

North East Medical Sociology Half day event October 2012

The North east Medical Sociology group held their second half day event on October 3rd 2012. The event proved a great success, with around 50 researchers and postgraduate students attending from across the North East. The group is now looking forward to their next half day event, which is being planned for spring 2013.

The group was delighted to have Professor Gareth Williams (Cardiff University) to kick start the programme with his key note, 'Social Inequalities - Notes in the Margins'. Gareth provided a thought-provoking sociological essay, without the aid of a safety net in the form of PowerPoint! Delegates also heard from local speakers: Stephanie O'Neil, a PhD student from Newcastle University; Susan Peake of Teesside University; and Richard Lee from Newcastle University. Full accounts of all four presentations can be found below:

Social inequalities, notes in the margins

Gareth Williams – Cardiff University

The key note speaker, Professor Gareth Williams, opened the event with a sociological essay exploring 'Social inequalities, notes in the margins'. Gareth introduced his talk by describing the similarities between South Wales and the North East of England in both cultural and economic terms.

The use of the phrase 'notes in the margins' highlights the dominance of social epidemiology in the social inequalities field. However, there remains a place for other ways of thinking. Quantitative data are important in this area to explore the scale of inequalities, critical gaps in care and provision, and so forth. However research questions are often born out of ethical, political and moral concerns, and the context and history surrounding this data is also important. Qualitative research can therefore be of value here, and there has been a steady current of work contributing to the inequalities debate.

Professor Williams discussed the Marmot review, and the conclusion that 'inequalities kill people' which is both a statement of evidence and a moral judgement. Vicente Navarro's response was also raised, namely that this was a 'courageous yet insufficient' statement. Navarro argues that current social systems allow people in particular positions of power to produce and reproduce inequalities. Inequalities don't occur accidentally: they are produced by a social system which allows some to have dominance, and, though it is inflammatory, it might also be more correct to say that 'people kill people'.

Some have averred that there is an almost dialectical relationship between some people's wealth and other people's poverty (very well epitomised in an example of graffiti seen by Gareth in Manchester in the 1980s - "Feed the poor, eat the rich"). Such feelings fuel experiences of social injustice, and are well expressed in Graham Scambler's 'greedy bastards' hypothesis, which has received wide coverage. In comparison with this, public health research has often expressed a depressing failure of nerve and vision in challenging inequalities.

Discussion then moved to the Black report, and the emphasis in this report that the social sciences and sociology in particular can improve understanding of inequalities. The current situation was also explored with reference to a recent Kings Fund report by David Buck, which discussed the clustering of problem health behaviours. This report emphasised that gaps in health inequalities were increasing. The report finds that whilst the health behaviours of middle class social group are improving rapidly, the health risk behaviours of less affluent groups are not necessarily getting worse (after all, smoking and drinking rates have actually reduced), but are not getting better at the same rate. A significant number of people with multiple risk behaviours are, as the report chooses to put it, 'stuck in a rut', and unwilling or unable to change their behaviour.

Professor Williams discussed how this raises three key questions. 'How do we reduce bad habits among poor people, in order to help them get out of these ruts?' (behavioural approach). 'Who dug these ruts anyway?' (political approach). How do people understand these ruts and how they got there, and what resources do they need to extricate themselves from these ruts? (social understanding approach).

Professor Williams felt that the third of these questions was of particular interest, requiring exploration of hidden experiences and issues. He discussed some of his own work in Salford and Wales, which listened to residents' own thoughts around clustering of poor health behaviours. Professor Williams also raised the importance of critically considering the meanings behind what respondents say, for example what was meant by terms like 'segregation' (produced by one individual in his own work, to describe his feelings of alienation from some aspects of social life) and how these individuals came to be using such terms about their own lives.

Qualitative accounts are of great value to sociologists. They allow access into the 'black box', enabling insight into what experiences mean to people and exposing the sense-making element of lay moral feeling and knowledge. The work of Andrew Sayer was emphasised, which argues that in order to understand the significance of class it's important to probe lay normative responses. Without listening to individuals' stories and what they say, sociology is likely to create bland, alienated interpretations.

