

# Pebbles in palms: Counter-practices against despair

Hannah C.M. Morgan | James Randall | Amy J. Lyons | Sarah Oliver |  
Jessica Saffer | Jacqui M. Scott | Lizette Nolte

Department of Psychology and Sport Sciences,  
University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK

## Correspondence

Dr Hannah C. M. Morgan, Department of  
Psychology and Sport Sciences, School of Life  
and Medical Sciences, Health Research  
Building, College Lane Campus, University of  
Hertfordshire, Hatfield, AL10 9AB, UK.  
Email: h.morgan@herts.ac.uk; dclinpsy@herts.  
ac.uk

## Abstract

With ongoing news of hardship and suffering in the United Kingdom and throughout the world, and in the context of austerity, shrinking public services and increasing social inequalities, it is sometimes difficult not to fall into despair, to feel hopeless or ineffectual. In this paper we consider counter-practices to such despair and hopelessness that we hope will be helpful to all clinicians.

## KEYWORDS

austerity, clinical psychology, community psychology, hope, NHS, public services

We live in challenging times, with widening economic inequalities and growing prejudice (Majumder, 2017; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). This has created conditions for large-scale effects on physical and emotional wellbeing, with multiple studies finding that increasing inequalities disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged in society (Bambra & Garthwaite, 2015; Gelormino, Bambra, Spadea, Bellini, & Costa, 2011; Marmot et al., 2010; Pickett & Wilkinson, 2017). As clinical psychologists working in the National Health Service (NHS) of the United Kingdom we bear witness to the individual stories of hardship unfolding within a context of discrimination and injustice. Many work tirelessly and devotedly to find ways to alleviate service users' distress. We sit or stand alongside our clients in their world, using formulation, novel ways of working, and both evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence to think with them about how best to move things forward.

However, the authors often wonder whether this is enough, when our clients leave their one-hour weekly appointment only to return to a world where they face endless social, political, economic and familial challenges (Waldegrave, Tamasese, Tuhaka, & Campbell, 2003). Furthermore, we have persevered through the political imposition of austerity (see Tudor & von Sommaruga Howard, 2016), necessitating us to work with scarce and diminishing resources (Hillier et al., 2017). We are yet to see whether the rhetoric of "an end to austerity" (BBC News, 2017; Kentish, 2018) will find its way into the lives of our service-users and into the walls of our clinic rooms. Often, we find ourselves faced with the imbalance between what the client or family in front of us require and what resources we can offer: for example, having to provide limited numbers of sessions, having to turn people away who do not fit the service criteria, and frantically searching for alternative third-sector services to fill the gaps. We find ourselves

and our colleagues constantly going above and beyond the call of duty, struggling to respond to ever-increasing numbers of referrals amidst decreasing resources.

As we try to adapt to these difficult environments, we have diminishing time to reflect on our work. Our contexts encourage the tendency to concentrate on the immediate work in front of us, which may lead us to lose sight of the bigger picture. To protect ourselves, we are at risk of holding very real issues at arm's length and not connecting with the lived realities of those who consult with us. Services become more target-driven and business/market-orientated (Diamond, 2008; Smail, 2005). We experience services as becoming increasingly impersonal; we sense a loss of choice and a loss of professional autonomy as interventions become ever more structured and manualised (Binnie, 2015). At times, services have felt like harsh and brutal spaces, for clients as well as for practitioners; we sense reducing morale in our teams and a loss of job security (e.g. Cotton, 2017; Mulholland, 2017).

From a privileged position, as educated and well-paid professionals, the expectation we place on ourselves is that we should have something helpful to contribute; that we should be able to offer meaningful solutions to the gross injustices we bear witness to. With the skills and training that we have been privileged to receive and that give us insights into the many impacts of trauma and inequalities on individuals and communities, comes a responsibility to use them well. It can at times feel too overwhelming even to attempt to use these knowledges at broader and more meta-levels. (We use the term "knowledges" in the narrative sense, to acknowledge that "alternative knowledges" always exist; see Epston, 1999). Thus, when we consider the complexity of the issues confronting us, it can seem that our contribution, and the contribution of every well-meaning psychologist who came before us, cannot be enough to stem the ongoing crises in our communities and in wider society. At times we can find ourselves trapped, and in a similar predicament to the late David Smail, who ended his last book observing that "the world is in a bloody mess and, even though I know, as do many others, what it would look like if we weren't, I have no more viable idea than anyone else how to get there" (Smail, 2005, p. 101).

