SOCIAL THEORY, PERFORMATIVITY AND PROFESSIONAL POWER—A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HELPING PROFESSIONS IN ENGLAND

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Drawing from interviews and ethnographic research, evidence is provided to suggest a sense of “anxiety” and “regret” amongst state social workers and case managers working on the “front-line” within local authority social service departments. There have been a number of theoretical approaches that have attempted to ground the concept of “power” to understand organizational practice though Foucauldian insights have been most captivating in illuminating power relations and subject positioning. In order to theoretically interrogate the relationship between social theory and professional power, we draw from the neo-Foucauldian work of American Social Philosopher Judith Butler—especially regarding Butler’s (1990, 1993 and 1998) powerful work on “performativity” and its relationship to social work. We also attempt to examine the “distances” between the social work role and social workers narratives through an examination of notions of “anxiety” and “regret” in the face of the professionalisation of state social work.

Keywords: Performativity; British social work; social theory; Judith Butler; power; Foucault; role displacement.

Introduction

Social work behaviour has been defined as an economic and moral cornerstone of current US and European societies exemplifying its moral regulator role to intervene on issues such as crime, deviance and anomie (Parsons, 1954), as upholders of monopoly power (Freidson 1970), agents of the capitalist state and owners of means of production (Jones 1983) and as a self-disciplinary form of governmentality (Powell 2001; Powell 2005; Gilbert, Powell 2005). The latter perspective encapsulates a more ambivalent position towards social work, insofar as the privileges and status accorded to social workers are dependent on a form of subjugation and reflexive monitoring and the effects of this on experiential practice (Biggs, Powell 2000 and 2001). By using Judith Butler’s (1991) neo-Foucauldian thesis on “performativity” engenders an understanding of social work in the face of disciplinary practices in contemporary society. The paper uses England as a case example and 44 care managers were interviewed (and 4 case managers). Traditional ethnographic methods that included participant observation and overt interviews
were completed in five social service departments—one based in central London, the other four around a major city in the north of England. Each social work team dealt predominately with adults (older and disabled people), but interviews with a small number (n=4) of case managers were also completed. The findings illuminate how social work has been problematized in its performance to engage in disciplinary practices. Indeed, Whitehead (1998) has suggested that professionals such as social workers in England are always embedded in discursive institutions (cf. Foucault 1977) which function according to particular expectations around their role. In addition, this organisational context is typically complex with multiple demands. In such circumstances social workers can adopt different roles depending on their function and client group—with the consequence that there is always some degree of fluidity and uncertainty around expectations. This myriad of sites for Butler’s (1991) lexicon of “performativity” also contains the potential for practitioner resistance, such as against legislative or organizational policies or procedures. In addition, a profession such as social work will not take place in isolation nor is it practiced around an audience of passive observers. Performance is always relational, drawing others into the act: managers, other professionals, clients and so on construct both the meanings associated with the performance and mutually dependent subject positions.

