Mind the gaps: Understanding the rise and implications of different types of cynicism within statutory social work

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Summary

This paper explores the notable rise of cynicism among state social workers in Britain. Theoretically cynicism has been viewed as 'deviant emotion' and pathology or as offering a type of employee resistance that may protect or support a person's identity. Drawing upon case study research with practicing social workers the article looks at three different case examples of employee cynicism. These include the cynic as organisational survivor, disenfranchised sceptic or altruist. It was found that although cynicism within social work predominately emerges as an emotional response to structural change, other factors such as those embodied within professional discourses and government or academic rhetoric, can also impact. Other factors such as risk-averse assumptions that distance the practitioner from the 'service user' or colleagues can also have influence. Although often viewed negatively cynicism can greatly benefit an organisation or motivate a practitioner to challenge normative principles and promote the needs of service users and carers.

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Introduction

Within high-stress modern work arenas cynicism can emerge among employees as a relatively common mind-set characterised by 'hopelessness, disappointment and disillusion, [whilst also being] associated with scorn, disgust and suspicion' (Dhar, 2009: 152). During the past decade or more in many Western countries empirical evidence suggests that there has occurred a noticeable rise in the prevalence of discontent and cynicism among social work practitioners (e.g. Jones, 2001; Dustin, 2007). This is most evident for state-sector employees although some recent research also suggests that cynicism is also prevalent among many social work students (e.g. Worsley *et al*, 2009).

Empirical research highlights the tendency for many social workers to complain about their intensely bureaucratic and stressful work environments, ongoing and often disorientating departmental reorganisations, deskilling, increasing work-loads and responsibilities, staff shortages and retention and recruitment problems. In addition staff complaints are made about resource constraints and the strained relations which often develop with management, service users, carers or colleagues (Jones, 2001; Dustin, 2007). However there is also a longer history of cynicism within social work, in particular regarding tension, suspicion or even contempt felt towards clients or carers, an ideological culture initiated around the Victorian Poor Law tradition of 'less eligibility' and echoing in later investigatory child protection, safeguarding or 'social work' with asylum seekers (Otway, 1996; Humphries, 2003; Wrennall, 2010). Stephens (1945) nevertheless provides evidence that any such intolerance has at times remained relatively common amidst other welfare service professionals:

> These are the problem families. [That] they are a reproach to the community and a disgrace to our social services needs no emphasis…To school attendance officers, health visitors, housing managers, relieving officers, and many others, they are a burden, each demanding as much attention as many normal families and deriving little benefit from the services they receive. (cited in Jones, 1983: 17)

Despite this an implicit assumption persists that cynicism is likely to be merely a consequence of now long-term neo-liberal market reforms of the public sector in the UK, as elsewhere, which continue to develop alongside wider pressures influenced by globalisation (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). However although supply-side reforms such as the promotion of care management and privatisation inevitably represent an

important structural and ideological influence, this paper draws from empirical research to propose that cynicism also persists within social work due to other mitigating factors, some of which cannot again be explained due to neo-liberalism or managerialism. In particular, the gap between policy related or pedagogical and professionally induced *rhetoric* and the day to day realities of 'street level' practice can also encourage employee cynicism. Also, related discursive trends such as the growth of an ideologically driven 'risk-aversion' culture have also maintained an influence. This paper identifies some of the different types of cynicism that can be present among employees, and notes that, although often treated with scorn, this seemingly deviant emotion may help to support increasingly fragmented and 'fragile' post-Fordist organisations (Grugulis and Vincent, 2005). In social work cynicism may also encourage practitioners to challenge normative practices and consequentially provide better support to users and carers.

The paper is in four parts. First, an overview of the theoretical literature relating to cynicism is provided alongside some findings from previous research that recognises cynicism within social work. Second the methodology for the empirical research is presented. Third, three different case studies are presented in which the causes and impact of cynicism are explored as part of 'street level' practices. Finally some conclusions are drawn.

Theorising cynicism

The original 'Cynics' within 5th Century Greece were led by the philosopher Diogenes and advocated 'a natural way of life, holding virtue to be the only good…[whilst] scoffing at the relentless pursuit of power and wealth by fellow citizens' (Dudley, 1937; TenHouten, 2007: 69). Dean *et al* (1998: 342) also note the subversive tendencies which distinguished the Cynics from their peers:

> Cynics wore rough clothing and drank out of their hands so as not to need a cup. Diogenes is even said to have lived in a tub instead of a house. In short, the original Cynics held societies institutions in very low regard and expressed contempt for them in both words and actions.

