

The Potentials and Pitfalls of Lived Experience: Theoretical and Practical Reflections

Book of Abstracts:

KEYNOTE:

EXPERIENTIAL KNOWLEDGE IN DIALOGUE WITH ACADEMIC KNOWLEDGE:
WHAT CAN BE LEARNED?

PROF JENNY PEARCE

Academic knowledge is generally understood still in positivist terms. The researcher must stand outside the 'object' of study. The purpose is to extract data, alongside systematic literature review and meta-analysis applied to the 'problem'. Scientific methods disdain the subjective. There is no question that the search for evidence through respected methods of research is of utmost importance. However, the assumption that interactive rather than extractive research has no value is what I aim to question in this presentation. Trained as a political scientist I came to realise that the field lacks methods which can avoid a repetitive paradigm trap. Rather, an iterative approach whereby the deductive proposition is explored by inductive research and then challenged, can enable us to 'see' realities we otherwise miss. However, researching Latin American issues of violence, democracy and social change, I learned something much deeper. Research 'objects' are actually research 'subjects'. Their experiential knowledge is vital- and a source - of academic knowledge that should be recognised and valued. And even more than this, if research is to contribute to change, academic knowledge alone will never be sufficient. Latin America generated a field of participatory action research that has given us vital insights into the relationship between knowledge and social action. This presentation critically explores these issues based on years of research in Latin America, in order to highlight the added value as well as the challenges and risks, of acknowledging that experiential knowledge can enrich rather than distort academic knowledge.

Lived Experiences through Structural Invisibility and Precarity Faced by Nightworkers

Dr. Julius-Cezar MacQuarie

At night, cleaners keep cities clean because daytime cleaning remains under-utilised by European institutions and other large clients, all over the world. On 8 June 2024, I have discussed with the EU social partners in the Industrial Cleaning, researchers and guests organised by UNI Europa trade union in Brussels, at the European how to engage in activities to increase the implementation of daytime cleaning, so as to improve the living conditions of cleaners.

Nightwork has a ubiquitous presence in our society, from office cleaners to street sweepers and late-night food service employees. Many individuals take up nightwork out of necessity in view of limited alternative employment opportunities. Despite their numbers, these workers remain largely invisible and are rarely portrayed as protagonists in media or popular culture.

There are common misconceptions about night-time workers, such as the notion that nightwork is synonymous with illicit activities or sex work. One can observe a surprising lack of research and visibility surrounding this segment of the workforce, even within studies on workers and cleaners.

On the basis of my contribution then, explaining the disastrous effects of nightwork on manual workers, I propose to engage in a dialogue with the often-overlooked challenges faced by nighttime workers and the urgent need to address their structural invisibility and precarity. I will be sharing insights from my research on 'Invisible Migrant Nightworkers in 24/7 London'. I immersed in the lives of workers in a night market for fourteen months, and performed the same tasks, lived a similar lifestyle, resulting in weight loss, poor sleep, social isolation and a near-surgery spinal damage caused by manual labour.

Learning from the lived experience of Madness and distress -towards epistemic justice?

Dr. Lydia Sapouna (School of Applied Social Studies, UCC)

This discussion draws from my involvement in critical social work education and my position as an aspiring ally of the survivor/Mad movement. I focus on my increasing unease about the appropriation and co-option of potentially radical ideas, such as 'lived-experience knowledge', to serve institutional and professional interests, including my own. Using the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) I consider how Mad people continue to be discredited as knowers and therefore excluded from knowledges that interpret their experience and shape their 'treatment'.

The emerging field of Mad Studies is built on the validation of Mad people/survivors as knowers, proposing a shift from learning *about* madness to learning *from* and *with* madness, ultimately democratising processes of knowing and practising. Achieving epistemic justice in the academy is particularly challenging as it requires relinquishing positions of expert knowledge and superiority on which academic authority and careers are built. Yet, this challenge does not only concern traditional education and mental health systems. Paradoxically, epistemic injustice can also happen through critical, seemingly liberatory, approaches to education, research and activism when we fail to meaningfully learn from the lived experience of madness and distress. Recognising these paradoxes and the challenges posed to learning *from* and *with* lived experience are at the core of this discussion.

Social Policy Kills: Or, How Lived Experience Fights Statistical Flattening - And Loses

Dr. Ray Griffin (SETU)

Lived experience has always been the up-and-coming neighbourhood of social policy—promising, disruptive, but never quite accepted. This lecture explores the persistent inability of "living data"—the lived experiences of individuals—to challenge the purchase of statistical data in social policy and politics.

Drawing on Foucault's concept of governmentality, I first outline how statistical methods flatten the complexities of social life, rendering populations governable by extracting and structuring data into rigid, comparable units. Tim Ingold's critique of data as extracted rather than given highlights how knowledge production in social science detaches phenomena from their relational and generative contexts—killing the sample to dissect and forensically examine it.

