

## Editorial

### Research as praxis: challenging inequalities in systems of care

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We proudly announce the latest Outlines Critical Practice Studies issue! Bringing to fruition the transformative power of knowledge, and embracing the journal's commitment to interdisciplinarity, the authors in this issue advance social justice-oriented research agendas and bring powerful insights on urgent problems of our time. Perhaps not surprisingly after two years of a pandemic, the articles in this issue critically interrogate social practices of care, including medical and social practices. The articles published herein, though representing different voices and stances, powerfully channel a shared ethical-political commitment to carry out research as praxis to move beyond the status quo by challenging inequalities in a range of systems of care.

The issue opens with a thought-provoking article by Joanne Hunt about the entanglement of medically unexplained symptoms (MUS) with medical practice at the intersection of other social practices, including their underpinning theoretical frameworks.

The article reveals disablement to be as much a product of structural, institutional, and interpersonal misuse of power, as it is a product of biology. It suggests that psychosocial distress in MUS, far from being a predisposing or primary perpetuating factor, is largely secondary to such misuse of power. In other words, the author makes the well supported claim that the ‘seeking to avoid mental health stigma’ narrative of MUS functions as a means to further misrepresent, other, and deflate the credibility of people labeled with MUS. This raises the question of whether the ‘biopsychosocial’ (BPS) discourse, despite its apparent liberatory appeal, ultimately serves to disempower patients suffering from MUS. Consistent with a critical approach, she contends that BPS discourse has over-emphasised the role of individual factors and eschewed analysis of socio-structural context. In particular, attention is paid to clinical and therapeutic settings wherein the patient-practitioner relationship is an important contextual factor, necessitating practitioner reflexivity. The fact that the author is a person diagnosed with medically unexplained symptoms and a background on psychological therapies brings a fresh look into this issue from her unique position as someone who knows first-hand about the perils of the psychologization of such symptoms. Hunt inspires us to take a careful look into these discourses and calls for a more reflexive and critical view of the biopsychosocial model” as well pointed out by the reviewers. Moreover, the article critically unpacks the notion of ‘gains of suffering’, demonstrating how it disempowers patients by serving as “further evidence of dysfunctional illness behavior.” Brilliantly, the author turns this concept on its head and applies it to examine practitioners’ own gains in eschewing reflexivity. Arguably, this is the main import of the manuscript, to discuss the how “lack of reflexivity on the part of actors and institutions whose practice and policy derives from BPS theorizing and those whose vested interests have given rise to and reinforced such theorizing, notably in

the psy professions, is contributing to the persistence of BPS hegemony and furthering of patient harm.” Furthermore, the article offers a penetrating analysis disclosing the important but tacitly hidden link between BPS discourse and a broader agenda of austerity management, which dominates health and social policy. This missing link is revealed by demonstrating how individualistic psychosocial discourse (and practice) about patients’ symptoms are crafted without considering the broader social context.

Another critical interrogation of health care practice, Nina Nissen challenges takes a surprising new look not only at Western herbal medicine (WHM) but also at our ways of knowing about it. Her innovative photo essay departs from conventional academic genres by experimenting with an alternative format of ‘doing and sharing knowledge’. The article lives up to Outlines’s mission to push the publishing envelope further, by experimenting different formats and writing styles, seeking to analyze core discussions about human development and taking publishing as a form of (critical) practice. The author lays out an anthropological discussion about the necessity of looking into practices of western herbal medicine, with a specific attention to the mediating materiality of technologies. This includes spatial and aesthetic arrangements and displays of knowledge that we take for granted, such as by relying on the presence of medical measurement instruments, spaces, and recipes, and the possible relations between these technologies and the traditional models of medicine. On the surface, this strategy may seem as an attempt to question the legitimacy of so-called natural medicines by exposing how they often borrow the tools and practices of traditional western medicine. However, this beautifully illustrated work evinces the strategically negotiated legitimacy of WHM at the intersection with traditional practices. Rather than deconstructing the validity of Western herbal medicine, Nissen’s article draws attention to how everyday technologies contribute to its production.

Straddling this fine line, the evocative edge of this photo essay invites readers to fold back the analysis and consider how the legitimacy of mainstream medical practices is reliant on the mediating materiality of those technologies.

Last but not least, the issue closes with an article by Karl Eriksson and Asbjørn Storgaard which “makes a substantial, original, and creative contribution to the topic of the peer-relation in the field of social work. Readers will appreciate how the authors advance our understanding of peer relations, in particular by elucidating the emancipatory potential of solidarity in practices of mutual care and support groups in self-help groups, such as Alcoholic Anonymous (AA). The text will certainly catch the readership’s attention by drawing an unexpected link between Saint Paul’s letters to the First Thessalonians and peer-relation practices. As one reviewer put it, “I asked myself at the outset what this biblical text could help in the understanding of such practices of relationship between peers?” The link is that, according to Heidegger, Saint Paul placed himself as an equal, suffering the same uncertainties and anxieties as the other Christians of his ancient community. The thrust of this discussion is to understand the potential of practices between peers, which, according to the authors, consist of practices that are not mediated by hierarchical relationships, knowledge or power. In other words, the authors explore how the non-hierarchical and non-professionally mediated position of peers in these groups promotes a common, collective, and horizontal listening. Importantly, this is often the last resort for those seeking recovery, as the afflictions of one are also the affliction of another, so the feeling of collectivity, of sharing their struggles in recovering from addiction creates a sense of collectiveness that is fundamental to the treatment. The article then offers a fresh perspective to researchers interested in the potential of the non-hierarchical partnerships as a tool to foster active engagement in problem solving.