Today organisational cynics are often viewed negatively: in particular, as projecting a sense of apathy, despondency, scorn, and resentment; most prominently towards senior managers and other leaders but also often aimed at the wider employing organisation or corporation. Perhaps inevitably such attitudes are assumed to encourage unhelpful or even destructive behaviours that may threaten normative traditions or effectiveness and lead to absenteeism, idleness, incompetence, poor social skills as well as an increased tendency to fall into conflict with colleagues or customers as well as risk staff retention problems (Dean *et al*, 1998; Dhar, 2009). Within social work such characteristics may also disrupt or challenge institutionally embedded professional codes, norms and expectations. Conversely the student or practitioner should be pleasant, happy, good mannered yet assertive and trusting, good natured, consciousness, altruistic and empowering. These values and dispositions reflect embedded middle class and judeo-christian norms which promote reason, common sense, hope, resilience and critical liberal support for established institutions, as opposed to the scorn or pessimism more common among a disenfranchised proletariat. This is despite the ever present obstacles of resource constraints,

bureaucracy or tensions with managers, service users, and so forth, within the typical high pressured social work organisation (Heywood, 1964; Jones, 2001; Banks, 2006).

Since the 1980s there has been a notable rise in the prevalence of organisational cynicism in the United States, Europe and Asia: indeed as Dean *et al* (1998: 341) declare, it appears as if 'cynicism is everywhere'. Explanations regarding the cause of any rise in cynicism tend to vary but common explanations include reduced trust in government, business and labour leaders, as well as distain felt regarding 'lofty' or extortionate salaries commanded by senior and corporate executives (Anderson and Bateman, 1997: 449). More generally, however, some commentators' link cynicism with institutional or social trends: including those of persistent and relative high unemployment, increased workloads and expectations, or more generally the apparent incapacity of 'institutions in contemporary societies to meet the high expectations of modern life' (TenHouten, 2007: 71). Cynicism, not unusually, can also emerge from the gaps which spring from omnipresent yet at times irksome organisational or managerial rhetoric: as Collinson and Ackroyd (2005: 318) suggest, more often than not such scepticism is 'often fuelled by [employees] awareness of significant discrepancies between official managerial policies and actual practices'.

Cynicism expressed through humour and rule bending or sabotage may also offer any besieged employee a type of emotional or psychological therapy by which they may increase their self-esteem and protect a challenged identity. Indeed Ezzamel and Willmot (1998) argue that such emotional deviance often masks a more subtle form of class struggle that stands between management control and resistance from labour, and which was previously articulated within larger-scale industrial and Trade Union activism. As Taylor and Bain (2003) add, the prevalence of such cynicism again suggests that resistance has not so much disappeared from the modern (office-based) workplace but has instead evolved into many different types. Paradoxically more dispersed and fragmented 'post-Fordist' resistance can be more difficult to locate and control than traditional large scale labour movements.

Theoretical stances that seek to explain organisational cynicism reflect a distinction drawn between normative, critical and post-structural stances. Normative paradigms draw influence from behavioural psychology to present cynicism as a pathological condition or peculiar set of symptoms. Such 'normative aberrations' demand managerial intervention or employee re-training so to encourage greater integration, involvement and a more positive view of work and the organisation or professions role and purpose. Thomas and Davies (2005: 728) draw reference to social work and note that cynicism is typically viewed as signifying a form of deviance common among 'social anomalies' who represent 'an impediment to the smooth functioning of organisational culture, team affiliation and other 'soft' human resource management initiatives: a sort of 'psychological 'defect' that needs to be 'corrected' if the organisation is to succeed'.

