

**Social Suffering: Changing organisational culture in children and families
social work through critical reflection groups: Insights from Bourdieu**

Mark Smith^{1,*}, Vivienne E. Cree¹, Rhoda MacRae²,

Douglas Sharp³, Elaine Wallace³ and Susan O'Halloran³

**1School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh,
UK**

**2Alzheimer Scotland Centre for Policy and Practice, University of West of
Scotland,**

Hamilton Campus, Hamilton, ML3 0JB, UK

3City of Edinburgh Council, Edinburgh, UK

***Correspondence to Dr Mark Smith, Senior Lecturer in Social Work,
University of**

**Edinburgh, School of Social and Political Science, Chrystal MacMillan
Building, 15A**

George Square, Edinburgh, EH8 9LD, UK. E-mail: Mark.smith@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

Child protection systems across the English-speaking world have been subject to critique in recent years, identified as overly procedural and compliance-based, within which relationships between social workers and clients are characterised by mutual suspicion and animosity. This article draws on findings from a knowledge exchange project in which a university social work department worked with two local authorities with the aim of bringing about culture change in children and families' social work. The focus is on what the social workers said about their work in contemporary child protection systems and organisations in the course of participation in critical reflection groups. The experiences of practitioners are considered using insights drawn from Pierre Bourdieu, and especially his notion of social suffering, which suggests that workers may feel compromised in fulfilling the moral and emotional dimensions of the job as a result of the demands of a neoliberal state. The article concludes that critical reflection may provide some limited possibilities to destabilise dominant practice orthodoxies and cultures and in so doing, encourage culture change in organisations.

Keywords: Bourdieu; child protection; social suffering; knowledge exchange; critical reflection, organisational culture

Introduction

Child protection systems across the English-speaking world have been subject to damning critique in recent decades. From the 1980's, social work with children and families moved from what was, largely, a family support role to assume a predominant child protection focus (Parton, 1985). This shift was reflected in the kind of relationships that existed between social workers and families. By 1995, Cooper *et al.* drew attention to what they perceived as a 'siege mentality' in local authority social work departments, while Jones, in his study of perceptions of statutory social work, noted that, 'In many disadvantaged and marginalised working-class places, social workers are seen as part of the problem and not as part of the solution' (2001 p. 558). Academic commentators have concluded that the system is 'close to bankrupt (and) it may be doing more harm than good' (Lonne *et al.*, 2009, p. 5). More recently, Featherstone *et al.* (2014) have drawn attention to what they describe as a culture of 'muscular authoritarianism towards multiply deprived families' (p. 2). They call for more humane practice and, in so doing, draw attention to the reality that current practice may not always be humane.

The current context impacts on practitioners; they have been described as experiencing 'compassion fatigue' (Richardson, 2011), hopelessness (van Heugten, 2011) and low morale (Martin *et al.*, 2010). Performance management demands and the proliferation of administrative recording and reporting alongside ineffective IT systems have also taken their toll on their spirits and confidence (Wastell *et al.*, 2010; Wastell and White, 2010). These feelings can, at times, be engaged with critically and creatively through peer support and supervision, but at other times, they may be so deeply embodied that they transcend more objective or dispassionate thought processes (Frost and Hoggett, 2008). Thus, workers can feel, at a profound level, that something in their

everyday experience of social work practice is not right and certainly does not reflect their hopes and aspirations in coming into the profession, but they struggle to articulate what it is that is wrong.

The need to support different cultures of social work practice was acknowledged in *Changing Lives*, the Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review (Scottish Executive, 2006), which observed a social work profession lacking in confidence in its own skills and unclear about its distinctive contribution to society. It concluded that social work had lost touch with some of its core purpose and called for transformational culture change across the profession. In England and Wales, the Government-sponsored review of child protection conducted by Professor Eileen Munro (2011) provided a further layer of critique in relation to managerial responses to child protection. While the need for culture change is broadly established, the means through which this might be achieved are far less clear.

