Book of Abstracts

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Small Group Conference

Serving the Underserved in the Tropics:

Making a Difference with Positive Psychology

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From everyday life to social change: The role of the scholar activist.

Professor Darrin Hodgetts

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In this presentation Darrin will reflect up the role of the scholar activist in social psychology today. He will consider how research into the conduct of everyday life can be used to anchor efforts to understand the broader implications of inequalities in society. Central to such work are issues around how macro level structures and intergroup relations are reproduced through micro level situations. In making his argument for local efforts to document and lobby for structural changes in society, Darrin will focus on three interrelated manifestations of generalisation. Theoretical generalisation constitutes efforts to enlarge the significance of small-scale exemplars through research by relating local insights to the broader body of academic knowledge. Referential generalisation involves relating everyday artefacts produced by research participants metonymically to the social context which renders these things knowable. Empathetic generalisation involves promoting recognition and empathy towards people experiencing inequalities by people who have the power to help. These three forms of generalisation will be related to the development of action strategies to address inequalities in society.

The effect of work stressors, stress recovery and work-family conflict on employee wellbeing and burnout.

Martina Mae Schlittler & Doctor Divjyot Kaur
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With the development of information technology and growing competition in many industries, employees are often expected to work regardless of time or place, with lines between work and nonwork becoming increasingly blurred and causing greater strain, less wellbeing and increasing the risk for burnout. While the topic of work stress and its stressors has been widely explored, there is a gap in literature exploring the role of stress recovery on wellbeing and burnout, as well as the work-family conflict that is often experienced. In view of this, the present study conducted among 201 Singaporean working adults (21 to 64 years) employed across a variety of jobs, examines the roles of work stressors (role clarity, job control, job demands, work relationships, colleague support, management support, and organisational change), stress recovery, and work-family conflict on wellbeing and burnout. An online survey was conducted on Qualtrics to collect demographic information and scores from Health and Safety Executive Management Standards Indicator Tool (HSE), Recovery Experience Questionnaire (REQ), Work-Family Conflict Questionnaire, PERMA-Profiler scale, and the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI). Data collected was analysed using multiple regression analyses and mediated hierarchical regression analyses. Findings demonstrated the importance of social support and stress recovery in predicting wellbeing. Job demands and social support from colleagues were found to predict burnout. In the relationship between work stress and wellbeing, a mediational effect was found for stress recovery, but not work-family conflict. Theoretical and practical implications of these findings are discussed and future research directions are provided.

Understanding the Underserved through an Action Learning Project.

Associate Professor Wendy Li, Megan Balgue, Renee Ericksen & Danielle Smallacombe

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Prominent psychologist Kurt Lewin coined the term 'action research' to describe research aimed at solving social problems. Action teaching is the educational counterpart to action research. Just as Lewin developed action research to address social issues, action teaching not only teaches about a subject topic but contributes to the greater good. This presentation showcases the innovative approach to action teaching using CAR (Concept, Action & Reflection) to assist students to understand the underserved through their action learning.

The philosophy of experimentalism developed by John Dewey has been regarded as a theoretical root of action learning. Dewey's experimentalism emphasises on the principles of experience, inquiry and reflection. Inspired by Lewin's action research and Dewey's experimentalism, CAR adapts the experiential paradigm for the design of the CAR assessment. Specifically, three theories are employed to guide the design of CAR: Situated cognition theory, instructional scaffolding and guided discovery learning.

Situated cognition is a theory that emphasises that people's knowledge is constructed within and linked to the activity, context, and culture in which it is learned. Thus, learning is inseparable from doing and should be situated in activities bound to social, cultural and political contexts. Instructional scaffolding is a learning process that is designed to promote a deeper level of learning with sufficient support provided to learners to help learners achieve their learning goals. In the guided discovery learning the teacher devises a series of questions that guide learners, step by step, making a series of discoveries that leads to their predetermined learning goals.

Applying these theories to CAR design, CAR consists of three components:

- Concept—this component requires students to conduct a short literature review on the concept(s) they employ and to establish the conceptual connection with the pre-designed action.
- Action— I design the action that applies the concept(s) students have learned to a real world setting. Students are required to engage with community according to the instruction of action.
- Reflection—in the Reflection section, students are required to conceptualise their action, and reflect on what they have learned from their action and how the specific CAR helps them understand the abstract concept(s).

Systematic Review and Meta-analysis of risk factors of the forgotten parent.

