

Lockdown: Mental Illness, Wellness, and COVID-19

An online conference
November 16-18 2020

Curtin University
University of East London

Featuring
Deborah Lupton
Will Davies
Stephanie Alice Baker
Anne McGuire

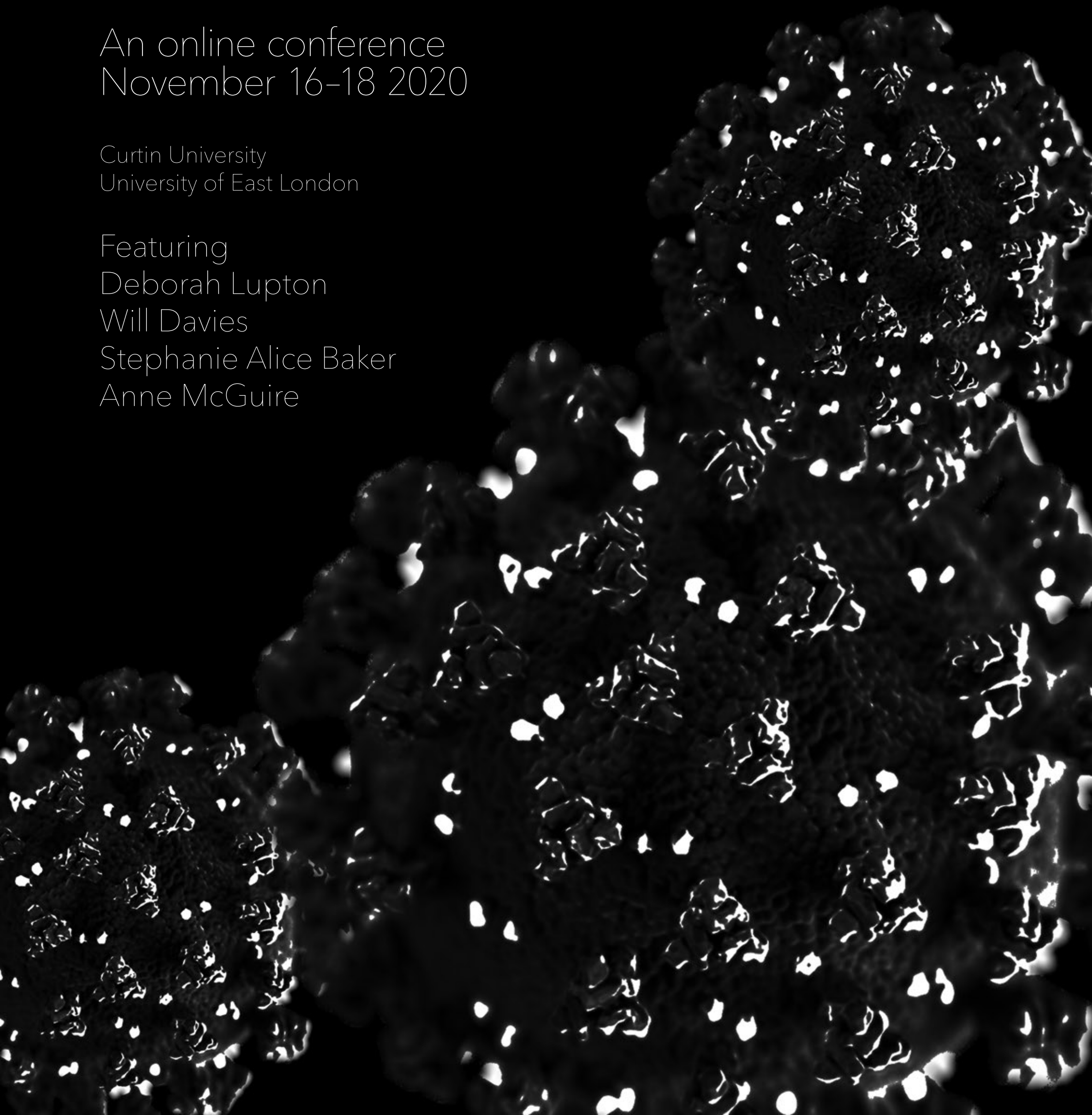


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Acknowledgment of Country

Curtin University is situated in Perth, Western Australia. As such, we would like to acknowledge and pay respect to the custodians and elders of the Nation's First Peoples and the continuation of their cultural, spiritual and educational practices. We pay particular respect to the traditional owners of the land on which our Perth Campus is located, the Wadjuk people of the Noongar nation, and on our Kalgoorlie Campus, the Wongutha people of the North-Eastern Goldfields. We would also like to acknowledge the struggles of indigenous people the world over against systemic racism, state violence, and the capitalist destruction of culture and nature. Australia always was, and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Introduction

In the wake of the global COVID-19 lockdown, digitally mediated and online forms of mental health therapy and wellness practices have proliferated. Such therapies and practices have been necessitated by the COVID-19 lockdown and its unique demands. Nevertheless, the necessity of social distancing has the potential to fuel calls for digitising treatment of mental illnesses, calls that emerge from institutions and entrepreneurs who see tele-therapies as cost effective, and as pushing a technocratic model of social-organisation, in line with the neoliberal discourse of ‘self-care’ in the service of ‘resilience’. Although there is much discussion of whether these technologies are effective or not, we argue it is important to ask beyond questions of efficacy and towards the implications of how these technologies will shape understandings of mental health and wellness.

Given the uncertain temporality of the pandemic, how will digital technologies be exploited, harnessed, opposed, and embraced? How will they contribute to determinations of what counts as mental health in the context of new and evolving cultures of work and social life beyond COVID-19?

In order to pursue these questions, Lockdown brings together academics, researchers, and a range of psychoanalysts, psychologists, counsellors, and therapists from around the world.

Conference Hosts

The Centre for Culture and Technology (CCAT), Curtin University

CCAT is located at the intersections of disciplinary and creative boundaries, and operates as a portal to cutting-edge research in media, digital practices, culture, theory and new technologies.

The Centre focuses on national competitive grant schemes and international research collaboration in cultural, media and journalism research, the creative economy and cultural science.

The proposition that motivates CCAT research across these fields is that the study of culture, with its emphasis on identity, meanings, relationships, power and values, needs to be better integrated with the study of media and digital technologies, especially the internet.

Centre for Cultural Studies Research (CCSR), University of East London

CCSR was established to serve as an international centre for research in contemporary cultural studies, cultural theory and cultural production. The centre supports research into political and theoretical issues in cultural studies and cultural practice. It is committed to interdisciplinary research in five general areas:

- cultural studies and politics
- cultural studies and its disciplinary neighbours
- cultural studies in the public sphere
- cultural studies and creative practice
- cultural studies and national contexts

Conference Organisers

Madison Magladry

Madison Magladry is an ECR and sessional tutor in MCASI at Curtin University. Their current research focuses on the intersections of feminism, femininities and digital media in women's fitness and wellness spaces. This was the subject of their doctoral thesis, which is now being contracted by Palgrave Macmillan for development into a book entitled *Postfeminism, Digital Media and Authenticity in Women's Fitness Culture: Fitspiration or Fitsploitation?* (Palgrave, forthcoming). Their broader research interests include queer theory, fandom and other participatory cultures.

Francis Russell

Francis Russell is the coordinator of the Bachelor of Arts Honours program at Curtin University. He has a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies from Curtin University, and researches the political and philosophical implications of mental illness, alongside conducting broader research into neoliberal culture. He has published with *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, *Culture, Theory & Critique*, *Space and Culture*, *Ctrl-Z: New Media Philosophy*, *Cultural Studies Review*, and *Somatechnics*. As a freelance art critic, he has published with a range of contemporary art journals, including *The Australian* and *New Zealand Journal of Art*, *Artlink*, *Eyeline*, *Runway: Experimental Art*, and *RealTime Arts*. Along with the artist David Attwood, he is the co-editor of the essay collection, *The Art of Laziness: Contemporary Art and Post-Work Politics* (Art + Australia 2020).

Jeremy Gilbert

Jeremy is Professor of Cultural and Political Theory at the University of East London, where he has been based for many years. His most recent publications include *Twenty-First-Century Socialism* (Polity 2020) the translation of Maurizio Lazzarato's *Experimental Politics* and the book *Common Ground: Democracy and Collectivity in an Age of Individualism* (Pluto 2013). His forthcoming publications include: *Hegemony Now: Power in the Twenty-First Century* (Verso 2021, co-authored with Alex Williams) and *The Last Days of Neoliberalism: Politics, Culture and Society Since 2008* (Pluto 2021)—both should finally appear in 2021, if schools ever re-open.

Deborah Shaw

Debra Benita Shaw is a Reader in Cultural Theory in the School of Architecture, Computing and Engineering at the University of East London. She is the author of *Women, Science & Fiction* (Palgrave, 2000), *Technoculture: The Key Concepts* (Berg, 2008), *Posthuman Urbanism: Mapping Bodies in Contemporary City Space* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018) and co-editor of *Radical Space: Exploring Politics and Practice* (RLI, 2014). Aside from her interest in architecture, technology and the body, she has published widely in subjects ranging from the space suit as a cultural icon to the politics of LSD and is founding editor of the Radical Cultural Studies series for Rowman & Littlefield International.

Keynotes

Deborah Lupton

Deborah Lupton is a SHARP Professor in the Centre for Social Research in Health and the Social Policy Research Centre and Leader of the Vitalities Lab. She has a background in sociology and media and cultural studies, and her research combines qualitative and innovative social research methods with sociocultural theory. Deborah is the author/co-author of 17 books and editor/co-editor of six book collections, as well as many chapters and articles, ranging across such topics as health and medicine, food, the body, the emotions and affect, risk, parenthood, digital technologies and digital data. She blogs at This Sociological Life.