Critical theorists provide a more diverse yet ambiguous set of interpretations. For example, some neo-Marxists locate cynicism as an inevitable symptom for workers' alienated within a Capitalist labour process (Braverman, 1974; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). For other critical theorists not as committed to, or restrained by Marxist theory, cynicism can also provide a form of *positive* recalcitrance, articulated through creative individual, small-scale or occasionally more collective acts of

resistance. Indeed as Fleming and Spicer (2003: 160) suggest, cynicism may offer 'a way of escaping the encroaching logic of managerialism and provides an inner 'free space' for workers when other avenues of opposition [including Union related] have dried up'. Potentially at least such forms of recalcitrant cynicism can undermine the seemingly rational objectives of senior management and the wider organisation, or simply help employees cope with the boredom or stress of deskilling and work intensification. Finally, post-structural theorists draw extensively from Foucault and instead interpret cynicism as facilitating individual forms of resistance that are ineffective or even counter-productive (e.g. Kunda, 1991). Fleming and Spicer (2003: 161) note the post-structural tendency to stress the capacity of established institutions to accommodate resistance and the ways by which such resistance may ironically support normative principles:

> The general idea is that modernity systemically relies upon a degree of channelled criticism in order to avert stagnation. Middle-class radicalism, for example, is often absorbed by the state and corporate apparatuses so that an element of vitality is maintained without seriously threatening the foundations of these institutions. In the UK Paul Willis's Learning to Labour (1977) explored a similar theme by showing how the astute criticisms of capitalism expressed by working-class 'lads' created a set of low expectations that were ultimately self-fulfilling and thus slotted them into an oppressive class structure.

However within a corporate setting cynicism may offer some employees a form of 'dis-identification' through which they are able to detach themselves emotionally from an otherwise imposed corporate identity 'from above'; one which demands loyalty, conformity, efficiency, drive and resilience. Paradoxically however such 'dis-identification' supports the company ethos because cynical workers still fulfil their delegated roles despite salvaging a sense of independence.

The rise of the modern cynical social worker

The Audit Commission (2002) identified that the key motives for staff leaving state social work (SSW) in high numbers within the UK included their sense of being 'overwhelmed' by bureaucracy and targets, as well as having to cope with persistent organisational reforms, 'unmanageable workloads' and 'insufficient resources'. Tham's (2006: 1240) survey research with a sample of 309 qualified social workers in Sweden echoed prominent feelings of dissatisfaction and scepticism. Indeed almost half of the practitioners interviewed (48%) wanted to leave social work within two years of qualification. The author prioritised the 'human resource orientation' of the organisation as the key factor encouraging social workers to complain and/or exit. This included factors such as the extent to which 'personnel are rewarded for a job well done, feel well taken care of and where management is interested in their health and well being'. Thus, discontent or exit were fuelled by the poor relationships held between employees and their manager/employing organisation rather than some other factors highlighted by Jones (2001) such as the loss of social democratic ideals which previously included the provision of adequate support services to 'service users'. Similarly Pithouse (1987) and Harris (1998) emphasise good collegiate relations, support and discretion as priorities for staff satisfaction.

The corrosive impact of neo-liberal reform, globalisation and the advent of 'new managerialism', care management and personalisation have nevertheless tended to dominate attempts to explain the rise of the dissatisfied and alienated social worker (e.g. Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). Whilst the impact of such structural and wider political factors has undoubtedly been significant in encouraging employee dissatisfaction or cynicism, such policy related reforms have nevertheless varied according to national and local interpretations (Harris, 2005). McLaughlin (2008: 140) adds an alternative explanation. The author proposes that in parallel with supply-led policy reforms wider risk-management techniques and discourses have encouraged a 'degraded view of the human subject [to become] prevalent'. Here 'micro-political' narratives of risk and abuse permeate social work and other 'therapeutic' professions based within education and health care sectors, such as counselling, applied psychology and psychiatry. Subsequently the 'subjective agency' of the service user, patient or practitioner are presented as either at risk from, or a risk to, themselves, other service users, colleagues, or more generally wider society. Suspicion or fear of 'the other' permeate our consciousness as we are presented (such as through medical discourses or the media) as being always vulnerable to harassment, bullying, discrimination, sexual abuse, addiction, physical violence, and so forth, from people around us. This pathological micro-culture generates exaggerated 'risks' whilst persuading us to question ourselves and and treat others with deep suspicion, consequentially increasing our dependence upon seemingly 'therapeutic' health and social care professionals. Conveniently such discursive processes also draw attention away from the profound impacts of structural disadvantage, economic mismanagement, poverty and, more particularly, the incompetence of governments or ruling elites. Pessimism and cynicism, rather than trust or empathy, are promoted within discursive institutions, to which social workers are both perpetrators and victims.