Doctor Jasleen Chhabra, Associate Professor Wendy Li, Professor Brett McDermott

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Transitioning to parenthood is an important event in one's life. Arrival of a new family member is often portrayed as a joyful and happy experience. However, this transition can also be a stressful period in the new parents' life because of various changes to their lifestyle and increase in responsibilities. The stress during this period may manifest as depression and anxiety in the parents. Several studies have published a positive relationship between mothers and depression and anxiety during pregnancy and childbirth, however, the other parent, the father, has been forgotten. The aim of the current study us to systematically review and meta-analyse the risk factors associated with perinatal depression and anxiety in fathers. Five databases (CINAHL, Medline, PubMed, PsychInfo and Scopus) were used to extract studies reporting paternal perinatal depression and anxiety. The study followed Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Review and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA). In total 58 studies with 37,4789 participants were included in the final meta-analysis. The risk factors included maternal depression, gender roles, sociodemographic factors (age, education, parity, employment history) and marriage related factors. The study highlights the presence of depression and anxiety in fathers simultaneously identifying the associated risk factors which may help in developing an effective screening and treatment plan that will not only help the fathers but their partner and children as well.

Positive psychology for the underprivileged: Lessons from the tropics.

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Studies on underprivileged population have largely employed deficit model that examines consequences of living in at-risk backgrounds. There is, however, a recent growing interest across the globe in exploring this population using a strength model. A variety of factors at multiple levels, viz., individual, family, school, and community appear to serve as protective factors for those coming from at-risk backgrounds. In this keynote, we will show the protective factors and processes that nurture resilience in this target group. This presentation will provide an opportunity to explore agencies and pathways of resilience in underprivileged population through multiple studies carried out in the tropics. Many culturally informed interventions have been attempted to promote strengths among the underprivileged. The presentation will also explore the strengths and limitations of such interventions. The scope and challenges in applying positive psychology in the actual field to nurture resilience among the underprivileged in the tropics will be discussed. The responsibility of positive psychologists in promoting and safeguarding the strengths of the underprivileged in general, and in the tropics in particular, to help them thrive will also be examined in the presentation.

Exploring Explicit & Implicit Attitudes towards Mental Illness-A Study of Psychology and Non-psychology students.

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Mental illness has a high stigma. Apart from the general population, research has indicated the presence of stigma among mental health professionals and health care workers too. This can have a detrimental effect on patients seeking help. Hence, there are two main objectives of the study. First, the study will investigate attitudes towards mental illness among psychology and non-psychology university student population. To date, no study has investigated attitude towards mental illness by using both explicit and implicit measures. This study aims to evaluate the limitations and strengths of each of these approaches and draw conclusions based on comparative analyses. Second, we aim to study the significant correlates of attitude measures by drawing data from both psychology and non-psychology student population in Singapore. Explicit attitude is measured via the Attitudes towards Mental Illness-Singapore (AMI-SG) scale, consisting of 20 items. The measure of implicit attitudes, Implicit Attitude Questionnaire (IAQ), is patterned after the Denial of Continuing Discrimination subscale of the Modern Racism Scale. The present study aims to recruit 250 participants (125 psychology and 125 non-psychology students) from James Cook University Singapore. Firstly, an Exploratory Factor Analysis will be conducted to establish construct distinction between the two attitude measures. Multivariate Analyses will be conducted to test the following hypotheses. The expected results are psychology students should score significantly higher on both AMI-SG and IAQ than non-psychology students, reflecting more positive attitudes towards mental disorders. Second, there will be a significant difference in the overall responses of explicit and implicit attitude measures. The implications of this present research would help in improving acceptance towards the mentally ill and how undergraduate psychology training can be further improved to reduce such stigma.

Keeping our relationship blooming in adversity: Interpretative phenomenological study of socio-political stressors and long-term relationship resilience in gay men in Singapore.

Muhamad Alif Bin Ibrahim & Doctor Joanna Barlas

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Societal and political attitudes towards homosexuals have evolved in recent decades. However, many countries, including Singapore still do not recognise homosexuals and their long-term relationships, preventing them from accessing various social and structural support systems. Research on gay men in long-term relationships has focused mainly on their experiences of sexual minority stress, stigma and discrimination. Much remains to be understood on the coping and resilience processes that help such relationships to flourish despite being in adverse environments. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine gay men in long-term relationships. We explored their long-term relationship experiences, the socio-political stressors that impacted their relationships in Singapore, and how they coped and grew from facing these stressors. Interviews lasted approximately one and a half hours, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. Participants described anticipating stigma and discrimination from their social networks and feeling frustrated about the existence of Section 377A of the penal code. The analysis points to the varied ways in which participants coped or shielded themselves against socio-political stressors. While some participants sought solace with families of choice, others learned to live with things they could not change or made do with implicit recognition in order to maintain social harmony. Some participants used personal financial security, and some rejected heteronormative norms and chose to define their relationships in their own terms and conditions as strategies to overcome the need for social and legal recognition. The study has helped our understanding of long-term gay relationships and how couples safeguard their relationships against existing socio-political stressors in Singapore. Being cognisant about the subtle cultural differences in coping and resilience processes may help improve educational and counselling initiatives for gay couples living in adverse environments.

