

Responses to risk in social welfare and the denial of emotion

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Abstract: Involvement in work such as child protection, mental health and intimate caring entails forms of emotion work that have received little attention in the literature on risk in these areas. This paper argues that the dominance of procedural approaches exemplified by risk assessment protocols in social welfare militates against consideration of the relational and emotional aspects of such work in any meaningful sense. In fact, the increasing dominance of rational, bureaucratised and procedural practices can perhaps be best understood as a reaction against the irrationalities and uncertainties that characterise work in emotionally charged arenas. Yet emotions such as anger, fear, jealousy, and the equivocal nature of human relationships are palpably relevant to understanding many if not all ‘risk situations’ in the human services. This paper explores these issues with reference to the health and social welfare literature on risk and sets out the case for empirical research in this area.

Introduction

Emotions are central to the functioning of all organisations and workplaces, although emotionality is still generally regarded as being at odds with efficient functioning (Speedy 2007). Like health care settings, social care organisations are normally seen as being particularly highly charged in emotional terms, given that the focus of the work is with people who are vulnerable, often angry and invariably in some form of psychic and/or physical pain. Social work, since it by definition involves ‘working the social’, is concerned with human relationships and, most fundamentally, it involves practitioners making judgements and decisions about the character and moral worth of others (Taylor and White 2006). Emotions are thereby regarded as central to interpretation and decision- making in social work:

Emotions are not the messy and recalcitrant enemies of rationality, but are absolutely integral to the processes of decision making and judgement.”
(Taylor and White 2001: 52)

There is also a perceived need for practitioners to deal with their own emotions as well as those of service users “in order to make and interpret observations”. (Morrison 2006: 11).

However, judgment and decision-making in social welfare fields such as child protection and mental health have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, most obviously in the form of numerous inquiries into child deaths and homicides by people with mental illness (Butler and Drakeford 2005). Concerns about risk and the capacity of professionals to predict and prevent harmful outcomes are reflected in the widespread adoption of rational-technical and procedural approaches to risk

assessment and decision-making. The emotional and relational aspects of practice are regarded as increasingly marginalised (Morrison 2006).

For social work practitioners, particularly those who explicitly identify their work as 'relationship-based', the marginalisation of emotional aspects of the work can be understood as a reaction to the intense anxiety that the nature of social work involves (Ruch 2005). Relationship-based social work is characterised by its emphasis on the inherent complexity of human relationships and the uniqueness and unpredictable nature of them. The relationship between practitioner and client is both the primary source of information about the difficulties the client faces and is also the main resource in terms of any help that may be offered. Most importantly, it is the management of anxiety that is of central importance in terms of the emotional nature of welfare practice as it is "the primitive emotional response to distressing and uncertain situations." (Ruch 2005: 115). In psychoanalytic terms, this anxiety is seen as being felt not only by individuals but also at organisational and institutional level (Ruch 2005).

In this paper I explore these issues from a sociocultural perspective in order to highlight the extent to which the changes associated with risk and emotion work in social work are more complex than they may at first appear.

Forms of knowledge and the creation of emotional subjects

The sociological analysis of social work proposed by Philp (1979) emphasised that its chief role has historically been that of mediation across an 'us'/'them' divide, since "It mediates between those who are accorded political and discursive rights and those who are excluded through fear, censure, mistrust or superstition." (p97). Emotional responses are therefore at the heart of divisions between 'us' and 'them'. Central to the task of mediation, argues Philp, is the creation of 'subjects': people whose story can be understood and whose conduct thereby explained. Social work therefore occupies the space 'in-between' those who are included as social beings and those who are excluded. For the excluded, social work gives a "sociable voice" whilst also functioning to control (Philp 1979: 97). The operation of creating subjects is described as follows:

The creation of subjects is essential to mediation. The social worker faced, on the one hand, with an objectified vandal and, on the other, with a legal discourse has to attempt to present the underlying subjectivity of the vandal... The social worker does not say that the vandal did what he [*sic*] wanted to do, for in so doing the role of the social worker would disappear. What he does, rather, is to allude to the underlying character, the hidden depths, the essential good, the authentic and the unalienated. In doing so he is producing a picture of the vandal as a subject who is not immediately visible but who exists as a possibility, a future social being. Even if he does this without hope or cynically, he does it because it is the major factor which differentiates him from the policeman, the lawyer, doctor or psychiatrist. The object that these discourses deal with is one which is constructed out of facts and objective utterances. With his place in and between these the social worker cannot help but try to create people, subjects, where everyone else is seeing cold, hard, objective facts. (Philp 1979: 99)

Writing more than a quarter of a century later, Parton (2006) argues that a significant shift has taken place so that social workers are increasingly mere managers of information. Initially, practice was largely mediated through textual processes such as form-filling rather than relationships.

