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PhD Thesis Summaries 2025

This section showcases recently completed PhD theses in sociology and associated disciplines in Aotearoa.

Responsibility and Resistance at the Clinic – How is Opioid Use Now Understood and Managed?

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PhD completed: 2024

Summary

From monomania of the will to the subject of criminalisation, the trajectory of how opioid use has been conceived and managed shows it to be susceptible to appropriation – a locus at which various socio-political values and interests are constantly being negotiated (Valverde, 1998). In modern treatment practices though, the motivations behind categorising those using opioids are obscured behind claims of 'objective practice' which target physiological issues such as withdrawal and tolerance (Campbell, 2012). Considering these claims, this research investigated how dependence was understood at an Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST) service; how any understandings were enacted, by whom, and whether they were pervaded by conflicting socio-political values.

To do so, an OST service in Tāmaki Makaurau was studied across 2023. Operated by a team of medical and allied health staff, these services provide substitute opioids (e.g., methadone or buprenorphine) to those diagnosed with opioid dependency. OST has previously been argued to re-calibrate service users in-line with neoliberal norms of self-responsibility and rational consumption, that are established (at least in part) by these clinics (Oksala, 2013). Lancaster et al.'s (2023) longitudinal study of Australian opioid provision has also suggested that across various contexts, dependence might be a situated and relational becoming.

To explore these possibilities, using Institutional Ethnography, nine informants were interviewed (three were service users, three were service staff, two were involved with service policy development, and one was a General Practitioner). Their work at the service was also observed and texts activated through this work (e.g., guidelines) were analysed.

There was a persistent understanding of 'successful recovery' as requiring individuals to become self-responsible. A service user's recovery involved regularly collecting their dose within the pharmacy's

restrictive opening hours, passing random urine screens, and showing evidence of employment, for example. Service users were often described as arriving "chaotic" and, through the staff's application of "guidelines and service documents", being 'responsibilised' to "reach their potentials" (Rose, 1999). However, though dominant (responsibilising) modes of constructing opioid dependence and recovery were identified, these manifested paradoxically in practice, as service user autonomy was both promoted and restricted.

How service users described themselves and their opioid use was equally varied, and context-dependent, but also leveraged opportunistically. Service users understood themselves and their dependence in anticipation of the expectations of the service, but also in resistance to these, despite the service's seeming intent. It is thus argued that there was a complex 'performativity' of dependence amongst the research informants (Butler, 2003). Informants' constructions largely mapped onto (or were made through anticipation of) the dominant (responsibilising, but also, medicalising) modes of constructing these categories of being within OST. Service users constructed their own opioid use as a medical issue, and a hereditary disease; however, service users then leveraged these understandings to 'de-responsibilise' themselves from the consequences of their opioid use. Dependence was argued as being performative; 'real' insofar as it affects people's lives, but not as some objectively knowable internal essence. This research undermines dominant understandings (and treatments) of dependence, which, in approaching opioid use as a knowable essence, also seek to responsibilise service users. Focus is instead directed to how various socio-political interests are being enacted, leveraged, and contested through treatment, to expose the need for significant reform.

Further research must look beyond OST to the broader landscape of opioid management. Acknowledging the complex ways by which opioid use is constructed, and the various motives behind these, future inquiries must explore alternative systems of management which better support those using opioids.

Link to thesis

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"We're Here, We're Queer, We're Fascist! Get Used to It." Identity Conflict in the Homosexual Radical Right

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Summary

This thesis examines the supposed identity conflict in homosexual men who have radical right (or far right) political identities and articulates the identity conflict resolution techniques which nullify or minimise this identity conflict. Conventional understanding of the gay radical right suggests that these men are more interested in fetish than ideology (Berlet & Vysotsky, 2006; Waldner et al., 2006), and this understanding is based on the supposition that the interests, demands, and needs of being both homosexual and politically far right are so opposed that there cannot be a synthesis between these two identities; this can be characterised as identity conflict.

I have taken a symbolic interactionist perspective in examining this identity conflict, and I am particularly influenced by Sheldon Stryker's approach to identity (as articulated in Serpe & Stryker, 2011; Stryker, 1987; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This approach views identity as a performance, and the commitment to the performance is strengthened through positive or negative feedback. Individuals may have multiple identities that they perform, which are conceptualised into a salience hierarchy. This salience hierarchy is established by assessing an individual's commitment to their different identities and framing any conflict as a challenge to this commitment. I argue that the homosexual radical right can maintain congruent identities by resolving any challenges to their identity commitments.

