



2023 CONFERENCE ON CRITICAL PSYCHIATRY

pluralism in anti-oppressive praxis

april 1 - 2, 2023

[mainly] online with [limited programming]
in-person

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WHAT IS THE CONFERENCE ON CRITICAL PSYCHIATRY (CCP)?

The CCP provides an opportunity for people to come together across disciplines and professional backgrounds for thoughtful critique and discussion of mental health care. Existing venues for conversation - frequently limited to forums or social media - have difficulty engaging diverse audiences or capturing the nuance necessary for dialogue and movement-building. Put another way, *the CCP hopes to confront current bottlenecks in mental health reform by providing panels, roundtables, digital content, and other events to highlight diverse perspectives and the value added from transdisciplinary, scholar-activist, community-engaged dialogue.*

CONTEXT: WHY?

We believe that critical spaces as they currently exist are limited in terms of who they reach, who they include, and who they get taken seriously by. These limitations in turn restrict movement building and practical change. For one example, Twitter, Discord, email, and other "unofficial" venues where critical discourse frequently occurs are frequently dismissed. This is likely due to format (280-character tweets cannot effectively capture nuance) or the very nature of said platforms (e.g., those in power may place stock in formal academic writing but not claims shared over social media). Critical psychiatry is in turn frequently reduced to simple "anti-science" rhetoric similar to flat earth and anti-vax conspiracies. On the other hand, some peer-reviewed journal articles or newspaper columns have been published by critical psychiatrists, but this comes with its own issues. Critiques of the psy-disciplines are taken more seriously in these cases, but by way of being technical and in many cases paywalled, they often exclude affected and minoritized populations. These academic critiques may also be dismissed as coming from disciplines not recognized as scientifically rigorous (sociology, anthropology, philosophy, history, and so forth). Conversely, when effective critiques are provided by academics like psychiatrists, they may be dismissed as being nonetheless complicit. In sum, communication and collaboration across fields and backgrounds has been a serious bottleneck for movement-building and reform. The CCP hopes to confront these challenges by providing panels, roundtables, and other events that highlight diverse perspectives and the value added from transdisciplinary, scholar-activist, community-engaged dialogue.

HISTORY

The CCP began in Fall 2021 as the Vanderbilt Critical Psychiatry Conference when undergraduates at Vanderbilt University (in Nashville, TN, USA) observed that there was a lack of accessible and transdisciplinary conversation about the ethics, practice, and evidence base for psychiatry. Planning quickly began for the 2022 Vanderbilt Critical Psychiatry Conference, to be held in January 2022.

The 2022 Conference was planned to be in-person only. However, due to the Omicron breakout that began in December 2021, the event was moved to a virtual format. To our surprise, this boosted the signal of the Conference significantly. With only minor online promotion, over 200 attendees were able to attend and hear panels/roundtables on topics like psychiatric coercion, scientific controversies within the psy-disciplines, and patient-clinician dynamics (e.g., medical gaze). Each panel was transdisciplinary in nature. Speakers included academics from anthropology, sociology, psychiatry, health policy, and clinical psychology as well as non-academics ranging from high school to graduate students interested in community organizing. A poster session including over 20 student projects was also available online. You can view last year's talks [here](#).

Because of the success of the online format in 2022, the 2023 Conference will also be held online, with some programming available in-person for those who live in the middle-Tennessee region. (Example in-person programming includes live-streams of all talks, fishbowl discussions, and networking, with a special emphasis on promoting dialogue across backgrounds, e.g., creating space for conversation between local therapists and local activists.) We are excited for the potential of online programming to highlight more diverse perspectives than we were able to last year. The lack of representation for so-called serious mental illness (e.g., psychosis) and established activists was a major weakness of the 2022 Vanderbilt Critical Psychiatry Conference. Online formatting makes our list of potential speakers far more expansive and diverse than previously available.

In Fall 2022, as our work picked up this time with organizers from across the United States and beyond, we rebranded from the Vanderbilt Critical Psychiatry Conference to the Conference on Critical Psychiatry. This captures our grander vision, which is to establish a touchstone conference for inclusive and transdisciplinary dialogue that therefore promotes innovative, practical, and diverse dialogue to as many people as possible.

PLURALISM IN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRAXIS

Our theme for the 2023 CCP is **Pluralism in Anti-Oppressive Praxis**, which we situate here in the context of critical psychiatry. In short, we as organizers believe **critique is best when it realizes the strengths of a wide range of approaches, unified in purpose even if separate in kind.**

Mental health and the psy-fields have long engendered controversy, contestation, and debate. Service users, survivors, and critical scholars across fields have articulated deep concerns with status quo responses to perceived mental difference. Major fault lines include the uses and abuses of psychiatric medication, diagnostic labels and the consequences of medicalized language, and the power imbalances that exist between psy-professionals and service users. Further, recent protests (e.g., Black Disabled Lives Matter) have brought to the fore the effects of racism and other social issues within the psy-fields. Amidst so many concerns and with an expanding number of individuals affected by an ever-growing umbrella of disorder, critiques of mental health care now embody a precarious landscape of complex identities and positionalities. This spectrum of ideas and the methods we use to inform them - across disciplines and lived experiences - is difficult to harness. The 2023 Conference on Critical Psychiatry (CCP) hopes to address this bottleneck in mental health reform by providing panels, roundtables, and other events that **highlight diverse perspectives and the value added from transdisciplinary, scholar-activist, community-engaged dialogue.** We are excited to welcome a breadth of speakers for generative and insightful dialogue on April 1st and 2nd, 2023.