Stephanie Baker

Dr Stephanie Alice Baker is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology. Dr Baker's research explores how we connect and communicate online, particularly around issues pertaining to health. Her first book, *Social Tragedy* (Palgrave MacMillan 2014), analysed how collective narratives emerge in different cultural contexts and the role of the media and social media in communicating tragic events of social significance. Her second book examined how authority and influence are constructed online in the context of health knowledge and medical misinformation. She situated this research in discussions around trust, the decline of expertise, authenticity and microcelebrity. She has published several key articles on these topics as well as a book, *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing authority and influence online* (Polity 2019), co-authored with Chris Rojek.

Will Davies

Will Davies is a political economist with particular interests in neoliberalism, history of economics and economic sociology. His work explores the way in which economics influences our understanding of politics, society and ourselves, themes which he has addressed in two books, *The Happiness Industry: How the government & big business sold us wellbeing* (Verso, 2015) and *The Limits of Neoliberalism: Authority, sovereignty & the logic of competition* (Sage, 2014). His most recent books are *Nervous States: How Feeling Took Over the World* (Vintage 2018) and *This is Not Normal: The Collapse of Liberal Britain* (Verso 2020).

Anne McGuire

Anne McGuire is an assistant professor in the Equity Studies Program at the University of Toronto. Her teaching and research draw on interpretive perspectives in disability studies and cultural studies and focus on questions of human vitality and precarity. McGuire's monograph, *War on Autism: On the Cultural Logic of Normative Violence* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), was awarded the 2016 Tobin Siebers Prize for Disability Studies in the Humanities. Her current research project traces the emergence of broad-spectrum approaches to health and illness and reads these against the backdrop of neoliberal social and economic policies.

Day One – Monday November 16th

Session One – Keynote

10:00am-11:30am GMT

Dr Stephanie Alice Baker (City University of London)

Session Two – Digital mental health, patient experience and control

12:00pm-1:30pm GMT

“Experiencing the digitisation of mental health support: AI, peer support and creative communities”
—Ian Tucker (University of East London)

“Caring at a Distance? Patient Sovereignty and mental health, post-COVID”
—Andrew Divers & Parisa Diba (Teesside University)

“Psychopower in the age contagion: A qualitative study of digital counselling and remote working”
—Michael Arribas-Ayllon (Cardiff University)

Session Three – Labour, narrative and power

2:00pm-3:30pm GMT

“Telecommuting Pedagogies: Adaptivity and White Plasticity with Home Computing”
—Renyi Hong (National University of Singapore)

“Flourishing: A participant-centred narrative study of ecotherapy, mental health and wellbeing”
—Heather Elliott (University of East London)

Day Two – Tuesday November 17th

Session One – Keynote

10am-11:30am GMT+11

Professor Deborah Lupton (University of New South Wales)

Session Two – Wellness and sociality

12:00pm-1:30pm GMT+11

“I associate long hair with being sad”: Salons and Sorrow in Times of Lockdown”
—Hannah McCann (University of Melbourne)

“Lifestyle gurus’ quarantine routines, ‘self-care’ and intimate networked publics”
—Madison Magladry (Curtin University)

“Better Living Algorithmically”
—Francis Russell (Curtin University)

Session Three – Mediated presence, crisis & coaching

2:00pm-4:00pm GMT+11

“The future is here now: How the chimera of personal control scuttles the prospects for ethical and secure relationships”
—Mark Furlong (La Trobe University)

“‘Are you there?’ Establishing and maintaining therapeutic presence via Telehealth psychology during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.”
—Leanne Downing (University of New South Wales) & Heather Marriott (Independent)

“‘I thought I was getting better at being a good mother... but then all that changed’: Mothering during a Pandemic for mothers who were already struggling with their mental health”
—Aleksandra Staneva (Independent Researcher)

“Mental coaching through crisis: Digital technologies as psychological governance during the COVID-19 pandemic”
—Neil Lindsay, Tom Baker & Octavia Calder-Dawne (The University of Auckland)

Session Four – Curating mental space: music, mood and informal therapies

4:30pm-6:30pm GMT+11

“‘It’s sad time once again boys...’: Lofi Hiphop and Wellness During COVID”
—Lana Stockton (Curtin University)

“The Effects of Virtual Reality on Stress and Emotional Tension in Social Isolation”
—Kata Szita (Independent Researcher)

“Musical Mood Tracking, Biomedicalization, and Mediated Emotional Health”
—Holly Avella (Rutgers University)

“COVID-19, mental health and digital practices among arts and creative sector workers”
—Jacinthe Flore & Natalie Hendry (RMIT University)

Day Three – Wednesday November 18th

Interview with Anne McGuire (University of Toronto) available online

Session One – Plenary discussion

10am-11:30am GMT

Debra Shaw (University of East London)

Stephanie Alice Baker (City University of London)

William Davies (Goldsmiths University of London)

Session Two – Critiques of digital therapies

12:00pm-1:30pm GMT

“UberTherapy: Working in the therapy factory”

—Elizabeth Cotton (Cardiff Metropolitan University)

“What have we lost?”

—Rosemary Rizq (University of Roehampton)

“A critique of digital mental health via assessing the ‘psychodigitalization’ of the Covid crisis”

—Jan De Vos (Cardiff University)

Session Three – Connection, intimacy and affect

2:00pm-4:00pm GMT

“Teletherapy, Contact, Intimacy, Relationality, Disconnection”

—Shaun Respass (Virginia Tech)

“COVID-19 and Networked Care: The Affective Rhythms of Online Therapy and Counselling”

—Marjo Kolehmainen (Tampere University)

“Online grief support during COVID-19. Practical and social implications of live-chat services”

—Lorenza Entilli (University of Padova)

“Thriving on the Beat: An Alternative to the Digitization of Mental Health & Wellbeing?”

—Neha Khetrpal (Central European University) & Sonal Agarwal (Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology)

Abstracts

Stephanie Alice Baker (City University of London)

Title

Influencing the ‘infodemic’: how wellness became weaponised during the pandemic

Abstract

The ubiquity of smart phones and social media have been credited with democratising health and wellness by increasing public access to health information and affording users a voice to communicate about these concerns. While the digitisation of wellness culture can be empowering by providing individuals with a sense of agency and an alternative to mainstream science and medicine, wellness culture has also contributed to the spread of misinformation and disinformation online. In this paper, I explore how wellness culture has been weaponised on social media in the context of COVID-19. I discuss how wellness influencers – and the self-branding techniques upon which their influence is established – have been deployed by a new type of celebrity during the pandemic, contributing to the spread of false and misleading narratives, conspiratorial thinking and political extremism. While wellness culture is characterised by personalised solutions, independent thinking, truth-seeking and alternative beliefs and practices, I contend that it is these very preoccupations that facilitate the fear, uncertainty and doubt that the movement seeks to erode.

Bio

Dr Stephanie Alice Baker is a Senior Lecturer in Sociology. Dr Baker’s research explores how we connect and communicate online, particularly around issues pertaining to health.

Her first book, *Social Tragedy* (Palgrave MacMillan 2014), analysed how collective narratives emerge in different cultural contexts and the role of the media and social media in communicating tragic events of social significance. Her second book examined how authority and influence are constructed online in the context of health knowledge and medical misinformation. She situated this research in discussions around trust, the decline of expertise, authenticity and microcelebrity. She has published several key articles on these topics as well as a book, *Lifestyle Gurus: Constructing authority and influence online* (Polity 2019), co-authored with Chris Rojek.

Deborah Lupton (University of New South Wales)

Title

Living Through Lockdown with Mental Health Conditions: Australians' Experiences

Abstract

In this talk, I will present some initial findings from my project involving telephone interviews with 40 Australians across the country about their experiences of the COVID-19 crisis. I adopt a sociomaterial theoretical approach to analyse their experiences that includes consideration of digital but also more-than-digital experiences and things in contributing to wellbeing or feelings of distress. The interviews were conducted between May and July 2020, a period in which all Australians were grappling with the impacts on their lives of government-imposed restrictions to limit the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. Several of the interviewees reported living with pre-existing mental conditions before the COVID crisis hit. I will discuss some findings based on their interviews, including some surprising insights into how these individuals' mental wellbeing improved in some cases, as well as deteriorated in others, as well as how people without pre-existing diagnoses coped during lockdown.

Bio

Deborah Lupton is a SHARP Professor in the Centre for Social Research in Health and the Social Policy Research Centre and Leader of the Vitalities Lab. She has a background in sociology and media and cultural studies, and her research combines qualitative and innovative social research methods with sociocultural theory. Deborah is the author/co-author of 17 books and editor/co-editor of six book collections, as well as many chapters and articles, ranging across such topics as health and medicine, food, the body, the emotions and affect, risk, parenthood, digital technologies and digital data. She blogs at This Sociological Life.

Ian Tucker (University of East London)

Title

Experiencing the digitisation of mental health support: AI, peer support and creative communities

Keywords

Experience, mental distress, digitisation, environments

Abstract

The environments of mental health care have shifted from institutions to communities and are now experiencing a third wave transformation through digitisation. Digitisation is operating across formal and informal forms of support, from online consultations, digitally delivered interventions (e.g. CBT) and chatbots developed by and for mainstream services, to social media groups and instant messaging associated with local support groups. Such moves are presenting new forms of care and support. The immediacy of digital support can be beneficial at times of need but also challenging in terms of feeling a responsibility to be ever present for others seeking support. The potential of tools such as chatbots to learn personal preferences regarding coping strategies and modes of support can be valuable, and yet replicating the power of the empathic relationship in digital form remains elusive and as such limits the human-digital therapeutic relationship. Digitisation is not only about access formal care services, but also increasingly saturates the environments of everyday life. This means that digitisation in relation to mental health is not only about accessing services, but also about managing everyday relationships (e.g. with friends, family, work etc) in environments that are increasingly digitally mediated. Valuable work has emerged from human geography (Parr, 1999; 2008), and social psychology (McGrath & Reavey, 2018; Reavey et al, 2019; Tucker et al; 2019) about the impact of environments on experiences of distress (e.g. green spaces, domestic environments, secure forensic settings) but less work has focused on the role and operation of digital practices within such spaces. Covid-19 has accelerated practices of digitisation. Individuals experiencing various forms of mental distress face having to anticipate already uncertain futures from a position of lockdown-imposed precarity. Facing the prospect that future care will continue to be digitised is an added layer of uncertainty and concern, experienced in a present time that is already highly uncertain and destabilising. In this paper I will discuss these issues in relation to empirical work exploring the development of AI-based therapeutic agents, peer support, and the use of digital platforms by creative community groups. Central to these efforts is making the experiences and views of those who experience forms of mental distress central to research and knowledge production. Doing so is vital to attempts to ensure that future forms of digitally mediated support provide therapeutic benefit to those in need.