I conducted a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of forty-four texts (including literature, images, and memes) that the homosexual radical right has produced between 1930 and 2020 to study this identity conflict. These texts were intentionally selected from a range of international actors and represent temporal and spatial variation to best examine identity conflict resolution techniques.

Through this CDA I show that many members of the homosexual radical right successfully resolve identity conflict through two strategies: either by denying the conflict exists or by minimising the conflict to a tolerable level. The first strategy of denying that identity conflict exists has three methods: primarily, the CDA shows that the homosexual radical right engages in an ideological reconstruction to allow homosexuality to exist within the radical right ideological typology. This reconstruction creates a symbiosis between homosexuality and the radical right, therefore eliminating any conflict. I suggest that this is, in effect, a queering of the radical right ideology. The additional two methods within the 'no conflict' strategy are to either fictionalise the homophobia of the radical right or suggesting that any identity conflict is artificially created by those who are critical of the radical right. The second strategy of identity conflict resolution that emerged through the CDA is the minimisation of identity conflict. This is achieved through creating a group of people (the 'Other') which significantly threatens both homosexuals and white people so that any identity conflict can be tolerated.

This research is particularly important in the Aotearoa New Zealand context as many gay men in Aotearoa vote for right and far-right political parties (James, 2019) and is underscored by the growth of the far-right in New Zealand (Ford, 2020). The identity conflict resolution techniques identified herein could be used to better understand any identity conflict these men may experience. Future research could also test these techniques through qualitative methods with the gay radical right themselves.

This thesis presents a dual contribution to the sociological understanding of the relationship between sexual and political identities. The research has resulted in the novel suggestion that the radical right, as an ideology, can be queered. Queering is often seen as a tool to dismantle and question heteronormative power structures, however in this thesis I suggest that this same process can be utilised by the radical right. The second contribution is the collection and collation of homosexual radical right material: much of the early chapters are dedicated to documenting the authentic homosexual support for radical right and far right political movements. In an era where the homosexual radical right is often dismissed as being a fetish or ideologically incoherent, this thesis presents a coherent radical right ideological framework that is based on primary sources from the homosexual radical right themselves.

Link to thesis

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Exploring Bullying Against Academics in Pakistan: A Corrosive Workplace Issue

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Summary

This doctoral research investigates workplace bullying within Pakistani Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), focusing specifically on the experiences of women academics. It explores the nature and various forms of bullying, paying particular attention to how gender shapes these experiences. The study also examines institutional responses and coping strategies employed by those affected, while analysing how cultural norms and power dynamics influence both the occurrence of bullying and the effectiveness of organisational interventions. Through this, the research aims to provide a nuanced understanding of bullying in academic settings and the complex interplay of social factors that sustain it.

The study reveals how mid-level academics in HEIs are marginalised by gendered stereotypes that undermine their authority and block career advancement (Kanter, 1975). These dynamics, reinforced by hierarchical and patriarchal structures, normalise bullying and create environments where it can persist—particularly when tenured positions shield perpetrators. The findings emphasise that positional power, rather than gender alone, drives such behaviours.

Another critical finding is the limited efficacy of formal mechanisms such as HR departments and union bodies. Participants often described these channels as either complicit or powerless, further contributing to institutional silence and inaction. Many chose to resign or disengage, some strategically remained in toxic environments while planning their exit, an act described as both defiant and psychologically costly while others employed resilience strategies, including self-reflection and support networks, to cope with the abuse.

In countries where gender egalitarianism is low, women are socialised to be more accommodating and less assertive, increasing their vulnerability to bullying (Escartín, 2016). HEIs in Pakistan reflect these societal patterns, including gender-specific job roles and discrimination, reinforcing women's subordinate status and exposing them to higher risks of bullying.

In terms of theoretical contribution, the study explores Joan Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organisations and Sidanius and Pratto's (1999) social dominance theory to examine how bullying operates as a form of gendered oppression. It further expands the predominantly Western-centric literature by introducing a cultural dimension to workplace bullying. Specifically, the concept of 'Seth culture'—a paternalistic organisational system marked by rigid hierarchies, unquestioned authority, and personalised power—is commonly practiced in Pakistan, shaping workplace dynamics in ways that enable abuse and suppress dissent.