This article reports on an ESRC-funded knowledge exchange (KE) project involving social work academics at a Scottish university and children and families' social workers from two neighbouring local authorities. KE has been called 'a dynamic, ongoing, two-way interaction and flow of ideas and people between colleges and universities and business, public and third sector' (SFC, 2009, p.3). The project follows on from and extends previous and ongoing KE activity between the partners (Gallagher *et al*, 2012, Smith *et al*, 2012). While the remit of the Munro Review (2011) did not extend to Scotland, the funding bid for this current project was based on Munro's recommendation that:

'Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered, drawing on evidence of effectiveness of helping methods where appropriate and supporting practice that can implement evidence based ways of working with children and families' (p.13).

Furthermore, Munro identified the need to 'help professionals move from a compliance culture to a learning culture' (p.6). The project sought to employ understandings from the wider knowledge exchange literature (Nutley *et al*,

2007) and from our previous KE projects (Smith *et al*, 2013) to help bring about that shift from a compliance to a learning culture.

What is organisational culture?

Questions of organisational culture are complex but generally converge around Schein's idea that it involves '...shared learning experiences that lead, in turn, to shared, taken for granted basic assumptions held by the members of the group or organisation' (2004, p22). Thus, culture 'embodies shared values, beliefs and assumptions that are deeply ingrained in an organisation's traditions, and influence how an organisation thinks and feels' (Drumm, 2012, p.1), suggesting that any efforts to bring about change need to both challenge the underlying assumptions of an organisation and engage at an embodied level with practitioners' assumptions, values and feelings (*ibid.*). This can be particularly difficult in the public sector where cultures are generally hierarchical, focused on internal stability and adherence to rules and procedures and often resistant to flexibility, innovation and openness (*ibid.*). On the other hand, a number of key enablers to culture change can be identified, including the presence of institutional support and leadership. The fact that this project could count on such support from the participating local authorities and from key individuals and was part of wider change initiatives within both of them could be seen as optimising the prospect of success.

The project

Our project consisted of three strands: supporting small-scale practitioner research projects, facilitating critical reflection groups and working with managers around effective learning transfer and mobilisation. Together, the various strands when taken alongside previous collaborative projects aimed towards Nutley *et al's* (2007) organisational excellence model of knowledge exchange whereby organisations, working in partnership with universities, become sites for local experimentation, evaluation and practice development.

The focus of this article is on the critical reflection strand. We are less concerned here with the process of critical reflection (this has been explored elsewhere –

Cree et al, 2014) or on the impact of the knowledge exchange activity (although we do point to some tentative possibilities in this regard). Instead, we use the article as an opportunity to report on the current state of child protection work as experienced by those front-line practitioners whose views were gathered in the course of the critical reflection groups. On the basis of these views, we argue that any prospect of culture change needs to incorporate both a political analysis of the current state of affairs, but also an awareness of how daily practice impacts on workers at an emotional level.

Why critical reflection?

Critical reflection, as an approach to staff development and learning builds on traditions of reflection, reflective practice, reflexivity and critical theory. Fook and Askeland (2007) suggest that it offers a process through which to analyse practice in order to reframe it in a way that represents its complexity. It involves small peer groups working together to assist one another to reflect on concrete examples of practice that are identified by practitioners to be significant. Learning happens as the group members unpack the incident, unearthing deep-seated cultural norms as well as unspoken values and assumptions. By focusing on concrete examples of practice, critical reflection foregrounds professional experience as a source of knowledge. As such, it constitutes a challenge to normal hierarchies of knowledge, which privilege technical rational and received academic knowledges. It thus fits well within a KE paradigm. Workplace cultures that are increasingly procedure and regulation-based and which induce anxiety in practitioners may act against critical reflection as an ongoing professional experience (Ruch, 2002). Critical reflection thus validates the role of emotion in practice and can help reaffirm social work values. Critical reflection is not simply an exercise in introspection, however; its primary purpose is, as Fook and Askeland assert, to bring about 'some improvements in professional practice' (2007, p. 521);