Bio

Ian is Professor of Psychology at The University of East London. Ian's research interests include mental health, emotion and affect, digital media and surveillance. He has published empirical and theoretical work on care and recovery in a range of environments for mental health support; digital peer support in mental health and surveillance. Ian is co-author of *Social Psychology of Emotion* (Sage) and 'Emotion in the Digital Age' monograph for Routledge's *Studies in Science, Technology & Society Series*.

Andrew Divers & Parisa Diba (Teesside University)

Title

Caring at a distance? Patient Sovereignty and mental health, Post-COVID

Keywords

Patient Autonomy, Wellbeing, Virtual Care

Abstract

This paper will critically examine the shift in not only the underlying theory, but the expectation and delivery of mental healthcare in the wake of COVID-19. In the first instance, this paper will show how the COVID pandemic has fundamentally shifted how people look at what is valuable not only in, but more importantly about human life. This shift, it will be argued, has moved towards valuing the sheer act of survival above and at the direct cost of the quality of that life – the human flourishing or eudaimonia of Aristotle. The impact of this shift on mental health has the potential to be catastrophic, as well-being is sacrificed to maintain the survival of populations. While it is not in the remit of this paper to provide a morally prescriptive judgement on the rights and wrongs of this ‘mass triage’, it is important to highlight this shift and its impact. Yet this is not the only impact that the pandemic is having on mental health. Alongside the issues stated above, public expectations of healthcare (and especially mental health) have changed dramatically. In a time where the very notion of the expert has become eroded, patients demand greater agency in their own healthcare. Navigating a healthcare system which is agentic in essence is difficult in any area, but these difficulties become even more pronounced when speaking about mental health. This is compellingly exemplified in the proliferation of telemedicine services, which include the electronic transfer of prescriptions, ‘E-Pharmacies’ and the ‘virtual’ pharmacist, as well as ‘E-Clinics’ and the ‘digital’ prescriber (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Although risks such as the buying of counterfeit or substandard medicines exist, the demand for such treatments highlights important societal trends. These include the rise in ‘expert-patients’ who self-diagnose online for healthcare purposes, to bypass professional gatekeepers and governmental structures in the belief that cost cutting exercises are in place, consequently rendering individual care as inadequate (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Such ‘expert-patients’ also profess cynicism towards large pharmaceutical corporations and public health care systems (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Moreover, patients are observed as being ‘sovereign consumer-citizens’ who are independent, capable of choice and self-governance (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). In this sense, the Internet acts as a mechanism in which this self-governance can crystallise, where patients can access information on health and illness, purchase medicines, and discuss experiences with others, such as on dedicated forums as a form of cultural support (see Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016). Research has shown that mental health patients are an expressly at-risk group of consumers pursuing illicit medicines. The Internet therefore has altered how individuals and patients manage their healthcare choices. Patients are increasingly consumers, who question professional proficiency by utilising their lay knowledge and experience to contest traditional means of obtaining treatment (Sugiura, 2018).

Bios

Andy joined Teesside University in 2019 as a Research Assistant on a project dealing with domestic abuse. Prior to joining Teesside University, he has worked in a number of settings, working with charities to improve access to Higher Education for under-represented groups and within SEN education.

Parisa Diba is a Project Manager and Research Associate at Teesside University. Parisa is lead researcher on a NIHR Clinical Research Network, North East and North Cumbria-funded project which is a collaborative endeavour between Teesside University, the University of Sunderland, Middlesbrough Council and Redcar & Cleveland Council. Parisa has been the lead researcher for various internally and externally funded projects including the European Commission, the National Lottery Community Fund, the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR), and the Clinical Research Network (CRN).

Michael Arribas-Ayllon (Cardiff University)

Title

Psychopower in the age contagion: A qualitative study of digital counselling and remote working

Keywords

Digital counselling, remote working, COVID-19, psychopower

Abstract

In many ways COVID-19 is the realization of a dream that one day counselling and psychotherapy will be a rational and technical enterprise, capable of flexibly delivering mental health services to those in need. Only a state of exception or emergency could have achieved such a stunning transformation in a short period of time. The mass migration to digitally mediated practices has been all the more surprising given that many practitioners may never have thought it possible that meaningful and effective therapies could be delivered online. But if the digitalization of mental health services has been accelerated by the demands of biopower – the level of power directed towards the administration and preservation of biological life – the technical and digital landscapes that have emerged during the lockdown are perhaps better described as a form of psychopower – a form of power directed towards the level of the mind. On the one hand, the organization of psychopower as a response to COVID-19 has aggravated existing tensions in the community that increasing digitalization will erode and devalue the integrity of relational therapies. On the other hand, the rapid expansion of psychopower has given rise to new and productive forms of intersubjectivity. The unexpected intrusion of psychopower has highlighted not only the insecurity of the care industry but created new ways of caring and relating to others in uncertain times. In this paper, I present the findings of ongoing research with counsellors and therapists working in the UK. Twenty-five participants were interviewed online about their experiences of working before and during the pandemic. Characteristics of the sample were diffuse, with practitioners working in a variety of modalities across a range of sectors. A majority of participants were older women (30-60+yrs) working in private practice, the NHS, academia or local charities. Online interviews elicited detailed narratives of career progression, from training and qualification to in-depth accounts of therapeutic modalities, conditions of work and descriptions of caseload. The strategy of narrative building was designed to produce a sense of the practitioner's life world prior to the pandemic to understand how practices and routines were disrupted during the lockdown. Overall, accounts of digital counselling and remote working were complex and ambivalent. Some resisted psychopower by claiming that authenticity and embodiment is significantly reduced in online relational work, which many described as mentally fatiguing and prone to disruption. Others reported the unexpected productivity of online work citing new forms of digital intimacy, attention and disclosure which some attributed to the reconfiguration of the client-therapist relationship. Across these divisions, many believed that COVID-19 introduced new therapeutic choices and possibilities but warned that it exposed the profession to powers that seek to reduce it a technical manualized service. There was a strong sense in which counselling and psychotherapy ought to be defined by its philosophical values and principles rather than by the efficacy of its delivery.

Bio

Michael Arribas-Ayllon is a reader in Social Sciences at Cardiff University.

Renyi Hong (National University of Singapore)

Title

Telecommuting Pedagogies: Adaptivity and White Plasticity with Home Computing

Keywords

telecommuting, history, plasticity, power, adaptivity

Abstract

The opportunity to work from home has presented yet another site where the biopolitics of work is made painfully evident as the pandemic sweeps the globe. The racialized distribution of infections, caused by the number of non-whites having jobs that require physical presence, shows the racial stratification of jobs in our logistical, info-centric New Economy. My essay extends this subject by inquiring into a genealogy of “middle-classed telecommuting adaptivity,” revealing intersections between computing technologies and the racial buffering that took place decades before the lockdown. Since the mid-1970s, the American telecommuting movement has structured a pedagogy of the distanced information worker through telecommuting and ergonomic home office advice, disseminated through self-help books, newspapers, magazines, and corporate advisories. Such advice was largely made applicable only to upper, middle-classed educated whites, offering reassurance that they would “future-proof” themselves from threats to the middle-classed good life, coming from precariousness of jobs and the suburban sprawl. Central to the discourse is a notion of “white plasticity” – an adaptivity that had populational implications that cannot be reduced to simple racial privilege. It is a pedagogy modeled after the development of Moore’s Law where computational power and miniaturization of transistor chipsets are argued to be on the order of exponential growth, rendering adaptivity to be only safeguard against a future coming too fast to be predicted. Following three areas – (i) psychology, (ii) environments, and (iii) body ailments – I show how the uneven nature of precariousness is built into white plasticity. Telecommuting workers are taught techniques to negotiate with bosses, to deal with isolation according to their personalities, and develop habits essential to working from home. These texts coached readers to rebuild their chairs and tables, to refashion cookie cutter homes into ergonomic, personalized spaces, so that they can fully appreciate the freedom provided by networked home technologies. This emphasis on responsive coevolution – the mutable interface between biological bodies/minds and synthetic home environs – aimed to locate workers on one side of the cybernetic discourse. At a time where fears of the “electronic sweatshop” and economic slowdown was rampant, this discourse explained how workers would become beneficiaries of computational systems rather than exploited subjects. This argument draws a variety of areas to chart the telecommuting discourse from the mid-1970s to the early 2000s. It primarily relies on telecommuting self-help books and Home Office Computing and Personal Computing magazines; but it also centers the analysis on the negotiation of the conjoint terms of “telecommuting” and “homeworking.” The proximity between these terms gradually disappeared as experts strived to maintain boundaries between two different spheres of adaptivity. While telecommuting became emblematic of grown-up white countercultural youths, now set to integrate work with lives; the homeworker described an immigrant woman of color whose home and body was regarded as a resource to be exploited and discarded. Agential adaptivity was recognized and built only for one group. Fast-forward today, this history shows how modern rationales of working from home is not innocent of division of bodies meant to decay, and those to flourish.