In contrast, Bergson's philosophy of duration and vitality offers a framework for understanding lived experience as an unruly, emergent force that exceeds statistical abstraction. Yet, precisely because of its dynamism, "living data" remains supplementary—resisted, entertained, or dismissed in policy.

My comments to this roundtable interrogates whether social policy can ever accommodate the flux of lived experience—or whether, by its very nature, it must always privilege the static and the dead, as the only governable objects. I suggest recreating new dead objects as being a more vital and ontologically commiserate activity of well meaning policy makes, than attempting to make the living dwell amongst the dead.

KEYNOTE:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO LIVE AN EXPERIENCE?

PROFESSOR SHARON WRIGHT (UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW)

'Lived experience' has become an incredibly popular notion in recent years within academic literature and is now also routinely used by research funders, grassroots campaigners and within the voluntary sector (McIntosh & Wright, 2019). Public services, including health and social security, have consciously established lived experience panels to shape provision from users' perspectives. Governments are increasingly seeking lived experiences in policymaking processes. However, there are no clear-cut answers to a range of underlying questions. For example, what does lived experience actually mean, if anything at all? Whose lived experiences matter and why are some people's lived experiences seemingly irrelevant? How are lived experiences accessed and what purposes are they put to? This session opens debate about the potentially conflicting assumptions around lived experience in knowledge production, truth claims, and power-infused policy processes. Taken for granted assumptions about what lived experience might mean or imply will be questioned. Conceptual connections and incongruities will be explored in relation to examples from phenomenology, ethnography and feminist

thought. There will be an opportunity to debate what lived experience could mean theoretically and methodologically for academics and within policy contexts.

Speaking Your Truth: Lived Experience, Values, and the Question of Legitimacy

Jody Moore-Ponce (PhD Researcher Sociology and Criminology Department)

The invocation of ‘lived experience’ as a form of epistemic authority is a dominant feature in contemporary activism, policymaking, and academia. However, this authority is conditional, it is granted when lived experience aligns with ideological commitments but is often dismissed when it does not. This paper examines whether social justice movements and institutions are truly invested in lived experience, or whether it serves as a vehicle for promoting specific values and interests. For example, the Migrants' Rights Network, a UK-based non-governmental organization, has shifted its ethos towards a 'values-led lived experience' approach, where personal narratives are elevated or excluded depending on their alignment with broader political objectives. By interrogating the power structures that determine which experiences are deemed valuable, this paper challenges the assumption that ‘lived experience’ is a neutral or democratic form of knowledge. Instead, I suggest that its deployment often reflects various forms of expediency, raising broader questions about lived experience as an authoritative form of knowledge production.

The Lived Experience of Being Right: Interviewing Critics

Dr. Tom Boland (Department of Sociology and Criminology UCC)

The sociology of critique attempts to study critique within society, taking a nominalist and post-structuralist approach to any discursive claims – including those based on ‘lived experience’ (Scott, 1992). Drawing from an on-going research project, this brief paper considers how individuals involved in a vast range of public issues discuss their lived experience of getting involved, learning more, arguing on-line and IRL, facing public backlash and most importantly, ‘being right’. Following Browne and Ballantine’s (2024) approach to doing interviews with the ‘wrong people’, the problem of widely divergent claims based on ‘lived experience’ is considered.

Lived Religion: Examining the Lived Experience of Some Faithful but not Others?

Dr. Gema Kloppe-Santamaría (Department of Sociology and Criminology UCC)

The concept of “lived religion” refers to how people experience and interpret the sacred in their everyday lives. The term, which gained visibility in the late 1990s, was driven by scholars’ aim to break away from institutional, top-down, or officially sanctioned understandings of religion and to address how ordinary people – particularly those who identify as religious or faithful – lived religion (Orsi 2002, Scheper Hughes 2010, Rubin 2014). Challenging secularized

understandings of religion as a separate sphere, the term also offered a lens to understand how people's encounter with the holy might be found outside of those spaces traditionally identified as religious- including the workplace, the household, and the public sphere more broadly. Furthermore, lived religion offered a critique to an interpretation of religion as a two-tier system divided between "official" and "popular" religion, where the latter was often rendered as backward, ignorant, or marginal (Orsi 2002). In my presentation, I will reflect on the important contributions made by the concept of lived religion and then point at how class and political ideology seem to define the contours of its deployment by scholars working on Latin America, either by an exclusive focus on the lived religion of the marginalized and/or by its omission when it comes to understanding the religious underpinnings of far-right leaders and their followers.

Fear and uncertainty in Direct Provision

Dr Amin Sharifi-Isaloo

Ireland has witnessed far-right activities on its streets in recent years, including protesters and rioters targeting accommodations or camps housing asylum seekers and refugees which are dangerous and frightening. Drawing on René Girard's scapegoat mechanism and the function of violence in human societies, this paper aims to explore the lived experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland to examine how the far right's tactics are designed to instil fear, dislike, and hatred to make asylum seekers and refugees a dominant issue in Ireland which, in turn, can isolate asylum seekers and refugees further from Irish society through a schismogenic process and leave them in liminality.