The paper maps out a consideration of the themes that come to prominence through the juxtaposition of performativity and power, and what social theory derived from Foucauldian studies might offer critical studies of professional power. Of course, the legacy of Michel Foucault looks at the discourse of professionalism as “a disciplinary mechanism” which allows “control from a distance through the construction of appropriate work identities and conducts” (Fournier 2001, 33). Analysts writing from this perspective argue that such knowledge does not exist in relation to an observable outside world; rather, “the core of the professional project is the constitution of disciplinary knowledge as representing or mirroring a “naturally isolated” and self-contained referent object in the world.” (Fournier 2000, 71). Hence, a Foucauldian approach to professions (Fournier 1999, 2000, 2001) attempts to integrate the micro-political tactics of professionalisation with broader power relations through the analysis of discourse and regimes of power/knowledge. As Fournier argues (1999), while the legitimacy of the professions relies upon the establishment and maintenance of appropriate norms of knowledge and conduct, such norms also act as a form of discipline over otherwise autonomous professional power. Thus induction into professions, in terms of both knowledge and conduct, serves to construct a specifically governable subjectivity rooted in self-disciplinary mechanisms (Grey 1998). Subjectivity is also rooted to Performativity, a conceptual tool that is omitted in Foucault’s “box of tools” (cf. Powell 2001) but has been developed by Foucault inspired scholar Judith Butler. The context and relevance of performativity is conditions of possibility of meaningful subjectivity afforded to
workers in helping professionals. Michel Foucault (1977) suggests that power itself is “relational” in that whilst one social actor may exercise power with other individuals we also need to be aware that all other individuals have “power” in their social relationship that can be expressed through “resistance” in its dance with surveillance. Consolidating this, we map out a consideration of the themes that come to prominence through the juxtaposition of surveillance and power, and what social theory derived from Foucauldian studies might offer critical studies of professional power. Foucault (1977) has looked at the discourse of professionalism as “a disciplinary mechanism” which allows “control from a distance through the construction of appropriate work identities and conducts” (Fournier 2001, 33). Analysts writing from this perspective argue that such knowledge does not exist in relation to an observable outside world; rather, “the core of the professional project is the constitution of disciplinary knowledge as representing or mirroring a “naturally isolated” and self-contained referent object in the world” (Fournier 2000, 71). Hence, a Foucauldian approach to professions (Fournier 1999, 2000, 2001) attempts to integrate the micro-political tactics of professionalisation with broader power relations through the analysis of discourse and regimes of power/knowledge. As Fournier argues (1999), while the legitimacy of the professions relies upon the establishment and maintenance of appropriate norms of knowledge and conduct, such norms also act as a form of discipline over otherwise autonomous professional power. Thus induction into professions, in terms of both knowledge and conduct, serves to construct a specifically governable subjectivity rooted in self-disciplinary mechanisms (Grey 1998; Gilbert 2001).

In agreement with Foucault (1977) proposal that “resistance” is paramount at this crucial stage in the dialectical state social work labour process, we suggest that technologies of control in state social work based around understanding Butlerian “performativity” offers a response to the urgent need map out a consideration of the themes that come to prominence through the juxtaposition of professionalisation and performativity. Performativity offers critical studies of state social work and a theoretically informed grounding of the self-narratives of care/case managers collected during our research reveal problems of implementing social policy that creates further tribulations of anxiety and uncertainty in social work practice. The next section looks to the conceptual and epistemological insights of Judith Butler that provides novel and original insights than can be applied to understanding the ambivalence of helping professions derived from fieldwork.

**Butler’s Performativity Thesis**

Through the past 15 years, the work of Judith Butler has had a significant impression on Foucauldian debates over performativity most notably on “queer theory”, largely in response to her hugely influential *Gender Trouble* (1990). More recently, her notion of performativity was further delineated in her later works *Bodies...*
That Matter (1993) and The Psychic Life of Power (1998). Her conception of performativity builds primarily on the work of Foucault; in particular, developing the twin themes of power as productive and of discourse—or rather, discursive practice—as constitutive of subjects. As she states in Bodies That Matter,

“This text accepts as a point of departure Foucault’s notion that regulatory power produces the subjects it controls, that power is not only imposed externally but works as the regulatory and normative means by which subjects are formed (Butler 1993, 22).

While broadly within the Foucauldian tradition, then, Butler attempts to complement and develop this position by drawing on (among other influences) the psychoanalytic influence of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan as well as more diverse work of Searle, Austin, and Derrida, amongst others. For many, the key innovation of Butler’s view of performativity is her incorporation of linguistic influences, and especially the parallels between Foucault’s subjectification/subjection, Althusser’s interpellation (1971) and the “speech acts” of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969). Austin in particular distinguishes performative utterances from other speech acts such as denotative (descriptive) or prescriptive (command) utterances. As Butler explains; “Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power” (1993, 225). The typical examples used, in Austin as in Butler, are the launch of a ship or the wedding ceremony, wherein the words “I name this ship…” is simultaneously the announcement and description of an act and the act itself. Equally in other vows, guarantees, and other ritualised forms of interaction, the distinction between talk and action is effaced by “the apparent coincidence of signifying and enacting” (Butler 1995, 198). As such, this phenomena offers a useful antidote to the unquestioned oppositions of word and deed, rhetoric and reality, and crucially, discourse and action (Powell 2001).