Methodology

This research draws from interviews with 14 social work practitioners completed between January and March 2009. Each qualified practitioner had five years or more experience in either the adult or child-care statutory social work sectors. Part of the research aimed to explore 'emotional practices' within social work or the ways by which emotions impact upon and influence applied routines or attitudes within a stressful work arena such as within statutory social work. Data was collected through a combination of semi-structured and unstructured interviews. A convenience sample that comprised statutory social workers developed and grew over the period. The majority of interviews were completed in London although four took place within an inner city within North West England. Interviews lasted on average from between one to two hours.

The inductive methodology was influenced by two interrelated strands that included the use of:

> i. *Case study research*: Which seeks to 'approach a real-life phenomenon from the inside, using a range of methods… [and] to examine the phenomenon in depth in order to analyse thoroughly detail that might be lost in any other type of research such as a larger survey' (Humphries, 2008: 87).

ii. *Ethnomethodology*: In which the researcher asks questions regarding 'how social reality is constructed and/or negotiated through everyday interaction and talk' (Marvasti, 2004: 75).

Transcripts from interviews were read several times and themes were identified and coded to exemplify specific emotional practices. Individual case studies and embedded themes were then utilised to determine the ways or strategies by which practitioners respond to, construct, negotiate and order their (professional) roles and relations. Subsequently, quotes from each practitioner that best captured their response to themes addressed were isolated and are presented for analytical purposes.

Three cases are presented which reflect examples of how different practitioners respond to, or utilise, their attitudes or emotions; in particular, cynicism or a sense of 'hopelessness, disappointment and disillusion [or] suspicion' (Dhar, 2009: 152) regarding roles, responsibilities or relations with others. It is recognised that because of the limited size of the sample these results may not be in anyway representative of wider practice and beliefs The case examples presented were carefully selected as they reflect the most common responses discovered among the small sample. They are also presented as *examples* of the many different ways by which cynicism can express itself within a social work setting. Indeed the cases were representative of many of those interviewed and it is assumed that a larger sample may have found a further array of emotional responses within inevitably disparate fields of social work practice. The study conforms to internationally accepted ethical guidelines and participants names have been changed accordingly to encourage anonymity. Participants gave verbal consent prior to each interview, were informed that the contents of interviews may be submitted for publication and were assured that they would not be personally identified.

Findings: case examples

i.   The organisational survivor

Ruth had worked as a qualified social worker for over 14 years and had accrued extensive experience of supporting children with a physical disability. She found her job "very difficult at times" but also "fulfilling and rewarding". Ruth stressed the numerous reforms that had occurred within SSW since she began her career, many of which undermined her capacity to support vulnerable children. As well as the increased regulation, responsibilities and workloads - and the pressures generated by seemingly "pointless targets" - there was also a lack of available time to spend with service users or carers; the implications of which were "against the best interests of the child".

Like so many previous studies exploring practitioner views of social care reforms in recent years (e.g. Postle, 2001), Ruth expressed doubt and scepticism about the implications of subsequent reforms of policy and legislation:

> Most of [my colleagues] are deeply suspicious of new policy agendas because they have learnt from experience…. During the early community care reforms some of us were taken in by the claims made about 'choice' and 'empowerment'. But very quickly we all learnt that this rhetoric translated into

a lack of money made available or services being taken off people…It's difficult to believe anything again once things like that happen.

References to rhetoric and in particular the gaps that prevailed between altruistic claims and the day to day experiences of practitioners were regularly articulated by a majority (n=10) of the sample. Such rhetoric was prominently linked to government policy or legal statutes and how this differed from the realities of limited resources, intense bureaucracy, and so forth. Yet the use of rhetoric was also tied to exaggerated professional claims made within social care, such as by professional bodies or regulators including the British Association of Social Work or the General Social Care Council. Three practitioners however also complained about their initial academic training as advocating practices or presenting theories that were "out of touch with the real world [of social work and social care]" or of "grossly exaggerating what we can do". Such references related to initiatives or 'models of practice' such as Anti-Oppressive Practice or the Codes of Ethics for Social Work (NASW, 1999).