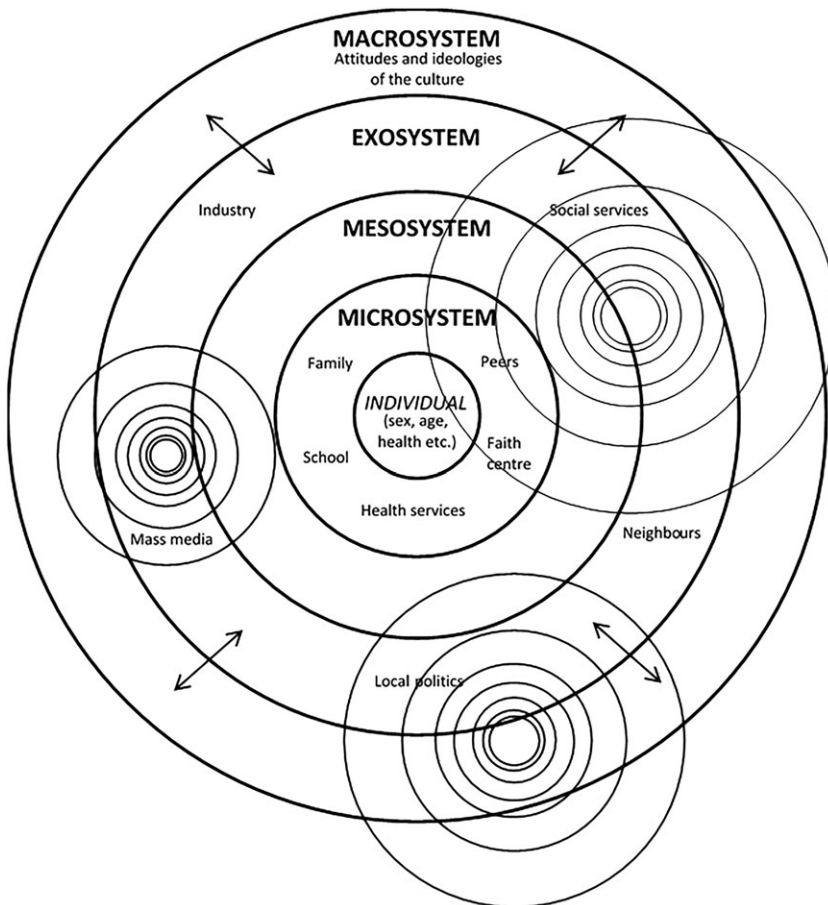
Within the context of these challenges we find ourselves struggling not to fall into despair, not to lose faith in the NHS or the ability of our profession to achieve something meaningful in its daily work, and not to be drawn into positions of helplessness. The NHS reached its 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary just months ago, in July 2018. We feel this should have called for celebration, but our feelings have been bitter-sweet. The vision of a health service that is fit to provide health *care* within a network of support alongside other public services that together represent the shared values of a compassionate and responsible society is hard to recognise. The NHS is now, it has been argued, a lone institution within "a society where the principles at the NHS's heart have been eroded to scarcity" (Sheers, 2018, para. 7). Alongside so many other caring professions, we feel pressured to do *everything*, that is, to change the world and fix all of these problems, only to realise how little we can actually do. Then we oscillate to a position of hopelessness, where we feel we can do *nothing*. This can result in distancing ourselves from our social responsibilities, justifying our own actions or inaction and placing blame elsewhere.

