

Living between worlds, thinking beyond categories: Experiences and expressions of the in-between

A transdisciplinary gathering within the OU (hosted by CuSP, the Culture and Social Psychology Research Collaboration)

List of Abstracts

Introduction: Living between worlds, thinking between categories

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What is it to be between worlds, between spaces, between times? Today it seems the in-between is all around us. Migrants transit between territories both spatial and existential; precarious workers labour between employment and unemployment; managers demand self-management, blurring creative improvisation and duty; the chronically ill navigate between health and sickness; digital technologies blur boundaries between the formal and the informal, home and work; news hybridises into infotainment; education transforms into business; corporations don the mask of ethical enterprises. These in-betweens are nothing if not ambivalent: some we celebrate (mixes of sexual orientation, gender identity, ethnicity and other becomings) and some we castigate (permanent precarity, homelessness), but all are contested, unsettled, controversial, moving. How should we make sense of experiences and expressions of the in-between? It is now commonplace for researchers and practitioners across many disciplines and fields to grapple with subject matters and circumstances that are described as indeterminate, ambiguous, emergent, volatile, messy, uncertain and ambivalent. To address such issues we find a proliferation of concepts including thresholds, boundaries, marginality, liminality, hybridity, complexity, transversality, contingency, duration and emergence, and we find a growing appetite for modes of thought and practice that can follow these subject matters as they spill out across, over and between disciplinary boundaries. Many now talk of 'in-between spaces', but it seems these spaces are inseparable from in-between times, calling for concepts expressing the in-between of spatial and temporal aspects.

Matters between Life and Death

Steve Pile (Open University, FASS, steve.pile@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: Communication with the dead, of the kind witnessed every week in Spiritualist services across the English-speaking world, presents a significant challenge for both secular and Christian ways of understanding the world. In this short paper, I will focus on the way that spirit mediumship relies on creating a place for Spirit. This relies upon the production and use of affectual forms and an affectual infrastructure. Taken together, we can see that spirit communication is routinely experienced as successful because it is grounded in an affectual infrastructure that enables the sharing of feelings and emotions between people which are experienced as deep and personal.

The inbetween space of menopause in the workplace

Jo Brewis (The Open University, FBL. Joanna.brewis@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: Menopause is the stage in a woman's life where she stops menstruating for good. On average, women reach menopause at 51; and perimenopause, the stage where they experience menopausal symptoms including hot flushes, anxiety and difficulties with concentration, at 48. However, menopause is quite literally unique to every woman. As such, menopausal symptoms and their onset, duration, severity and impact on everyday life are extremely varied. Although menopause is often regarded as a private, even taboo subject, and one which has nothing to do with employment, there are actually very good reasons why employers need to pay careful attention to the menopause. In this paper I will discuss existing gaps in our knowledge about menopause and the workplace, including the experiences of those who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, non-binary or gender non-conforming; women who attain menopause early; women who experience 'cliff-edge' menopause, for example because of an oophorectomy; BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic) women; and women in 'lower skilled' or manual occupations.

Working between Cultures: the postcolonial experience of the labour process

Charles Barthold (The Open University, FBL, charles.barthold@open.ac.uk)

In this conceptual and speculative paper I will explore the experience of postcolonial female workers in precarious work from the Global South in the Global North. The discussion will be based on the French case and its postcolonial regime linked to a universalist civilising mission – especially for women from North Africa and West Africa. I will draw *inter alia* on two pieces of research – one using discourse analysis and the other cultural analysis – I have carried out about postcolonial workers in the French context. These female workers are caught between different entities: a colonised culture and a colonising culture. This will be articulated to recent discussions on femonationalism as these female workers are at the intersection of different discourses about the performing of femininity at work – a Western one and a non-Western one. This will allow me to discuss how the in-betweenness of their experience can be related to a third space or on the contrary to self-orientalism through a form of permanent liminality. Additionally, drawing on other research in organisation studies analysing highly skilled professionals I will argue that the capacity to resignify this in-betweenness and recover some agency in this space is linked to class. Finally, this will be an opportunity to interrogate the level of autonomy of the space between cultures with power differentials, as opposed to a cosmopolitan and egalitarian relationship.

Re-Thinking Religion with the Rhizome and the Body-Without-Organs

Paul-François Tremlett, (The Open University, UK paul-francois.tremlett@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: What is religion? Through appeals to at least two distinct biological imaginaries, late nineteenth century anthropologists and late twentieth century

evolutionary psychologists have sought to define and contain 'Religion' (with a capital R) in terms of fixed traits such as beliefs. Through recourse to a biologically driven discourse of evolutionary laws, religions were rendered in the singular as a now redundant stage of human development and as an unfortunate side-effect of evolved cognitive processes. In this short paper I propose a re-think in terms of an alter biological imaginary drawn from the work of Deleuze and Guattari – that of the rhizome and the body-without-organs. This imaginary works in a different way and through it, it becomes possible to conceive Religion in the plural, as porous a-centred and hybrid flows, inevitably intermingled with practices and ideas drawn from the non-religious or the secular.