Potter (1996) distinguishes between two types of rhetoric: that which is 'reifying', or presents an abstraction as if it were material or real, and that which is 'ironizing', which conversely seeks to reveal 'facts' as a social construction. In the quote above from Ruth 'choice' or 'empowerment' are ironized by the cynical practitioner as reifying social constructs that ultimately seek to serve ulterior motives. Such an intended reification process of presenting empowerment or choice as dispersed within policy initiatives are also similar to Althusser's (2003) notion of ideology; by which a person is held within an imaginary relationship to the means of production. These ideas also fit with Barthes (1970) understanding of cultural and political 'myths' reinterpreted and presented as 'common sense' and which are necessary to maintain power and economic disparities within society.

Some studies have analysed the use of ideology and rhetoric within social work. For example, in a stark account Wrennall (2010) has recently drawn from Foucault to propose that a 'Child Protection discourse' continues to be used internationally to promote ulterior government, business and professional agendas. Here seemingly altruistic claims to protect vulnerable children from neglect or abuse act as a discursive 'Trojan Horse' which conceals a range of political, economic and commercial agendas that involves the extension of Information and Communication Technology to survey, monitor and disarm seemingly deviant populations, extend punitive forms of governance and professional powers and also promote business interests.

From a practitioner perspective however it also quickly emerged that scepticism or cynicism were regularly being used as a shield that protected Ruth (and others) from the trials and tribulations of an unpredictable and demanding role. This strategy is what Collinson (1994) has identified as 'resistance through distance' in which an employee is able to detach themselves symbolically (rather than physically) from wider organisational objectives or principles. As Ruth suggests:

> Questioning things helps me to remain sane and has probably kept me in this job over the years… Some of the younger staff don't really have the experience to recognise the lies that we have been told over the years.

Contrary to some of the assumptions made or priorities advocated within the 'radical social work' literature (e.g. Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004), the key motive for Ruth was not a personal desire to confront management or undermine a wider capitalist system. Instead the principle driver was to *cope* and *survive* within a stressful and emotionally demanding work setting. Recounting the limitations of previous policy initiatives again offered a psychological 'layer of support' against possible future government initiatives as encroachments against personal principles, or an identity continually under siege in a morally challenging, if not dystopian, setting. As Casey (1995) suggests, cynicism can protect 'against both commitment to the company… and its further encroachment into the private realm of (relative) individual choice and apparent self-determination' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 160).

Because Ruth's cynicism was predominately targeted and directed away from service users and colleagues - and instead towards agents, institutions or initiatives that were 'far removed' - suggests at first that this form of cynicism can be viewed as positive. That is it is not targeted against 'human nature' as such but is instead aimed at what are perceived to be 'unethical practices' on behalf of, or embodied within, the wider organisation (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 464-465). Despite this, another interpretation of these findings might suggest that this type of 'endurance cynicism' does not in itself seek to directly *challenge* 'unethical practices' but instead maintains and reproduces existing (dominant) ideologies (neo-liberal and/or corporate managerial) embroiled within the policies, procedures and rituals that the cynic is paradoxically keen to distance themselves from. This stance echoes du Gay and Salaman (1992: 630) in their critique of a seemingly all embracing 'enterprise discourse' that accuses public sector bureaucracies of quashing the vitality and empowerment seemingly evident within private sector corporations and initiatives:

> Certainly the discourse of enterprise appears to have no serious rivals today… even if people do not take enterprise seriously, even if they keep a certain cynical distance from its claims, they are still reproducing it through their involvement in the everyday practices within which enterprise is inscribed.

In this context cynicism may again help to stabilise the threatened identity of the disenfranchised employee and encourage her to comply with at times questionable practices. Therefore although perhaps unpopular with management, colleagues or even service users as apparent 'normative aberration', it is still likely to provide support in maintaining the survival of an increasingly fragile organisation. Also within direct and at times visceral emotional and moral work such as social work, cynicism may be more necessary for survival to employees than in other employment processes where longer term and engaged direct human contact is less prominent.