Bio

Renyi Hong is assistant professor at the National University of Singapore, department of Communications and New Media. He publishes on affect and computing technologies. His book *Passionate Work* is contracted with Duke University Press. He is currently on a project titled *Bearable Media*.

Heather Elliott (University of East London)

Title

“Flourishing: A participant-centred narrative study of ecotherapy, mental health and wellbeing”

Keywords

ecotherapy; narrative; mental health support; digital; volunteering

Abstract

“Flourishing: A participant-centred narrative study of ecotherapy, mental health and wellbeing” Dr Heather Elliott, Professor Corinne Squire and Dr Cigdem Esin University of East London This paper discusses a participant-centred narrative approach to examine the positive mental health and wellbeing effects of ecotherapy based in a North London community vineyard, and how those effects have been maintained and developed during the Covid-19 lockdown. The vineyard was established in 2012 as a social enterprise and received a Big Lottery Fund grant to expand and evaluate its services in 2018. As well as producing high quality wine, a core aim of the vineyard is to support mental health, both restoratively and preventatively, through ecotherapy. A three year evaluation of this work is underway at the Centre for Narrative Research at the University of East London. In this paper, we draw on data collected face to face at the vineyard in 2019 and remotely during lockdown in 2020 Specifically we discuss how practices of care, including self-care, which were embodied rather than articulated verbally, were developed through technologies. Additionally, we explore how the actual and imaginative space of the vineyard has been maintained (and even developed digitally) when physical access was extremely limited. The lockdown presented particular challenges for the vineyard’s mental health support because, in the words of one of the volunteers, ecotherapy depends on co-presence and shared activity and the freedom from having to talk or narrate oneself ‘Just working alongside (the ecotherapist), not having to explain... I just needed a bit of help.. it was like offering me her hand.’

Bio

Dr Heather Elliott is an independent researcher and writer, working across academia, public and charitable sectors. She specialises in work on equalities and with seldom heard communities and in creative and narrative methodologies.

Hannah McCann (University of Melbourne)

Title

“I associate long hair with being sad”: Salons and Sorrow in Times of Lockdown

Keywords

beauty, salons, gender, emotional labour, identity

Abstract

Hair and beauty salons are often thought of as sites of vanity, surface, and frivolous aesthetic pursuits. Along these lines, salon workers are often stereotyped as low-skilled bimbettes. However, recent scholarship has started to consider the site of the salon as one of social connection and emotional labour, a place of touch and talk as well as identity transformation. This paper reflects on a 2020 survey of 400 salon clients and workers about their experiences of visiting/not visiting and working/not working during COVID-19. Many popular news sites claimed that lockdown periods would provide liberation from normative beauty standards, with people no longer able or willing to visit salons in the crisis. However, the survey results reveal that the inability to access salons has had serious negative impacts on the mood and mental wellbeing of many salon clients. Survey responses reveal that while some people felt alleviated pressure to present in certain ways, for the most part not being able to visit salons left most people feeling disconnected both from salon workers and from their sense of self. The results reveal that while outer appearance may appear a “surface” level issue, it also has deep ramifications in terms of maintaining a sense of identity. The survey data also reveals the marked increase in client disclosures about mental health and stress to salon workers during COVID-19, for those salons which were able to keep operating. Together, these results reveal the complex role of the salon in identity maintenance, as well as the interconnected dynamic of salons providing social connection, support, and human touch. This presentation will consider the implications of these survey findings for the way that we think about beauty, salons, and salon workers, and the way that we value these services in our communities post-lockdown.

Bio

Dr Hannah McCann is a Lecturer in Cultural Studies at the University of Melbourne. Her research sits within critical femininity studies, exploring areas such as feminist debates on femininity, affects in beauty culture, and queering the fangirl. Her first monograph *Queering Femininity: Sexuality, Feminism and the Politics of Presentation* was published with Routledge (London) in 2018, and her co-authored textbook *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures* was published in 2020 through Red Globe Press (London)

Madison Magladry (Curtin University)

Title

Lifestyle gurus' quarantine routines, 'self-care' and intimate networked publics

Keywords

intimacy, mindfulness, self-care, surveillance, neoliberal feminism, microcelebrity

Abstract

For many, lockdown in COVID19 meant an embodied link between one's home, one's routine and one's mental health. Influencers on Youtube, who are arguably not traditionally bound by conventional '9-5' work schedules, began documenting special content giving viewers an idea of what their life looks like in quarantine. In these videos, time is very much structured around events and how the events are framed; as self-care, as coping mechanisms, as a means to meet a goal around productivity. Through textual analysis, I will examine the quarantine video diaries documenting a typical quarantine routine for youtube influencers Lavendaire and Lauren Snyder as well as a viral tweet by user Jocelyn (@plntbasedcutie) and its numerous response memes. I examine how neoliberal technologies of self-care are deployed in these texts through what Crystal Abidin calls 'calibrated amateurism' (2017), which constructs these figures through narratives of relatability and 'affirmative perfectionism' (Baker and Rojek, 2020). These texts and their responses position wellness and stress as a private issue to be dealt with by an individual through selfsurveillance and discipline; the emergence of these texts as a typical response to a global health crisis has critical implications for how health is constructed as an individual concern.

Bio

Madison Magladry is an ECR and sessional tutor in MCASI at Curtin University. Their current research focuses on the intersections of feminism, femininities and digital media in women's fitness and wellness spaces. This was the subject of their doctoral thesis, which is now being contracted by Palgrave Macmillan for development into a book entitled *Postfeminism, Digital Media and Authenticity in Women's Fitness Culture: Fitspiration or Fitsploitation?* Their broader research interests include queer theory, fandom and other participatory cultures.

Francis Russell (Curtin University)

Title

Better living through algorithms

Keywords

Digital therapy, CBT, algorithmic culture, computational capitalism

Abstract

In the wake of the various COVID19 lockdowns, several influential mental health advocacy bodies have called for greater access to online and platform-based therapies. For some, the rise of big data and algorithmic psychiatry is framed as the only realistic response to the psychological impacts of COVID19 and its interlinked economic crisis. Understandably, a range of mad activists, psychoanalysts, and mental health workers have voiced concerns over the dehumanising impact of such technological interventions. However, such concerns about the use of algorithms in the diagnosis of mental illnesses, and the devising of treatments, perhaps overlooks the extent to which an algorithmic revolution has been facilitated by existing human-centred psychological therapies. Through the dominance of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), commonly experienced mental illnesses such as anxiety or depression have come to be understood as the result of faulty processes of recursive thinking. The model of consciousness that underpins cognitive-behavioural approaches, suggests that to be human is to already engage in forms of cognition that are open to algorithmic manipulation, insofar as to think is to produce recursive rules of self-conduct. Accordingly, this paper seeks to articulate the inhuman model of thought that is assumed by CBT, and to consider how it has opened the space for an algorithmic revolution in mental health that has only been intensified by the COVID19 lockdowns.

Bio

Francis Russell is the coordinator of the Bachelor of Arts Honours program at Curtin University. He has a PhD in Literary and Cultural Studies from Curtin University, and researches the political and philosophical implications of mental illness, alongside conducting broader research into neoliberal culture. He has published with *Deleuze and Guattari Studies*, *Culture, Theory & Critique*, *Space and Culture*, *Ctrl-Z: New Media Philosophy*, *Cultural Studies Review*, and *Somatechnics*. As a freelance art critic, he has published with a range of contemporary art journals, including *The Australian* and *New Zealand Journal of Art*, *Artlink*, *Eyeline*, *Runway: Experimental Art*, and *RealTime Arts*. Along with the artist David Attwood, he is the co-editor of the essay collection, *The Art of Laziness: Contemporary Art and Post-Work Politics* (Art + Australia 2020).

Mark Furlong (Bouverie Centre, La Trobe University)

Title

The future is here now: How the chimera of personal control scuttles the prospects for ethical and secure relationships

Keywords

Control, people making, mediated therapy

Abstract

The pandemic offers a place of outlook to assess William Gibson's epigram that 'the future is here now. It is just unevenly distributed.' Right now, we can review trends that were well underway, sequences that have been authorized by the cultural logic of late capitalism, that have been intensified by the impact of Covid 19. These include more obvious examples (mental health fragility; the digitalization of social relations), as well as the less obvious (social atomization; economic inequality; the de-legitimation of science; peak oil). With a focus on mental health fragility and the digitalization of social relations this session will examine how a ramped-up quest for control – of one's mental health; of personal boundaries – is a false flag in a time when the unpleasingly aberrant is increasingly the new normal. The project to be 'in control', it will be argued, is self-defeating, particularly with respect to our prospects for realizing secure and ethical affiliation. Content Mental health fragility: Whether the example is trauma, depression or anxiety, there is an unstable relationship between what the mental health trade terms 'case finding' and what the philosopher Ian Hacking refers to as 'people making.' This problematic is seen in particularly clear relief in an infirming vocabulary for the narration of interiority: rather than preferring terms that normalize, citizens are being schooled to scrutinize inner life using the lexicon of pathology. Once we were socialized to be stoical and to minimize: yes, I do have bad days; it can be something of a struggle; worries, yes, I have those; bear-up. Currently, citizens receive a succession of at-risk notices: mental illness affects one-in-four; have you noticed any changes in your mood / appetite / sleeping patterns / etc.; contact a mental health expert if you have any concerns about how you are coping. These notices not only pre-occupy, they tend to script how subjectivity is to be articulated – in the first-person and in the passive voice. The digitalization of social relations: There are benefits, as well as disadvantages, to mediated communication. On-line anonymity, synchronous and asynchronous interaction and single user control, for example, 'score' different results in, for example, chat boxes, (different modes of) psychotherapy and rituals such as weddings and funerals. What can be at issue is the 'presence', but the key question is: how do mediated relationships stack up with respect to face-to-face interactions in terms of the prospects for fairness and secure affiliation? The line of sight running through an engagement with the above is control. This focus is evident in everyday maxims ('don't worry about what you can't control') as it is in expert protocols ('an internal locus of control is healthy'). In so much as citizens have been incited to 'be in charge' a problem arises with respect to relationships: any attempt to control the other is unethical and destructive. This leaves those so groomed a self-defeating legacy.

