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A political-representational crisis: A response to the draft manifesto for a social materialist psychology of distress

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At a broad brush level I could go along with this manifesto. Largely positioning myself as a social constructionist, feminist, critical psychologist in terms of leanings, with a healthy respect for evidence based practice, such a manifesto at first sight appealed, and so I happily agreed to provide a response. However, as with many things the devil is in the detail and when I sat at my computer giving it a couple of close reads, poised as I had first thought to write an entirely supportive response, I started to feel less comfortable, and indeed I found myself actually marshalling more of a critical set of thoughts than anticipated. Here's why:

1. I have grown suspicious of binary polemics and in this manifesto I see too many of them. CBT, cognitive psychology, proximal, intrapersonal = bad; systemic, community psychology, distal and interpersonal = good. Surely we have all moved on from this and have a much more sophisticated understanding of the world and psychology's place in it than this? I will not go into the details that I am sure will be presented in other responses from my more model fidelity conscious colleagues, but I suggest that few psychological practitioners these days would really truly advocate models of psychotherapeutic practice which are completely removed from the material world. Sure, the biological reductionist debate still rages in psychiatry, but in the mainstream practice of applied psychology I see psychologists highly aware of social inequality and striving very hard to take account of this in theory, research and practice. Undoubtedly, such pluralism is being ever more tightly constrained and boxed in through the increasingly restrictive reconstruction (or destruction) of our health system, but this is a consequence of politics and economics not driven by our psychological understandings, which in my view are far more diverse and sophisticated than suggested here. The status against which we need to react is I feel overly caricatured, making me want to redress the balance a little.
2. So who are these mystery psychologists ignoring social and material influences, taking a mechanistic approach and through re-engineering cognitive or neurological processes believe they can cure the internal defect which has resulted in distress? The strident CBT therapist eschewing all but internally generated maladjusted schemas has taken on the stature of a tyrannical despot, but it is one I just do not recognise in the people around me. Maybe I just don't get out enough, but most of the psychologists I know expend a fair amount of intellectual energy trying to integrate their understanding of psychology

with the world at large in which they practice, teach or research. Indeed, this is not through just individual preference but through the professional structures we have in place to support this. The QAA benchmarks, HCPC Standards of Proficiency and Standards of Education and Training require an understanding of psychological knowledge within the context of history and philosophies of knowledge and research to be attained by every qualifying psychologist. Indeed, my experience of the last 20 years of working with clinical psychology trainees is that an understanding of psychological distress within a wider social, political and economic context is very warmly greeted. Who are these psychologists towards whom the manifesto points an accusatory finger? Clearly the authors of the manifesto are quite rightly trying to move on from psychology criticising psychiatry and vice versa, but constructing an alternative good/bad dichotomy in psychology which may have little resonance with reality should be questioned.

3. Perhaps also as a consequence of wanting to move away from the psychology/psychiatry dialectic I also found myself wanting to remind us of two very basic tools within clinical/therapeutic psychology, the first being formulation. The points in the paper about the dangers of diagnosis are well made, but also well rehearsed. Psychologists are taught to formulate and it is here where we have to integrate our understanding of the internal and external world in terms of psychological explanation. This is a unique skill to psychology and one we should be promoting heavily. The words formulation or formulate do not appear once in the document. Given, for me, the manifesto is light on the 'what should we do', whilst heavy on the 'what we should not do' this is an important omission.

The second tool I wanted to remind us about is the simple model of antecedents, behaviours, and consequences, our ABCs. Whilst originating from a behaviourist school, this simple conceptualisation has much wider applicability, especially when conceptualised systemically, not as a singular causal pathway and phenomenologically to include personal experience, not just observable behaviour. It draws our attention to definitions, which are sadly missing from the manifesto, with neither distress nor social materialist psychology being defined, (the latter being an especially significant omission as this is what is being espoused as an alternative viewpoint). Taking a dynamic ABC perspective of psychological distress makes us define the observable and phenomenological characteristics of this state of distress (e.g. demoralization and pessimism towards the future, anguish and stress, self depreciation, social withdrawal and isolation, somatization, and withdrawal unto oneself, according to Massè, 2000). Noticing along the way that these features are shared by numerous labels (ADHD, schizophrenia, anorexia etc.) i.e. are not discrete categories, and that they all fall on dynamic, relational continuums, not a binary cliff. In other words, they can only be

considered unusual, and therefore perhaps worthy of treatment if they occur at a significant level of intensity and, or, for an unusually protracted period of time, to be of course defined usually statistically, and that such experiential phenomena are open to be measured reliably. Whilst simultaneously recognising that these are arbitrary judgements of ab/normality heavily open to historical and cultural influence. Trying to understand the antecedents to such phenomena requires us to survey the landscape from the proximal to the distal, from the biological to the economic, allowing us to hold wide ranging associated factors and multiple, interacting contributing antecedents simultaneously. Likewise understanding the consequences of such life contexts and experiences from this perspective requires us to take a broader, holistic, perspective, considering not just the internal psychological sequelae, but also the interpersonal and material, leading us clearly into the vicious spirals which then come into operation.