ii.   The disenfranchised sceptic

Terry qualified as a social worker 16 years earlier and worked for many years within 'child protection' services before moving two years ago to a multi-disciplinary centre specialising in support for older people. Terry stressed his economic and financial motives for remaining within SSW. Although initially keen to engage with the social work role this optimism had eventually evaporated (as with many others in the sample) during the early stages of his career. In this instance initial optimism had been replaced by a combination of pragmatism, pessimism and, eventually, scepticism

and cynicism. Indeed when reflecting upon his motivation to fulfil his role Terry was open about his general sense of apathy:

> My commitment is minimal because this is *just a job*. [Service users] have a right to an assessment and may benefit from a referral or some advice… Generally we don't have the resources to provide anything else unless someone's in dire straits, at great risk: it has to be an emergency really…the difference [in adult services] is that it's not a "police" role as before [in child protection] where the chief activities are more surveillance, warnings and removal [of a child].

As with others interviewed, priority was again given to fulfilling numerous administrative tasks, the following of procedure and engaging with "investigations" into suspected neglect or abuse. For Terry at least this privileging of bureaucratic responsibilities had subsequently led to him recognising social work as a ritualistic, almost mechanical, labour process, one with no real purpose other than providing for basic economic or social needs:

> I don't really care that much about providing a service as such: the key is to do the paperwork and make sure that your case files are updated on screen…. This job pays my bills more than anything - I just live for the evenings and the weekends.

Such apathy would seem to echo Beynon's (1973: 118) ethnographic research with Ford factory workers. As he concluded: '[The men] feel no moral involvement with the firm or any identification with the job. No one I talked to thought that he'd feel too bad about leaving Ford's for a 'similar job in the area''. However studies in service sector industries where contact with the public is regular, such as retailing, leisure and call centres, suggest that when placed under pressure, employee cynicism can be aimed at customers as much as management or the firm. There is also inevitable tension with immediate colleagues (e.g. Van Maanen, 1991; Taylor and Bain, 2003). McLaren and Leonard (1993) however warn of the prevalence and dangers of pessimism and 'fatalism' among practicing social workers, emotions that may seriously hinder their role and work with vulnerable children or adults.

Baines (2007) however draws from interviews with social workers in Canada and Australia to argue that many practitioners (in non-profit or voluntary sectors) do not necessarily engage with emotions in the way that many other service sector employees may. In contrast to Hochschild's (1983) exploration of emotional *stamina* – by which workers such as flight attendants use 'feigned' emotions to control and speed up their 'service interactions' – many of the social workers interviewed by Baines instead used 'natural' care related emotions such as empathy or altruism in order to add meaning to their role and life. Despite this Baines recognises that there are forces which seek to undermine this traditional emotional bond: such the prominence of business style managerialism that seeks to 'tightly quantify and standardise emotion management'. It is also possible that due to their dual care and control roles with service users, the social worker will move or stand between the two extreme examples of emotional stamina offered by Hochschild: that of the flight attendant (presenting empathy, happiness, 'pleasant talk', etc) and the debt collector (distance, distrust, hostility, cynicism). However, as Terry suggested, with ever more

risk management and crisis centred social work prevalent, social workers appear instead to be pushed towards, or perhaps even inevitably embrace, the detachment and cynicism of the debt collector:

> I don't have a lot of sympathy with [service users] anyhow…Like a lot of people I started out with good intentions but I have had so much abuse in the past [from service users]….Many are simply unable to find their own way regardless of the effort or advice you give… You won't last long here if you walk around feeling empathy and love for every 'client'!

Jones (2001) also notes that many social workers are now forced to carefully distance themselves from service users in the hope that they will not unfairly raise expectations for receiving support (that is typically no longer available). This contrasts with his earlier experiences as a practitioner in child-care whereby palliative support, however limited, was more readily available to families, parents and their children (Jones, 1983: 53). There is also the 'class specific' nature of a SSW role that deals almost exclusively with the working class poor, which contrasts with other core components of the welfare state such as health or education that serve a wider demographic. This source of tension or conflict, increasingly more akin to a police role or that of a social security clerk, is again likely to further fuel hostility from users and can quickly become a breeding ground for mutual distrust and cynicism (Otway, 1996).

