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## Psychologists Against Austerity: mobilising psychology for social change

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## **Psychologists Against Austerity: Mobilising Psychology for Social Change.**

### **1. The Psychologists Against Austerity Campaign**

Psychologists Against Austerity is a national campaign, which began to take shape in 2014. We launched officially in March 2015 at the House of Lords, with an event hosted by Baroness Ruth Lister. The term 'psychologists' is relatively broad: we are a coalition of people from all areas and stages of psychology theory and practice, encompassing senior chartered psychologists, academics, trainees, therapists, students and graduates at the beginning of their psychology career. What unites us is a body of psychological knowledge, academic and applied, and a desire to utilise that knowledge to challenge the narrative, and highly damaging effects, of austerity. We started in London, but have spread out around the rest of the country, including in Scotland, Wales, the North-East, Yorkshire and the North-West groups. We initially were focussed on the run up to the General Election in May 2015, but have extended beyond that following the Conservative victory, and continuation of austerity policies and rhetoric.

As a campaign we have two major aims. The first is to mobilise psychology professionals to speak, and act, out against austerity. To this end, we have been encouraging psychology professionals to write to their MPs, political candidates, and local newspapers; attend protests and anti-austerity actions; as well as raise issues within their workplaces (where appropriate). To structure activism by psychologists, we have organised two 'Weeks of Action', one in April 2015 and another in March 2016, both aimed at generating activity in the run up to the May elections. In addition, we have spoken at multiple psychology events, written articles for the British Psychological Society magazine 'The Psychologist', and worked to raise awareness of the campaign within Psychology. Our position here is that psychologists' ethical and professional duty extends beyond the clinic, school, or prison, to also challenge social and economic policy which has deleterious psychological effects.

Our second aim has been to utilise and publicise relevant psychological knowledge. This is of course related to the first aim; we have been aiming to encourage as many psychologists as possible to publicise their psychological knowledge (clinical, academic and personal) in spaces where it is less often heard: in public discourse; policy debates; and political life. In particular, having been exercised by anger at the devastation that 'austerity' was wreaking on communities, the economy and individual lives, we were aware that the specifically psychological impacts of austerity were less often discussed (with some notable exceptions, see O'Hara, 2014). We therefore created a briefing paper 'The Psychological Impact of Austerity' (McGrath, Griffin & Mundy, 2015) to bring together some of the relevant psychological evidence.

In this, we identified key experiences, formulated as 'austerity ailments', which have increased following austerity policies and are well known to underlie experiences of mental distress. One example is humiliation and shame. It is well established that humiliation underlies many experiences of distress, for instance prolonged and repeated experiences of humiliation treble the chance of being diagnosed with depression (Brown, 1996). We also know that some of the outcomes of austerity policies are leading to increased experiences of humiliation. A US study, for instance, has found that 84% of people who attend food banks report being humiliated by the experience, and 43% hide the experience from their children (Van der Horst, Pascucci & Bol 2014). The Trussell Trust gave out over a million food parcels in the UK in 2015, a figure which has skyrocketed from around 40,000 since the beginning of austerity in 2010 (Trussell Trust, 2016). This is just one example of the damaging

psychological costs of austerity, which include increased experiences of: fear; mistrust; instability; isolation; and being trapped. As we take the campaign forward, we are exploring new ways of utilising psychological knowledge to challenge austerity, including assessing the psychological impact of specific policies, as well as assembling information on the psychology of communicating difficult and negative messages.

Inherent in our campaign, therefore, is a structural and political understanding of psychology, psychological practice, and mental health. Whilst not subscribing to a particular tradition within Psychology, we have aimed to widen the remit of psychology to include engaging directly with the macro social, political and economic climate. In this, of course, we are not alone. This campaign has arguably come at a time of a renewal, or even for many, simply the beginning, of a more politicised psychology. A prominent example is 'Walk the Talk', a walk co-organised by the then President of the BPS, which took in August 2015, between Leicester and London. The aim of this action was to highlight rising levels of homelessness, food poverty, and cuts to the benefits system. There have also been a spate of conferences focussed on political and social action over the past year: including 'Beyond the Therapy Room'; 'Power, Interest and Psychology', looking at the ideas of David Smail; the second ever UK Community Psychology festival; as well as 'Psychopolitics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century'. It is arguable that some of this upsurge in political activity has been generated by the climate of austerity. Psychologists work with many people at the sharp end of the cuts, and also mainly within public services, so have been subject to cuts in funding to their services as well. Much of the motivation for involvement in our campaign has been this double concern – of both a growing need and shrinking capacity to deal effectively with that need.

Such problems demand structural solutions. The role of politics in psychology, or psychology in politics, is not, however, without controversy. The rest of this article will consider how it may be possible to reconcile psychological theory, practice and political action. The ideas formulated below are not necessarily indicative of the motivations of the several hundred psychology professionals who have engaged with our campaign over the past year. We have deliberately not positioned ourselves within a particular intellectual tradition within Psychology, to be as inclusive as possible to those who wish to challenge austerity. These ideas have, however, been instrumental in the foundation and development of the campaign.