Using such a framework it is impossible to conceptualise distress as a discrete category or diagnosis because it raises too many questions and relative propositions. Quite rightly the manifesto clearly states distress is not about categories or diagnoses, but makes this point largely through a critique of diagnosis without pointing, except in the briefest detail, to alternatives. Regardless of whether you have formulation written through you like a stick of rock, or find the ABC model of any value or not, what I crave for in this manifesto is a strong psychological framework being put forward as a way of explaining distress, not just a series of 'what it is not'. What about grasping the opportunity and trying to explain what psychological distress is, what causes it and the appropriate responses? I wonder how easily we could come to an agreed alternative conceptualisation and if our fear of not being able to do this is what drives us into the less problematic, polarised, area of agreeing what it is not.

4. *'Distress cannot be removed by will power.....The notion of willpower inhabits many theories of psychotherapy'* – although having been taught a number of psychotherapeutic modalities I never thought distress could be overcome by will power, nor indeed do I recall having had many professional conversations suggesting this, over and above explaining how the 'pull yourself together' approach is less than helpful. I do however, believe in resilience, although in the manifesto this is described as the more 'fashionable' idea, which came as a surprise to me as I remember reading *'Vulnerability and Resilience in Human Development: A Festschrift for Ann and Alan Clark'* (Tizard, & Varma, 2000), which so clearly set out the evidence over three decades showing the potential of an individual to break the chain of disadvantage, and how multiple disadvantages, (what we would call today adverse inter-sectionality), make it harder.

Psychological research has provided us with much insight into understanding how we can reduce vulnerability and enhance resilience. I find the message in the manifesto around these issues a little confused and again I feel a real lost opportunity to say what a more psychologically informed understanding gives us.

5. I find it hard to talk about different paradigmatic approaches within psychology without also having a parallel discourse about what constitutes evidence, and so inevitably research paradigms. I find it odd that this manifesto says little about evidence. Thankfully, it keeps away from the quantitative/qualitative dialectic; however I find it equally as strange that whilst critiquing the quality of existing research it seems to hold up the traditional experimental/RCT approach as the gold standard with no comment. Approaches to how we research a topic go hand in hand with how we conceptualise the topic, and this can be no better demonstrated in the field of psychological distress than in Massè's paper '*Qualitative and Quantitative Analyses of Psychological Distress: methodological Complementarity and Ontological Incommensurability*' (2000).

In this paper he sets out to explore distress using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The results set out two descriptions of distress, one resulting from the cultural forms through which the participants described their distress (qualitative constructs) and the other through factors derived from the statistical analysis of a quantitative measure of distress. The approach demonstrates the complementarity of the two methodological approaches, but reveals two operationalisations of the concept of psychological distress '*founded on incommensurable representations of distress*', one being the more phenomenological 'lived language' and the other the more reified empirical entity, but both having he suggests strong methodological and empirical legitimacy.

This ontological incommensurability lies at the heart of the argument underlying this manifesto. Massè describes on the one hand the scientists' search for certainty and order, in this case by containment within the individual through the imposition of a limited nosology, compared to the 'interpretative-constructivist' position which he describes well by quoting from Abbot (1992) '*fuzzy realities with autonomously de-fined complex properties...engaging in a perpetual dialogue with their environment*' (as cited by Massè, 2000, p20). Massè (2000) also notes that both positions are influenced by the researcher themselves and are '*scientific construals that try to integrate these empiricist and semiotic fragments of distress into coherent representations.*' p20.

Massè's paper draws to a conclusion by positing that we not only have two incommensurable representations of distress (and I would suggest we have more than two), but one is prefaced above the other through the existence of the '*dominant, instrumentalist rationality in the management of illness*' p20 i.e. the vehicles of politics and government. This he terms '*a politico-representational crisis*'. This brings me to my final point, of how theoretical understanding and research evidence is processed through the vagaries of political direction, policy making and service delivery.

6. There is a serious job to do in terms of the delivery of psychological understanding into political debates and decision making, which in turn result in policy and service delivery. Providing alternative explanations are as important as combating arguments. To these ends I would like to point at another previously published manifesto – *The Geek Manifesto: Why science matters* (Henderson, 2012).

In this book is a chapter entitled '*Policy –based evidence: why science matters to government*' in which Henderson gently explains that what politicians want is not evidence-based policy, but policy-based evidence, i.e. '*spray-on evidence.....The conclusion comes first, followed by a trawl of useful data that might be daubed on afterwards*', p48. He goes on to describe other types of evidence abuse and acts of wilful ignorance. Other chapters cover the media, education, the law, economics and health. Having presented some convincing evidence as to how the world of policy making and implementation works, and how divorced it is from scientific evidence, he presents a manifesto of how science should be used to influence policy, and then goes one step further by reminding us that we all have a responsibility to play a part in this. This is a helpful reminder as it drops this responsibility straight back into my lap and that of all other psychologists who by deed of their privileged professional training have a responsibility to try and explain psychological distress.

So to summarise, whilst I may seem somewhat critical in my reflections on this manifesto, it is meant constructively and to add liveliness to this debate, as I must congratulate the authors most sincerely because they have had the courage, energy and foresight to write this and get the ball rolling. The dilemma we find at the heart of this discussion about distress is not a new one and suffers so clearly from the '*politico-representational crisis*' described by Massè. We need to find a way through this, firstly by greater reflexivity and understanding the forces which may drive us to unhelpful binary polemics. This should be in addition to combating what we believe are unhelpful beliefs, but perhaps just as importantly forcefully foreground what we **do** believe as psychologists about the roots of distress, the

function it plays in our society and how to alleviate it. Of course easier to suggest than do, but let the debate continue and flourish and let us at least, as this manifesto is I believe trying to do, get some broad brush strokes of understanding painted on the ground.

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