By the early/mid-1990s, it is clear that social work had become much more routinized and proceduralized and this was having a significant impact on its 'form of knowledge'. In many respects, the form of knowledge had become more 'formalized' and subject to a whole series of different and detailed forms – literally. Forms came both to represent and constitute the nature and form of knowledge which lay at the centre of front line practice. (Parton 2006: 8)

However, as the influence of information and communication technologies have grown, it is the database that has largely come to replace the narrative construction of 'the subject'. According to Parton, coherent stories that form the basis of knowledge about the people with whom social workers work are no longer as relevant as the patterns of information *about* them that can be detached from the lived experiences of the individuals concerned. Parton distinguishes information from knowledge in terms of its decontextualised and disembodied nature. Knowledge, which demands a 'knower' (and hence a subject itself), is not suited to the increased use of computer databases as the main medium through which the social is now 'worked' nor to the role of social workers as 'information processors'. Traditionally, knowledge in social work terms has been based on the complexity, ambiguity and contradictory nature of human relationships. This is the 'social' that is 'worked' in social work. Information, in contrast, can be reduced to categories such as 'high-risk', 'medium-risk' and 'low-risk'.

Changes in the form of knowledge in social work can be regarded as a reflection of the observed shift from 'dangerousness' to 'risk' in social administration in general (Castel 1991). The shift to risk heralds a new approach to surveillance, which Castel terms "systematic predetection" (p.288), whereby risk assessment starts with a general definition of the dangers to be prevented rather than with the direct experience of some kind of threat based on contact with an individual. Castel identifies this shift, not only in professional practices within psychiatry but also in all of the social care professions, where increasing detachment from risky individuals is emphasised. The chief characteristic of this shift is that intervention is now focused upon constellations of 'risk factors' rather than upon concrete individuals or groups of individuals, with the consequence that "*there is no longer a subject*" (1991: 288, emphasis in original). Where there is no longer a subject, there is no longer emotionality.

The identification of these shifts in forms of knowledge *implies* that narrative approaches, which emphasise emotional and emotional dimensions, are less strongly associated with the classification/surveillance processes involved in risk work. In the next section, I critically explore this implication with reference to the notion of 'emotion work' as a mode of power.

Emotion work, classification and risk

The traditional sociological idea of emotional labour can be distinguished from 'emotion work' in so far as the former involves enforced expression of emotions that may not be felt by the individual concerned. Emotional labour is particularly characteristic of jobs in the service sector where expressions of warmth and friendliness are often required (Speedy 2007). Emotion work, in contrast, is not formally prescribed by employment roles but is used autonomously and is generally associated with the private domestic sphere. In her study of a care home for older people, Lee-Treweek (1996) extends the concept of emotion work to social care practice, demonstrating how in these settings it is not only used in a positive sense to comfort and nurture but also as a means of creating and maintaining order. Lee-Treweek utilises Foucault's notion of pastoral care as a mode of power and form of surveillance to highlight the features of control that are evident in such care settings. Whilst not explicitly abusive, nor is emotion work confined to positive emotions as it may entail manipulation and coercion:

Within a broad construction of emotion work, verbal coercion and emotional manipulation can be as much a part of emotion work as loving, facilitating and caring. Therefore, emotions and control cannot necessarily be constructed in all contexts as opposing points on a continuum, and they may be best perceived as sides of the same coin. From this perspective emotion work can be seen as a means of creating order and a method of control. (Lee-Treweek 1996: 119)

Crucially, from the viewpoint of the present paper, emotion work by the care assistants in Lee-Treweek's study involved the construction of typologies of older persons in the care home. Emotional relationships within the home were based around the construction of categories of resident such as 'the lovelies', who were characterised by compliance with the care regime. Emotion work therefore involves processes of classification, which have already been seen to be an important aspect of risk work in social welfare contexts such as mental health (Warner and Gabe 2004). Classification is a central part of the process of deciding who is a risk or at risk, particularly in terms of determining the 'root cause' of high-risk behaviour. In the study by Warner and Gabe (2004), for example, social workers were concerned to classify service users according to whether their behaviour could be attributed to the personality of the individual or to their illness or 'madness' as a causal agent. Such classificatory processes involved a strong moral component in that they implied designations of deservingness or blame and determined very different types of risk management activity. They can be most usefully understood as 'a quest for order', where processes of classification are employed to deal with fears and anxieties arising from uncertainty and ambivalence (Bauman 1991). As Lupton (1999) argues, the practice of separation through the use of dichotomous categories has a central role to play in the process of creating order.

If emotionality and the relational aspects of social work can be regarded as involving processes of categorisation, classification and control, then they should not necessarily be regarded as existing on opposing points on a continuum to increasingly proceduralised forms of social work – at least, not in terms of risk work. An important

factor here is the *textual* nature of rational-technical and procedural processes of classification through which particular designations of risk are made explicit.

