Lydia Lewis
User involvement in mental health services: a feminist critical discursive analysis

'User involvement' – the active participation of service users in shaping or influencing services – has been a recent key policy development within mental health services in Britain. This study aimed to explore the outcomes of this policy development for the involvement of women and men service users within mental health services and for the development of services for women and men experiencing mental distress.

This research will be of interest to:

Others working in the area of mental health, medical sociology or health services research; those with an interest in feminist research or discourse analysis

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Keywords
1. user involvement
2. mental health
3. gender/feminism

Research Methods & methodology

The research was carried out in the north-east of Scotland and employed a variety of qualitative methods: policy analysis; participant observation at meetings of three mental health service user/community groups; and in-depth interviews with service users, providers and practitioners who were members of these groups.

The study was conducted from a feminist and critical discourse analytic perspective. Its focus was on how (gendered) power relations operate in and through language within the field of user involvement in mental health services.

Key Findings/Ideas
- Disorders of discourse – misunderstandings and conflict – arose between users and service professionals.
- The contributions of service users to mental health service planning and policy-making were discursively regulated.
- The dominant discourse of mental illness worked to undermine users' authority and credibility.
- Users engaged in discursive struggle to (re)claim power and authority in their interactions with mental health services.
- Gender was a silent, yet omnipresent, dimension of power in the field setting.

Conclusions
- User involvement worked to reinscribe and reproduce existing hegemonies (structural and ideological relations of domination) within mental health services whilst also destabilising these to some degree.
- Discursive and structural change is needed if the transformatory potential of user involvement is to be realised.