

# Psychiatry's need for Vergangenheitsbewältigung

‘culture wars’, cognitive dissonance and  
coming to terms with the past

Prof Peter Lepping & Prof Rob Poole

(BCUHB and Bangor University, Centre for Mental Health and Society, Wrexham Academic Unit)

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# Advance warning

- I will talk about racism, psychiatry and Empire
- This is going to hurt
- Frank discussion of shameful aspects of our profession's history causes a degree of cognitive dissonance or even offence to some colleagues, and we fully acknowledge this.
- This is not an apology. We think it's important to have these discussions.
- It is hard to avoid defensiveness in response to shaming facts, even when they are perceived to belong in the remote past.

# Why here in EViPRG?

- Provoke discussion and reflection
- I realise that most members of EViPRG are from Northern Europe where the legacy of eugenics and phrenology are most apparent (Scandinavia, UK, Germany, Benelux)
- Thoughts about Empire are most positive in The Netherlands and Britain, so relevant to many of our members
- I focus on *British* Psychiatry and Empire because that's where I work and live, but this is an example for all Empire and professional failure, esp in Europe and North America

# Background

- Recent attempts by the Royal College of Psychiatrists to acknowledge wrongdoings of the past
- Contrasts with leaflets celebrating British psychiatry in particular (*Celebrating Our History*)
- Responses to *Black Lives Matter* movement
- Accusations of institutional racism
- German psychiatry's efforts to acknowledged psychiatry's involvement in the organised deaths of mentally ill patients during the Nazi era.
- The UK was a victor in the Second World War, and British psychiatry has long avoided examination of its direct involvement in the development of eugenics that was later used to justify the mistreatment, sterilisation or murder of large numbers of people with learning disabilities and chronic mental illness across Europe and North America.

# Psychiatry, empire, eugenics and hereditary degeneration

- The term 'eugenics' was coined by Sir Francis Galton
- The Eugenics Laboratory London he founded was the key institution in the world for the development of concepts of genetic (or racial) hygiene.
- He classified the 'comparative worth of different races' into grades from A to I, arguing that 'Africans can never attain the average grade of Anglo-Saxons'.
- Strong associations of eugenics and phrenology with psychiatry and psychology (Bethlem Hospital)

# Maudsley

- Henry Maudsley was the key UK proponent of the concept that mental illness was an untreatable genetic disorder leading to ‘hereditary degeneration’.
- Maudsley: ‘the brain of the Negro [...] does not reach the level of the white man’s brain’. He continued to point out that *even* European females had heavier brains [than Black Africans and Aborigines]. He found alleged similarities between the brains of Africans and orang-utans.
- Many disagreed. Other psychiatrists at the time (f.ex. Friedrich Tiedemann) pointed out: ‘neither anatomy nor physiology can justify our placing of [Black people] beneath the Europeans morally or intellectually’.
- Maudsley called Tiedemann ‘the Negro’s advocate’.
- Maudsley was unequivocally in the camp of those who used the eugenic ideas of the time to justify assertions of White superiority.

# British psychology

- British psychology was equally heavily engaged in the eugenics project.
- Modern critics such as David Marks argue that
- ‘from the perspective of the colonial British Empire, the eugenics mission was an emblem of ‘white supremacy’, the traces of which seep into the British Psychological Society to the present day’.
- Marks states that institutional racism and micro-aggression against non-White psychologists are still active in the British Psychological Society, citing several recent controversies, and that racial stereotypes from the colonial past have a residual impact on psychologists’ practice and research.
- Similar is true for all medical specialties.

# Consequences of eugenics in Britain

- Therapeutic nihilism.
- Social fascism (White lower classes in Britain being seen as genetically inferior).
- The eugenic ideology of racial superiority was used to justify imperial expansion in the popular imagination.
- In our opinion, the legacy of colonial racism is seen in the modern-day disproportionate use of coercion in mental health services interactions with patients of African heritage.
- Psychiatrists often react defensively to the suggestion that mental health services are structurally racist, **even though this does not imply that psychiatrists are necessarily individually racist**. However, in our opinion, there is an obvious link between imperialism, White supremacy, concepts of eugenics, hereditary degeneration and modern structural racism.