An important aspect of Butler’s work subsequent to Gender Trouble (Butler, 1990) is to correct the impression that many took from her earlier work that performativity in some way reasserted the power of voluntarist action over structural constraint. While the relationship between constraint and individual agency are clearly of concern to Butler, her understanding of this relationship is far more sophisticated than simply adding her weight to the voluntarist side of this tired debate. Instead, Butler’s aim is to circumvent the traditional structure-agency debate so as to avoid becoming “mired in whether the subject is the condition or the impasse of agency” (Butler 1998, 14). With reference to misreadings of her position on gender, for example, she insists that gender is not a simple matter of

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1 Butler’s dramaturgical conception of “performativity” as defined above should be clearly differentiated from Lyotard’s notion of system performativity, which he defines as “efficiency measured according to an input-output ratio” (1984, 88). While Lyotard’s notion has may have implications for professionalism (see Cohen et al. 2003), they are not directly relevant here.
choice; a garment donned in the morning and discarded in the evening by the sovereign and autonomous individual (Butler 1993). What is of interest is instead the power of discourse to construct the subject who makes this “choice”. Or as she argues elsewhere, “Power not only acts on a subject but in a transitive sense enacts the subject into being” (Butler 1997, 13). Her vision of the performativity of gender proposes instead a recursive and reflexive model of identity, where actions are in a sense citations, re-enacting previous performances to claim a certain identity. Butler “cites” Derrida to support this:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a “coded” or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a “citation”? (1988, 18)

Moreover, the theme of performance is by no means unfamiliar to studies of social life, in particular, the micro-political domain. Much of this theoretical development draws its inspiration from the symbolic interactionist school, and in particular Erving Goffman’s The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (1959). Equally, in studies of professionalism and professionalisation the theme of performances as embodied in the interactionist school has had a significant influence since the 1960s.

Our empirical focus is upon the narratives of state social workers and impingement on their performativity and this has a fervent presence especially in the US; recent debates over the nature of social work (cf. Estes 2001) can be characterised as centring on a fault-line separating the functionalist mainstream position from that of critical theorists. Broadly, a distinction has been drawn between the traditional mechanistic view of the profession as a purely productive organisation of experts possessing skills and knowledge vital to society, and the critical view of the profession as the mobilisation of monopoly power to secure power and influence for a privileged group. How is this done? A Foucauldian approach to social work (e.g. Biggs, Powell 2000 and 2001; Powell, Biggs 2000 and 2004) attempts to integrate the micro-political tactics of social action with broader power relations through the analysis of discourse and regimes of power/knowledge. Thus induction into professions, in terms of both knowledge and conduct, serves to construct a specifically governable subjectivity rooted in self-disciplinary mechanisms (Grey 1998). The situation is summarised succinctly by Fournier, who states that “Professionals are both the instrument and the subject of government, the governor and the governed” (Fournier 1999, 285).

This view of professionalisation as a mode of disciplinary control also provides a useful counterbalance to perspectives which reinforce the stereotypes of pampered and privileged professionalism. In recasting professionalism as a source of influence and status concomitant with self-discipline and controlled performance, the Foucauldian position also links professionalisation with a wider
range of control strategies based on the manipulation of identity. These might include corporate culture initiatives, domination over the “client” or specific acts of surveillance and control (Jones 1983; Ray 1985; Dominelli 1989).