These challenges threaten to take us away from our values, intentions, and the reasons that brought us into the profession of clinical psychology in the first place. Our values include: bringing not only our clinical skills to clinical encounters but also our humanity and kindness; a commitment to see people's difficulties within the context of their lives; and finding ways to facilitate change within the wider systems surrounding a person. These values represent an underlying ethos of social justice, equality and solidarity—factors that are considered key attributes of approaches such as community psychology and liberation psychology, developing schools of psychological practice that address adversities beyond the individual in order to support, facilitate and advocate for oppressed and subjugated groups within and beyond the remit of the "established order" of things. Ultimately, these approaches look to critique psychology and the therapy industry itself (Smail, 2005), address the neoliberal underpinning of the psychology industry (Ferraro, 2016) and training communities (Cromby, 2017; Itten & Roberts, 2014), and to decolonise (Pillay, 2017) and democratise (Diamond, 2008) psychological and mental health services overall. Holding on to these intentions, practices and their underlying values can, however, become very difficult within the current austere climate of increasing demands and dwindling capacity—with limits on reflection at the individual and systemic level.

## 1 | THE DROP OF A PEBBLE

The authors met whilst completing their doctoral training in clinical psychology at the University of Hertfordshire in the UK. We came together as a group and considered what approaches and actions had sustained us in our endeavours over this time. We started to understand the ways in which we had countered despair throughout our work together. We developed the analogy of a pebble dropping into a pond, causing ever-expanding ripples. No matter the size of the pebble, the change it creates can be widespread. It was through this way of understanding our actions that we began to realise we could pursue positive change and achieve *something*. Our analogy is informed by Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems model of ways to work beyond the individual. Indeed, thinking of our actions as pebbles being dropped at particular levels of a wider system appears to restore all sorts of possibilities for our work. We suggest that the impact of such actions is not limited to the systemic level in which someone has dropped their pebble; the ripples ensure this impact can be felt, in some shape or form, at many other levels even if we are unaware of this happening. We have conceptualised these potentials and this impact visually in Figure 1.

In short, holding these pebbles in our palms and finding ways to drop them at different levels of the model could empower us as clinicians to keep doing what we can not only for the individual, but for the circumstances they find themselves in and the contexts around us all. This is without necessarily foreseeing what may come after. Indeed, there are many examples in history of actions rippling out from their initial objective and having an impact at a later



**FIGURE 1** Our pebbles analogy of intervention, as adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development (1977)

time (Solnit, 2017). For example, working at a macro-systemic level shifts the focus to the overarching cultural context in which an individual resides. At this level, the socio-political contexts influence the narratives that are held by people in society. Research has highlighted the power of political narratives and their impact on the media's portrayal of immigration, highlighting their influence in shaping the stories that refugees tell about themselves (Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Turner Baker, 2008).

As psychologists, we have developed competencies that enable us to not only provide support at the individual level, but also consider ways in which we can influence the wider system, for example, through the use of psychological theory. Together, we have the power to consider or to create, research and use this to help influence the political agenda, both now and in the future (e.g. Head, Ellis-Caird, Rhodes, & Parkinson, 2018; Saffer, Nolte, & Duffy, 2018). However, in order to reach the point of dropping our pebbles, we first need to be able to survive these imperfect systems.

## 2 | PEBBLES IN PALMS

*To have the freedom to take action [was] to somehow be able to survive the devastation and disappointment that sometimes inevitably occurs in the course of dealing with the tragedies of living. To be able to keep going and not lose hope, [and to be] able to find the humour in the absurdity of seemingly impossible situations. (Cecchin, Lane, & Ray, 1992, pp. 74–75)*

In order to warm the context to your own pebble dropping plans, we wish to explore further some of the factors that enabled us to reach such a place. Working through adversity, hopelessness and inaction, we discovered practices that could sustain us and counter that despair. To drop a pebble was, for us, a discovery of the freedom to take action—to do *something* that could help. We hope that what follows will allow you to surpass that absurdity of imperfect and restricting systems and discourses, in order to move towards a context in which we and others can survive and thrive. In short, to find the “difference that makes the difference” (Bateson, 1979, p. 99).