Bio

Mark Furlong PhD is Thinker-in-residence at the Bouverie Centre and an independent scholar. In addition to around 60 academic contributions, Mark has published *Re-sizing psychology in public policy and the private imagination* (Palgrave, 2016), and *Building the client's relational base: A multi-disciplinary handbook* (Policy Press, 2014). His key research focus is what builds, and what undermines, ethical and secure relationships.

Leanne Downing (UNSW)

Title

“Are you there?” Establishing and maintaining therapeutic presence via Telehealth psychology during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia

Keywords

psychology, telehealth, presence, COVID-19, Australia

Abstract

On March 29 2020, as Australia grappled with the early stages of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Australian Federal Government made the unprecedented decision to add telehealth psychology consults to the nationally funded Medicare system. Prior to this date, Medicare-funded telehealth psychology was only available to a small percentage of the population who lived in rural or remote parts of the country. With little formal telehealth training behind them, Australian-based mental health practitioners embarked on a steep learning curve around negotiating new technologies and creating safe online environments for effective therapy sessions. By the end of May 2020, less than two months into the crisis, Australian psychologists and mental health workers had become the nation’s largest cohort of telehealth service providers. In this presentation we will discuss findings from our recent empirical research into how 50 Australian-based psychologists established and maintained therapeutic presence via telehealth technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic. In thinking through issues of digital mediation and intimacy we will discuss the ways in which our survey respondents engaged with notions of ‘being therapeutically present’ for their clients via digital technologies. We will also discuss the notion of telepresence (the sensation of being seamlessly present over mediated technologies), and problematise the fragility of this concept against a background of client-end interruptions, audio-visual lag, and real-time safety and privacy concerns that were repeatedly reported by our respondents. In working through and beyond questions of efficacy and technological function, this presentation seeks to contribute to broader industry and academic considerations around what the future of digital mental health services may look like for practitioners and their clients. In thus framing our research around therapeutic and technological ‘presence’, we are also cognisant of the need to recognise what is ‘absent’. To this end, we will discuss our respondents’ recurrent concerns that telehealth technologies do not currently allow for the observation of bodily gestures, posture or non-visual cues. As these aspects have traditionally assisted the therapist in being able to make whole-body assessments and develop therapeutic rapport, we explore the concern that therapists may be missing the ‘complete picture’ of the client’s issues and that the client may feel unheard or misunderstood. In working to compensate for these ‘absences’ we note that many of our respondents indicated their need to concentrate more intensely and verbally ‘check in’ with the client. We found that this inevitably led to increased therapist fatigue and therapists feeling as though they became ‘less present’ over a number of sessions. Finally, in acknowledging the socio-cultural parameters of the COVID-19 pandemic, we will also briefly discuss the next stage of our research which addresses issues of counter transference in relation to the shared social experiences that currently exist between therapists and their clients during times of physical distancing and social lock-down.

Bio

Presenter details Dr Leanne Downing is a Visiting Fellow at the Vitalities Lab in the Centre for Social Research in Health at UNSW Sydney. She has a PhD in Media Studies from La Trobe University and writes regularly on the topics of digital health, media, sensory experience and the emotions. Ms Heather Marriott runs her own psychology practice in Melbourne and rural Victoria. She has previously worked at large counselling agencies as a supervisor, senior clinician and trainer of psychologists and counsellors. Heather is currently an industry advisor to a UNSW study exploring telehealth and psychological private practice in Australia.

Aleksandra Staneva (Peach Tree Perinatal Wellness)

Title

“I thought I was getting better at being a good mother... but then all that changed”: Mothering during a Pandemic for mothers who were already struggling with their mental health

Keywords

mothering, peer support, lived experience

Abstract

Quickly emerging perinatal evidence on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on pregnant women and new mothers is highlighting higher rates of depression and anxiety with plenty of contributing factors such as physical isolation, increased household and childcare duties, relationship conflict, health and financial concerns, and an overall fear over the state of the world. Peach Tree Perinatal Wellness, an Australian Brisbane-based non-profit peer-led organization that offers support to mums who have experienced perinatal mental health challenges, conducted a research project to look into the impact of the pandemic on mothers, whose mental health has been already compromised prior to the announcement of a COVID-19. Seventeen telephone interviews with women at the time of the pandemic lockdown (May-June, 2020) explored mothers' lived experience of coping and parenting during a pandemic. Participants were aged between 27 and 44, had recently had a child (0-5 years old) and had disclosed either a diagnosis of perinatal depression, anxiety, birth trauma, and/or psychosis related to becoming a mother. Five of the women had given birth during the pandemic lockdown, and one woman was pregnant at the time; all but one women were parenting with a partner at the time of lockdown, some continuously working from home. This presentation will explore the intense type of mothering that women were forced into, with particular focus on the obstructed path of recovery that most mothers found themselves on and the helplessness and anguish that mothers shared around birthing, and caring for young children with limited digital support networks in place. Apart from challenges, several silver linings such as ‘enjoying a new slower pace’, and ‘cocooning with the new baby’ will also be explored. We will also discuss the many creative ways and identities in which mothers managed to cope and adapt.

Bio

Aleksandra Staneva, PhD is a lived experience researcher at Peach Tree Perinatal Wellness, Brisbane, Australia, exploring maternal mental health from a peer support and lived experience frameworks. She employs feminist critical-realist approaches, applying mixed-methodologies (Participatory Action research, Poetry and Visual methods). Aleksandra is also a Counsellor in private practice.

Neil Lindsay, Tom Baker, Octavia Calder-Dawe (The University of Auckland)

Title

Mental coaching through crisis: Digital technologies as psychological governance during the COVID-19 pandemic

Keywords

Psychology governance, neoliberalism, New Zealand, digital technology, app

Abstract

Harnessed by a range of institutions and state actors, psychological interventions that address the general public are assuming a central role in social governance and social life. Psychological forms of governance have mainstream purchase, and act on people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours to produce desirable, 'improved' forms of subjective experience and social conduct. Digital technologies, including online applications (apps), are an increasingly significant site for the proliferation of psychological coaching and governance.

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered an accelerated roll-out of digital psychological interventions, often available at population scale, to encourage and channel the self-management of various stresses wrought by uncertainty and physical isolation. These technologies will likely shape understandings of mental health and wellbeing during and long after COVID-19. In Aotearoa New Zealand, such digital technologies have been a notable presence in the COVID-19 response. Lockdown measures and the resulting unavailability of in-person services have pushed digital technologies to the forefront as sources information and influence regarding mental wellbeing. The New Zealand Government, media, and private businesses all quickly advertised several different digital technologies designed to reduce mental stress, which have seen widespread use.

There has been little critical examination of these technologies and how they are framing mental health and wellbeing. This presentation examines the discourses surrounding the use of digital mental-wellbeing technologies in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on the mental-wellbeing app Mentemia, a 'virtual mental health coach' made available to the general population through government funding in the wake of COVID-19, this presentation aims to highlight the different activities, behaviours, thoughts, and feelings that Mentemia encourages, and to how mental wellbeing is framed during COVID. The presentation first situates Mentemia within the wider context of psychological forms of government and digital wellbeing technologies. The presentation then explores how the Mentemia attempts to reconstitute the self through psychological intervention and cognitive alteration. We conclude by reflecting on the role of digital psychology-oriented technologies in the promotion of a psychologically resilient citizenry.

Bios

Neil Lindsay is a postgraduate student in Human Geography at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research interests involve the geographical aspects of psychology and how place may inform how we think, feel, and behave.

Tom Baker is a Senior Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. His research examines the politics and practice of policy-making and the governance of socio-economic marginality. His previous and current research focuses on homelessness, housing, social security, and drug treatment.

Octavia Calder-Dawe is a Lecturer in Health Psychology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Her research explores the imprint of normative rules and expectations on everyday life, with particular attention to identity, power, affect and emotion. Her interests include gender and sexuality, ableism and wellbeing.

Lana Stockton (Curtin University)

Title

“It’s sad time once again boys...”: Lofi Hiphop and Wellness During COVID

Keywords

Lofi hihop, e-community, wellness, youtube, music

Abstract

In the wake of COVID, the online "Lofi hiphop" community adapted to meet the emotional demands of lockdown. Home to grass-roots wellness practices for students, the community offers participation in a kind of informal tele-therapy; in which listeners share their nostalgia for better times and share in each other's depression and anxiety, whilst listening to chill live-stream music. In this social organisation, resilience to hardship is offered to participants in the form of a communal ethics of care facilitated by live-chats and music remix technology. This paper notes some COVID lockdown-specific developments that have occurred within the community, highlighting the adaptation of its non-conventional, technologized wellness practices for lockdown times. It finds that new forms of connection were produced via the participatory nature of the genre.

Bio

Lana Stockton is graduating from Curtin University with a PhD in Media, Culture and Creative Arts. Her thesis proposed a theory of the haunted novel by tracing phantasms represented in the novels 2666 by Roberto Bolano and The Plains by Gerald Murnane.