Pierre Bourdieu (1986; 1998) especially has drawn attention to the fact that class is traditionally part of a relational struggle for scare economic and social resources; yet it is also founded upon the enforcement of distinct normative cultural and moral values, such as those imposed, often symbolically or with little recognition, by professional groups upon lower working class members. Again such implicit or more salient roles and norms – not unusually embedded within the social worker 'habitus' - can provoke and help to maintain a series of cyclical cynical relationships with hostile clients and their family or friends who receive little that is positive. As Terry acknowledged, there is generally little on offer to clients from social services; 'at best an assessment or some care with charges if you are lucky'.

Pithouse's (1987: 92) year long ethnographic research completed in two Social Service Departments in South Wales again suggests that the 'debt collector identity' has been evident within 'child protection' social work for sometime. For many of the social workers that he encountered or interviewed, 'the abstract meaning of the client as worthy participant in the welfare endeavor [was] matched by practitioner folk-lore of the client as venal and unappreciative and in need of careful management'. This type of punitive or 'quasi-police' role is not unlikely to fuel negative cynicism whilst also promoting a pessimistic interpretation of 'human nature' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003: 464-465).

iii. The altruist

Jane qualified as a social worker eight years earlier and had since worked with adults with a physical disability within a multi-disciplinary setting. Although acknowledging problems relating to her role throughout Jane enjoyed her job, especially the "brief but rewarding 'client-centred' work'". When concerns were expressed these tended to relate to wider policy initiatives, legal statutes or were specifically located at the level

of the statutory organisation which employed Jane. For example, Jane argued that there was inadequate support available for vulnerable adults with a disability:

> There's very little available now. It just seems so unfair and sometimes cruel… Everything is so strictly monitored and assessed, so many benefits or services have been taken away or are due to be scrapped; we are all drowning in unnecessary paperwork…you have to put so many weeks of work in just to trigger a small service now. But one or two hours of domiciliary care [in the home] or half a day spent at the local college can make a massive difference to someone's life: it can also keep them alive in some instances.

Much of Jane's concern related to policy initiatives that seemingly failed to prioritise community-based social care:

> Priority is always given to health care, medication or whatever short-term or cheaper solution is available…in the past we have tended to make do with whatever is left over [from central government] but now even that is being taken away…There's a rumour going round that they are talking the Independent Living Fund [central government disability benefit] away, that would be a disaster because almost half my cases are totally dependant upon that money.

Much of Jane's stance appears to contradict some critical responses to professional identity. For example, although Davies (2003: 116) argues that professional identities will tend to be 'flexible, complex and socially constructed', an assumption is also made that they are traditionally been built upon a 'binary reasoning process' that pits the privileged expert against the 'devalued other'. Jane's cynicism however did not adhere to such 'traditional' professional assumptions, and indeed appeared to counter any such implicit arrogance. There was again a targeting of *positive* cynicism aimed at a wider structural or meso organisational-level, specifically relating to "unethical practices", rather than at the immediate micro-level of the service user. Symon (2005: 1657) looked at [anonymous] UK public sector professionals and presents post-structural accounts that highlight managerial strategies to maintain or enforce 'identity regulation'; a process which can create resistance through cynicism for some employees who fail to adhere to established discourses (e.g. professional norms, beliefs, practices). Symon proposes that identity construction is instead more ambivalent and can be created or contested *between* employees and their supervisors. Subsequently an identity may adapt such as through talk and the moulding of distinct or opposing rhetorical strategies. For employees identity construction is an ongoing and delicate process, 'a political resource to legitimate particular arguments and counter others'. For the seemingly subversive employee, '[rhetorical] counter-arguments may be about arguing over interpretations of particular discourses, seeking to commandeer the same discursive space, rather than being relegated to an 'otherness''.

Thomas and Davies (2005) and Aronson and Smith (2011) each interviewed social work managers in Wales and Canada and discovered that scepticism and resistance were as apparent among senior staff as among front-line employees. In particular, the questioning of the prominence of market-led discourses and policies were remarkably similar in both countries. In South Wales Thomas and Davies (2005: 724) highlight

the 'varied ways [by which] different individuals construct their identities in reflecting, resisting and reinscribing the normalising discourses of new public management'. In Canada, Aronson and Smith (2011: 432) note the delicate 'interplay of oppositional behaviour' and conformity which takes place, and that their participants were 'intensely aware of the dangers of losing themselves and their oppositional capacity amid these multiple and conflicting performances'. Rather than the binary simplicities often adhered to within some of the new managerial literature, there is instead a much more nuanced and multi-dynamic series of power relations and counter beliefs at play. This process was most apparent for Jane during supervision with her line manager:

> We disagree on some stuff but more often we are singing from the same song sheet. Nobody here enjoys cutting services or benefits for people in desperate need, Lisa [line manager] is very principled and has lots of person experiences around disability too.