Throughout clinical training and practice, individuals have to deal with a constant process of identifying and addressing a range of challenges when faced with unique and complex situations. During our training, we were grouped together both within the context of a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) group and also, as we came to realise over time, through our shared sense of values. Recognising this, we planned intermittent meetings to consider what factors had enabled us to progress through training in a way that allowed us to overcome ruptures in our relationships and maintain a sense of group cohesion and/or solidarity through our differences. We were curious to explore how we had developed such innovative and creative ideas and worked productively and effectively together with minimal disruption or conflict. During one of our later meetings, we reviewed our experiences, looked back over reflective diaries, and considered the work we had achieved collectively over the three years of training. Through this process, we began to draw out common themes from our discussions, wrote these down and revisited them—checking in with one another to explore individual and group experiences connected with them. We had begun by sharing an individual exercise, taken from the narrative-therapy-informed Tree of Life approach (Ncube, 2006), that enabled each of us to bring awareness to influences, difficulties and inspirations that had brought us into this work and this particular form of training. From the sharing of these emerged a “forest of life” (Ncube, 2006, p. 12) in which, through the value of collaboration, we recognised that together we have more reach, resources and strength than we do as individuals. Our forest contains connections to those who gave us ideas so generously—not least our course programme that provided the opportunity to consider a critical psychology stance—and those we met along the way who introduced us to concepts of imperfection, hope and rewilding. Ultimately, we identified a range of factors that, we feel, enabled us to survive the devastations and disappointments we faced during these last few years. They include reasonable hope, small acts of resistance, being stronger together and sustaining ourselves over time. We will explore each factor in more depth below.

Beyond the scope of this paper, but pivotal to our group identity, were other themes, such as the use of humour in encounters with the absurd and at times of feeling distraught, and a shared vulnerability. The latter was not only in relation to the broader context of societal changes that seemed to disempower us, but also in our shared state of being trainees—with a collective history of turbulent struggles to secure places on the training course and having had to experience, and live within, competitive contexts that necessitate perfectionist drives – and learning to thrive through this as individuals. It was also evident from our discussions, that we held a sense of containment by our kind and supportive facilitator throughout, who became our friend and colleague over time and, ultimately, a collaborator and co-author on this paper.

## 2.1 | Reasonable hope

Despair might at times be a reasonable response to our experiences. There is an argument that those in power may even wish for us to remain hopeless, without power or reason to act. However, to remain within a position of despair and hopelessness is not fruitful. Hope can sustain us when circumstances impose despair upon us, but hope does not necessarily mean wishing for or wanting something to change. Rather, it can be the energy that connects us to our situation and drives us to act in response to it. Therefore, we extend ourselves “a permanent invitation to think about hope” (Edey & Jevne, 2003, p. 47). We particularly value Weingarten's idea of “reasonable hope” (2010, p. 5), with a focus on translating this principle into praxis; namely, conceptualising hope as a verb, rather than a noun. “Reasonable hope” refers to actions not, as hope does, to a feeling that may or may not be accessible. Hope is often considered the attribute of an individual; in contrast “reasonable hope” can be the actions of one or many people. In this light, we are not static in positions of reasonable hope, but are in a constant and dynamic process of practising it. As a result, reasonable hope becomes something we can do together:

*When we work . . . within a framework of reasonable hope, we are not casting about for the perfect solution but are considering what may be good enough. From this perspective, we realize that small actions need not be trivial. They may also have ripple effects. (Weingarten, 2010, p. 19)*

In line with this idea of reasonable hope we were also inspired by the essays of Rebecca Solnit (2016), who was quick to point out what hope is not, namely “the belief that everything was, is, or will be fine” (p. xi). She too advocated a type of hope that demands action. This is similar to Smail's position that hopes, wishes and vision, without action, are equivalent to a “magical voluntarism” (Smail, 2005, p. 28)—an effective route to stagnation, rather than progress. Thus, within our imperfect systems we have been able to move from positions of overwhelming paralysis to positions of hope; that is, from doing *nothing* to doing *something*.

