Peter Sedgwick and defining disease

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Peter Sedgwick  
1934-1983

Social Activist
Translator Victor Serge
Independent Thinker

Psychopolitics
(published 1982 reprint 2015)
Book: Psychopolitics

Well written, many catchy phrases, food for thought
In depth discussion of Goffman, Foucault, Laing and Szasz.
Criticism of criticism of psychiatry

Even left wing politicians and theorists ignored people with mental health problems
Anti psychiatrists not focusing in working class families
Book: Psychopolitics

Sedgwick’s alternative namely treatment in families as is happening in Geel (Belgium) not very well worked out, no data while criticizing lack of data from Laing

Focus on community, help in patient’s groups.

One of the criticism of Sedgwick is the problems with defining disease (emphasis this talk)

Psychopolitics written in a time when there was a discussion about defining disease even in BJPsych
Less attention for discussion

- Google trends 2004-2019

Psychopolitics: (Worldwide)
Disease/Illness concept How relevant?

Reporter: What executive action are you prepared to take on guns?

Trump: I do want people to remember the words 'mental illness'. These people are mentally ill......
Plan

Discuss some thought provoking remarks in the book

Emphasis on defining disease

Criticism of Sedgwick, especially his ideas about biology/evolution

What is important now
Philosophical Methodology

Conceptual analysis

Becoming more aware and more precise about how we articulate shared meaning (ordinary language is not the last word, but the first word (Austin, 1957) reflecting experience of many generations.

Spiritual Father Fulford (1989)
Moral Theory and Medical Practice
Review in 1992 called the method old fashioned
Conceptual Genealogy

Perspective from the time it was written and the role of the concept/argument in solving particular problems (Dutilh Novaes, 2017).

Fallacy risk:

evolutionary debunking morality is a product of evolution by natural selection, hence we do need to follow moral norms. Nietzsche: Christianity was slave morality, hence we should not accept Christian ideas.
Psychopolitics (1982)

Thatcher
Prime Minister 1979-1990
Limited spending on mental health
Reduction community services

Before collapse of communism
Sedgwick a member of the Communist Party
Against capitalism
Problem: mental health services are encouraging/forcing people to adapt to a very unfair society instead of encouraging people to make changes.

Sedgwick Page 43
‘I myself am perfectly happy to see as many mentally ill persons as possible treated, fully and effectively, in this society: for no matter how many maladjustments may become adjusted through expert techniques, the workings of capitalism will ever create newer and larger discontents, infinitely more dangerous to the system than any number of individual neuroses or manias.’
Sedgwick’s trust in psychiatrists?

Presentation RCPsych conference 1982
Article Psychiatric Bulletin 1983 both about new MHA
Psychiatrists could help patients getting access to community services which were reduced by the Thatcher government.

Against power of Mental Health Review Tribunals and in favour of power for psychiatrists
‘..the general tendency of the Act, with its limitations upon psychiatric decision making, … comes from the Government and Department of Health itself.’
Sedgwick’s starting points (1982)

He rejects Kraüpl-Taylor (BJPsych 1976)

- Statistically significant deviation from a norm
- therapeutic concern felt by the person and/or his social environment

Sedgwick: heaven help a patient who appears at the surgery with a deviation that fall below statistical significance. He also stated that people sometimes do not know that they need to see a doctor. (This fits with his emphasis on communities.)
Sedgwick’s starting points (1982)

He rejects Kendell BJPych (1976)

- Biological disadvantage
- Increased mortality and reduced fertility
- Rejected by Sedgwick rhetorically ‘perspective of an unremitting baby boom’
- Sedgwick psoriasis not biological disadvantage
Untreated Psoriasis Impairs Male Fertility: A Case-Control Study

Giacomo Caldarola\textsuperscript{a} Domenico Milardi\textsuperscript{d} Giuseppe Grande\textsuperscript{d} Andrea Quercia\textsuperscript{a} Silvia Baroni\textsuperscript{b} Renato Morelli\textsuperscript{b} Riccardo Marana\textsuperscript{d} Alfredo Pontecorvi\textsuperscript{c} Clara De Simone\textsuperscript{a} Ketty Peris\textsuperscript{a}

Departments of \textsuperscript{a}Dermatology, \textsuperscript{b}Diagnostic and Laboratory Medicine and \textsuperscript{c}Endocrinology, and \textsuperscript{d}International Scientific Institute Paolo VI, Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Rome, Italy
Sedgwick’s starting points (1982)

He rejects Kendell BJPsych (1976)

- Biological disadvantage
- Increased mortality and biological disadvantage
- Rejected by Sedgwick psoriasis not biological disadvantage (but is it?) Sedgwick also mentioned that preference for same sex partner would be a disease, using Kendell’s criteria
Sedgwick’s starting points (1982)

