This is a repository copy of *Recalcitrance, compliance and the presentation of self: Exploring the concept of organisational misbehaviour in an English local authority child protection service* .

Article:

Recalcitrance, compliance and the presentation of self: Exploring the concept of organisational misbehaviour in an English local authority child protection service.

Abstract

This article examines how social workers reinterpreted certain legal requirements to meet their organisation's performance targets. Using an ethnographic approach, I combine organisational misbehaviour theory and Goffmanesque conceptions of dramaturgy to explore the regional activity of one team in a statutory agency. I argue that singly neither misbehaviour theory nor dramaturgical performances account for our understanding of why workers respond differently to organisational changes in a neo-liberalist environment. This study differs from current literature by shifting emphasis away from workers either resisting or conforming with organisational directives on to the ways in which individuals and collectives devise methods which instead give the appearance of co-operation. I demonstrate how workers disguised their resistance in an attempt to achieve potentially unachievable objectives and in turn avoid disciplinary action. I conclude by suggesting that applying Goffman to studies of organisation can advance scholars' understanding of how certain individuals respond to change and might come to be defined as loyal and compliant. This approach can also encourage discussions relating to the concept of recalcitrance and whether it is developed, and enforced, by those in powerful positions on the basis of their own desire to be well regarded by others.

Key words: Goffman; organisational misbehaviour; recalcitrance; compliance; ethnography; social work;

1. Introduction

Studying organisational misbehaviour is a feature in organisations' literature which has grown in popularity in recent years. However, in studies of social work it is a relatively unidentified and unexplored form of resistance (Carey and Foster, 2011; Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, Pithouse, 2010). Although human relations scholars widely recognise that misbehaviour is endemic in organisations, in social work it is sometimes not always seen for what it is. This may be because revealing the extent of misbehaviour is not an easy task to undertake. It involves an exercise of detection, identification and making particular definitions of what the behaviour is (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). One scholar who dedicated his attention to exploring the (mis)behaviour of people was Erving Goffman (1959-1982). In his seminal study, The Presentation of Self (1959), Goffman's attention was drawn particularly towards the performances that individuals 'put on' in social situations which were supported in 'the context of a given status hierarchy' (Lemert and Branaman, 1997: xlvi). As a sociologist Goffman was inherently interested in how the self, as a social product, depended on validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the norms of a stratified society (Manning, 2002).

Goffman (1959) developed the theory of impression management whilst carrying out anthropological fieldwork in the Shetland Isles. He found that communication between individuals took the form of the linguistic (verbal) and non-linguistic (body language). These gestures were employed between individuals when in interaction with others. By observing the local crofter culture closely, Goffman discovered that individuals who over-communicated gestures were trying to reinforce their desired self, whilst those who under-communicated gestures were detracting from their desired self (Lewin and Reeves, 2011). Impressions of the self were therefore managed actively by individuals during their social

interactions, a process which Goffman termed 'impression management', and in order to be seen as credible they relied on the intimate cooperation of more than one participant.

The presentations that individuals performed were undertaken in two distinct areas: the front region and the back region (Goffman, 1959). In the front region, Goffman observed performances as more formal, restrained in nature. Whereas in the back region, performances were more relaxed and informal and thus allowed the individual to step out of their front region character. However, Goffman also felt that individuals used the back stage to prepare for front stage performances. Each region therefore has different rules of behaviour, the back region is where the show is prepared and rehearsed; the front region is where the performance is presented to another audience (Joseph, 1990).

Goffman's contributions to organisational theory have been hailed 'substantial, significant and stylish' (Clegg, Courpasson and Phillips, 2006: 144) and his recent return to the disciplinary space of organisational theory has provided researchers with the tools to explore a variety of scenes relating to misbehaviour within the occupational community (McCormick, 2007). Goffman's framework has also been applied widely across healthcare research such as medicine (Lewin and Reeves, 2011), nursing (Melia, 1987) and oncology (Ellingson, 2005). However, although often loosely referred to, Goffman's frameworks for conceptual analysis in studies of social work are less well incorporated (Hall, Slembrouck, Haigh and Lee, 2010). The purpose of this article, therefore, is to demonstrate how a Goffmanesque perspective of organisational misbehaviour can provide an interdisciplinary understanding of how broader social and institutional orders can affect individuals in the children's social work setting.