## 2.2 | Small acts of resistance

We started to discuss the times when we noticed ourselves or our colleagues acting in line with our shared values and against the dominant narratives of despair or apathy. To notice the “tiny and temporary victories” (Solnit, 2016, p. xxii) and potential for other partial “victories” within the confines of the systems in which we act. Examples included stepping outside of a “model”; offering more than the “allowed” number of appointments, advocating alternative models of treatment when indicated (Nel, 2012); going beyond the manual; “bending the frame” (Eversole, 1997, p. 23) and engaging in political and policy debates as a profession (e.g. Psychologists for Social Change, see [www.psychchange.org](http://www.psychchange.org)). We noticed that together we could uncover, for ourselves and our clients, the “small acts of living” (Wade, 1997, p. 32) that led to “everyday resistance” (Wade, 1997, p. 37). These small acts or steps, if acknowledged and celebrated, help to build an alternative story (White & Epston, 1990)—a story in which we, as clinicians, are working and practicing ethically, in line with our values, and at the same time resisting the despair narratives that we found so dominant. At the same time, these small acts of resistance are said to promote broader and more substantial acts towards change in the longer term (Wade, 1997); to act in whatever small way now, means that

we are more likely to act in such a way in the future, and perhaps to a more significant extent. An example of this is the small ways in which practitioners question and challenge what they deem to be unhelpful and/or unethical diagnostic practices making more sustained and collective action more likely over time—such as a shift from a focus on language usage within reports, to wider-scale activism and protest (Randall-James & Coles, 2018). As in our model above (Figure 1) these small acts, or “pebbles” as we came to refer to them, also had the potential to ripple out and have an impact on a much grander scale.

History tells us, however, that sometimes resistance needs a friend.

### 2.3 | Stronger together

These acts of resistance can feel risky and it may require courage, obtained through relational risk-taking, to build a trust between people (Mason, 2005). We were therefore inspired by Reynolds' concept of “imperfect ally positions” (2010, p. 13), in which standing alongside means taking collective ownership of issues that should not be made to reside within individuals. Solidarity, community and collective action can contribute to a shared social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Within a collective, the values we hold as individuals are recognised and validated, making us more likely to act in line with these values and feel a shared humanity with wider groups of people.

We experienced this ourselves in our training when we came together for the Problem-Based Learning group task which inspired this paper (see Nel et al., 2008). As individuals, the tasks put before us often led to feelings of hopelessness; however, we found that we were more likely to feel that change was possible when working together, and that this led to both individual and group action towards meaningful change. Through this social categorising of selves we could also pursue political change and become activists by directing “collective action” through (re)defining self-categories (Reicher & Hopkins, 1996, p. 300).

In the wider context, this is what clinical psychology could potentially be doing: re-defining its social identity in order to instigate political change. As small but not insignificant exemplary pebbles, this could involve blurring lines between clinical practice and community psychology by expanding our thinking beyond the clinic, or contributing to critiques of the therapy industry. Some clinical psychologists, and many who may define themselves otherwise, including community workers, community psychologists and youth workers, stress the importance of developing preventative rather than reactive interventions (e.g. Harper, 2016), as individual therapy will never be available to all who could benefit from it and nor should we expect individual interventions to be the most effective solution to collectively held social issues. Rather than isolate ourselves as a profession, we can be involved in community work, share these ideas and learn from those with lived experiences or other experiences than our own.

### 2.4 | Sustaining ourselves

We noticed the additional and ongoing enthusiasm it takes to maintain these practices, and the need for ways to look after ourselves to sustain these causes. Failure to do so can lead us to lose the faith and energy to do our work, that is, to remain passionate and available to our clients, and practice in line with the beliefs and values that initially brought us to the work we do (Reynolds, 2011). The importance of self-care and considering our own wellbeing in this endeavour cannot be underestimated. Here, we again borrow the words of Vikki Reynolds, who defined sustainability as:

*an aliveness, a spirited presence, and a genuine connectedness with others. It requires more than keeping-on, more than resisting burnout, more than keeping a desperate hold onto hope; and yet it encompasses all of these capacities. We are sustained in the work when we are able to be fully and relationally engaged, stay connected with hope, and be of use to clients across time. (2011, p. 32)*

During our exploration of these ideas together we noticed that each of us had very different but no less important ways of looking after ourselves and protecting ourselves to some extent against despair. For some this involved

personal therapy, for others it was getting close to nature and the outdoors, and some of us turned to the arts (music, dance, theatre) or physical activity. For all, the support we experienced in our relationships with each other and with our allies in our wider contexts were invaluable.

