’s Mental Project Manager

Dr Vicki Coppock – Edge Hill University (Department of Social and Psychological Sciences)

Sarah Lyons – Edge Hill University (Department of Social and Psychological Sciences)

Caroline Rowsell – Domestic Abuse Co-ordinator for Sefton

Angela Cotton and Lydia Lewis, October 2011