Methods

Twelve social workers in the children and families' teams in our two local authorities volunteered to participate in a series of five workshops led by two

social work academics over a period of three months between April and June 2013. The funded project upon which this article is based was considered within the ethical approval framework of the host university. Participants gave both written and verbal consent to take part in the process and were advised of their right to opt out at any point and while some were unable to attend every session, none withdrew. The self-selecting nature of the process might indicate that those choosing to take part may have had particular motivations to do so and, as such, may not reflect the views of local authority social workers more generally. Each workshop lasted for four hours, and involved discussion of a critical incident or incidents presented by practitioners, and more open discussion, either focused on research literature or on practice and agency organisation. Four participants returned to meet us for a follow-up session to look back on the workshops and discuss plans for maintaining change initiatives. Those people also contributed to dissemination events thereafter.

Notes were taken during each group, describing the cases that were the subject of reflection and the subsequent discussion of themes and issues emerging from these. The follow-up discussion was recorded and transcribed in full. The notes and transcriptions were then analysed for the insights they offered into social work practice and the possibilities for change. Drafts of this article were shared with the practitioners involved and their reflections around a year after the conclusion of the groups were incorporated into this final version, thus completing a hermeneutic circle of interpretation (Gadamer, 2004). Anonymity has been preserved as far as possible within the reporting and any obvious identifying features omitted.

Of the twelve social workers who took part in the workshops, all but two engaged with the process fully and told us how much they had appreciated and learned from the experience of critical reflection. The two who did not find the examination of practice helpful shared feelings of frustration, seeing little point in what they saw as introspective and a 'talking shop'. This may reflect different understandings of the social work role among those who see its political and emotional aspects and those who perhaps regard it as more practical and

instrumental. For now, however, we consider a suitable theoretical lens within which to interpret some of the findings emerging from the groups.

Child protection as 'social suffering'

It became quickly apparent from the critical reflection sessions and from the follow-up discussion with practitioners that child protection is, to use Hochschild's (1979) term, 'emotional labour'. The emotional impact of social work practice generally has been subject to recent (re)exploration (Ruch, 2012; Fenton, 2012). While emotional labour can be satisfying (Lynch et al, 2009, Hochschild, 2013) and our KE project offered some examples of this, the dominant expressions of emotion from the practitioners in the workshops were around frustration and the pressure to subsume the moral and emotional content of the work beneath the task-centred demands of the organisation. As a consequence, practitioners experienced a 'disjuncture', described by Fenton (2012), as they were often unable to practise in ways that were consistent with their values.

It was the emergence of this disjuncture that led us to what the French social theorist, Pierre Bourdieu, in his collaborative book, *The Weight of the World* (1999, 2012) identifies as 'social suffering', whereby the everyday world of public service workers reflects the consequences and frustrations of a neo-liberal state that has abandoned welfarist principles. Bourdieu argues that it is impossible to understand the present state of social welfare without taking into account the wholesale conversion to neo-liberalism that began in the 1970's and was accompanied by a retreat from an ethic of public service.

Those who work within a neo-liberal state experience 'all kinds of ordinary suffering (la petite misère)' (Bourdieu, 2012, p.4). What he describes in this term is not the absolute poverty (la grande misère) of many of those with whom social workers and public service workers more generally, (notwithstanding that the austerity agenda and its consequences makes this absolute poverty a pressing cause for concern), but the everyday feelings encountered by those professions 'whose mission is to deal with poverty or to talk about it ...' (2012; p.5) and the

impact that proximity to such poverty has upon them. They can 'feel abandoned, if not disowned outright, in their efforts to deal with the material and moral suffering that is the only certain consequence of this economically legitimated Realpolitik' (2012, p.183).

At the same time, social workers are agents of the state who are 'shot through with the contradictions of the state' (2012, p. 184); they 'become liable to two masters: the practices and norms of the discipline and the practices and norms of the market' (Pileggi and Patton, 2003, p.318). They are fighting on two fronts: 'against those they want to help (their clients) and are often too demoralized to take a hand in their own interests, let alone the interests of the collectivity; on the other hand, against administrations and bureaucrats divided and enclosed in separate universes' (in Garrett, 2007b, p.238).