Drawing on neo-Foucauldian positions on social work, we would concur that an essential part of social work involves the constitution and operation of social work as a discipline and practice. Indeed, regarding the latter point, it is argued that despite initial benevolent intentions on the part of many social workers, practitioners are at times unable to fulfill early altruistic ambitions to support vulnerable people via a career in social work (Carey 2003). Instead, through their exposure to an often hostile and stressful arena of work, as well as other sources of employee frustration, such initial altruistic principles can quickly recede. Such principles are then supplanted by feelings of apathy to a role detached from initial expectations, and at times lead to the development of conservative practices in response to, say, regular exposure to legal, policy and organizational procedures which again appear alien or contradict initial sentiment in deciding to “become a social worker”. For some, personal frustration regarding the formation of a “structure/agent paradox” can lead to the development of disinterest or even intolerance towards clients or their informal carers (Carey 2004).

Method, Theme and Narrative

The research attempts to combine qualitative empirical research with an epistemological paradigm which considers Butler’s neo-Foucauldian emphasis on performativity. There was a number of interviews with a total of 44 care managers and 4 case managers that were undertaken in 2006 as part of fieldwork research in England. Traditional ethnographic methods that included participant observation and overt interviews were completed in five social service departments—one based in central London, the other four around a major city in the north of England. Each social work team dealt predominately with adults (older and disabled people), but interviews with a small number (n=4) of case managers were also completed.

In response to the data collected, the research agenda concentrated upon three themes which are discussed and critically detangled here by the appropriation of Butler’s performativity insights: bleak places; disillusionment; and role displacement. Bleak places highlights the strains of the enclosed environment in which care/case management is now performed (the social service department). Disillusionment responds to the conspicuous findings of employee frustration and anxiety regarding their tasks undertaken and stressful arenas of employment—particularly the administrative procedures and tasks which dominate care/case management (Pithouse 1998; Jones 2001; amongst many others). Finally, role displacement offers further details and analysis of the discrete yet alienating care/case management role which, as was discovered, is also dominated by work intensification and deskilling which impinges on the process of performativity.
We ground Butler’s “tool-kit” of performativity by analysing the *narratives* of state social workers—in this research around the frank and unequivocal expressions of distress and despair regarding a transformed role which appears alien to initial (and at least conscious) ambitions to offer support and advocacy to client groups (Jones 2001; Carey 2003; Ferguson, Lavalette 2004). Of course, “narrative” has become popular in the social sciences, both as a method of undertaking and interpreting research (Holstein and Gubrium 2000) and as a technique for modifying the self (McAdams, 1993). Gubrium (1992) suggests that individuals construct their own analytical models of personal identity based on lived experience and on narratives already existing in their everyday environments. By using a narrative approach, the meaning of state social work can be told through stories about the self as well as ones “at large” in public discourse.

“Discourse” itself is an idiom more often used to denote a relatively fixed set of stories that individuals or groups have to conform to in order to take up a recognised and legitimate role. Such an understanding of discourse can be found in the earlier work of Michel Foucault (1977) and others (Powell and Biggs 2004). Self-storying, draws attention to the ways in which state social work identities are more likely to be owned and worked on by individuals themselves through process of subjectification (Butler, 1992). Social work is subject to both the formal rhetoric of public discourse, and the self-stories that bind them together in everyday life. The notion of social work is, then, an amalgam of policy discourse and everyday practice and as such alerts us to the wider social implications of such roles. The language of social policy and the formal representations of social work that one finds there, provide a source of raw material for the construction of identity and a series of spaces in which such identities can be *legitimately performed*. It is perhaps not overstating the case to say that the “success” of social policy can be judged from the degree to which social workers self-storying perform within the narratives created by it.

**Theme one: Bleak places**

In terms of location, a social work student on placement in one of the social work teams studied discussed openly her thoughts about the Social Service Department where she was training:

> It’s a horrible place. Often I feel sick with the smell of damp… I can’t wait to get back to the University. I keep feeling sorry for the people who have been here for years but then I realize, I’ll probably be based here very soon…The place needs a lick of paint, and some lighting and decent furniture…its so ugly.