Understanding Chinese Dying in North Queensland: Developing a Chinese Palliative Care Cultural Competence Education Resource Toolkit.

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Since the 1980s, palliative care has been established as a specialised area in the Australian healthcare system. Palliative care aims to improve quality of life of people with a life-limiting illness, and support them and their families to live, die and grieve well. Although Australia is a multicultural society, its dominant practice in palliative care is largely situated in the western medical traditions. The core in western palliative care is the concept of autonomy that promotes the individual being a free agent who is able to make his or her own decisions. These decisions, including accepting or rejecting medical treatments, are based on the patient's right to be fully informed about all treatment options. However, in Chinese culture, the decisions of the end of life of the patient are greatly made by the patient's family members who are culturally expected to be responsible for looking after their beloved one with a terminal illness at home and/or in hospital. As a result of the rapid growth of the Chinese population in Australia, palliative care for Chinese people has been on the agenda of Australian palliative care provision. For example, Palliative Care Australia offers palliative care information in Chinese languages. However, there is little cultural competence training being provided to palliative care workers, in particular in north Queensland. This project aims to develop a Chinese Palliative Care Cultural Competence Education Resource Toolkit for palliative healthcare clinicians working in north Queensland. The toolkit will provide resources and exemplars in relation to Chinese palliative care, and facilitate the implementation of cultural competencies in palliative care.

Refugee mental health and community attitudes towards refugees.

Associate Professor Wendy Li

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The presentation showcases a series of studies, conducted by my research team, on refugee mental health of and community attitudes towards refugees living in Australia. The past decades have witnessed high numbers of people seeking refugee status globally. According to the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, refugees are persons who have crossed an international boundary because they are unable or unwilling to avail themselves in the confines of their former country due to a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. At the end of 2017, the number of has reached a new record high of 25.4 million, an increase in 2.9 million from 2016. Traumatic experiences are at the very center of the refugee journey, which has negative impacts on mental health among refugees. Our studies suggested a higher prevalence rate of mental disorders among refugee groups than the general population. The most common mental health disorders among refugees included anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Compared to younger refugees, older refugees had the highest prevalence of anxiety, depression, and PTSD. These findings suggested that war and organised violence have long-term, negative impacts on people's mental health and that older refugees are especially vulnerable to these long-term, negative impacts. Despite of the fact that Australia has had a long history of accepting refugees since 1945, there is still a lot of misunderstanding of refugees which results in negative perceptions of and targeted discrimination against refugees. In our studies, community members who had higher scores in prejudicial attitudes were more likely to perceive refugees as representing a realistic threat (resources, economy, job opportunities, etc.) and/or symbolic threat (Australian values, way of life etc.). Such racist attitudes towards refugees were subtle and indirect because classical racist attitudes are not socially desirable. As such, Racist beliefs and attitudes may not decline, but people are increasingly unwilling to admit them. Our studies found that those who had contact with refugees reported less prejudicial attitudes towards them than those who had not had contact. Positive contact with homosexuals (a stigmatised minority group) resulted in less classical and modern racial prejudice towards refugees indirectly through intergroup anxiety. This finding suggested that prejudicial attitudes towards refugees can be efficiently and significantly decreased through the integration of other stigmatised groups within society by decreasing intergroup anxiety.

Testing the newly developed Relationship Self-Sabotage Scale on a sample of English-speaking Asians.

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Research looking at adult attachment and self-sabotage provides some answers for why some people cannot maintain romantic relationships. Self-sabotage is a strategy people use to protect themselves and self-saboteurs typically hold insecure views of romantic relationships often due to having a history of difficult relationships with either parents, peers, or romantic partners. However, no instrument exists to test this phenomenon. The aim of the current study was to test a newly developed instrument, the Relationship Self-Sabotage Scale (RSSS), in a culturally diverse sample. The RSSS includes three subscales: (1) defensiveness; (2) trust difficulties; and (3) relationship skills. Further, adult attachment styles were measured using the Experiences in Close Relationship Scale-Short Form (ECR-SF), which includes two dimensions: (1) anxiety and (2) avoidance. A total of 171 participants, aged 17-56 (M=22.29, SD=5.26), from all over the Asia continent including countries such as Singapore, China, and India were recruited. Participants included 129 (75%) females and 43 (25%) males, where the majority sexually identified as heterosexual (140, 81%). Results showed that adult attachment is a significant and strong predictor of defensiveness and trust difficulties. Age, gender, sexual orientation, and relationship satisfaction were not significant predictors. Notably, this could be due to the small number of male and non-heterosexual participants. Further, relationship satisfaction was marginally significant when predicting trust difficulties. Interestingly, relationship status was a significant predictor of trust difficulties and the only significant predictor of relationship skills was the relationship length. Overall, it is well known that motivation to form close affectional bonds with significant others is a strong human drive. However, it is possible to conclude that for those who are not successful in relationships, the drive for self-protection becomes the predominant motive.