Findings: illustrations from critical reflection discussions

The critical reflection discussions gave us ample illustrations of social suffering and contradiction as described by Bourdieu. The social workers, each of whom wanted and tried to do a good, morally justifiable job on behalf of their clients, struggled with the frustrations and incongruities of managerialism on their working lives. They shared many examples of the ways in which decision-making was explained and justified in such a way that the harshness of the decision being taken (for example, not to provide a service) was obscured. As one practitioner said: 'There's never any acknowledgement that there aren't enough resources – managers hide behind 'scientific' decisions (i.e. eligibility criteria) not to allocate resources.' Another spoke of 'the department's expectations and how these become a barrier to building relationships with people', thus highlighting the pull in opposing professional and managerial directions.

We will now unpack three accounts from the critical reflection workshops that give clearer insight into some of the issues being discussed.

The child protection interview

A social worker at one of the workshops spoke about her extreme discomfort at the department's routine practice for interviewing a child where there had been an allegation of abuse. In such situations, the child is driven to police headquarters on the outskirts of the city and subject to video-interviewing. This is meant to be a joint process involving a police officer and social worker but was increasingly undertaken by a police officer alone, thus foregrounding evidence gathering over any more supportive role for the child. This frequently happens on the basis of what the social worker believes to be a minor allegation, and the result is almost invariably, no further action.

When the group members discussed this more fully, there was a shared acknowledgment that such practices can result in a kind of secondary trauma for those children concerned. Not only is it terrifying for children, but they are much less likely to ask for help or say that they have been harmed in the future. And yet the practice is followed, largely unquestioned. What Bourdieu and Wacquant (2002) might term 'symbolic violence' percolated the system. As one social worker said: 'How we are managed mirrors the way we work with clients – targets at every level – case conferences ... “you need to do this, this and that, or we'll take your kids off you” ...'

The cultural embeddedness of a language of control and of threats to remove children and the incongruence between declared and actual practice was recognised by the practitioners. As one said: 'we have a council or councils that behave in certain ways towards its employees, who are expected to behave in a different way to their clients, and in a different way amongst themselves about learning cultures'. Thus the critical reflection workshops were themselves illustrative of the contradiction and the social suffering experienced by practitioners.

The pre-birth case conference

At another workshop, a social worker recounted the story of a recent pre-birth case conference that she had attended. Key people had not been present and so the meeting was not quorate, but the chair did not have the power to postpone

the decision. The default position was therefore enacted: in such situations where a case conference did not take place the baby or child would be placed on the child protection register. So that is what happened in this situation, leading to a most distraught, pregnant woman, and a social worker feeling that 'this was so wrong'.

This scenario, just like the one before it, led to a wider examination of why individual social workers find it impossible to uphold their own personal and professional values in such situations. The social workers all identified a sense of fear within organisations and individuals. As one person said: 'Fear is enormous ... it really needs to be experienced and talked through but we hold onto it. Fear is at the heart of what we are and aren't doing. [The organisation] tries to contain things so that things don't happen.' This fear, which percolates every level of an organisation might be recognised as a feature of what Garrett (2010) identifies as the precarity induced by neoliberalism, whereby workers (and indeed managers) are to be kept on their toes and held to account for anything that might go wrong. The consequence on workers was, as one social worker related, that:

'imagination has gone out of the window Paralysis has set in – "please don't think!" The focus is on control – we've got to the point of managing situations rather than being in them. I don't feel I work in an organisation where the human factor is recognised.'

The centrality of fear in organisational cultures led one participant to question: 'we're hearing of fear, blame, helplessness, hopelessness – if this was an individual we'd be thinking about anxiety, depression – are we an anxious, depressed profession?'