Methodologically, the research makes a significant contribution through its innovative use of autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, and semi-structured interviews. These qualitative methods enable a textured, insider account of bullying that captures both emotional and organisational dimensions often missed in quantitative studies. The personal narrative component aligns with Laslett's (1999) assertion that sociological insight is enriched through the convergence of personal experience and social context, and Sparkes' (1996) argument that autoethnography can yield deep sociological understanding.

This dissertation contributes to academic scholarship by offering a culturally grounded, gender-sensitive perspective on workplace bullying, while also serving as a potential reference point for policy reform in Pakistan. This research is relevant to a New Zealand sociology audience concerned with diversity, workplace justice, and global perspectives.

The study invites further research into the intersections of class, ethnicity, and religion in shaping bullying experiences in South Asian academia. It also calls for longitudinal studies to track the long-term career and psychological impact of bullying on faculty, particularly women. Lastly, there is scope for comparative studies between developing and developed nations to refine anti-bullying interventions through cross-cultural learning.

This work is relevant to academic leaders, human resource professionals, policymakers, and researchers interested in organisational culture, gender studies, and workplace equity. The combination of lived experience and scholarly insight makes the thesis both academically rigorous and socially impactful.

Link to thesis

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It's (not) Just Time: The Lasting Effects of Incarceration on Identity

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Summary

Early in my prison experience, a fellow incarcerated person told me that "it's just time, bro, that's all they can take from you." I learnt quickly, however, that prison is never *just* time.

This thesis argues that a sentence of incarceration never truly ends, because it disrupts identity through its impact on how time is experienced and recalled. Time is not just something taken away in prison; it is rearranged, distorted, and politicised. I introduce the concept of temporal friction to describe the dissonance that occurs when institutions impose rigid, linear structures of time onto the fluid, relational, and layered ways people experience time. This friction does not end upon release. It continues to shape how people think, feel, relate, and understand.

Grounded in autoethnography, I use narrative, analytical, and evocative writing to explore the effects of incarceration on the self. I bring memory, theory, and reflection into conversation to examine what happens when institutional time collides with the body, grief, sexuality, coping, shame, and fantasy. This method demanded vulnerability and emotional labour. For me, autoethnography was more than a methodology. It became a journey of struggle, survival and, ultimately, healing. This journey was supported by the conceptual framework I used to make sense of time's disorienting effects. Drawing on Deleuze's three syntheses of time (habit, memory, and future) (Deleuze, 1994; Williams, 2011), this thesis explores how, inside prison, habit becomes enforced routine, memory becomes fractured, and future becomes suspended and conditional. These altered temporalities persist beyond incarceration and reshape how temporal friction is navigated and experienced in one's sense of self.

Unresolved grief disrupts how time is felt and understood. Losing a partner created a temporal rupture. It was not a moment to process and leave behind, but the start of a new tension with institutional time. Grief follows no linear progression. In contrast, prison imposes a rigid temporality with expectations of discipline. These structures demand that grief be suppressed, compartmentalised, or reshaped into something acceptable. That demand intensified the dissonance between internal rhythms of grief and external carceral time. I examine the embodied, emotional, and relational consequences of temporal friction. Drawing on Butler (1990; 2004), Foucault (1977; 1988; 2019), Goffman (1961), and Scott (1985), I explore how shame is structured by action, how grief is denied rhythm, how identities are policed through gendered norms, and how fantasy becomes both a coping strategy and form of resistance.

In the final chapter, I discuss temporal justice and argue that justice must include access to reclaimed and restorative time. Current models treat time as something to be served and then resumed. This thesis shows that these models do not reflect lived experiences of incarceration. Temporal justice

explores how time is structured and controlled and addresses the lingering effects in the aftermath of incarceration. I propose that policy must shift to restore agency over time by rethinking sentencing, creating rehabilitation that responds to temporal disruption, and developing reintegration strategies that address the enduring effects of institutional time. This framework invites future research into how time is governed, resisted, and reclaimed in institutional settings.

This thesis contributes to sociology, criminology, and criminal justice scholarship. Its central argument is that the sentence never truly ends because the effects of incarceration go beyond the measurable sentence and physical boundaries. Time is not just the measure of the sentence; it is the mechanism through which it is enacted and bodies controlled. If justice is to mean something beyond containment, we must think differently about what it means to do time and to live after the gates open. Because, a sentence of incarceration is never *just* time.

