

International Workshop

Modelling Reform: Psychiatric Reform Across Histories, Contexts, and Circulations

The Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at King's College London, the Department of Humanities at the University of Trieste, and the Department of Clinical and Community Sciences at the University of Milan are jointly organising an international and interdisciplinary workshop exploring the broader question of how psychiatric reforms have been conceptualised, shaped, and modelled at local, national, and global levels, both historically and in the present. The workshop will be hosted by Sapienza University of Rome.

RATIONALE

Psychiatric reform has become a central reference point in contemporary mental health policy and practice. Across diverse settings, it has been associated with deinstitutionalisation, community-based care, human rights, rehabilitation, social inclusion, participation, and new forms of governance. Today, reform is widely understood as a process through which mental health systems seek to transform institutions, improve services, and respond to changing social, political, and ethical expectations. Particular reform experiences have also become influential international points of reference, circulating across jurisdictions as sources of inspiration, comparison, and policy innovation.

Yet this understanding leaves an important question largely unexplored. Reform is not only a programme of institutional transformation; it is also a way of producing particular understandings of the past and the future. Every reform advances a selective reconstruction of history. It identifies certain actors, events, and experiences as foundational, constructs genealogies, and legitimises particular futures. Some histories become exemplary while others remain peripheral, fragmented, or forgotten. In doing so, reforms also establish particular epistemic orders, determining whose knowledge counts as authoritative and which experiences become recognised as legitimate sources of understanding changes in psychiatric practices and ideas.

This workshop invites contributions that examine psychiatric reform beyond its own self-descriptions (1, 2). Rather than taking reform narratives or internationally recognised models as given, we are interested in work that explores how reforms are assembled, institutionalised, translated, contested, and remembered across different historical periods and geographical settings. We are interested in how particular reform experiences come to acquire the status of “models”, how these models circulate across jurisdictions, and how they are continually reworked, transformed, and adapted to different political traditions, institutional arrangements, languages, and cultures (3, 4, 5). Conversely, we ask why other reform experiences, practices, or intellectual traditions never achieve comparable visibility or authority, and how reforms reshape relations of expertise, legitimacy, and knowledge within and beyond psychiatry.

The workshop widens the observational field through which psychiatric reform is approached. Psychiatric hospitals and mental health services remain central objects of inquiry, but are analysed within broader social configurations involving welfare institutions, municipalities, families, neighbourhoods, religious organisations, political movements, service users, professionals, international organisations, and many other actors whose relationships both enable and constrain processes of reform. From this perspective, mental health reform initiatives emerge through the reconfiguration of broader institutional and social ecologies (6).

Spatiality is equally central to these questions. We therefore encourage approaches that move beyond the nation-state as a primary framework of analysis by examining borderlands, multilingual regions, transnational intellectual networks, colonial and postcolonial trajectories, international organisations, and the movement of concepts, people and practices.

Taken together, these perspectives seek to historicise psychiatric reform beyond its own canonical narratives. The workshop aims to bring together historians, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, psychiatrists, social workers, public health researchers, political theorists, and others to explore reform as a dynamic process of institutional, conceptual and social interpretation and transformation.

WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

We particularly welcome contributions **addressing questions** such as:

- How do psychiatric reforms construct their own histories and political genealogies?
- How do reform models circulate, interact, and become reconfigured as they encounter different sociocultural, political, and institutional contexts?
- How do particular reform experiences become recognised as exemplary and transferable models, while others remain marginal, contested, or forgotten?
- How are concepts such as community, recovery, participation, territory, or deinstitutionalisation itself redefined as they circulate across different contexts?
- How do reforms emerge from broader social, political, cultural, and material conditions rather than solely from developments within psychiatry and the work of policy leaders?
- What roles do border regions, migration, multilingualism, and transnational networks play in shaping psychiatric reform?
- How do different actors—including users, families, communities, social workers, municipalities, activists, religious organisations, and international agencies—participate in, reshape, or resist reform processes?
- How do negotiations among professional groups during reform processes reshape hierarchies of expertise, and how do these hierarchies affect whose knowledge counts in the design and evaluation of reformed services?
- How can comparative and transnational research move beyond methodological nationalism while remaining attentive to historical specificity?
- What forms of historical and sociological inquiry allow us to reconnect contemporary reform vocabularies with the longer trajectories from which they emerged?

INDICATIVE THEMES

Contributions may address, but are not limited to, the following themes:

Histories and Temporalities of Reform

- Genealogies, histories, and temporalities of psychiatric reform
- Reform in contexts of political, social, and institutional change
- Memory, heritage, and critical reassessments of reform narratives

Models, Circulations, and Transnational Configurations

- Circulation, translation, and adaptation of reform models
- Borderlands, transnational psychiatry, and international organisations
- Comparison, exemplary cases, and the tension between universal models and local contexts

Institutions, Public Mental Health, and Social Worlds

- Institutional, community, and informal infrastructures of care
- Welfare, housing, labour, governance, and the political economy of reform
- Social movements, professionals, users, families, and other actors of reform

Concepts, Methods, and Epistemologies

- Reform as a historical, conceptual, and epistemic object
- Concepts of community, participation, recovery, and territory
- Interdisciplinary and methodological approaches to psychiatric reform

WORKSHOP FORMAT AND PARTICIPATION

We welcome contributions from history, sociology, anthropology, geography, psychiatry, psychology, public health, political theory, disability studies, Mad Studies, Science and Technology Studies, and related fields.

The workshop will be organised as a collaborative space for collective thinking rather than a conventional conference. Participants will circulate draft papers in advance, allowing sessions to prioritise sustained discussion, conceptual development, and comparative engagement across disciplines, places, and historical experiences.

The workshop will take place in person at Sapienza University of Rome on 20–21 May 2027. Selected participants will be asked to circulate a draft paper approximately four to six weeks before the workshop.

The workshop is also intended to provide an opportunity to develop work towards a future collective publication. Participation in this publication will be optional, and publication plans will be discussed further with interested participants following the workshop and will be subject to the usual editorial and peer-review processes.

Applicants should submit a paper title, an abstract of up to 350 words, and a short biographical note of up to 100 words by 31 October 2026. Submissions should be sent to francesco.toncich@units.it, cristian.montenegro@kcl.ac.uk and chantal.marazia@unimi.it. For any questions about the workshop, please contact the organisers at the same addresses.

Limited financial support may be available for early-career researchers who do not have access to institutional or project funding for travel. Applicants who would require such support should indicate this when submitting their proposal.

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Dangerous Affairs – The Rise of the Dangerousness Complex, Psychiatric Reform and the Development of Human Rights in Europe, 1950–2000: [link](#)

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