

Opening Plenary

Wednesday 13 September 2017 at 17:00 - 18:00

Exhibition Centre, Main Lecture Theatre, Room PX001

Professor Nick Fox

**The Micropolitical Economy Of Health: A (New) Materialist
Odyssey From Food Banks To Environmental Sustainability**

The sociology of health and illness has always acknowledged the significance of materiality – not just the bodies of patients and health professionals, but also technologies such as pharmaceuticals and medical devices, and the physical spaces and places of health care such as hospitals, operating theatres and mortuaries. However, the parent discipline of sociology has often struggled to overcome its arguably foundational opposition between culture and nature, along with other deep-seated dualisms such as human/non-human, mind/matter and animate/inanimate.

In this plenary I shall explore what the 'new' materialisms now emerging in the contemporary social sciences, arts and humanities offer to the sociology of health, illness and health care. This 'turn to matter' is neither a return to the earlier historical materialism of Hegel and Marx, nor simply a re-booted post-structuralism, though both these moments in social theory are – in their different ways – avatars of the new materialisms. These latter encompass a range of perspectives, including actor-network theory, posthuman feminism, non-representational theory, biophilosophy, affect theories and assemblage approaches. They have been applied to a range of problems and issues, from gender and class to drug use, erectile dysfunction and human development, and are informing post-positivist research practices.

I shall set out the main tenets of the new materialisms, and use these to establish a materialist toolkit of assemblages, affects, capacities and micropolitics, that can be applied to address a range of health sociological topics. To illustrate this toolkit, I present data and findings from my recent research. I look first at a study of overweight and obesity (Fox et al, 2016), which explored the materialities – from food and supermarkets to food banks and slimming clubs – surrounding 'becoming-fat' and 'becoming-slimmer' assemblages. I suggest the need to move beyond an individualistic approach to obesity, and the implications for public health and policy. I then discuss recent work on the interactions between environment and human health, and use this to replace anthropocentric responses to the 'health' of the natural and built environment with a posthuman understanding of environmental sustainability, in which human health is about opportunities and becoming (Fox and Alldred, 2017).

Professor Nick J Fox has spent most of his career at the University of Sheffield, where he is currently honorary professor of sociology in the School of Health and Related Research. His first book 'The Social Meaning of Surgery' (Open University Press, 1993) was based on doctoral work, and was followed by a focus on postmodern social theory which has been central to all his subsequent work. A focus upon health technologies has been a theme, from a study of pharmaceutical use and governance, work on internet technologies and health, and more recently work on digital health and medical devices. His book 'The Body' (Polity, 2012) drew on these strands to set out a materialist analysis of health, embodiment and care. Recently, Nick has extended his work beyond health and illness, to address sexualities and sexualisation, creativity, and environmental sustainability, all from within a materialist and posthuman theoretical framing. His book 'Sociology and the New Materialism' (Sage, 2017; with Pam Alldred) aims to supply students and academics with a materialist toolkit for sociological inquiry across the discipline.