More experienced social workers (*n*=6) tended to be less surprised and had become resigned to their work setting. They talked intimately about the stress they now experienced at work, but were keen to point out that state social workers had rarely been allowed (in their experience) much relief or respite in their work.
locations. Although experienced front-line workers are now becoming increasingly few and far between (Jones 2001), those that remained articulated their shared dismay felt during periods throughout the working week. There is perhaps nothing surprising about this stance from employees since state social work has always been unique from the other components of the British Welfare State. In contrast to social security, health and education, social work receives considerably less in resources (economic and other), is “class-specific” in its almost sole delivery to the working class poor (Jones 1983), and therefore has always retained a residual quality in comparison to other state services (Baldock 2003).

What we see here within the opinions expressed by state social workers is the intensification of the experiential narrative distance of social work from its discursive foundation. As Fournier argues (1999), while the legitimacy of the professions relies upon the establishment and maintenance of appropriate norms of knowledge and conduct, such norms can also act as a form of discipline over otherwise autonomous professional labour. Implicit in this is the disciplinary constitution of subjectivity whereby socialisation highlights the problematisation of retaining a “professional” viewpoint of the world.

Indeed, a majority of the state social workers (n=32) also discussed their work arena as if it was a point of conflict, and it became apparent that conflict was central to the work and role of the employees. As well as the “wastelands” that had been created around their offices (particularly since the early 1980s), there was also, from some workers, an identification with the despair and disenfranchment that often saturated the lives of local residents. Drugs, crime, poverty, unemployment, and, at times, violence were established, indeed they were taken for granted dynamics in the locations where the workers were based:

I’ve been doing this for over twenty-five years now …we’ve always been based in small offices in “run down” areas. The interiors have remained quite similar—apart from the increased security (CCTV, security doors, glass reception panels, and so on)—but the areas surrounding the offices have also changed. The [19]80s, which was a strange time; issues like drugs, unemployment and crime became much more apparent…Take a look outside, would you like to live here?

To understand the production of social work subject positions through the professionalisation discourse, it is useful to draw on Butler’s reading of Althusserian interpellation. The core of professional practice is epitomised by the pessimistic assertion of one state social worker discussing her time spent within neo-liberal social spaces which impinge on any viewpoint of the world:

My role has changed significantly over the years….first I had regular contact with clients and their problems but then we began to spend more and more time enclosed in the [social service department] office, mostly following and completing procedures”…the relationship [between client and social worker] has become superficial and in many respects meaningless.
It is this understanding of performative acts as the elision of discourse and action which suggests a relevance for social work as more than a mere linguistic curiosity. For Butler, this insight suggests a way in which identity may be similarly seen as constructed in and through action, or performance. Performativity offers a non-idealist way to counter neo-liberal policy and de-personalise the status of social work as a benevolent universal profession. It is this understanding of performative acts as the elision of discourse and action which suggests a relevance for social work as more than a mere linguistic curiosity. For Butler, this insight suggests a way in which identity may be similarly seen as constructed in and through action, or performance. In the case of bleak places thematic findings, performativity can be seen to offer a non-idealist way to counter the reification of stereotypes.

There is a clear link in this formulation to a “strong” conception of discourse, positing identity as discursively constituted, which treads between the extremes of the social constructivist debate, accounting for constraint through performativity.

Two further issues arise from this argument. Firstly, citation sets out a link between performativity and social work and ultimately social structures—“performatives utterances” are institutionalised over time and hence become identifiable and carry meaning. Secondly, it is this circular, reiterative aspect to performativity which provides the space for opposition and change and by the same token for a pragmatic form of resistance. And it is this latter point on resistance which best encapsulates Butler’s potential contribution to Foucault’s social analyses in its application to understanding narratives by helping professions.

Butler’s own substantive contribution is to build upon this understanding by drawing on work in related areas, particularly by developing a temporal dimension to subjection. The production of the subject is not a one-time condition, a static state but instead should be seen as temporalised, a continual and circular process of sedimentation and congealment. “Performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993, 2). As noted, the “reiterative” or “citational” aspect of performativity contains within itself the seeds of change and transformation. This “repetition that is never merely mechanical” (Butler 1998, 16) provides the space for divergence, contestation, subversion and ultimately what might be read as resistance. Thus Butler argues; “it is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate that dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization” (Butler 1998, 93).