Nevertheless it is also important to move beyond mere collection of qualitative data, and consider how data are used and made sense of. Professor Williams reflected on the timidity of social scientists and felt that we should make use of data more effectively. Imaginative engagement and the consideration of hidden meaning was critical in qualitative work, as opposed to the production of purely descriptive accounts.

Gareth summarised his essay with three key points.

1. The study of social inequalities often deals with individuals and loses a sense of the particular situations in which data were generated. Data can then be divorced from context and doesn't always represent individuals' experiences. Data needs to be situated in context.
2. Research councils have begun to emphasise creative ways of working with communities around health issues, to allow people to develop greater 'voice'. Arts

and Humanities may offer ways of moving beyond purely scientific data-gathering approaches, and social scientists might need to learn how to embrace this.

3. Evidence-based policy runs the risk of descending into policy-based evidence unless the politics of situations were acknowledged and understood by researchers. Some social scientists are not keen on doing this, yet politics are central to this debate on inequalities.

Exploring industry-driven marketing influences on young people who drink alcohol Stephanie O'Neil – Newcastle University

In her introduction, Stephanie O'Neil described some trends in young peoples' drinking habits, drawing attention to the significance of branding in their product choices. She indicated that the proportion of young people who drink has declined but the quantities of alcohol drunk have increased rapidly in the recent period, and the volume of alcohol consumption increases as people age through their teenage years.

Price is one important element of the marketing mix to young people, but marketing itself is critically important as well. Voluntary industry agreements on types and styles of advertising are hard to monitor and the advent of social media has been skilfully used by the alcohol industry to target young people.

In the doctoral study described, mixed methods were used, underpinned by a critical realist approach, to explore young people's understanding of their vulnerability to marketing. The young people Stephanie worked with made micro-choices but claimed that they weren't influenced by marketing and were sophisticated consumers. Nonetheless the subjects could still recall advertising, which appeared to have a role in building consumption as the norm. Stephanie found that parents introduced alcohol gradually at home, where it was "OK", whereas drugs would definitely not be acceptable. Alcohol consumption became associated in young people with established and often elaborate routines of consumption.

Stephanie explained that she had used Q methodology in her research, allowing her to identify various types of respondents:

- Autonomous and active choosers who rejected marketing
- Seekers after price offers and 'freebies'
- Pragmatic hedonists – who chose bounded fun and organised their drinking around rituals.

Within the study it had proved difficult to pick out specific elements of marketing which affected behaviour but it was possible to say that price played perhaps only a small part. She described marketing and behaviour norms as the 'invisible hands' which affected respondent's reactions.

Changing the subject: gender and the instrumental relationship to the body

Susan Peake -Teesside University

In her introduction Susan discussed her early research on incontinence, and the normalisation of 'leaky bodies' for women, often after childbirth. This highlighted the control relationship between the mind and body mechanisms.

Susan explained how sociology couldn't be used in isolation to explore these issues. Body image has both sociological and neurological facets, through the influence of body schemas. The work of Merleau Ponty was discussed and the dual nature of human embodiment as both objective and subjective described.

Susan's study involved 40 participants from Australia who had experienced significant changes in corporeality due to varying reasons, including cancer or motor accidents. Susan explored the impact of gender on responses to these changes. Men and women reported different relationships with their changed bodies. Men appeared to have a more instrumental relationship with their body, and perceived it as a tool. If it loses capacity in one way they find another way; the body changes didn't appear to affect their sense of self. The notion of disabled men sometimes feeling feminised was discussed due to perceptions of their increased vulnerability. Disabled men also have to get used to their bodies being a subject of the gaze in ways which are much more familiar to women.

For women, however, changes in corporeality are perceived differently. For some, such changes reinforced their inferior relationship with sociality, leading to questions around self-worth. Women perceived a less instrumental relationship with their body and instead saw the healthy female body as more of a right, with corporeal changes infringing on these rights.