Hot-desking

The third example from our workshops offers a fascinating insight into the fact that the retreat of the state is spatial as well as metaphorical. At the time of the critical reflection groups, one of the local authorities was undergoing a restructuring process, caused by austerity cuts and by the need to reduce physical office space. The other had already experienced a similar process, reflecting a

wider trend across public service agencies. The manifestation of this policy was a reduction in desk space available to workers. Based on a time and motion calculation that workers spent only 70% of their time at their desk, the decision was taken to reduce the overall number of desks and to introduce a system of 'hot-desking'. One social worker described this:

'We're moving to people not having their own desks, people having hardly any space to store anything, and it's all expected that everything will be digitally stored or electronically stored, but there's a limit to how much space you have to even store there, compared with an attempt at a kind of learning culture. Now, learning theory says people learn in different ways, need different things, but the corporate thing says, "this is what you need and that's all you'll get". And I think whatever folk are saying up yonder ..., I just think the corporate thing is just massive and it's just like a steamroller. It's like, "no, you'll behave like this, you'll do this, and that's it". We're moving at the end of the week and I have taken boxes and boxes and boxes of stuff home, and it will never go back to work because I will never have any space for it. Literally, physically, let alone anything else.'

Aligned to this retrenchment in physical space was the removal of storage space and the allocation of a 'linear metre' of storage within which workers were to keep case files and any documents or resources. As another practitioner explained, 'The common-sense logic of this allocation of the linear metre was reduced *ad absurdum* by the pro-rata allocation of space to part-time workers But I'm ... I'm part time, ... So I don't have a linear meter.'

This physical and spatial retreat has implications for professional identity. The environmental psychology literature around place identity posits that questions of 'who we are' are often intimately related to questions of 'where we are' (Dixon and Durrheim 2000). 'Who we are' professionally and as members of teams can thus become bound up with questions of space, as one social worker outlined:

'There was never anything about what happens to identity, what happens to the team, what happens to support? You're wandering around a building that's half empty. Which days are there going to be people there?... And it's

no wonder that, for instance, your team identity seems to have vanished, because your own identity's vanished. Where are you in all of that? You think, "hello?" You want to jump up and down. "This is me. Where do I fit?"

The practical implications of this for day-to-day practice were evident, but so was the impact on developmental practice:

'And actually a colleague of mine said that when they underwent the same process where she was, their team meetings dropped away, because of course the expectation is that everybody would try to come in for team meetings, but by definition there won't be enough desks on that day for everybody, so people will kind of think twice about going somewhere, that they'll then have to leave to find working space.'

Bourdieu also recognises this importance of space, noting that 'Because social space is inscribed at once in social structures and in the mental structures that are produced in the incorporation of these structures, space is one of the sites where power is asserted and exercised' (2012, p. 126). Social structures become converted into mental structures and spatial distance then acts to affirm social distance. For experienced social workers, this shift was felt as one of losing what they had thought of as social work, which had previously involved notions of team identity and support. There was also a tangible sense of loss of an identity that some participants felt they once had, and within which social work enjoyed a greater sense of professional identity and belief in the possibilities of social change.

Participants recognised that such policy directions did not even make good business sense. One noted:

my son had just finished his sixth year and has done business management as a subject, was actually very quickly able to quote back to me all the main features (of the Council's approach), the kind of constant remodelling, the new work style, all the elements, he was able to tell me what's happening, he was able to tell me the reasons for it, one of which

does include wiping out individuality and making everybody on a level, kind of worker bees. He was also able to tell me that it's been discredited.

I: It's essentially Taylorism isn't it? ...

R: It is Taylorism, yes.

Management practices based around the 'scientific management' of Frederick Taylor were discredited as far back as the 1920s when they were replaced by a greater emphasis on human relations. It is fascinating, although perhaps not entirely surprising that such practices should be resurgent under conditions of austerity.