Despite this, the question of resistance in Butler’s neo-Foucauldian work and within the interpretations of critical narratives by social workers is both an underdeveloped theme in the article and lies at the root of what Fleming and Sewell (2002) refer to as “the Foucault wars” in critical studies of social work (cf. Powell 2005). Foucault’s work has been roundly attacked from various quarters for at best...
his pessimism regarding the possibility of emancipatory action or at worst, his crypto-conservatism (Dews 1989; Callinicos 1990).

**Theme two: Disillusionment**

In addition to their work locations, many state social workers \((n=35)\) also complained at regular intervals about their work intensification. It was now an established tradition in each social work team that new cases were allocated by front-line managers despite the fact that workers’ felt that they were already carrying unmanageable workloads. Inevitably there was also (as a consequence) limited time available to give to clients or their respective informal carers, despite a range of complex and sensitive social issues being apparent to the state social workers interviewed. Inevitably as a consequence the social workers recognized that clients or their informal carers typically became frustrated when they were not able to spend any meaningful time in their company, even just to listen to their problems. Morris (2000, 12), in a qualitative study of social care workers (including state social workers) and children involved in “child protection” work in England, discovered similar themes of frustration and neglect felt by clients—with children in local authority care being particularly forthright about their feelings:

She [state social worker] only comes to see me once every two months. She doesn’t want to know how I’m getting on.

I just wish my social worker would come and see me. He hasn’t seen me since my last review.

What we see here is the interpolation of power on state social work. Butler’s epistemic stretching of power shares this ambivalence over the pervasive nature of power relations in professional practice, seeing them as both potentially domanitory and oppressive. Thus the fact that power operates *through* the production of the subject and through the constitution of agency clearly undermines the perceived “purity” of resistance and does imply a nihilistic pessimism:

That agency is implicated in subordination is not the sign of a fatal self-contradiction at the core of the subject and hence further proof of its pernicious or obsolete character. But neither does it restore a pristine notion of the subject, derived from some classical liberal-humanist formulation, whose agency is always and only opposed to power” (Butler 1998, 17).

This compromised view of “agency” certainly calls into question traditional forms of resistance. The following care manager argued that:

We’ve always been busy but it was around the early [19]80’s that things really began to change for the worst. Many parts of the city have never recovered from the recession of the time, and to be honest things have never really gone back to how they were...We [social services] have however become a lot more organized in deflecting people away to other places such as the DSS [Department of Social Security], and our [eligibility] criteria [to receive services] is now set so high.
Alongside the stress generated by their limited structural resources, the agency of professional workers also expressed insecure concerns related to their changed role. Particularly, the development of the care/case management system since the early 1990s had for many workers encouraged a sense of apathy to develop towards work: something which veteran workers argued had never been as apparent before. Here the increase in bureaucratic tasks completed each day by care/case managers had now become a burden that was proving ever more difficult to contend with. The care/case management system had meant that since its implementation in 1993 a wide range of administrative forms (assessments of need, financial assessments; care package plans, review of services, and so on) now needed to be completed in order for employees to have any opportunity of providing support services to clients (Jones 2001). The tedious nature of the many paperwork tasks completed each day was stressed at regular intervals, and most of the workers interviewed argued that they probably would not have entered “social work” if they had previously been aware of the bureaucratic rituals that lay ahead. Many care/case managers also questioned why their interventions required so much information to be collected (on “assessment of need” or “review of service(s)” forms), and some queried the numerous probing questions asked of clients and carers during the assessment process:

I find it very difficult and sometimes embarrassing asking so many questions [from the assessment] that are often not in any way related to the issues discussed in the referral…I often know before the assessment begins that there is no money left for services anyhow, and this makes the experience even more uncomfortable.

A parallel can be drawn here between professional social work and, in Althusser’s terms, the conscience of the “good citizen”. As Butler argues, “Conscience is fundamental to the production and regulation of the citizen-subject, for conscience turns the individual around, makes him/her available to the subjectivating reprimand” (Butler 1998, 115).