Similarly prosthetics were perceived differently among men and women. Again men viewed these instrumentally, describing the importance of different prosthetics for different tasks, and the practicalities of these. Women on the other hand had a much more personal relationship with prosthetics, and some described how they looked after them, at times describing them almost like a child.

Slowing down qualitative synthesis: comparing meta-ethnographies of informal caring for musculo-skeletal conditions - young people's involvement in treatment decision-making and health service transitions

Richard Lee – Newcastle University

Richard Lee explained that he was presenting a methods paper, the subject of which was meta-ethnography, as one approach to qualitative synthesis. He described the history of meta-ethnography or ME which went back to a publication in 1988 by Noblit and Hare. It underwent a revival as a method once interest in evidence-based medicine developed. He presented the seven stages of ME.

The study included mapping out how other people did ME under the seven overall headings. In addition each of the team did a meta-ethnographic study in their own disciplines, studying a small number of papers in each case. During the process they met regularly to exchange ideas. As part of this they attempted to form a deeper understanding of what 'reading' amounted to, and also found that some of the process involved managing their own anxieties and doubt, for example over what papers to include, and also the approach to analysis and coding. They worked as a team on how to 'read across' papers without the process getting out of control and over-detailed. An example of analysis as a form of mind-map was shown in the presentation. The team encountered some difficulties in identifying metaphor and innovating new ideas, and re-did work to try and understand these issues better. They concluded that some materials didn't lend themselves to ME, whilst other subjects were very suitable. Overall conclusions:

- ME is slow, laborious and time consuming – it is better to investigate a small number of studies intensively
- The work should involve repetition, creativity and doubt
- Conceptual innovation is not guaranteed.

Discussion session: getting published

For the final part of the event delegates were given the opportunity to ask three editors of sociological journals questions around getting published. Editors were Gareth Williams (newly-appointed editor of Sociology of Health and Illness), Dr Paul Crawshaw (former editor of Critical Public Health), and Dr Sally Brown (member of the editorial board for Sociological Research Online).

This provided an excellent opportunity for early career researchers to raise any pressing concerns or queries they had. Questions and answers, or general tips included:

- Is it advisable for PhD students to publish throughout their PhD?
Varied opinions were acknowledged, however the panel expressed that in their opinion it was best for PhD students to wait until after completion, as writing for publication is time consuming.
- Is it advisable to produce a publication as a sole author?
This can be advisable for PhD students who have recently complete, in order to get their own contribution 'out there'. However it is also acknowledged that the reflection rate for sole authors can be high, particularly in the more 'scientific' journals
- How do you decide which journal to aim for?
Go for the best you can get into. Impact factors are of great importance today, particularly because of the up-and-coming REF. If rejected, you can then try elsewhere. A publication strategy is advised to identify where to target your work.

- How to handle contradictory or 'nasty' reviewer comments?
Editors should take a role if they sense there are two very different reviews. They should give some interpretation or make a judgement on this. Criticism/rejection can be difficult to accept. However authors should try not to be too attached to articles/ take it too personally. Some learning can still be taken from these experiences
- *Early career researchers need to ensure that their writing style matches their target journal's requirements. Take full advantage of information available on journal websites. Also be clear that you back up what you say you have done. For example if you state qualitative interviews make sure that's what's in your methods section!*
- Is it advisable to enter into dialogue with editors prior to submission of an article?
Brief conversations are okay around whether an article is relevant. However, most journals have sufficient information available for authors. One of the panel also pointed out that editors often scrutinise reference lists within submitted papers when assessing whether they are appropriate for that journal. This allows them to assess whether the individual has an understanding of the type of work published by that journal.
- Is there a code of practice for reviewers?
Editors commented that reviewers are often provided with information on what to look for and how to write comments. The selection of reviewers was discussed. In some journals this is automated i.e. if an author has previously submitted there and stated their interests their name will be generated when looking for reviewers on that topic. Others mentioned that they often have a 'pool' of reviewers that they know are reliable, as long turnaround times or unconstructive comments can be a problem.
- *Early career researchers were advised to offer to review papers themselves, as this is great for the CV and can be beneficial for building insight into the publication process, and how to write for publication.*