



Programme: Young people, social media and new understandings of mental distress



Thursday 9th – Friday 10th July 2026

The British Academy, 10-11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH

Conference Summary

This conference brings together an outstanding interdisciplinary group of scholars, alongside activists and NGOs working on youth mental health, to discuss the ways in which everyday understandings of mental health and distress are changing.

In the context of a widely documented mental health crisis among young people, we are interested in new ways of understanding psychological distress including the apparent de-stigmatisation of mental ill health, a paradoxical growing attachment to diagnostic labels, alongside simultaneous resistance to psychological/psychiatric expertise, and new emerging ways of representing mental distress from the 'crying selfie' to the playful, cuteness-informed language of the 'menty b'.

Through expert presentations, conversations and creative workshops we ask: how are young people making sense of mental health today? What role do digital platforms and social media play in shaping new understandings of psychological distress? How are young people's understandings situated in relation to critiques of medicalisation and the 'psy-complex'? Is there a mismatch between everyday understandings of mental ill-health and those rooted in medical models? And do they reinforce or challenge inequalities related to race, gender, sexuality, class and disability?

Conference Convenors

- Professor Rosalind Gill FBA, Goldsmiths, University of London
- Professor Sarah Riley, Massey University of New Zealand

Schedule

Day 1

9:30–10:00 am: Registration opens

Coffee and refreshments served in the Wohl Gallery.

Day 1 Thursday 9th July

Session 1 10am-12pm How are young people talking about mental health on/with social media? (SHAPE Room).

Chairs: Rosalind Gill and Sarah Riley

Speakers:

- **Ruth Page** will talk about her new UKRI-funded research about mental health influencers and the stories they tell.

Ruth Page is Professor of Applied Linguistics, Birmingham University. Her books on influencers include "Narratives online. Shared Stories and Social Media".

- **Holly Avella** will discuss her research on TikTok#Therapy charting the rise of therapeutic discourse post-pandemic and exploring 'algorithmic mood disorders'

Holly Avella is an early career researcher at Scranton University, US, who recently completed her doctorate at Rutgers; specialising in mental health and social media, including TikTok therapy.

- **Fredrika Thelandersson** will talk about her research about ‘sad girl’ cultures and circulating accounts of depression on social media, and the way in these may be marketized.

Fredrika Thelandersson is a postdoctoral researcher at Lund University, Sweden. She is interested in gender, age and mental health and is author of “21st Century Media and Female Mental Health: Profitable Vulnerability and Sad Girl Culture”

Short Q&A facilitated by the chair

Discussion Activity – led by Jenny Mackewn

Lunch 12 - 1 (Sandwiches and refreshments served in the Wohl Gallery)

Session 2 1pm-3pm: The psy complex and psychologization of cultural life (SHAPE ROOM).

Chair: Ann Phoenix

Speakers:

- **Christina Scharff** will talk about mental health as a culture wars issue.

Christina Scharff is Professor of Culture and Subjectivity at King’s College London and works around digital activism, transnational feminisms, cultural and creative labour and the psychic life of neoliberalism. She is the author of numerous publications including the books *Gender, Subjectivity and Cultural Work*, and *Repudiating Feminism*.

- **David Harper** will talk from his extensive experience as a critical clinical psychologist researching social inequality and its influence on mental health.

David Harper is Professor of Clinical Psychology, Mental Health and Social Change, University of East London. His books include the award-winning “Psychology, Mental Health & Distress” which won the British Psychological Society book prize, and he was also one of several senior psychologists who, along with activists and psychiatric survivors, developed the “Power Threat Meaning Framework” as an alternative to traditional psychiatric diagnosis.

- **Sarah Riley** will present her research on the kinds of ideal selves and bodies circulated by tracking apps targeted at women, reflecting on the fraught relationship between digital technologies, subjectivity and embodiment.

Sarah Riley is Professor of Critical Health Psychology, Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand. She specialises in researching gender, digital technology and wellbeing and her books include the award-winning “Postfeminism and Health” which won the British Psychological Society book prize.

Short Q&A facilitated by the chair

Discussion Activity – led by Jenny Mackewn

30 min break

Session 3 3.30-5.30 pm

How are activists and practitioners responding to new and emerging ways of talking about mental health and distress? (SHAPE Room).

Chair: Sarah Riley

Speakers:

- **Jazza John** will talk about their work as a researcher at YouTube, with a particular focus on LGBTQ mental health.

Jazza John is a UX (user experience) Researcher at YouTube London. Their particular focus is on researching LGBTQ+ mental health for the platform.

- **Anna Bailie** will talk about her PhD research on community mental health activists who are using social media to challenge existing ways of thinking about psychological distress.

Anna Bailie is a PhD student in Politics and International Relations at University of York researching dynamics of isolation and empowerment in relation to mental health discourses on Instagram.

- **Zoe Glatt** will discuss her research on the mental health costs of being a content creator for platforms such as YouTube, Instagram or TikTok, and the ways in which mental health is being discussed among some of the 207 million people globally who make up the creator ‘community’ in 2024/5.

Zoe Glatt was awarded her PhD from the LSE in 2022 and then worked as a postdoctoral researcher at Microsoft New England. She now teaches on the interdisciplinary LSE100 course. She has worked extensively with content creators on different platforms to raise issues about emotional, affective and relational labour, mental health, and experiences of racism and misogyny.

Extended Q&A facilitated by the chair

DRINKS RECEPTION (Wohl Gallery)

Day 2 – Friday 10th July

9:30–10:00 am: Registration opens

Coffee and refreshments served in the Wohl Gallery.