# How Empire plays into this

- British politicians and media continue to project a positive image of the British Empire, construing it as the time when Britain was 'Great'.
- The British supposedly civilised the world through propagation of their civil institutions and legal system. Injunctions to be proud of the Empire are commonly accompanied by denial of the oppressive and destructive consequences of domination of one country by another.
- Surveys suggest that only the Dutch surpass the British in their insightless pride in their imperial past.
- Voices that are critical of this benign and victorious historical narrative provoke furious condemnation from authority and the media.

# The prevailing narrative examined

- The British-Nigerian journalist David Olusoga puts it thus:
- ‘If you have been told a version of your history and that is part of your identity, it’s very difficult when people like me come along and say: ‘There are these chapters [that you need to know about].’ People feel – wrongly in my view – that their history is being undermined by my history.
- ‘But my history isn’t a threat to your history. My history is *part* of your history’.
- From the point of view of the peoples that have been subjugated, all empires are built on racism, oppression, misappropriation and exploitation.
- Despite strong support from the historical record, pointing this out provokes defensive counter-attack and a refusal to engage with alternative views (see *Black Lives Matter*).

# Realities of Empire

- Sathnam Sanghera in 'Empireland':
- 'The manner in which our imperial history inspires a sense of exceptionalism results in dysfunctional politics and disastrous decision-making. Our collective amnesia about the fact that we were, as a nation, wilfully white supremacist and occasionally genocidal, and our failure to understand how this informs modern-day racism, are catastrophic'.

When plunder becomes a way of life for a group of men in a society, over the course of time they create for themselves a legal system that authorizes it and a moral code that glorifies it.

Frederic Bastiat



# Death toll of the British Empire

Difficult to examine precisely because of

- Long time frame and poor data (some call the British the “slow Nazis”), including deliberate destruction of records
- Difference between atrocities with thousands killed in a specific incident and famines produces by deliberate British policy (immediate versus premature deaths)
- Deaths by neglect
- Impact of slavery, which was ubiquitous in the Empire
- Lest we forget that the Irish, Scottish and Welsh were disproportionately involved in imperial activities.

# Death toll of the Empire (conservative estimates)

- Estimated 50 million Indians died prematurely between 1891 and 1920 with a huge rise of people in extreme poverty.
- ‘While the precise number of deaths is sensitive to the assumptions we make about baseline mortality, it is clear that somewhere in the vicinity of 100 million people died prematurely at the height of British colonialism in India. This is among the largest policy-induced mortality crises in human history.’ (Sullivan & Hickel, historians)
- As the chairman of East India and China Association boasted to the UK Parliament in 1840: “This company has succeeded in converting India from a manufacturing country into a country exporting raw produce.” Just in case anyone doubted the intention.

# Random list of atrocities (as examples),

20<sup>th</sup> century events in yellow

- Systematic actual and cultural genocide of North American indigenous people with help of British settlers (Gradual Civilization Act 1857), continued by Canada and US, est. 1 mio before US independence
- Irish genocide (known here as potato famine), est. 1 mio
- Aborigines genocide, over 400 massacres, est. tens of thousands
- Destruction of Benin kingdom, est. 150,000 during sacking of Benin City
- Malaysian war displacement of 15% of population into concentration camps (known here as “new Villages”), est. 400,000-1 mio
- Significant British help (esp Henry M Stanley, known here as explorer) in setting up Belgian Congo with loss of 13 mio lives

## Cont.

- 1<sup>st</sup> Indian war of independence (known here as Indian mutiny), est. 800,000
- Indian famines, est. 100 mio (esp Bengal famine, est. 4 mio)
- Amritsar massacre, est. 1,000
- Boer war concentration camps, est. 25,000
- Mau Mau uprising (with systematic destruction of records), over 10,000
- Transatlantic slavery (millions)
- Pacific islands and Caribbean genocides



# Why is it problematic?

- The binding of British patriotism to pride in the Empire has become a battle cry for those who wage so-called 'culture wars', where voices that dissent from the narrative accepted by the political right are defined as non-patriotic and thus anti-British.
- Interestingly, dissent from the prevailing narrative has always been acknowledged, negating the idea that values were fundamentally different in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and that any judgement of past actions is therefore ahistorical.
- A good example of this is the aftermath of the Amritsar massacre, the tone of which was remarkably similar to today's so-called 'culture wars'.
- What's it like in your country?