A Literature Review – The Challenges Faced by International University Students: Retention, Mental Health, and Related Factors.

Doctor Timothy Leow

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Australian university enrolments have increased over the recent years (ABS, 2013). Various factors can be attributed to this, such as the ease of entry into courses, generous 'trial' period, and an overall growing population (Norton et al, 2018). In 2009, there were approximately 61,000 International students enrolled in Australian Universities. This accounts for 1 in 5 students (ABS, 2011). A significant point of difference however between Australian and International students is that International students a required to pay upfront fees estimated to be $15,000 per semester, prior to commencing their studies with no 'trial' period allowed (Monash, 2018). Of the students enrolled in an Australian university, 30 per cent will not complete their degrees within 8 years (Norton et al, 2018), opting instead to defer or cease their studies. Factors contributing to this substantial rate of non-completion include: mental health issues, financial stressors and socio-cultural-demographic features. The primary aim of this literature review is to evaluate the relevance of the above factors on the completion rates of tertiary students and to ascertain if there is a difference in completion rates between Australian and International students. If such a difference exists, the reasons accounting for this will be explored. A comprehensive search of PubMed was completed utilising MeSH keywords as follows: "Universities", "Student dropouts", and "Mental health." This yielded 6 results. After the exclusion of studies greater than 10 years old the remaining studies were included for review. Analysis of these studies showed that there was a higher risk of non-completion in students who experienced unmet expectations in relation to course work, mental health issues and financial stressors globally. There is a gap in the data regarding the performance and retention of International students, which requires further validation and rates of course non-completion in International students needs to be ascertained.

University Wellbeing Programme - Positive Psychology Interventions integrated into University Classes.

Tarli Young

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University students have comparably low levels of wellbeing but it can be difficult to access this population with ongoing interventions. The University Wellbeing Programme uses positive psychology interventions integrated into university psychology classes. The intervention served the dual purpose of providing students with practice assessing intervention's efficacy, while also increasing their wellbeing. The programme includes in-class and take-home activities to target positive emotions, and eudaimonic wellbeing. In the first study, 94 students participated in the University Wellbeing Programme which led to significant increases in wellbeing which were maintained at follow up. There were clinically significant improvements in mental health status among a portion of students and those who undertook activities more frequently benefited more. We conducted a direct replication in Study 2 with 129 students and replicated the significant increase in students' wellbeing. In Study 3 we compared the intervention to an active control group who were undertaking a different university subject and found those in the University Wellbeing Programme experienced greater increases in wellbeing. By incorporating the intervention into class time, there was very little attrition and students were able to receive benefits without taking on additional activities. This research can inform the incorporation of interventions into university classes.

Non-Fatal Deliberate Self-Harm in three remote Indigenous communities of Far North Queensland.

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) peoples experience a suicide rate over twice that of the general Australian population. With non-fatal deliberate self-harm (DSH) being the single most important risk factor for future suicide, understanding the incidence and characteristics of DSH is essential. A clinical file audit investigated injury in three remote Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland for the six-year period 1st January 2006 to 31st December 2011 and provided an opportunity to examine Indigenous DSH in a primary healthcare setting. A DSH presentation rate of 1,638 per 100,000 population was found within the communities. Rates were higher in age groups 15–24 and 25–34, varied between communities, and were not significantly different between genders. Sixty percent of DSH repetitions occurred within six months of an earlier episode and 32% of all presentations involved hanging. The populations in these communities represent some of the most marginalised, socially excluded, and disadvantaged people in the world. This study highlights the need for urgent action to: (1) reduce the incidence of DSH in these communities and; (2) establish effective surveillance of DSH to inform intervention strategies.

A Population-based Approach to Mental Health: The Townsville Mentally Healthy City Project.

Professor Brett McDermott

James Cook University, Townsville, Australia

Mental health service providers in Australia have embraced a stepped-care model, which can be visualized as a pyramid; moving towards the top of the pyramid are services which are higher cost and lower reach. The base of the pyramid (level 1) is promotion and prevention, typically a less funded area of service provision. Level 4 services are tertiary public inpatient units which typically take the majority of mental health funding. From an international perspective, no city in the world has attempted a whole of city stepped-care model. This talk will detail the Townsville Mentally Healthy City Project; a collaboration between the Townsville City Council, beyond blue, North Queensland Primary Care Network and Queensland Health. Promotion - prevention initiatives, and mechanisms to improve and facilitate interaction between services at different steps in the model will be discussed.