Link to thesis

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The Precarity of Platform Capitalism: How Collective Mobilisation Changes as the Sex Work Industry Shifts to Online Marketplaces

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Summary

Digital platforms have surged in popularity becoming transnational sites of economic activity. These platforms have provided the tools and software necessary for different users, including entrepreneurs (workers), consumers (customers), advertisers, and service providers, to connect with one another, share information, sell or consume products and services, and to establish their own marketplaces. This new mode of capitalism is known as platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) and has been questioned for its precariousness. One growing class of workers who experience precarity within the platform economy are online sex workers, who work on platforms such as OnlyFans and MyFreeCams.

My qualitative research, which involved a content analysis of online forums (AmberCutie forum) utilised by online sex workers along with eight semi structured interviews with New Zealand based online sex workers, explores how platform capitalism shapes their experiences. It asks: How do online sex work platforms operate and exert power? How do these dynamics affect workers' daily lives and experiences? Moreover, what does the platformisation of the sex industry mean for the collective organising of sex workers, particularly in the New Zealand context where sex workers have historically had a strong political voice? Findings reveal the social, economic, and political forms of structural violence enacted against online sex workers. These include algorithmic bias, exploitive platform practices that demand unpaid emotional, moral, and affective labour, unfair deplatforming practices, and the financial instability associated with risky third-party payment systems that are commonly used in the industry. Transnational regulations implemented by platforms that conflict with local sex work laws and the monopolisation of the online sex work industry also function as forms of structural violence affecting workers agency, whilst constraining their ability to publicly contest platform practices given the threat of platform retaliation (e.g., deplatforming).

By examining the economic, social, and political structures through which violence is enacted, this thesis highlights how workers' experiences are shaped by intersecting forms of power and control. However, despite these systemic barriers, online sex workers are restaging their collective mobilisation within private digital spaces like Discord and online forums. Within these networks, workers have established communities of care where they share experiences, provide mutual support, and inform on strategies to navigate and/or subvert exploitive platform systems. This engagement fosters solidarity and the development of what I term 'imagined resistance', an everyday form of resistance (Scott, 1985) where workers consider collective action that is yet to occur. Workers imagined resistance is a safe, strategic, and

necessary form of collective mobilisation undertaken due to the constraints imposed by platform capitalism. For example, workers are exploring alternative systems, such as platform cooperatives and unions, that may offer stronger support in the future without the risk of retaliation from platforms. While everyday forms of resistance are often criticised as being merely symbolic because they do not directly confront systems of power or bring about revolutionary change (Žižek, 2004), they remain politically significant. These practices challenge dominant power structures and serve as deeply prefigurative forms of organising (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021; MacLeavy et al., 2021).

The insights from this thesis have important implications for labour policy, offering guidance on how to better protect online sex workers and other platform based workers. Future research could investigate how different groups of platform workers conceptualise resistance, comparing their visions for change within the platform economy. Researchers might also explore how these forms of imagined resistance evolve over time, shifting from private expressions to public action, and examine the challenges and successes associated with these efforts. These findings also contribute to New Zealand sociology by highlighting how global forces, such as platform capitalism, shape local labour experiences. Further research could deepen this analysis through a stronger intersectional lens, for example by examining the experiences of Māori or migrant workers, and how platform capitalism may intensify existing forms of social and economic exclusion.

Link to thesis

Associated publications

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Settlers Against Colonialism? Education, Organising and the Tiriti Workers' Movement

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Summary

In literature concerning counterhegemonic activism within dominant social groups, significant emphasis is placed on the role of education as a key vehicle for social change (Huygens, 2007; Land, 2015; Pease, 2002). By contrast, subaltern struggles tend to incorporate a much wider range of transformative actions, including but not limited to education (Coulthard, 2014; Malva, 2018; Smith, 2012). In *Settlers against colonialism?*, I use the case study of the Tiriti workers' movement—a movement of non-Māori working "co-intentionally" with Māori to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi—to better understand how these groups work together across subaltern/dominant subject positions by exploring the relationship between education and social movement organising. The thesis considers a) how and why the action repertoire of the Tiriti workers' movement has historically been constrained to education and b) what foundations already exist within the movement to overcome these constraints, diversify its own repertoire and better respond to present sociopolitical conditions.