The In-between Worlds of Yogis: Body Jumping, Immortality and Kayakalpa practices

Suzanne Newcombe (Open University, Lecturer in religious studies, FASS.
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Abstract: This paper will consider some of the many techniques of indefinite life extension used within Indian yogic and Ayurvedic traditions. The process of achieving ultimate liberation may involve moving a consciousness in-between bodies, existing outside of a body, or going through a literal rebirthing process. The later practice, known as kayakalpa, has undergone a small revived in the last century. These techniques will be explained before a final discussion on how "reframing the world" through these practices can sometimes have powerful analgesic and revitalising effects (while at other times is physically harmful!).

City water matters: cultures, practices and 'in between' entanglements of urban water.

Sophie Watson (The Open University, FASS. sophie.watson@open.ac.uk)

Spatial justice in cities is typically thought through notions of division, inequality, resources- or their lack, and access. This short paper takes a different tack through considering water and its place in notions of spatial justice. Rather than looking at its scarcity and implications for urban spatial justice, I consider the enactment of purification rituals in urban environments. Drawing on Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos' (2015) argument that spatial justice is the conflict between bodies that are moved by a desire to occupy the same space at the same time, I consider the public washroom or public toilet to consider how particular 'atmospheres' define a 'lawscape' which codes the space as not to be defiled by the washing of certain body parts. The unspoken definitions of what is and is not appropriate use of water in these spaces, acts to marginalize specific populations, namely Muslim practitioners, making these water spaces liminal, contested and transitory when rituals are performed.

Reimagining between worlds? Feminist visions of personal ageing

Rebecca L. Jones (The Open University, Senior Lecturer, Health, WELS.
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Abstract: Popular imaginings of old age are dichotomised between ‘decline and decrepitude’ and extended mid-life (Sandberg and Marshall, 2017). Imagining future personal old age is acknowledged to be challenging for many. Critical gerontologists have called for more diverse and inclusive visions of a good old age, and especially for imaginings that do not depend on health, wealth and heterosexuality. In this presentation, I discuss ongoing research which responds to this call by generating explicitly feminist visions of a good old age. The project uses creative workshops in order to help participants to free their imaginations by accessing playful and creative parts of themselves. To some extent, these methods work: new feminist visions of a good old age are being generated. However, the difficulties of imagining oneself forward in time into an unknown future, and as a member of an often stigmatised and feared category-of-person, means that some significant methodological and ethical challenges remain.

Not less than human: animal transformations in the puppy play community

Darren Langdrige (The Open University, Professor, School of Psychology and Counselling. darren.langdrige@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: In this short talk, I will introduce a recent empirical project on a sexual sub-culture known as puppy play, in which people adopt the persona of a dog. I draw on this body of data to explore how people move between human and non-human animal states, with them casting off the weight of humanity as they embrace an alternative dog persona. Through the use of specific pup gear, interpersonal communication, and a variety of embodied actions, a person does not simply imitate being a puppy through role play but rather becomes a pup. This becoming is critical for understanding the appeal of this practice. I argue that participants who engage in this practice of the ‘in between’ are seeking out and embracing the unencumbered freedom (especially in the form of play) that comes from adopting a dog’s eye view of the world, learning from this new state of being and then carrying this new knowledge of selfhood to the human world. That is, ultimately, through becoming dog we can learn to be a more rounded human being.

Interdisciplinarity and reimagining development through time: between disciplines, between times

Lindsay O’Dell (Open University, WELS. Lindsay.odell@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: Ideas about how children and adults move through time have been formalised and assumed through the ‘psy-disciplines’, particularly developmental psychology. In this short presentation I explore how development is articulated and understood, illustrating the implications and problems with imagining development as a coherent trajectory. I am interested in how to articulate movement through time in ways that do not assume coherence and progression but rather acknowledge unevenness and also the normative assumptions embedded within mainstream understandings of ‘development’.

The atmosphere of the secure psychiatric ward

Steve Brown (The Open University, FBL steven.brown@open.ac.uk)

Abstract: The climate or atmosphere of a ward in secure psychiatric care is typically studied by examining the relationship between social and environmental factors. However the experiences of patients are irreducible to a set of discrete dimensions or factors. Drawing on recent work in affect theory and architectural studies, we argue for an approach to atmosphere that places it 'in between' persons and space, as a 'spatially extended quality of feeling' (cf. Böhme, 2017a) of which patients are intimately aware. The paper discusses empirical material drawn from a broader study of inpatient medium-secure forensic care in a large hospital in the South of England. We show how the process of becoming attuned to the fluctuations and shifts in the atmosphere of the ward is a critical aspect of everyday life for patients.