## **2. Psychology and public life: Finding a path to social change through Psychology.**

Psychology, in many ways, is booming. As a degree, Psychology is consistently amongst the most popular choices for undergraduate study in the UK; in 2014, 106,000 applicants made it the second most common choice (UCAS, 2014). Post-graduate training is also in demand; clinical psychology courses are so over-subscribed that they only accepted 16% of applicants in 2015 (CH, 2015). In addition, one of the notable areas of expansion in a climate of retracting funding for health services has been the large scale roll-out of the Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) service. Outside of the professions, pop psychology books are highly popular, and cod-psychometric testing has roundly infiltrated popular culture. Despite the rise of Psychology as a discipline, however, there are still comparatively few psychologists in public or political life. The Campaign for Science and

Engineering (2015) has identified only two current UK MPs with a Psychology background, which is relatively remarkable considering the consistent popularity of it as a degree subject.

There are many, however, who would argue that the relative silence of psychology in public life is no bad thing. It is perhaps no co-incidence that this expansion of psychology has correlated with the rise of neo-liberalism and accompanying individualism. While professional psychology is not particularly prominent in public life and policy making, it has been argued that psychological concepts are nevertheless central to many policies. It has been pointed out, for instance, that a feature of recent 'welfare reform' has been that previously non-psychological services have started to take on a psychological hue; Friedli & Stearn (2014), for instance powerfully point to the increasing use of psychological language and frameworks as part of coercion in the benefits system, with unemployment being attributed to 'lack of motivation' or insufficient 'positive affect', rather than structural lack of jobs. Similarly, Cromby & Willis (2013) have critiqued the prominent use of psychology-influenced 'behavioural science' in the government's Nudge Unit. These are two examples of psychology being used as a tool of oppression, to individualise and psychologise problems which lie in structural problems: a slow economy and an unequal society.

This is by no means a new observation; critical psychologists and other critical theorists have long argued that psychology is part of a wider 'psy-complex', a form of subjectification which shapes people to fit the demands and expectations of others, through discourses, practices and technologies (see, Rose, 1989; 1998). Central to the idea of psychology as a discipline, at all, this argument goes, is that people are self-regulating, atomised individuals who can (and should) be moulded at an individual level. An understanding of misery and suffering as complex experiences that are embedded within specific historical, cultural, political and economic settings therefore can be seen to challenge the very foundations on which psychology is built. To try to create artificial boundaries between the intrapsychic and the socio-economic works well if you're in the business of treating individual people for individual problems. But if your interest is in trying to understand the complex nature of distressing experiences, it makes little sense, not least because much routinized misery is invisible (Kleinman, Das & Lock, 1997) both to the sufferer and to the professional.

A reasonable question raised here is whether psy practitioners have any legitimate place in forms of activity that seek to counter austerity economics and the attendant suffering that accompanies them. One could make a convincing argument that wholeheartedly rejects the tools, technologies, apparatuses and practitioners of psy as a key part of the problem. There is a danger here that any involvement of psychologists in the austerity story simply legitimises the practices of atomised suffering and neoliberal subjectification which can be seen as a hallmark not only of some psychology, but of austerity economics themselves. By becoming involved as psychologists, and with psychology, we carry the danger of simply further contributing to the pathologisation of the poor and marginalized.

Moving from critical to community psychology, we can perhaps start to find some paths out of this conundrum. Burton (2013) offers Liberation Psychology, emergent in Latin America, as an example of: "a socially committed psychology characterised by the reconstruction of psychology in dynamic relationship with social issues, social action and social movements" (p. 252). Drawing on the work of scholars such as Martin-Baro (1996) and Enrique Dussel (Burton & Flores, 2011), then we can see the possibility of drawing on the legitimacy, training and knowledge of psychological practitioners, while subverting an individualised and individualising psychological account. Martin-Baro (1996), for instance, argued that psychology had created a fictionalised image of what it was to be human, based on an ahistoric individualism that had strengthened oppressive structures. He also, however, argued

that it was the role of the psychologist to intervene in subjective processes that make structures of injustice viable. He suggested that psychologists needed to contribute to introducing into the collective consciousness elements that can help dismantle dominant ideological discourses. It is for this reason that our campaign focuses not on the more usual rallying cry for greater provision of services, but instead on broader issues of economic policy, cuts and inequality.

Through engaging in this campaign, we are also seeking to practice a version of psychology that seeks to challenge and denature the brutalities of austerity. We want to show different ways that psychologists can operate to encounter misery, not by atomising and individualising but by challenging the complex structures that through austerity, and the subjectification of austerity, make manifest so much misery. As a strategy, we acknowledge that this is potentially paradoxical, but it may hold some potential for challenging the 'common sense' of austerity. In doing so, we are encouraging psychologists to engage in what Watzalwitz, Weakland & Fitsch (1974) call 'second order change'. Most psychology can be seen to operate at the level of 'first order change', seeking to change the individual. In engaging in politics, media and policy, this campaign instead aims to engage in 'second order change', working to shift the social, material and discursive context which leads to experiences of distress (see also Kelly, 2006; Rappaport, 1977). Distress is here understood as emergent from the social and material realities of people's lives; without engaging at a macro level, we would argue, psychologists will only be left to try and temper the outcomes of destructive social policy, inequality and oppression.

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