Spaces for change

Although the three examples above might lead to a rather pessimistic view about the spaces for change within a neo-liberal doxa, which is the term Bourdieu uses to explain organisational power, he also offers insight into some of the possibilities and the processes through which this might happen. His wider sociological project seeks to bridge structuralist and individual perspectives; it therefore allows for some agency on the part of actors within a given field, in this case, child protection. The contradictions of neo-liberalism open up, he argues, 'a margin of manoeuvre, initiative and freedom which can be used by those who, in breaking with bureaucratic routines and regulations, defend bureaucracy against itself' (2012, p. 191).

So, while the process of reflecting upon practice did bring to the surface a number of powerful emotions as to how and where child protection had lost its way, the current state of play was not wholly determined by external forces. Bourdieu recognised that while dispositions (what he calls 'habitus') are long-lasting and tend to perpetuate and to reproduce themselves, they are not eternal and may be changed through the process of awareness and of pedagogic effort

(Bourdieu, 2002, p.29). And in spite of the criticism of the current state of affairs and an occasional air of despondency, we also came across instances of practitioners hanging onto forms of practice that might not be thought to fit within the managerial doxa. One was moved to announce about a client in the course of a case discussion, 'I love that woman'. Another also acknowledged becoming emotionally involved, saying: 'of course I do –how could you not? – you can't switch off from your own experience, from who you are.'

Bourdieu identifies that moments or times of crisis can provide an opportunity for movement and change and 'provoke a redefinition of experience (Garrett, 2007b p. 232). In this sense, it is important not merely, as Bourdieu says, 'to accuse or indict, but to try and open up possibilities for rational action to unmake or remake what history has made' (2012 p.187). This possibility of challenging common-sense knowledge arguably foregrounds a role for academics within a knowledge exchange project such as this. Questioning of doxa is the foundation for intellectual work (Garrett, 2007b, p. 232). It is, according to Bourdieu, the 'civic mission of intellectuals; scholarship and commitment go hand in hand' (in Garrett, 2007b, p. 233).

One way in which we sought to achieve this was by sharing research literature with practitioners. This proved to be important in helping them make sense of what might be an inchoate feeling of things not being right, but not really knowing why. Stanford's (2010) article on 'Speaking back to fear' in which she discusses the need for social workers to take risks in order to maintain a moral stance within their practice, proved to be particularly popular and indeed validating. For one participant, it was her 'Eureka moment – it put so much in place for me'. Another said that she cried at the conclusion:

'I quite often feel like a little voice in the wilderness, but I'm not. People have done all this research and are saying the same thing – core values, how I relate in the moment and preserve my moral compass ...I know where my measure is. My measure is my own kind of conscience and barometer of well, I have actually met that person in a way that meets their needs in some way. But that's not actually measured and not given

any credibility or approval by managers for me. I suppose that's an edgy thing to say when these are on.

This idea of speaking back to fear involved an element of what might be thought of as resistance enacted through taking responsibility for everyday practice situations.

What I've tried to do is take responsibility. Because our team was six, now it's four because of maternity leave and someone's gone. I suppose a part of what has been brought to my awareness about this process ..., I put an email to the team to say 'can we get together to do a bit of, not supervision, but support and reflection. Just the four of us, to connect, because we're disparate'. Taking responsibility ... it's about taking responsibility to say 'well, what do I need and what do I want in my social work practice to support me, to support others ...

Two practitioners provided another example of how ideas expressed in the social work literature could strike a chord with the way they understood their roles. They made links back to some of our work from a previous KE project, where we introduced Michel de Certeau's distinction between strategy and tactics (Smith et al 2012); the idea that underneath the strategy there are people actually subverting the strategy by operating in small ways. As one participant said:

'I like that. That's individuals trying to be, in a sense, creative within the very tiny spaces that they kind of have. It's not putting it on a grand scale, but it's people trying to work with what they've got for good motives by and large. I'm generalising. ... It gets me thinking about the Orwellian kind of thing, and the image in *1984* where he's got that little space where the camera doesn't see him just behind the wall, and "I can be a bit freer here". And it's tiny it's the box. I can clamber into my box at work.'