This consciousness can be interpreted both as an attempt to manage anxiety and ambivalence in a social context and equally, as an important form of “distancing”, to use Erving Goffman’s (1959) terminology, on the part of individuals. Rather than seeing this the professional performance acts as a substitute for direct action or resistance. Butler’s reading of performativity might suggest that disillusionment and distancing is in itself action to undermine—and this placed practitioners in an uncomfortable and often paradoxical position of encouraging non-provision and exclusion through some of their central work procedures, despite the fact that they usually entered social work in order to support vulnerable people. Some practitioners also provided informal social care to relatives in need away from work, or experienced a disability themselves, which made their formal role even more politically ironic.

The unravelling of these arrangements can be traced to at least two types of crisis affecting social work: economic and social. The economic dimension has been well-rehearsed, with successive crises from the mid 1970s onwards
undermining, first, social work practice, and second, the fiscal basis of the welfare state (Estes 2001). These aspects led to the development in the social sphere of what Carroll Estes (2001) refers to as the “crisis construction” and “crisis management” of professional spaces, with social work performativity constructed through anxiety and insecurity in postmodernity. Arguably, social workers have had the most to lose given the restructuring of relationships associated with postmodernity. The extension of individualization may, to take one example, be perceived as highly threatening to professional identity and subsequent disillusionment. As Biggs (1999) argues, modern life raises at least two possibilities: the promise of a multiplicity of identities on the one side, and the danger of psychological disintegration on the other. Biggs suggests that in response to these circumstances, individual actors will attempt to find socially constructed spaces that lend some form of predictability to everyday relationships. Yet in a postmodern world such spaces may be increasingly difficult to locate especially as highlighted by social workers narratives:

I seem to have very little time now to reflect and evaluate my own [social work] practice...[Myself and colleagues] seem to just move from one procedure or meeting to the next with perhaps only another telephone call or brief conversation interrupting us every now and again...the workloads have increased steadily over the years, especially since the “care management” reforms came in [during the early 1990s]....We don’t tend to even take lunch breaks anymore—there just isn’t time!

This lack of developmental needs relating to self-reflection in light of increased workloads has served to change once again the definition of what it means to be a state social worker. In the conditions of advanced modernity, social work moves from being a collective to an individual experience and responsibility.

Theme three: Role displacement

Experienced state social workers particularly, but also more recently qualified workers, argued that they no longer felt as if they were “real” social workers. Indeed due to the excess bureaucracy some workers’ compared their current role to that of clerks in an office or bank. Pithouse’s (1998, 59) recent repeat, and comparison of his ethnography with two social work (child care) teams in South Wales ten years earlier (Pithouse 1987), discovered a similar finding:

...the workers saw paperwork as a burden and most eluded in some way to the encroachment this made upon their direct work with clients. Yet, here certain differences began to emerge between the assumptions and activities of a generation ago and their successors...A decade ago, paperwork was seen as peripheral to the central project of child care, ten years later there had been a significant change. It was not that completing records and other allied documentation were in anyway more popular, far from it, but that it was now seen as a major plank of practice and one that, in their view, demanded diligence and reliability.
In addition to the care managers, the case managers needed to be even more careful with the paperwork they processed each week. This was due, as Pithouse (1998, 59) suggests, to the number of “significant others” (who workers referred to as “outsiders”) that might survey their many completed forms and reports. Such “significant others” typically included the police, health workers, lawyers and magistrates.

As well as generating stress, a culture of extensive organisational change had left many state social workers feeling uncertain and lacking in self-esteem. A clear role and positive self-identity were recognized as being important if not central to the employees, and social workers’ argued that they no longer had such a role to embrace, or at least not one that they felt made them feel worthwhile or even proud:

…its not like it used to be. I used to help [clients] decorate or get their shopping, provide them with company or a shoulder to cry on. Now I speak [formally] on the telephone, if they can get through…We don’t seem to help anyone anymore.