Kata Szita (Independent)

Title

The Effects of Virtual Reality on Stress and Emotional Tension in Social Isolation

Keywords

social virtual reality, social isolation, mental well-being, collaborative activities, immersive media

Abstract

The recent measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have confined the majority of the global population to their homes thereby minimizing social contacts. During this period, a significant proportion of daily activities (related to work, education, free time, etc.) migrated to online and virtual spaces. As one of the many digital media platforms that gained vital importance during the pandemic, social virtual reality (VR) offers computer-generated environments in which people can engage in a wide range of small- and large- scale activities, such as home movie nights, sports events, or conferences. The innovative power of social virtual reality platforms is that users can feel present in simulated environments together with other human-like avatars without having to leave their homes while omitting health risks. Social virtual reality platforms have been used for over a decade, but their quality, fidelity, and usability have improved significantly. These developments make social virtual reality experiences a current and globally significant research subject. Yet, what further increases the urgency of this subject for extensive scholarly attention is the rapid growth in the number of users and platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role it plays in people's social experiences and social psychological state while in isolation. Demonstrating this rapid growth and increasing significance, during the first half of 2020, several cultural institutions, academic organizations, and performers arranged events in virtual reality. Examples include virtual museum tours at Rijksmuseum and Musée d'Orsay; concerts by John Legend and Billie Eilish; and performances by the Gothenburg Opera and the Metropolitan Opera. This paper offers previously unexplored insights regarding the immersive capacity of social virtual reality and its impact on mental well-being and engagement during social isolation. More specifically, I explore the role of immersive experiences in simulating social connections as well as their potential effects on well-being during the times of isolation. This I do through comparing people's self-reported experience in relation to different types of virtual activities (e.g., entertainment, education-related activities, etc.). In addition, I use content analysis and behavioral measurements to identify the characteristics and features of social VR experiences that likely lead to increased well-being and decreased stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic or similar events. The findings are expected to inform future developments of platforms for mental health treatments and more engaging virtual social spaces. The paper pursues questions regarding (1) the general impact of social virtual reality experiences on emotional tension during social isolation and (2) the characteristics of social virtual reality experiences that likely decrease emotional tension. I expect that engaging in activities with other people in an immersive environment leads to easing emotional tension related to being isolated for an extended period of time. Additionally, the completeness of the visual and sonic representation of avatars and the quality of collaborative activities with others would lead to an increased sensation of presence in the virtual environment; increased empathy toward other users/avatars; and increased sensation of well-being and decreased sensation of emotional tension.

Bio

Kata Szita is a postdoctoral researcher in film and media studies with an interest in cognitive studies. She applies the combination of these to digital and immersive media experiences to investigate the user's body and mind in relation to media technologies. Her recently published doctoral thesis, 'Smartphone Cinematics: A Cognitive Study of Smartphone Spectatorship', discusses the psychological and technological mechanisms of spectatorship on handheld devices. She is currently working on studies about social and cinematic virtual reality.

Holly Avella (Rutgers University)

Title

Musical Mood Tracking, Biomedicalization, and Mediated Emotional Health

Keywords

Mood Tracking Health Biometrics Music

Abstract

Across social and streaming media services, we are seeing the tracking and modulation of mood shift to the context of health and wellness. This paper reviews music-based mood tracking apps and the clinicalization of digital cultural encounters like streaming music, and the ways these and other mood mediating technologies may proliferate in states of crisis and exception. Mood tracking practices are increasingly supplementing, replacing, and incorporated into clinical forms of care and therefore can be viewed as co-constitutive of meanings that “create realities with medical consequences” (Kristeva et al., 2018), as well as biomedicalized transformations (Clarke et al., 2010) in bodies, selves, and phenomena, including “mood” and wellness itself. Citing astronomically rising healthcare costs of affective conditions, and the estimation that mood disorders would be the leading cause of disease by 2020, The European Commission created AffecTech, a research initiative funding mood tracking and regulation technologies. Now, in 2020, amid a public health emergency and growing financial uncertainty, those “locked down” at home are exhorted to focus on self-care, which often involves personal monitoring and regulation of mood through the use of digital technologies. Biosensing mood technologies, including wearable monitors, sensors in mobile phones, and self-report apps, were, in many ways, ready to take hold in this moment. Media platforms like Spotify may have likewise been primed for this shift, in that they were already collecting mood data to sell to advertisers and developing (along with Amazon Alexa and others) emotion-based bio-sensing components. From Spotify’s mood-based curation, to Karaoke apps marketed as immune therapy, this presentation looks at this move from leisure-based media mood modulation to marketized mood as personal and social wellness imperative. This paper also reviews the rise of streaming service-adjacent apps, such as Ensu, which are designed to track, report, and modulate the mood of the self and others based on digital music consumption. Are these devices through which users can supplement or counteract dominant forms of mental health care, and a form of connecting in lockdown akin to mass-balcony singalongs, or merely a means of expanding market reach into the realm of health and wellness and a biopolitical cooptation by psycho-medical regimes? These and similar mood tracking and regulation services have, before pandemic and widespread teletherapy, been thriving in market research, retail, news, and the workplace (Davies, 2015). Will these technologies help relieve intense stressors, or contribute to an ever-more exhausting cycle wherein “moods aspire to circulate with the speed and flexibility of capital” (Anderson, 2015). In the thrust of the COVID-19 pandemic, self-music mood therapy may now be more than a mode of social capital (Illouz, 2008), but an exhortation in the wake of state failures to maintain the health and well-being of the self and others through digitally mediated aesthetic mood performance. This presentation explores these tensions and asks what becomes of our understanding of sickness, health, and wellness through the lens of technologically mediated mood.

Bio

Holly Avella is a doctoral candidate in communication, information, media studies at Rutgers University

Jacinthe Flore & Natalie Hendry (RMIT University)

Title

COVID-19, mental health and digital practices among arts and creative sector workers

Keywords

creative arts, arts industry, digital work, labour, digital practices

Abstract

The creative arts industry is among the most affected by the restrictions wrought by COVID-19. Galleries, museums and concert halls have bolted their doors, music and arts festivals have been cancelled, and musicians and performers have been banished from the streets. Work in this industry is particularly precarious; those who have employment often hold several casual or fixed term contracts. In Australia, more than 193,000 arts workers were found ineligible for the federal Government's JobKeeper payment scheme which enabled people to remain employed and maintain a wage. The effects of the restrictions are particularly felt in Victoria, which underwent a second phase of Stage 3 and 4 restrictions over August-September 2020. The reduction or loss of work hours, combined with the general effects of living 'in lockdown' and, in Victoria, 'under curfew', has contributed to mental health issues. However, while statistics present a picture of the loss of work and income, little is known about the experiences of arts and creative sector workers and their mental health. In addition, during the pandemic, articles flourished in media outlets about artists continuing their work digitally. Such practices underline the importance of examining the cumulative impacts of digital labour, precarious work and mental health. This paper presents preliminary findings from the C19 x ARTS X DIGITAL LABOUR pilot study – a qualitative survey which explores Victorian arts and creative sector workers' experiences of precarious work, digital labour and mental health during the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdown. Emerging themes from the survey stress how the pandemic has disrupted the close relationship between work practices, everyday routines and maintaining mental health. Respondents share that the challenges for the industry – “terrifying to see the whole industry virtually shut down over one weekend” – are experienced personally, professionally and collectively; uncertainty is “crushing” and emotions have “been a rollercoaster”, while some “oscillate between feeling ok and getting low.” These early insights highlight that understanding the mental health impacts of the restrictions requires not a focus on ‘symptoms’ and ‘resilience’, but rather a critical interrogation of the entanglements of work, everyday life, digital cultures and practices, the creative arts industry and the global context of the pandemic.

Bios

Jacinthe Flore is a Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Social and Global Studies Centre at RMIT University whose research focuses on the social, ethical and policy implications of digital mental health. She has published on ingestible sensors for mental illness in *New Media & Society* and is currently working on a monograph titled *Digital mental health: Technologies, algorithms and smart devices* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming 2021).

Natalie Hendry is a Vice-Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Digital Ethnography Research Centre at RMIT University. Her research focuses on everyday social media and digital technology practices in the context of critical approaches to education, mental ill-health, media, and youth studies. Her PhD explored the social media practices of young people experiencing mental ill-health. Natalie's work draws on her experience prior to academia, working in community, school and hospital settings.

Rosemary Rizq (University of Roehampton)

Title

What have we lost?

Keywords

Aura, Benjamin, Freud, melancholia, therapy

Abstract

Even before the COVID-19 crisis, digital therapy services were becoming increasingly popular. At the end of 2019, NHS England announced that over 300,000 patients were using some form of digital therapy and the numbers today are far higher. Indeed, during the coronavirus pandemic most psychological therapists have been expected, even required, to offer their services via online platforms such as Zoom, Skype or DoxyMe. But in the current rush to capitalise on the convenience and accessibility of online therapy, it seems as if many therapists and their clients feel that something, somewhere, has been lost.

Drawing on Freud's (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia* and Walter Benjamin's (1936) *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, I discuss the relevance of Benjamin's notion of 'aura' for understanding how online technology not only alters our therapeutic stance but also re-shapes the ontology of how we relate to one another. Just as new forms of technology once liberated art from the shackles of tradition, making it accessible to the masses and available for new kinds of political engagement, so too online platforms such as Skype can similarly be thought of as liberating therapy from its elitist traditions and associations. However, the very accessibility of these new technologies forecloses the possibility of aura, defined by Benjamin as 'the unique appearance of semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be'. In forms of therapy such as psychoanalysis, the physical setting of therapy, the constancy of the frame and the analyst's own qualities of anonymity and abstinence are all significant ways in which a respect for the patient's own distance from himself, his 'otherness', is acknowledged, cultivated and sustained. Maintaining 'a semblance of distance', no matter how close the therapist may be, signifies respect for this alterity and for a particular mode of experiencing that is required in order to perceive it. By contrast, online work aims to cultivate and sustain a sense of proximity, no matter how far away the other may be. This means that however good the technology, our mode of experiencing will necessarily be one in which that 'semblance of distance' is deliberately minimised. What are the implications of this for mental health care? One problem is that the arrival and proliferation of new technologies in the neoliberal 'market for care' has already shaped our social consciousness. We are positioned as consumers ready and willing to accept forms of therapy convenient to the needs of the current political system. Are we able to think about what we are losing in our haste to comply with the new online norms of therapeutic treatment? This paper aims to follow Benjamin by suggesting that the expression and presentation of loss can be seen as the precondition of new meanings and possibilities: the basis of a radical political agency.