In our experience, it is easier to stay connected to hope when we stay connected to each other and to the meaning of what we do. As we each progress forward in our careers we find hope and continued sustenance in our practices of resistance against social injustices, through the connections we hold to each other in our expanding forest of life. Reconnecting from time to time, sharing small successes, supporting each other through troubling times, and the awareness that we are not alone in these endeavours can renew our energy in these challenging times.

### 3 | CONCLUSION

Even in the most critical and damning of contexts, even in “this bloody mess” (Smail, 2005, p. 101), the question can be asked “What then must we do?” (This is the question posed by the title of David Smail's poignant concluding chapter in the final publication before his death). Instead of being overcome by despair and feeling powerless, we have a vision of reviving our work (and learning) environments, believing that, when we act in line with our values and ethics, each act makes a difference and contributes to a collective change. As we reflected on our preferred actions and their potential to counter despair, once again we imagined the ripples from our pebbles broadening their spread. We all have the power to throw pebbles out into the world. We hold onto the hope that our pebbles will be enough to make changes, even if only the smallest of changes. We hold onto this hope both as clinical psychologists and as persons of the world. Thus, we have moved from a position of feeling paralysed, doing *nothing*, through a position of desperation and desire to do *everything*, to a position of hope that we can do *something*. To our clients, we owe that much.

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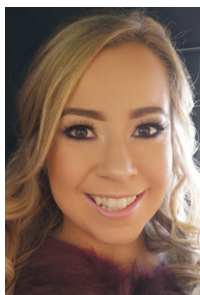
## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



**Dr Hannah C. M. Morgan** is a clinical psychologist currently working in the National Health Service with “looked after” children and their wider networks. Her role involves providing consultations to social workers and working together with professional and parental systems to promote functioning networks around children and young people. She is interested in research which empowers groups of people who could be considered vulnerable and/or may be otherwise silenced in society.



**Dr James Randall** is a tattooed, vegetarian clinical psychologist working in Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services within the UK's NHS. He trained at the University of Hertfordshire, is a visiting lecturer there, and occasional research supervisor. James is currently editing a book aimed to support those pursuing a career in clinical psychology, entitled *Surviving Clinical Psychology*. His main research interests are in systemic and team-based approaches, clinical training, and service-user involvement and co-production.



**Dr Amy J. Lyons** is a clinical psychologist originally from the north of England. She trained at the University of Hertfordshire, where her doctoral thesis explored the experiences of trainee clinical psychologists within reflective practice groups during clinical training. She currently works in the NHS within a neurological rehabilitation service, working alongside stroke survivors. She is also an associate at a private practice in London, where she works mainly with children and young people. She has a particular interest in training clinical psychologists with links to the University of Hertfordshire teaching programme and is currently contributing to various book chapters on this topic.



**Dr Sarah Oliver** is a clinical psychologist working within Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the NHS. She trained at the University of Hertfordshire and has conducted research on the experiences of young people who grow up with parents experiencing mental distress. She is passionate about community psychology and the accessibility of services for families.



**Dr Jessica Saffer** is a clinical psychologist working within Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services in the NHS. She trained at the University of Hertfordshire and has conducted research on the impact of changes to UK disability benefits on individuals' well-being and identity. She is passionate about the inclusion of people with different needs into their communities, and has challenged many of the organisations in which she has worked to become more accessible.



**Dr Jacqui M. Scott** currently works in an NHS community service in an inner London borough, with adults who carry a diagnosis of a psychotic illness. She trained at the University of Hertfordshire and aims to promote social inclusion, ideas from community psychology, and narrative practices in her work and life as a clinical psychologist.



**Dr Lizette Nolte** is a principal lecturer and researcher on the Doctorate in Clinical Psychology programme at University of Hertfordshire, United Kingdom. She is a clinical psychologist and systemic psychotherapist working with parents, young people and families in the NHS and education sector. Her research has an underlying value of social inclusion, equality and the reduction of stigma and is informed by systemic and narrative therapeutic approaches.

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