Between 'Rights' and 'Experience': Sociological Reflections on the Politics of Mental Health

This 'Special Event', offered by members of the Mental Health Study Group* of the BSA Medical Sociology Group, considers the interaction of human rights policy and legal frameworks in the area of mental health with political demands for the recognition of human experience. Three problems are posed. First, how do these demands interact? Second, what are the political consequences of this interaction? Third, what *paradoxes* do these demands imply and how may they be overcome?

First, Mark Cresswell *historicises* the notions of 'rights' and 'experience' in the field of mental health. He advances the new notion of an 'experiential right' – as a species of 'human right' – and considers, moreover, whether the claims of 'experience' exist prior to and, in a strong sense, activate, the notion of 'human rights'. Theoretically, the paper engages work in the post-Marxist and post-structuralist traditions, specifically that of Giorgio Agamben and Claude Lefort.

Lydia Lewis then exposes a paradox at the heart of the governance of mental health. Official pronouncements *do* recognise the experiences of service users and the imperative of 'participation' in service delivery. Yet in practice, those experiences are *misrecognised* through processes of status subordination and psychiatric disqualification, thereby amounting to a dereliction of the core principles underlying human rights. Theoretically, this paper engages critical sociological and feminist theory, specifically that of Pierre Bourdieu and Nancy Fraser.

Both papers recognise the importance of promoting a culture of human rights and mental health whilst simultaneously acknowledging the various paradoxes and tensions which surround such a discourse. The authors are also committed to constructive dialogue between different theoretical traditions.

*For more information about the Study Group, see
http://www.britsoc.co.uk/medsoc/MedSocMentalHealth.htm