Bio

Rosemary Rizq, PhD C. Psychol. AFBPsS. FHEA. is a Chartered Psychologist, an HCPC-registered counselling psychologist and a UKCP-accredited psychoanalytic psychotherapist. She is Professor of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy at the University of Roehampton and for many years worked as Specialist Lead for Research and Development for NHS Ealing. She has also worked as an Adult Psychotherapist for North-East London Foundation NHS Trust's Forest House Psychotherapy Clinic. She now has a part-time private practice in West London. Rosemary has published widely on issues related to organisational dynamics and psychotherapeutic training and practice, and her latest book *The Industrialisation of Care*, co-edited with Catherine Jackson, was published in 2019 by PCCS Books. She is co-editor, along with Dr Anne Guy and Dr James Davies, of the All-Party Parliamentary Report (2019) *Guidance for Psychological Therapists. Enabling conversations with clients taking or withdrawing from prescribed psychiatric drugs* (PCCS Books, 2020).

Elizabeth Cotton (University of Hertfordshire)

Title

UberTherapy: Working in the therapy factory

Keywords

Counselling Psychotherapy Digitalisation Industrial Relations

Abstract

Covid-19 brought with it a rapid digitalisation of mental health services but the move towards a annualised and standardised model of care has been in the making for over a decade, driven by the introduction of the IAPT model. The ‘Uberization’ thesis argues that it is though this adoption of a manualized and downgraded model of therapy spearheaded by the IAPT programme, digital providers are able to make a rapid redesign of what services people will be referred into. The rapid emergence of online platforms, online Employee Assistance Programmes and digital providers will soon dominate the sector, with no challenge from the institutions of mental health. It means that understanding the future threats to quality services, and the potential for the emergence of ‘UberTherapy’ requires looking at the nature of services from industrial and political perspectives, not just clinical ones. The discussion will look at the industrialisation and politicisation of mental health services in the UK and the conflicts that are emerging for and between the main stakeholders. The proposal is that an ‘Uberization’ is taking place as a result of the strategic downgrading of services and jobs, through the introduction of the IAPT model, that creates an opportunity both for the digitalization of services and the introduction of online platforms to deliver them. This industrialisation is part of a broader politicisation of mental health services, involving attempts to regulate the sector, the co-option of mental health services into austerity programmes and benefit sanctions and the emerging conflicts in relation to class and generation, service users and providers. The presentation will make use of the findings of a national survey www.thefutureoftherapy.org of 1500 mental health workers (2017), a survey of 650 IAPT workers as part of a media campaign for an IAPT inquiry (2019) and a national survey of 350 mental health workers on the impact of Covid-19 on their working lives (2020). The challenge that is presented is the growing conflict of interests between those who believe in the NHS/more funding position and those who regard the current system as having come to defend the indefensible. This future scenario opens up issues around industrial resistance and solidarity within the sector and what the organising challenges are ahead. Discussions will explore how the culture of ‘Noasarkism’ can be challenged through self-organising and engaging with new networks such as Partners for Counselling & Psychotherapy and the IAPT Workers’ Cafe, and using workers’ education methods in building collective action.

Bio

Dr Elizabeth Cotton is a writer and educator working in the field of mental health at work. Her background is in workers’ education and international development. She has worked in over 35 countries on diverse issues such as HIV/AIDS, organising and building grassroots networks, and negotiating as head of education for Industriall, one of the largest trade unions in the world, reflected in her book *Global Unions Global Business* (Libri Publishers). She teaches and writes academically as a Reader at the University of Hertfordshire about mental health at work, employment relations and precarious work. She is Editor-in-Chief of an ABS4 journal *Work, Employment & Society* looking at the sociology of work. She blogs at www.survivingwork.org and set up www.survivingworkinhealth.org a free resource in partnership with the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust. In 2017 she published the largest national survey about working conditions in mental health www.thefutureoftherapy.org. Her book *Surviving Work in Healthcare: Helpful stuff for people on the frontline* (Gower, 2017) was nominated for the Chartered Management Institute’s practitioner book of the year.

Jan De Vos (Cardiff University)

Title

A critique of digital mental health via assessing the ‘psychodigitalization’ of the Covid crisis

Keywords

psychologisation, digitalisation

Abstract

This paper connects a critical reading of the report “The Digital Future of Mental Healthcare and its Workforce” (the Topol Review) to the handling of the Covid crisis. The latter precisely testifies of a highly psychologised approach (e.g. stressing the need to address psychological issues, announcing the ‘other pandemic’ of anxiety and depression) which moreover goes hand and hand with a further rush to the digital (the pandemic as an impetus to move more and more things –shopping, socializing, educating... to the online and virtual spheres). The paper starts from arguing that in the Topol report the first underlying assumption to digitalise mental health is a far-reaching somatization and medicalisation of the “psychological”: somatising subjectivity seems a precondition to align it with silicon digitality and technology. I juxtapose this with the ‘psychodigitalization’ of the Covid-crisis: as psy-experts urge us to connect via social media and digital technologies they often voice the caveat that the digital is a good but not sufficient ersatz for bodily contact, as, for the moment, the digital cannot provide us with the stress-alleviating hormones that in-person contact give us. Is this biologizing argument, defending something beyond the digital, not in a paradoxical way delivering the final rationale to tie all things (inter)subjectivity to the digital realm? There is no alternative it seems! Or, as the Topol report states it, datafication and the use of the digital technologies, I quote, “will not be optional”! The second subjacent rationale of the Topol report is the neoliberal scheme of efficiency: indeed, the digitalisation of mental health closely leans on psy-models and theories understanding the human as an entrepreneur managing assets and recourses to manage his/her mental health balance. I relate this to the Covid Crisis arguing that while initially the debate was dominated by epidemiologists and policy makers, after a short while the psy-experts enforced themselves a way into the debate and this precisely at the moment that the entrepreneurial world was asking to urgently restart economic activities and to return to business as usual. I examine how the psy-discourses and the economic discourses concur in their individualizing, de-socializing and de-politicizing rationales, arguing that this is precisely what underpins the Topol report. In conclusion I question whether the Topol report –envisioning “automated treatment”, “ingestible sensor technology”; monitoring “clicks, finger movements, scrolls, locks and unlocks (...) charges, app usage”... – offers a bleak and scary vision of the surveillance society to come in which isolation and being disconnected are impossible. Also in the Covid-crisis many psy-experts urgently ask us to connect via the digital: paradoxically in times of lockdown: we are not allowed to fully retreat, seemingly for the hegemonic powers the issue is not you never know what happens when people connect, but rather, the fear is you never know what happens when people isolate. Psychodigitalisation hence seems above all meant to neutralize this dangerous withdrawal, perhaps as it could be the starting point of unchecked and uncontrolled subjectivities and socialities.

Bio

Jan De Vos currently is Lecturer in Critical Social Psychology at Cardiff University, UK. He holds an MA in psychology and a PhD in philosophy. His main interests are the critique of (neuro)psychology, (neuro)psychologisation, and, related to this, the subject of the digital turn. His inspiration is continental philosophy, Freudo-Lacanian theory and culture, and ideology critique. His books include *The Digitalisation of (Inter)Subjectivity A Psy-critique of the Digital Death Drive* (2020), *The Metamorphoses of the Brain. Neurologisation and its Discontents* (2016) and *Psychologisation in Times of Globalisation* (2012). <http://janrdevos.weebly.com/books.html>

Shaun Respress (Virginia Tech)

Title

Contact & Intimacy in Digital Therapy

Keywords

Teletherapy, Contact, Intimacy, Relationality, Disconnection

Abstract

Prolonged social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic has rapidly accelerated the demand for expanded teletherapeutic options: approaches to mental health care where patients can receive counseling and other services via digital mediums such as video-conferences, texts and phone-calls, automated services, and social media. Teletherapy is considered by many to be the future of mental health care, possibly a replacement for traditional methods. Early teletherapeutic initiatives demonstrate an immediate set of benefits for patients including increased physical access to care, reduced costs, better schedule flexibility, greater environment familiarity, and higher rates of patient engagement. Notable limitations to expanding teletherapy include enhanced privacy concerns, the uncertain digital literacy of certain populations/persons, and technology instability. However, other limitations regarding therapeutic relations, settings, and experiences have gone undertheorized and are not sufficiently represented in the prevailing research. I argue that digital medical interventions are unable to sufficiently replicate the same degree of “contact” and intimacy available in physical meetings; we should therefore be cautious in wholly replacing in-person care or in implementing a standalone paradigm of digital care. This does not mean that teletherapeutic methods cannot be utilized effectively as a supplement to primary therapeutic care. Instead of advocating for one over the other, I expose some shortcomings of teletherapy in order to more accurately identify its fit alongside of traditional methods. Using scholars like Annemarie Mol, Donna Haraway, and María Puig de la Bellacasa, I explore theories of “touch,” “contact,” belonging, and intimacy to isolate the unique contributions of relationality, connection, and trust. Focusing specifically on the condition of depression, I then discuss the necessity of these features in the caring process. The assessment of depression is largely inspired by Johann Hari, who outlines the different types of “disconnection” driving increased despair around the world. The goal is not to diminish the practical advantages of teletherapy like access and efficiency, but instead to accentuate the underrepresented capacities inherent in the therapeutic process. Competing models of treatment raise an additional concern. Teletherapy more aptly fits within the service-driven biomedical model presently in place, where patients are identified as consumers of individual medical interventions. Biomedicalization essentially structures care as a market defined by heightened consumer choice. Relational or community centered models alternatively emphasize interdependent solutions and social programs aimed at alleviating social pressures and fostering sustainable networks of support. Though many public institutions promote hybrid approaches, the distinction highlights competing objectives. Teletherapy certainly fulfills market interests such as cost-effectiveness, temporal efficiency, and socio-spatial outreach, but its ability to meet goals for intimate interconnectivity and social restructuring have yet to be fully realized or communicated.

