

SYMPOSIUM ON PUBLIC HEALTH AND THE ENVIRONMENT: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES**Rachel Hale**

PhD student, Community Health Sciences, University of Nottingham, UK.

Mcxrh3@nottingham.ac.uk

The format of this symposium consisted of three 20-minute papers, followed by half an hour of open discussion of the topics raised. The papers were presented by Nick Fox (Durham University), Richard Compton (King's College London) and Maya Gislason (University of Sussex). Each of the presenters called for medical sociology's attention to be turned to environmental issues and they all emphasised the anthropocentric nature of healthcare and research. The symposium was chaired by Daniel Wright, of the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit.

Richard Compton considered the relationship between medical sociology and climate change. Richard highlighted the anthropocentric nature of the main discipline of sociology, and of medical sociology. Richard proposed that despite the considerable attention that has been given by health researchers to the health implications of climate change, medical sociology has failed to critically assess these developments or make theoretical and empirical contributions. Richard suggested a range of issues that medical sociology addresses, including the impact of climate change on health, and the aims and organization of health care/services and its impact on the environment. Nick concluded by proposing that in future environmental issues be included as a MedSoc conference stream, rather than just a special symposia.

Nick Fox outlined five perspectives on 'health and the environment'. The first was that human health is threatened by environmental factors (for example, by climate change). The second, that improving the environment can enhance human health. The third, that improvements in health threaten the environment (for example, through population growth and economic development). The fourth, that initiatives can reduce the environmental impact of health care. And the fifth concerned Gaia-inspired conceptions of humans as part of a self-regulating environmental system.

Nick asked whether human health and environmental health are potentially antagonistic, contradictory forces, how human and environmental health can be complementary, and should human and environmental health have priority?

Nick asserted that most healthcare and medical therapy is inevitably anthropocentric, and that health has become a 'good' that is almost unquestionable. An anti-humanist, neo-materialist approach was proposed as an alternative to an anthropocentric approach to health. An anti-humanist approach would focus on the non-human, the inanimate and social formations, and would consider the way these elements affect each other; where humans would no longer be the sole agents. Nick suggested taking a Deleuzian approach which reveals that the environment is no longer separate from bodies. The latter are part of an assemblage that is 'environment' and health is a consequence of the capacity that bodies have, and is a by-product of sustainability or resilience.

Maya Gislason considered 'Health in the Anthropocene'. Maya considered the difference between 'tame' problems, which she says science was developed to deal with, and 'wicked' and 'super wicked' problems or social messes of 'Ecological Health Research and Practice'.

Maya drew attention to the interplay between social and ecological factors in many contemporary disease burdens and drew attention to the newly emerging field of 'ecological health', which she said is grounded in the use of ecosystem approaches to health research and practice.

The symposium was well attended and the open discussion was diverse. Among the topics discussed was the relationship between humans' exploitation and consumption of non-human animals, particularly as food sources, and the affect of this on the environment and human health. Some audience members suggested veganism as a solution to some of these issues. I was particularly interested in this part of the discussion, both as a vegetarian and, as a researcher interested in the zoonotic disease influenza.