WHAT DOES THE CCP'S PROGRAMMING LOOK LIKE?

Conference programming includes an array of **talks, roundtables, and panels** featuring invited speakers. Many talks to do with mental wellbeing are solely activists, solely academics, and/or (more often than not) solely clinicians. We as organizers aim to provide a space for folks of varied backgrounds - including all of the above and across socio-demographic identifiers - to speak alongside one another. **These will all be streamed online from April 1 - 2, 2023.**

Depending on the number of invited speakers who are available, we hope to offer parallel tracks. Example tracks might include: diagnosis and labeling (how do we construct and interact with diagnosis?), controversies in science (recent debates about chemical imbalance theory, science communication), patient-clinician dynamics (focus on consent and power in clinical settings), and issues in movement-building (how do movements like ours fail in terms of perspective or impact?).

WHO RUNS THE SHOW?

The idea for the CCP began with Joseph Sexton, a current undergraduate senior at Vanderbilt. Joseph proposed and directed the 2022 Conference (see “HISTORY” above) and still directs the CCP today. In the Summer of 2022, Joseph fielded applications (and reached out to some people himself) to form a larger team for organizing. Together the organizers constitute a wide array of educational, professional, and lived experiences.

EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	Joseph Sexton (he/him)	Director	Twitter
	Prameela Boorada (she/they)	Advisor	Website
	Stef Kaufman (they/she)	Advisor	Twitter , website
	Nev Jones (she/her)	Advisor	Twitter , website
	Rafik Nader Wahbi (he/him)	Advisor	Twitter
	Awais Aftab (he/him)	Advisor	Twitter , blog
	Ken MacLeish (he/him)	Advisor	Twitter , website
	Mel B (they/them)	Outreach chair	Twitter
	Hannah Griswold (she/her)	Outreach chair	LinkedIn
	Nika Mavrody (she/her)	PR & Press chair	Twitter
	Alma Ionescu (she/her)	Proposal chair	Twitter , LinkedIn
	Shannon Pagdon (she/they)	Proposal chair	Twitter
	Doah Shin (she/her)	Nashville organizing chair	LinkedIn
	Wenzhi Pan (she/her)	Nashville organizing chair	Website

Other contributors include (though this list is not exhaustive): Vardaan Bhat, Audrey Scudder, Charvi Gangwani, Crystal Widado, Fiona Wu, Agastya Jhaveri, Charu Balamurugan, Griffin Murch, Isabel O'Connor, Mikaya Kim, Nikita Rohila, Phoebe Young, Sam Gerry, Will Ford.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

BUT WHAT EVEN IS CRITICAL PSYCHIATRY?

Critical psychiatry, as we understand it, is a broad term that encompasses diverse methods of critiquing the dominant ideologies of the psy-disciplines (e.g., psychiatry, but also

psychotherapy, neuropsychology, and so forth). It might be considered **the application of critical theory to the development and current state of the psy-disciplines**. This might sound complicated, but it really just means **we are interested in how politics and social conditions both shape and, in some ways, are shaped by the psy-disciplines, and how this intersects with scientific considerations around diagnosis, explanation, and treatment**. Some classic topics of interest in critical psychiatry are: the limitations of the medical model in mental health, the relationship and power imbalances between psy-professionals and service users, critical perspectives on psychopharmacology, and the politics of diagnosis, etc.

IS THIS CONFERENCE IN-PERSON?

We are excited to offer **limited** in-person programming (to be held in Nashville, TN), but the conference is generally speaking **virtual**. In-person programming includes streaming of the conference in a group space, paired with facilitated discussions. We are excited to explore some options that make use of the power that comes from being together, in-person (e.g., [fishbowl conversations](#)).

HAVE YOU SELECTED SPEAKERS YET?

No. We plan to reach out to invite and finalize a slate of speakers by mid-February.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

We encourage you to see our [call for proposals](#), due February 3, 2023, at 11:59PM CST. Proposals are for **blogposts** to be published on the CCP website prior to the conference in April. **The call for proposals does not go beyond blogposts**, i.e., we do not have an open call for proposals with regards to speaking (because this requires a time- and person-intensive acceptance/rejection process).

WILL THERE BE CONTINUING EDUCATION UNITS (CEUs)?

CEUs are necessary for maintaining licensure in several psy-disciplines, e.g., clinical social work. We plan on providing CEUs this year - we provided them last year for practitioners in Tennessee - but cannot confirm specifics at this time.

CONTACT US

For partnerships, contact **Mel Butler** ([melbtlrr\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:melbtlrr@gmail.com)) and **Hannah Griswold** ([hannahgriswold2\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:hannahgriswold2[at]gmail.com)).

For PR and press, contact **Nika Mavrody** ([nikamavrody\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:nikamavrody[at]gmail.com)).

For blogpost proposals, contact **Shannon Pagdon** (shannonpagdon[at]gmail.com) and **Alma Ionescu** (alma.ionescu.20[at]ucl.ac.uk).

For in-person programming, contact **Doah Shin** (doah.e.shin[at]vanderbilt.edu) and **Wenzhi Pan** (wzpan17[at]gmail.com).

For any other concerns, including overarching conference philosophy and goals, contact **Joseph Sexton** (joseph.f.sexton[at]vanderbilt.edu).