



School for Public Health Research @ LSHTM (SPHR@L)

SPHR@L Seminar Series: 2013-2014

A talk by **Professor Alex Stevens**; from University of Kent

Tuesday, 19th November 2013, 12:45-14:00

Jerry Morris A, LSHTM, 15-17 Tavistock Place, London WC1H 9SH

Abstract

Telling Policy Stories: An Ethnographic Study of the Use of Evidence in Policy-making in the UK

Based on participant observation in a team of British policy-making civil servants carried out in 2009, this article examines the use that is made of evidence in making policy. It shows that these civil servants displayed a high level of commitment to the use of evidence. However, their use of evidence was hampered by the huge volume of various kinds of evidence and by the unsuitability of much academic research in answering policy questions. Faced with this deluge of inconclusive information, they used evidence to create persuasive policy stories. These stories were useful both in making acceptable policies and in advancing careers. They often involved the excision of methodological uncertainty and the use of 'killer charts' to boost the persuasiveness of the narrative. In telling these stories, social inequality was 'silently silenced' in favour of promoting policies which were 'totemically' tough. The article concludes that this selective, narrative use of evidence is ideological in that it supports systematically asymmetrical relations of power.

Alex Stevens is Professor in Criminal Justice and Deputy Head of the University of Kent's School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research. He has worked on issues of drugs, crime and health in the voluntary sector, as an academic researcher and as an adviser to the UK government.