Pivotal to untangling these issues is understanding how scholarship on education and social movements interact—or rather, tend not to. My theoretical framework comprises a novel synthesis of critical education and social movement theories which explore the roles of education and other forms of action in social transformation. While critical pedagogy and adult education literatures focus on developing individuals' capacity for transformative action, it has largely fallen to social movement theory to explore how people act on that capacity. Despite this disciplinary fissure, I argue that these orientations to social change are not only highly complementary but interdependent, and that the Tiriti workers' movement is uniquely positioned to demonstrate their symbiotic potential.

As a settler on whenua Māori and a participant in the Tiriti workers' movement, I adopted a scholar-activist approach to the research which necessarily straddled three knowledge traditions: mātauranga Māori, Western social constructionism, and the knowledge practices of the Tiriti workers' movement itself. Working "at the interface" (Durie, 2004) of these traditions, I interviewed 25 peers and elders within the movement to co-create an understanding of how non-Māori Tiriti work has evolved over time.

Upon analysis of these interviews, several contradictions became increasingly apparent. I found that the movement's emphasis on education contributed enormously to its accountability to Māori, given the strategy's co-intentional development between Māori and non-Māori activists in the 1980s (Huygens, 2007). Paradoxically, however, this choice also constrained further development of the settler movement's strategic repertoire; many research participants, including some Tiriti educators, expressed sentiments that the "next steps" after one attends a Tiriti workshop remain unclear.

Further limiting the diversification of the movement's action repertoire is its contradictory relationship to dominance. On the one hand, Pākehā participants struggled to articulate the ways in which race influences their/our work and reinforces their/our dominance, despite an otherwise strong conceptual grasp of settler colonialism (see Tecun et al., 2022). On the other hand, there was also limited understanding of the ways in which the predominantly middle-class research participants are *not* dominant in relation to the capitalist class. This too constrained the ways in which participants could see themselves supporting Māori by resisting the mores of colonial capitalism (see Scobie & Sturman, 2024).

I ultimately argue that context-specific interweavings of education and other forms of transformative action are necessary for addressing these contradictions and achieving social transformation. By bringing critical education and social movement theories into deeper conversation in this way, the thesis demonstrates the need for a continued scholarly push against the siloing of these disciplines. Future research will need to consider not only how education can be informed by and therefore contribute more meaningfully to social movements, but also how those movements can understand and recast their own activities as educational.

Link to thesis

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Empire of Punishment: A Social Reproduction Theory of Mass Incarceration

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Summary

In my work as a member of the prison abolitionist group People Against Prisons Aotearoa, I have often run into confused accounts of the causes for the present crisis of mass incarceration. This thesis was my effort to clarify the nature of incarceration, rejecting racial essentialism, the 'new slavery' hypothesis, and liberal reformism. The thesis aimed to provide an explanation for the massive expansion of the prison system that occurred after the neoliberal structural adjustment of the 1980s, rooted in Marxist political economy. My goal was to provide a theoretical framework that could guide and inform the revolutionary struggle of the social movements, in line with Marx's criticism that "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it." (Marx & Engels, 1969, p. 15).

Empire of Punishment drew on two key areas of Marxist political economy. The first of these was the concept of unequal exchange, derived from the work of Samir Amin and contemporary value theoretical studies (Amin, 2010; Smith, 2016). This concerns the Marxist concepts of value, determined by production, and price, determined in exchange, and the structural consequences for the third world when commodities exchange for prices lower than their values. The second area was social reproduction theory, drawn from Marxist-feminist debates over the origin of women's oppression (Bhattacharya, 2017). Social reproduction theory is concerned with the production of human beings and their capacity to labour.

I argued that neoliberal economic policy depends on unequal exchange in labour-power, driving the price of labour-power below its value. When this happens, people are unable to adequately replenish their existence, resulting in social dysfunction like mental illness, addiction, violence, and crime. Using Louis Althusser's materialist theory of ideology, I argued that the criminal justice system is an ideological process aimed at individualising responsibility for these dysfunctions (Althusser, 2014). This process diverts blame for criminal activity onto individual criminals, and away from the capitalist class who have overseen the creation of social conditions that make this crime inevitable. This process can work only so long as we continue to incarcerate, and so capitalism can survive only by imprisoning greater and greater numbers of people.