From cynicism felt towards policy makers or wider organisational agendas also emerged acts of rule bending or other forms of deviance. Such acts included exaggerating service user or carer needs on official forms (to increase possible support) or in supervision, ignoring procedure or policy such as by fulfilling a now seemingly defunct service 'provider' role (e,g. by offering counselling or advocacy or direct physical support to users) or on occasion at least, encouraging service users to claim benefits or access support services that they were not officially entitled to. Among others Hutchinson (1990) again prioritised altruistic drivers when discussing 'responsible subversion' and rule-bending amongst nurses.

What distinguishes social work, however, from many other non-welfare organisations remain the legal and professional powers that practitioners hold, alongside their more regular contact with service users, carers or patients. Although rarely collective this systematic 'idiosyncratic spirit' seems more purposeful that the fragmented and less purposive anti-managerial 'tomfoolery' that springs from cynicism within more regulated and enclosed commercial settings such as the call centre (Taylor and Bain, 2003: 1494-1495). In such context *positive* cynicism within social work remains not simply deviant within an emotional or identity-related perspective, but also provides the foundation upon which recalcitrance emerges within a counter-hegemonic context. In particular, such strategies may seek to challenge, disrupt or possibly rupture normative practices and expectations, and stand upon personal altruistic ethics that seek to offer purpose to a role largely under siege.

Conclusions

The findings from this study support the claim that the rise in cynicism among social workers reflects extensive changes in the organisation and delivery of social work services. Since a majority of reforms have increased employee responsibilities, whilst also altering and fragmenting their role, this has led to commonplace emotional responses that include anxiety, melancholy, scepticism and cynicism. Nevertheless this research suggests that other salient influences have helped to increase practitioner uncertainty and distrust. For example, McLaughlin (2008) has drawn attention to the rise of a 'risk-averse' discourse – in which a professional culture of risk containment generate concomitant fear or distrust among colleagues and others involved in social

work processes. In addition other influences, such as the prevalence of 'reifying' rhetoric which present exaggerated or distorted claims about choice, participation or as 'empowering' users can again fuel a sense of incredulity and cynicism to prosper, as the following employee reflects:

> It just seems we are always being lied to, and from a user perspective we [front-line practitioners] are seen as part of the problem. It was bad enough having to pick up the pieces from the mess caused by the care management reforms; now we're having to also deal with all the problems caused by trying to get 'personal budgets' off the ground.

Nevertheless this research also indicates that such ideological rhetoric is regularly contested and challenged by many practitioners 'at the coalface'. In relation, post-structural claims that employee 'identity management' is secured by management through discursive strategies that proliferate within rhetoric, training, supervision, responsibilities, task bombardment, and so on, is overstated. Whether through counter-hegemonic or deviant attitudes, day to day talk, beliefs or recalcitrant practices, dominant ideologies and seemingly omnipresent rhetoric is challenged; not least when practitioners vividly witness and emotionally engage with the gaps that appear between organisational, managerial, government, professional or academic claims and the more concrete or harsh micro-realities of organisational life at 'street level'.

Although other research suggests that cynicism and 'resistance' persist alongside one another in many settings (Collinson, 1994; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Dhar, 2009), this study suggests that emotional resistance within social work may carry greater impact. As well as closer contact between social worker and users or carers there are also the legal powers that practitioners carry in their albeit increasingly standardised, yet still largely unpredictable and precarious, roles. For example, the potential for altruistic cynicism to both emerge and find a positive means of expression is likely to be less pronounced in more confined and easy to regulate arenas of employment, such as the call centre (e.g. Taylor and Bain, 2003), or indeed many other commercial or public sector settings. Most social workers still perform a high number of their key roles away from the office base in a variety of economically deprived or excluded community and residential settings; and this inevitably increases the opportunities for recalcitrant emotions, values or practices to emerge or prosper.

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