Despite all the paperwork, we don’t actually do very much for people, do we?

Perhaps such stances could be dismissed as sentimental and deeply paradoxical in the light of social works long established tradition of applying punitive social control techniques to specific client groups (Jones 1983; Dominelli 1989). Despite this there was also a sense of uncertainty and a lack of confidence felt by workers around peers, most notably within a multi-disciplinary setting such as a hospital, but also when meetings were attended with health colleagues in a community setting.

Here it was argued by a number of reflexive workers that “their profession” had now become “tarnished” amongst health colleagues, and some clients/relatives—a perception based around performativity. We suggest like what Butler is arguing for, is an “understanding of performativity not as the act by which a subject brings into being what she/he names but rather as that reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 1993, 2). In doing so, Butler attempts a novel reworking of the tired structure/agency debate and offers a persuasive notion of (social work) subjectivity which is in no way predetermined but is nonetheless “always already” compromised. Or as Butler clarifies: “Social categories signify subordination and existence at once. In other words, within subjection the price of existence is subordination” (Butler 1998, 20).

Stress, anxiety and even fear were typical emotions that compromised the performativity of self-subjectification to the very texture of day-to-day practice for state social workers. Butler describes the alienation which underpins such ambivalence towards subjection well:

Bound to seek recognition of its own existence in categories, terms and names that are not of its own making, the subject seeks the sign of its own existence outside itself, in a discourse that is at once dominant and indifferent (Butler 1998, 20).
It seemed that many social workers were encountering some difficulty in matching their expected identity as professionals with their everyday experience in the face of the complexity and unpredictability.

Conclusion

Performativity offers productive insights into the processes of subjection and the nature of power relations which may be usefully incorporated into the study of state social work. Performativity offers a more sophisticated understanding of agency which fully embraces the complex and problematic nature of power relations; it breaks down realist distinctions between discourse and action through a palpable sense of the constitutive power of discourse; it suggests a view of social work subjection which is positioned by social forces that impinge on fostering feelings of anxiety and distrust of policy gazes; and perhaps most importantly, we would argue that performativity, in all of these ways, combats the Habermasian categorisation of Foucauldian work as fundamentally conservative and reactionary, erasing the possibility of effective resistance from the intellectual landscape. Performativity also connects with social work as a performance, and incorporates much older debates over authenticity, and the relations between emotion and subjectivity (Goffman 1959). In the first instance, then, such a perspective underlines the view of professionalism as always enacted and performed – the evidence in this paper is one of uncertainty, problematic within self-portrayed “bleak landscapes”. Indeed, the understanding of social work narratives as modes of subjection, involved subordination, dependence and power. For Butler as for Foucault, “…The disciplinary apparatus produces subjects but as a consequence of that production it brings into discourse the conditions for subverting that apparatus itself” (Butler 1998, 100).

The sense of subordination experienced by state social workers (Ferguson, Lavalette 2004) due to their now deeply compromised role cannot be considered as merely the result of external constraints (such as legislation, policy, or organizational and managerial priorities). Although—as is illustrated in the emotional quotes from state social workers—such constraints can regulate and even possess practice throughout the week, practitioner alienation is also dependant upon the compliance of agents to procedure or whatever else is established and pursued externally within arenas of employment. Individual strategies to gain power, influence, status or simply just a salary by practitioners will also have an inevitable consequence or price. In addition any acceptance of a dominant, if not hegemonic work culture founded on the interests of a punitive state apparatus (Leonard 2004), without resistance will inevitably lead to the intensification of practitioner frustration or further encroachment from “outside” upon any declared personal ideals. The point, as Foucault, Derrida, and many social work commentators (Jones (2001) and Ferguson and Lavalette (2004)) have maintained,
is to offer personal and collective resistance whenever or however possible, against such constraints on performativity. Otherwise the pervasive symptoms of postmodernity—which for many include a growing sense of anxiety and “distance” between social workers narratives and the conditions that allow professional practice to develop—will merely continue to intensify.

References


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