I concluded by proposing a triple crisis model for understanding mass incarceration. Capitalism entered into a crisis of profitability which it resolved through neoliberalism. Neoliberalism solved the crisis of profitability, but only by turning it into the crisis of social reproduction. Capitalism then turned to the justice system to divert blame for the crisis of social reproduction onto individuals. This worked, but in the process, turned it into the crisis of mass incarceration. This triple crisis model demonstrates that mass incarceration is not merely one horror among the many petty horrors of capitalism, but is a key internal contradiction of capitalism itself. Mass incarceration is the outcome of a whole series of tortuous

manoeuvres taken by the capitalist class in the effort to outlive its day. Attacking and undermining the system of mass incarceration should therefore be a central strategic priority for the revolutionary struggle against capitalism.

In the interests of making this thesis immediately useful for People Against Prisons Aotearoa, I used the economy with which I was the most familiar for all my examples. New Zealand's crisis of mass incarceration is not qualitatively different to the overall crisis of mass incarceration being experienced in every capitalist country. In my forthcoming book I carry out a more general study of the capitalist world-system to make the case that this triple crisis model is universally applicable.

Link to thesis

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Dual Liminality and Violation of Rights: Transgender Asylum Seekers and Access to Institutions, Social Services and Support in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Summary

This thesis explores the lived experiences of transgender asylum seekers in Aotearoa New Zealand, with a focus on how they access (or are excluded from) institutions, services, and legal protections. While New Zealand is often advertised as a global leader in supporting transgender rights (New Zealand Education, n.d.; New Zealand Story, n.d.), little is known about how these protections translate into practice for transgender people seeking asylum. Globally, much of the existing literature on transgender asylum seekers focuses on legal adjudication processes (see Avgeri, 2021; Gowin et al., 2017; Landau, 2004). In contrast, this research examines what happens before and after legal decisions are made, situating transgender asylum seekers within broader sociological questions of identity, marginalisation, and belonging.

The research adopts a qualitative design, combining four in-depth interviews with transgender asylum seekers and five in-depth interviews with organisational participants involved in working with transgender asylum seekers in different capacities. Along with interviews, I performed a cross-case analysis of 12 legal cases involving transgender refugee claims. The analysis is informed by aspects of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007), gender performance (West & Zimmerman, 1987), transphobia through reality enforcement (Bettcher, 2007; 2014), and scholarship on the social construction of 'illegality' (De Genova, 2002; Flores & Schachter, 2018; Patler, 2014). A central theoretical contribution of the thesis is the use of a 'dual liminality' framework (Sharaby, 2011), which conceptualises how transgender asylum seekers navigate simultaneous uncertainty around their gender identity and legal status.

The study's findings highlight a key distinction from international literature (Landau, 2004; Vogler, 2019; Wayne, 2016): while transgender identity can be a major barrier to successful asylum claims elsewhere, participants in Aotearoa New Zealand reported that their gender identity was less likely to be contested during the legal adjudication process. Instead, outcomes were more often shaped by perceived concerns around applicants' healthcare costs, character assessments, or whether they met rigid country-of-origin criteria. A particularly pervasive challenge identified by participants was the lack of access to gender-concordant identification documents. This limitation had far-reaching consequences, undermining their ability to access essential services such as healthcare, housing, education, and employment.

Participants described being trapped in a cycle of institutional exclusion: their status as asylum seekers denied them access to trans-affirming legal documentation, while the lack of such documentation impeded access to services that might otherwise support their integration and wellbeing. Many faced

discrimination and misunderstanding from frontline service providers unfamiliar with the legal entitlements or needs of transgender asylum seekers. This contributed to feelings of marginalisation, precarity, and isolation which are the hallmarks of the "dual liminality" framework (Sharaby, 2011).

This research contributes to sociological understandings of migration, gender, and institutional exclusion in several ways. It offers one of the first empirical studies of transgender asylum seekers in Aotearoa New Zealand, and it challenges assumptions about the country's inclusiveness by documenting gaps between policy ideals and lived realities. The dual liminality framework offers a novel lens for analysing how overlapping marginalised identities generate unique vulnerabilities, and how systemic shortcomings within refugee, legal, and social service infrastructures exacerbate those vulnerabilities.

Future research might explore how transgender asylum seekers experience resettlement or long-term integration, as well as how service providers and institutions could be trained to better respond to their needs. Comparative studies with other countries would also be valuable for assessing whether the Aotearoa New Zealand case is unique or part of a broader trend in global refugee systems. This study is especially relevant to a New Zealand sociological audience interested in how state institutions reproduce inequality through both visible and invisible mechanisms. It contributes to critical conversations about belonging, legitimacy, and the limits of inclusion in a settler-colonial welfare state.