Bio

Shaun Respress is a PhD Candidate in the Alliance for Social, Political, Ethical, and Cultural Thought Program at Virginia Tech. He also teaches for the Department of Philosophy. His research primarily utilizes the ethics of care to reveal and respond to various repressive conditions, while theoretically developing values that emerge from caring relations/practices. Currently, he attends to paradigms of mental health care in the U.S. with aspirations for both improving our understanding of despair and reimagining alternatives for those seeking mental and emotional relief. His work blends moral and political philosophy with feminist cultural theory, disability and dependency studies, biopolitics, medical anthropology, political economy, and behavioral psychology.

Marjo Kolehmainen (Tampere University)

Title

COVID-19 and Networked Care: The Affective Rhythms of Online Therapy and Counselling

Keywords

e-therapy, e-counselling, rhythm, affective movement, more-than-human care

Abstract

This presentation explores online therapy and counselling – a topic about which very little is known. The study of digital intimacies has focused on themes such as sexual content and sexual expressions, while other types of intimacies and their more-than-human constituencies have largely remained unexplored. To fill this gap, the presentation introduces an analysis of networked care. Empirically, it draws upon an analysis of 35 thematic online interviews where Finnish psychologists, therapists and other counselling professionals were interviewed about their experiences concerning the role of technology during the global COVID-19 pandemic. As a point of departure, online therapy and counselling provide an alternative lens on how intimacy works across series of intra-actions, where professionals and their clients, the clientele's personal and collective lives and challenges, COVID-19 and related policies, technological infrastructures and applications and technical qualities and user experiences re/de/assemble in various ways. Theoretically, the presentation brings together insights from feminist new materialisms, science and technology studies and affect theory. Conceptually, it contributes to the post-humanist idea of more-than-human care, seeking to expand the idea of more-than-human care to situations where technological infrastructures condition and shape the affective processes of advice-seeking and advice-giving. The analysis of the data pinpoints how these processes during the pandemic are shaped by multiple affective intensities that have global, national, collective and individual rhythms and qualities. The affective movements from paralysing shock to heating hot lines, from individuals who continue committed psychotherapy online to those who now seek non-recurring support, from professionals in need of more rest to those who become energised after a forced digital leap are all part of networked care and its rhythmic entanglements. Thus, the presentation also provides alternative insights into the notion of a singular, global crisis by attuning to the continuities, transformations, affective peaks and ruptures that form the affective fabric of COVID-19 and its living organisms.

Bio

Dr Marjo Kolehmainen is a researcher in gender studies at Tampere University, Finland. After obtaining a PhD in 2015, up until 2019, Kolehmainen worked as a postdoctoral research fellow on the research project, *Just the Two of Us? Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships*, funded by the Academy of Finland. In her postdoctoral project, Kolehmainen explored the practices of relationship and sex counselling, focusing on relationship enhancement seminars in particular. From the beginning of 2020, she has worked on the project, *Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture (IDA)* (PI: Professor Susanna Paasonen), funded by the The Strategic Research Council (SRC) at the Academy of Finland. Kolehmainen's work in IDA specifically concerns digital intimacies. At the moment, she is examining the diverse practices of e-counselling in the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. She has authored over 20 peer-reviewed publications. Recently, she has published articles in *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Body & Society*, and *The Sociological Review*, to name a few. Moreover, she is a co-editor of *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships* (Routledge, 2018).

Lorenza Entilli (University of Padova) & Sabrina Cipolletta (University of Padova)

Title

Online grief support during COVID-19. Practical and social implications of live-chat services

Keywords

critical psychology; digital health; crisis live-chat; online support

Abstract

People bereaved by a traumatic death, called “survivors”, are subject to increased risk of depression and suicidal ideation; fear of stigma, uncertainty on how to seek help, or inability to move from home may hinder them from receiving support. Crisis live-chat services allow a direct, immediate and confidential space for psychological and peer support, providing an established and widely used strategy for self-harm/suicide prevention and bereavement support. As the global health emergency of COVID-19 has forced us to rethink ways to offer support to people, the use of live-chats could intrigue practitioners to use this tool wishing to “easily” provide counseling, while reducing costs and face-to-face contact. The risk is that such emergency measures, if applied uncritically, could shape and discipline the way human users anticipate and benefit from a mental health service. Instead, we argue that live-chats should only be used if certain criteria are respected, and a critical approach to digital health adopted. Following a reflexive approach to grief support and our research experience with live-chat tools for people bereaved by a traumatic death, we aim to highlight and discuss what roles digital tools play when constructing and enacting experiences of grief support and social relations in the context of tele-health, going beyond the opportunities and limitations of live-chat services for health providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The contribution will address the broader implications of implementing live-chat services for grief support, such as the power relations implied in the user-operator relationship, and the necessity to be aware that different support-seeking behavior may be adopted (or not) among diverse social groups. The contribution will include a brief report of the authors’ experience from a thematic analysis conducted on 30 anonymous live-chat conversations between suicide survivors and trained operators. The crisis service is located in Italy, accessible during weekdays and targeted to people bereaved by a traumatic death. In our findings, live-chats are accepted by users and feasible in specific contexts where accessibility, confidentiality or discretion are requested; in some cases, anonymous chats are used to “test the waters” by individuals uncertain or reluctant to seek professional support. Despite the envisaged risk of promoting dependence between user and operator or creating the expectation in users to be provided a definitive solution to their problems, this was not observed in our study. Users entrust the operators to receive advice, empathic listening and directions on how to access mental health services. However, the solely provision of support through live-chat could marginalize bereaving individuals without access to Internet or become emptied of its meaning if used as a substitution of face-to-face support. Technology-mediated support to human actors is strongly embedded with social and power relations that should not be ignored. Live-chats could be used to approach users who are uncertain on where to find counseling but also people who may not seek or obtain support in any other way. However, providing support online should not be used instead of a service but rather to enrich the range of services offered.

Bios

Lorenza Entilli is a registered psychologist and PhD candidate in the Department of General Psychology at the University of Padova, Italy. Her project analyzes different types of mental health and counseling support for traumatic bereavement (including the ones from Covid-19) and the critical implications of using online tools for grief counseling.

Sabrina Cipolletta is an associate professor in the Department of General Psychology at the University of Padova, Italy. She also is a psychotherapist and the director of the research laboratory PsyMed. She teaches Social Psychology of Health and is a member of the PhD program in Brain, Mind and Computer Science.

Neha Khetrapal (Central European University) & Sonal Agarwal (Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology)

Title

Thriving on the Beat: An Alternative to the Digitization of Mental Health & Wellbeing?

Abstract

Harnessing the digital space for addressing mental wellbeing occurred in response to the gulf between the needs of individuals and the resources available for addressing mental health concerns. At the same time, the advancement of data analytics and artificial intelligence created optimism for managing this need–availability gulf. Nevertheless, these developments also kick started debates on maintaining data privacy and upholding ethical standards. The current pandemic has added another layer of complexity to the prevailing crisis. Can we deploy digital technologies for addressing isolation, discrimination, and other psychological hardships? It appears likely to argue that digital technologies are really the answer when physical distance measures are in place to flatten the coronavirus infection curves. However, the lockdown periods have further deepened the need–availability gulf and disrupted productive social interactions among members of communities. In such scenarios, known technologies (e.g. chat bots or apps) fall short of filling the gulf. The answer lies in undertaking an ecological approach to mental health that emphasizes interconnectedness among behavioural and socio-environmental domains as an individual’s wellbeing is facilitated by, among other things, social connectedness. Interventions focussed on strengthening social ties among community members are more likely to ameliorate functional problems because cooperation among members ensures equitable distribution of limited resources. When social groups are ‘armed’ to overcome stressors in this manner, individual wellbeing is bolstered as well. In the past, social activities like group meetings, social events and community projects have been deployed as a means of building social cohesion. However, these initiatives were launched in the context of close social/physical contact. Garnering efforts in similar directions may not be conducive for communities where physical distancing is required. As such, it is important that communities discover a niche concept of social cohesion; a concept that embodies ‘language neutrality’ for promoting close social ties when physical proximity is not viable. Music lends itself as a candidate here. When people engage in musical activities together, they engage in synchronized behaviours (e.g. tapping fingers to a beat or clapping in a particular pattern). Independent neuroscientific evidence shows that synchronized behaviours enhance positive feelings of empathy among participating individuals. Consistent with the music-based concept of social cohesion, it is easy to understand why people from different countries unknowingly started to make music together from their balconies during lockdowns. Historical examples also show that music was used for promoting social bonding in ancient Egypt, Greece, and the Babylonians. Moving forward, a promising future line of research is the merger of digital technologies and music. Technologies that promote ‘synchronization’ among people could serve as valuable tools for strengthening social ties and promoting wellbeing.

Bios

Neha Khetrapal is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Cognitive Science, Central European University (Budapest) where she studies children's understanding of future uncertain events and concepts of possibilities. She begins a new position this January as an Assistant Professor for Psychology at the OP Jindal Global University, India where she endeavours to advance research on the science of religion, music and embodied cognition.

Sonal Agarwal is a lecturer at the School of Management Studies, Motilal Nehru National Institute of Technology Allahabad (MNNIT) where she handles undergraduate and postgraduate courses for students of business and technology. She earned her PhD in management from MNNIT. Her areas of interest include innovative work practices and organizational performance. She has published her research findings as research papers and book chapters and has also served as an editor and reviewer for various SSCI and scopus indexed journals.