He rejects Boorse On the Distinction Between Disease and Illness (1975)

- Disease is value free, deviation from a norm in a biological reference class, influencing survival and/or reproduction
- Illness refers to social consequences (not having to go to work, not go to prison after committing a crime, etc.)
- Disease is a necessary condition for illness
- Sedgwick distinction too finicky, probably correct as distinction is not made in day-to-day practice
Sedgwick’s starting points (1982)

- Rejects the distinction between disease and illness

- If one disagrees with a doctor one can get a second opinion

- If one disagrees at a theoretical level, better to seek an opinion outside medicine (p. 14)

- Not only too finicky, does not fit with rest of Sedgwick’s ideas, it should be possible to discuss everything outside medicine
Sedgwick’s rejection biological definition

- Disagrees with biological approaches of Boorse, Kraüpl Taylor and Kendell

- But aim from Boorse, Kraüpl Taylor and Kendell was different. They wanted to prevent excessive disease/illness claims with more demand for expensive medical attention, not having to go to work, etc.

- Sedgwick wants more care and community support and is not against more involvement of doctors and other professionals and probably wants doctors to decrease suffering caused by the harsh society.
Sedgwick’s criticisms of Szasz, Goffman and Laing ideas of disease

- Sedgwick: they all make a difference between physical and mental health, like many other critical theorists of mental illness

- Szasz: there are no specific mental disorders, only diseases related to anatomical and pathophysiological deficits, even a cadaver can ‘have’ cancer, pneumonia, but ‘mental’ illness does not exist
Sedgwick’s criticisms of Szasz, Goffman and Laing ideas of disease

Goffman: political interests in mental health, physical health apolitical

‘Mental health expresses in the interests of some particular faction or person rather than interests that can be said to be above concerns of any particular grouping as in the case of physical pathology’.

Laing: (not always consistent) natural science methods cannot be applied but ‘science of persons’ (which has to be developed)
Sedgwick about biology

Both biology and psychology provide facts about organisms/behaviour

Diagnosis/treatment involve social decisions by professionals value judgments as well as facts.

Medicine is not applied biology but a social process, both for physical and mental health.
Values and judgment apply as well to bodily illness as mental illness, contrary to Szasz.

Consensus about the values of on bodily health and the prolongation of life hence value judgments involved in most medical decisions are less evident, but they are there.
Sedgwick: disease too human centred?

"health" and "illness" are value-laden terms used by humans. These terms are also applied to all plants and animals of some concern to humans.

Beyond that sphere of human concern, disease is just competition among species (infection), etc.

My question: should this concern health professionals, humans trying to help other humans (or creatures who can suffer)
Too human centred?

‘the broken arm would be no more of an illness than a broken fingernail unless it stopped us from achieving certain socially constructed goals’

‘the fracture of a septuagenarian’s femur has within the world of nature no more significance than the snapping of an autumn leaf from its twig’ (page 30).

Wakefield (1992) argued against this said that the leaf was bound to fall and the function of a femur is to make sure somebody can walk.
Evolution

‘the fracture of a septuagenarian’s femur has within the world of nature no more significance than the snapping of an autumn leaf from its twig’ (page 30)

Evolutionary perspective: leaf on the ground does not influence reproduction of the tree, septuagenarian’s femur does influence reproductive capacities either directly (men) or indirectly (women and men).

It has significance
Social factors

Sedgwick is in my view correct in stating that there are social influence on medical diagnosis and treatment, also for physical disorders.

Sedgwick Page 8

‘The accidents of heredity and the blows of the environment do not add up or multiply into the social position and personal identity of being ‘mentally ill’
Social factors

Sedgwick sees the problem that not every deviancy should be labelled illness. People can have bad manners, commit criminal offences, be wicked, etc.

However, how to make the difference?

Provisionally (p. 35) ‘sick state located within a relatively restricted set of causal factors operating within the boundaries of a human being’

But how to identify these causal factors?
Trump re-elected?

Reporter: What executive action are you prepared to take on guns?

Trump: I do want people to remember the words 'mental illness'. These people are mentally ill......

No argument against this?
No argument against Trump, if re-elected?

This was not Sedgwick’s problem. He was worried about lack of care for both physical and mental health. Hence his focus on social factors, thought a variant of communism would be a solution.
Important points

Sedgwick agrees with anti/critical psychiatry that psychopathological judgements are value judgements.

Sedgwick argues that physical health problems also include value judgements (contrary to anti/critical psychiatry).

Sedgwick incorrect about some evolutionary processes.

However, being exclusively social factors, no response if a society wants to call some condition an illness.
Thank you for listening.
Comments/remarks/questions
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