Link to thesis

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The Wise Ones Are All Mad: Cultural Dimensions of Mental Illness in India

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Summary

This dissertation investigates the perceived gap between medical and popular discourses about mental illness in India. It examines how historical and cultural factors - such as beliefs in karma/dharma and how the colonial asylums engaged with the local population - have contributed to different frameworks of understanding mental illness and questions whether these differences represent a 'gap' in knowledge (Webster and Devji, 2021), or whether popular perceptions reflect alternative epistemological frameworks. The research interrogates how colonial legacies have shaped contemporary biomedical discourses about mental illness and explores co-existing cultural frameworks that interpret mental illness in relation to madness within the larger knowledge landscape. Could these offer insights for more culturally attuned approaches today?

Through a series of discourse analyses of both popular and medical texts, spanning precolonial to contemporary portrayals, this research revealed that popular portrayals of mental illness in India offer distinct discourses that integrate social, cultural, and spiritual explanations. These not only show a different framework of understanding but also a continuity in precolonial knowledge, both of which contrast sharply with the contemporary biomedical framework's dominant discourses about mental illness. This divergence represents not merely a knowledge gap but fundamentally distinct and often incompatible knowledge frameworks that have lost the ability to form meaningful knowledge relations of interchange and discourse.

The historical analysis of precolonial texts demonstrates that knowledge relations were characterised by pluralism, exchange and coexistence before colonial intervention (Ram-Prasad, 2021; Sujatha, 2007; Wujastyk 2003). Colonial processes of knowledge production disrupted this pluralism by imposing standardised dominant biomedical approaches which dismissed alternative understandings (Ernst, 2014; Sharma, 2003; Wig, 2015). These colonial power dynamics persist in contemporary medical discourses. If the current dominant framework is inherently unable to form knowledge relations with other knowledge systems, then it calls to question our conventional interpretations of mental health and illness. For instance, is it possible that what experts categorise as stigmatising (Shrivastava et al., 2013; Thornicroft et al., 2007) behaviours may actually reflect historically shaped alternative responses rooted in cultural understandings, which modern biomedicine has lost the ability to understand in the process of asserting its dominance?

In questioning biomedical discourses' place in the knowledge landscape, this work contributes to understanding mental illness discourses in postcolonial contexts:

1. Through Foucauldian analysis, it demonstrates how colonial power relations established western medical frameworks' dominance while suppressing non-medical understandings (Guha, 1997), creating a context today where experts perceive ongoing tensions between public understandings of mental illness and contemporary medical discourse.
2. It reframes the perceived knowledge gap between experts and the public as an epistemological difference rather than a knowledge 'deficit,' challenging conventional approaches to mental health awareness.
3. It offers a critical reassessment of mental health stigma in India, suggesting that cultural responses often mischaracterised as stigma represent alternative epistemological frameworks with historical continuity.
4. It suggests that contemporary popular discourses maintain connections to historical understandings of madness that predate colonial intervention.

These findings open several promising research directions:

1. Exploring how precolonial knowledge relations of pluralism might inform more inclusive mental healthcare models today that acknowledge diverse cultural understandings.
2. Investigating practical approaches to integrate cultural and social explanatory models and decentre dominant medical frameworks.
3. Developing culturally attuned mental healthcare systems that recognise alternative conceptualisations of mental illness beyond western diagnostic categories.

For New Zealand's sociological audience, this research offers valuable insights into postcolonial knowledge production and mental health discourses in diverse cultural contexts. The analysis of power dynamics in mental healthcare in India, shaped by colonial legacies that continue to privilege biomedical hegemony over coexisting frameworks, are echoed in New Zealand's context between Māori healing traditions and western medical paradigms (Cohen, 2014; Jordan et al., 2021; Lawson-TeAho, 2013). The dissertation's methodological approach for analysing competing knowledge frameworks provides a model for examining similar tensions between biomedical hegemony within social/policy structures and cultural frameworks about mental health among the general public in other postcolonial societies, including New Zealand's bicultural context where biomedical, cultural and Māori epistemological traditions coexist and sometimes conflict (DeSouza, 2006).

Ultimately, this work advocates for the recognition of non-western knowledge frameworks, not as alternatives to the dominant western frameworks, but as their own systems of meaning-making and healing.

Link to thesis

Associated publications

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