For another, the impact of the critical reflection groups was experienced outside of work:

‘But for me that is more about a kind of energetic process, rather than bringing the social work ideas into work. That to me was an obvious sign of the energy that this process had created for me, but the outlet was not at work. That was not where it went, because there was space to do it elsewhere, but not here, and the things that we discussed, I got fired up about.’

There was, however, a crossover from these creative outlets outside of work and more work-related activities such as ‘... pitching up at more lectures and things’. This perhaps reinforces Frost and Hoggett’s (2008) argument that responses to social suffering need to recognise and incorporate the personal, emotional and embodied aspects of people’s personal as well as professional selves.

There would appear to be a, perhaps inevitable, tension involved in trying to maintain the enthusiasm and resolve to do things differently that the groups could engender with the realities of practice. As one participant related: ‘And then you go back and you think “Christ, this is all late, I’ve got this pile of work, and oh, I’ve missed all my timescales, and somebody will be wanting my head about that”. It’s soul destroying’. In those situations, there was a sense that any learning and resolve can just evaporate. On the other hand, there were some signs of hope. The KE literature tells us that the ways in which knowledge gets into practice is not linear but can be diffuse and even serendipitous (Nutley et al, 2007). An interesting perspective on how one of the practitioners envisaged change happening was through his understanding of the idea of ‘fractalling’, a mathematical term to describe the ways in which something gets repeated over and over. As he explained:

‘Fractals are a bit more and a bit more and a bit more, and repeats itself. I think doing stuff like this and taking... Although I asked the question “how do I truly explicitly take into my practice stuff from here?”, I think implicitly it fractals, and connects with other parts, other little parts of my own practice and my own learning and my own life philosophy, and connects with other things and it begins to make a pattern, small as it is, and then other people connect with me and the pattern gets bigger. So that’s my idea of fractalling.’

The critical reflection process allowed participants to think about how they might engage personal agency to effect change. A social worker told us:

after a while I thought “well, how selfish actually, here I am looking after myself and forgetting that I’m part of a team and that other people have needs and other people will have needs to see me, as I will need to see them”, because belonging in a team is very much kind of part of me, although I do need some space to work on my own as well. But I was just interested in how I went into almost survival mode straight away. “How can I cope, how I manage, what are the practical things I can do?” But I’d failed to take account of the experience...how are other people going to cope.

What the critical reflection process undoubtedly did was to challenge simplistic ideas of how organisational cultures might be changed. As one participant said, ‘people assume that knowledge exchange is a linear process. You go to a critical reflection group, you go back and you effect change’. It is, of course, far more complicated than that. Perhaps the most that might be hoped for is an unsettling of prevailing ways of doing things. Another participant expressed the view that such ‘unsettledness is probably sufficient to allow a social worker both to subvert and to work within (the traps of) organisational culture’. There is perhaps this inevitable and constant dialectic of acknowledging the need for some of the systems and processes that frame practice with a simultaneous need to ask questions of these.

Conclusion

The project upon which this article is based took as its starting point Munro’s (2011) call for culture change in child protection social work. Many of Munro’s criticisms of the culture of child protection social work were indeed apparent in the experiences of participants in our project. It is our contention, from the analysis presented, that attempts to effect the culture changes Munro calls for will not be brought about through instrumental or organisational fixes but need to start from a point of analysing the profession in its political context, which is

one of neoliberal hegemony and attacks on a public service ethic with resultant experiences of social suffering for clients and social workers alike. Within that, though, it is also important to recognise the embodied and emotional dimensions of such work and seek to work together to create ways through which workers might think differently about it in order to de-stabilise prevailing ways of thinking and practising. The findings of this project provide some encouragement that, given permission, support and resources such as signposting and access to relevant critical reading material, committed practitioners will take responsibility for engaging in the type of intellectual and emotional work that is required to begin to bring about the kind of culture change Munro calls for. The next stage of our work on this topic will involve a follow up as to whether the fractalling process described has in fact happened and continued to replicate different ways of thinking and working.

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