Whilst social work and social care have unquestionably always been documented practices, the nature of the document or the text has changed. For commentators such as Parton (2006) the use of computers marks a fundamental shift, not only in the forms of documented practice in social work, but also in its form of knowledge - as outlined in the previous section,. However, for others, it is the *situated* nature of documentary practice that requires attention if, for example, the use of computers is to be understood, since their use is always embedded in contexts (Prior (2003). Documentation, including computer software, may be used, “in ways undreamed of by its creators” (p87), and is always linked to a broader network of information retrieval and usage. In risk work, different agents will use documents in different ways to make risk ‘visible’. Crucially, whilst narrative accounts may on the face of it reflect emotionality, ambiguity and complexity, they can reduce and classify no less effectively than the binary classificatory system of a computer programme.

Inquiry reports are good examples of the way narrative and emotionality can obscure ambiguity as effectively as can the binary logic of the computer. Inquiry reports into homicides by people with mental illness present events leading up to the homicide in linear sequence in the form of a strong narrative, or story-format (Butler & Drakeford 2003; Carson 1996; Prior 2003; Stanley & Manthorpe 2004; Warner 2006). The narrative approach creates linkages between people, events and other factors which take on a specific meaning in the context of the outcome. The process of inquiries is also emotional and the reports they produce can reflect the painful experience of all those involved, including the authors, as in the case of Lord Laming’s inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (Butler and Drakeford 2003). The dramatic nature of the events that are recounted lends great significance to each detail of the person’s life; indeed, in the case of homicide inquiries, this may be the one and only time when the experiences of the perpetrator are reported in any coherent sense, since “outside of the Reports such lives and identities remain partial and fragmented.” (Prior 2003: 63).

However, items that are presented as factual in inquiry reports are often based on clinical records and files which are known to frequently contain errors or only interpretations (Price 1997). Rarely is there scope for ambiguity, uncertainty or contradiction. Furthermore, the process of compiling reports seldom involves transparency about how decisions are reached on what should or should not be included. It is this lack of transparency, argues Carson (1996), which seduces the reader into believing that such decisions are given rather than made by the authors, in the context of what has taken place and with the benefit of hindsight. What is presented in inquiry reports as a complete picture of ‘the truth’ is (inevitably) only a partial picture of external events from the perspective of the authors (Carson 1996).

Similarly, whilst social work practice may involve the construction of narratives around the creation of a subject (Parton 2006), such narratives or stories often appear to be fixed rather than fluid. In the case of decision making on risk in child protection, social workers, like other professionals, are susceptible to ‘confirmation bias’ in that once a view is formed they will tend to seek out information that confirms it. Once reached, such judgements take the form of ‘pervasive belief systems’ that are highly resistant to change even when contrary evidence comes to light (Taylor and White

2006). Taylor and White (2006) explore these areas and the tendency for all professionals in such work to 'strive for certainty', arguing that judgements are often arrived at "through a process of classification by characterization" (p943). As already highlighted in the present paper, such classification processes are strongly associated with the moral dimension of risk work.

Taylor and White share Parton's (2006) view that knowledge has become virtually synonymous with information, arguing that:

..what is needed is a broader approach that encompasses practical reasoning, emotion and, most of all, an intelligence that is disciplined and creative. It is time to revitalise reasoning by acknowledging the importance of emotion and interpretation. (Taylor and White 2006: 950)

What this statement underestimates, however, is the degree to which social work operates in the area of *cultural* as well as individual anxiety and emotionality. In this sense, social workers do not just speak for the subject, as emphasised by Philp (1979), they also speak for the 'us' of an 'us'/'them' divide. In mediating between the 'us' and 'them' of this divide, social work gives voice to the moral concerns of 'us' as much as it attempts to create subjects of 'them'. This explains why social work survives whilst at the same time being held in deep contempt. In the cultural sense, 'working the social' is a moral/emotional project that involves the classification and surveillance of those considered 'high-risk' and a threat in *cultural* as well as in 'real' terms. The paper now moves on to consider the significance of cultural anxiety in this context.

Cultural anxiety and risk

The nature of the relationship between risk and anxiety is complex in so far as anxiety can be understood as both *cause* and *effect* of raised risk consciousness. As well as causing anxiety, knowledge about risks can be used as a 'cultural resource' to cope with the anxiety associated with them (Wilkinson 2001). Thus, raised risk consciousness in social welfare, reflected in the widespread use of the language of risk in fields such as child protection and mental health, can be understood as one *cause* of the increased (or at least, reconstituted) anxieties surrounding some of the most fraught issues. At the same time, however, the dominance of rational-technical approaches to the assessment and management of these risks is – paradoxically - a means of *managing* such anxiety. In a psychoanalytic sense, risk assessment protocols might be understood as defence mechanisms that are deployed against the unpredictability of human behaviour. It is important to emphasise that if rational approaches to risk are a means to manage *anxiety about* risks rather than a means to manage risks themselves, they almost certainly contribute to a circular process of raised risk consciousness → raised anxiety → increased focus on risk assessment processes.

Further consideration will be given to these issues, as well as the implications for empirical work in this area, during the oral paper at the conference.