# Responses

- The instinctive intellectual response is to excuse past wrongdoing on the basis that values were different then.
- In reality, there was a range of opinion and values at all times, and our perceptions of the values of the past have been strongly influenced by those who control historical accounts, among them many apologists of Empire.
- Real harms occurred, even if perpetrators were insensitive to them at the time. The many dissenting contemporaneous voices negate the idea that people in the past adhered to a single monolithic ethic that supported the dominant view.

# The past is alive in the present

- Being part of the narrative makes it more difficult for psychiatrists to fully acknowledge its consequences in the here and now.
- In keeping with this, UK psychiatry has invested much of its pride and sense of self in being part of a national tradition that considers itself to be socially progressive.
- A deeper analysis creates cognitive dissonance over who we are and over our role within the life of the nation. This is hard to bear, and it is more comfortable to simply reject any re-evaluation of the foundations of our professional pride.

# Vergangenheitsbewältigung

- Coming to terms with one's past
- It describes the *process* of analysing and accepting one's past with all its failures, flaws and moral ambiguities. The aim is to get closer to one's real self, learn from past mistakes and develop concepts for a better future.
- Many of these stories are full of personal guilt and responsibility, moral injury, shame and suffering. They are about collective failure as well as collectively building a better future.

# Challenges

- The initial dilemma is the tension between the self-esteem we get from being part of a benign national and professional narrative and the cognitive dissonance that will be caused and has to be worked through when we challenge this narrative.

# Consequences

- If we are serious in our remorse for past wrongdoings, we must find a way to engage with historical truths that allows us to come to terms with our own, our country's and our profession's pasts, whilst preserving self-esteem. In a psychotherapeutic sense, shame needs to be integrated and not sequestered.
- A Vergangenheitsbewältigung process of coming to terms with the past might become a source of a new sense of self, integrity and pride.
- May lead to claims of compensation (atonement/apology versus reparations)

# Where to start?

- Sathnam Sanghera and others argue for:
- a broadening of the national curricula in schools and universities.
- Widen our understanding of our own past with regard to Empire.
- This should not only include the suffering in the colonies at the hand of the British and their colonial allies but also the negative consequences of Empire in the UK, given that the wealth the Empire created was only shared among a few, usually already wealthy, people.

# What about psychiatry?

- Psychiatry may equally need to widen its curricula to acknowledge the impact up to today of its involvement in eugenics, homophobia and dangerous, ineffective treatments such as insulin coma therapy.
- Telling the complete story can be part of a process that helps us come to terms with the shameful aspects of our past without losing self-esteem.
- Accepting our complex past in its entirety and learning from it can be a source of pride.
- Psychiatry has special understanding of self-esteem, shame, stigma and the development of the self.



# What is in it for us?

- If we can examine and come to terms with shameful aspects of our past and present, we may have something to say to the nation about how to deal with past failings.
- This includes a willingness to learn about and acknowledge what has happened and to act on that knowledge to make things different in the future.
- Just like coming to terms with personal histories, analysing professional and national failures, and not just successes, can show a route to a more mature society.

# National Museums NI Commitment to Inclusive Global Histories:

We will bring marginalised voices and stories to the fore.

We will exchange ideas and learn from others.

We will highlight and redress the injustices of the past.

We will face up to uncomfortable truths.

We will encourage mutual respect and understanding.

We acknowledge we have much further to go,  
but we must start somewhere.

We believe in **Inclusive Global Histories.**

Thank you very much  
Diolch yn fawr

Contact:

[peter.lepping@wales.nhs.uk](mailto:peter.lepping@wales.nhs.uk)

**Dum vives, homo, bibe. Nam post mortem nihil est.**

So people, live and drink, because after death there is nothing

Deshalb Leute, lebt und trinkt, denn es gibt nichts nach dem Tode