Session 4 10am-12noon: How do power and inequity shape young people's mental health discourse?

Chair: Rosalind Gill

- **Ann Phoenix** will address this theme drawing on her extensive body of research with and about young people, bringing a particular focus on young masculinities and on racialisation.

Ann Phoenix is Professor of Psychosocial Studies at the Institute of Education, UCL, and a Fellow of the British Academy. She is author of numerous books about identity, family life, young people, and methodology, including “Young Masculinities: Understanding Boys in Contemporary Society”.

- **Emma Sheppard** will discuss the arts-based creative methods she uses to explore how crip theory problematises mainstream perspectives on mental health.

Emma Sheppard is a lecturer in Sociology at Aberystwyth University working in critical disabilities studies. Her books include "Chronic Pain, BDSM and Crip Time"

Nia Sullivan will speak about her doctoral research and setting up the organisation MadEnCounters designed to share different stories about mental distress. The talk will focus in particular on how racialized young people build digital spaces that sustain care, even within the extractive pressures of platform capitalism, and trace how participants manage the demands of visibility and care labour while forging connections that resist narrow ideas of legitimacy in mental-health discourse.

Nia Sullivan is doctoral student at Åbo Akademi University, researching mental health, and an inclusion specialist working within the non-profit sector. She is co-founder of MadEnCounters: Visibilising Counter Stories of Mental Distress.

Lisa Blackman will talk about ‘Mental Health and Distress: Creating networks of resilience, care, and transformation’. Their talk will explore Lisa's entry-point into mental health research and activism in the 1990's through their collaborations with the Hearing Voices Movement. The research that formed the basis of this

collaboration took her experiences of growing up with a mother who heard voices and had a history of severe mental health challenges, and of navigating the psychiatric system as a child and young adult. These experiences form the backdrop to some thirty years of rethinking mental distress through a non-pathologizing interdisciplinary approach, which informs her current research in collaboration with OUTpatients.org.uk, the UK LGBTQIA+ cancer charity.

Note: there is an opportunity to see 4 of the films from this project in the next session.

Lisa Blackman is a professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her research focuses upon the broad areas of affect, subjectivity, and the body and embodiment. She has a particular interest in critical mental health research and activism, that has been a theme throughout her research.

Short Q&A facilitated by the chair

Discussion Activity – led by Jenny Mackewn

LUNCH 12-1 (Sandwiches and refreshments served in the Wohl Gallery)

Session 5 1pm- 2.00pm – small group creative thinking activities (SHAPE Room).

Options

- **Option 1: Screening: Living in Queer Cancer World: Our Stories**
talk, film and discussion led by Lisa Blackman (SHAPE Room – Online participants can access)

We will watch four short films from the project <https://www.queerstories.org.uk/> which profile the stories of young people from the LGBTQIA+ community living with and beyond cancer. Watched together, they explore how illness is always lived in community with others, and that healing could be better reimagined as a collective, creative, and deeply relational process. They all explore, in creative and critical ways, how a non-pathologizing, socially-minded approach to the mental health challenges of a cancer diagnosis can provide the basis for the creation of networks of care, community and resilience.

- **Option 2: COLLAGE WORKSHOP LED BY ASMA ISTWANI** (numbers capped at 20, Lecture Room)

Asma is a collage artist and cultural producer focused on inclusive workshops, community engagement and creative events. She has worked with TATE, Somerset House and Wellcome Collection, among others, on a variety of projects, programmes and commissions and is founder of RIOT SOUP, a grassroots collective that works to uplift Global Majority artists and audiences accessing art, culture and creative industry.

Asma's practice is rooted in care and creative resistance. She is passionate about creating space for voices historically excluded from the arts and inspiring audiences to reimagine what inclusive and equitable artistic landscapes can look like. Currently serving as Culturally Mindful Artist-in-Residence for the Wandsworth Borough of Culture, she is deeply committed to developing work that bridges art, health and community storytelling. Her ongoing interest in arts for health drives her to explore how creativity can support and inspire collective wellbeing and social connection.

- **Option 3: MENTOR WALKING PAIRS** – supported with guided questions by Jenny MacKewn (St James' Park)
- **Option 4: QUIET TIME** (Wohl Gallery)

TEA/COFFEE (Wohl Gallery)

Session 6: 2.15pm-3.45pm: Troubling digital self-help: affect, technology and power (SHAPE Room).

Chair: Dr Katie Masters

Speakers:

- **Zeena Feldman** will present her new research on mental health, wellbeing and self-care apps.

Zeena Feldman is Reader in Digital Culture in the Department of Digital Humanities at King's College London. She is also Director of Queer@King's and Co-Director of the Centre for Digital Culture. Her research explores how digital technologies impact understandings and performances of traditionally analogue concepts – for instance, belonging, identity, wellbeing and power. She currently runs the Quitting Social Media project.

- **Adrienne Evans** will present research from her current research project on digital mental health

Adrienne Evans is Professor in the Centre for Postdigital Cultures, Coventry University. She specialises in how affect circulates in media and creates novel public intimacies. Her books include “Digital Feeling”.

- **Oliver Chantler**, Mental health, technology and power.

Oliver Chantler is the Head of Policy and Public Affairs at the Mental Health Foundation.

Short Q&A facilitated by the chair

Concluding Session 3.50pm-4.30pm: Endings and beginnings (SHAPE Room).

- **Panel discussion – cross cutting themes:** Ann Phoenix, Katie Masters and Asma Istwani
- **Rosalind Gill and Sarah Riley:** concluding statements.

CONFERENCE END.