By combining Goffman with misbehaviour theory, I present a symbolic interactionist account which theorises why different members of a social work agency dealt with managerialist directives in a particular way. I argue that organisational misbehaviour differs

in meaning according to the position, location and perspective of the actor. Organisations are made up of individuals who negotiate issues that they encounter in different ways depending on the appearance they want to give. Goffman (1959) recognised that impressions tend to be treated as claims or promises which have a moral character because they involve a multitude of standards pertaining to politeness, decorum and exploitation. To understand the crux of everyday social interactions we need to explore the 'moral lines of discrimination' that blur what is seen, or is purposefully overlooked (Goffman, 1959: 242).

These moral lines of discrimination were what drew my attention to the misbehaviour I observed in the Child and Family Agency (CFA), the organisational setting of this study which was situated in England. The term "just nod and smile" became a popular colloquial term when senior management announced that the service was soon to expect an Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education) inspection. This announcement came shortly after they had revealed that redundancies were also going to take place due to a sudden government reduction in resources.

As senior managers became concerned that team performances were not going to meet the standards expected to achieve a 'good' or higher rating team managers started to feel that they needed to impress their seniors by reaching certain performance targets if they were to avoid involuntary redundancy. What followed was a general belief that as long as targets were achieved the methods chosen to achieve them were not of importance. This in turn conjured a growing belief amongst social workers that they should comply with top down directives if they were to receive promotion or, more conversely, avoid punishment. Yet, in busy teams, when the demands to support families are tactically subordinated to pressures which help to reduce 'workflow', identifying and meeting the needs of the child is a task which is often overlooked (Broadhurst, Wastell, White, Hall, Peckover, Thompson, Pithouse and Davey, 2010:16).

2. The neo-liberal context

The context in which local authority, or statutory, social work is now practised has changed considerably from the 1980s through to this present day. Largely influenced by Taylorism, many statutory social work management practices have aligned with the ideology that care work is best performed if the productivity of practitioners is closely examined (Bissell, 2012). This is because managerial practices have developed over time to reduce local government spending and improve service delivery (Jones, 2015). Both Schofield (2001) and Briscoe (2007) have contended that this bureaucratic approach has provided social workers with professional autonomy and shielded them from political fads. Yet critics of this process have argued that whilst this approach can free people from arbitrary rule, it can also interlock them into an official hierarchy which can be deskilling and authoritarian (Clegg et al. 2006).

The dominant discourse of care in the community has become redundant as social workers now have to work in accordance with managerialist agendas which focus heavily on paperwork and performance targets (Broadhurst et al. 2010; Gibson, 2016; Wastell et al. 2010; White et al. 2008). The impact of bureaucracy has led to a number of intra-agency conflicts as social workers often feel that their professional values have been sacrificed for the benefit of protocols and standardised services (Author, 2017; Bissell, 2012). Arguably, instead of social workers delivering quality care for those in need, workers frequently find they are enacting a cutbacks policy agenda and in effect, injecting neo-liberalism into the lives of service users and communities (Baines and van de Broek, 2016).

In recent decades, neo-liberal ideology has been pursued by dominant political parties within Britain and the implications of this capitalist rationality for social work has been profound (Ferguson, 2004). Furthermore, as required by the Education and Inspections Act (2006), the role of Ofsted has also changed. Ofsted has become responsible for not only inspecting the performances of schools but also those of statutory agencies delivering social

work. Although Ofsted is only one part of the neoliberal system, it plays an important part as its findings are reported to Parliament. The outcomes can have serious consequences for local authorities as those which do not perform well have often been criticised for poor managerial leadership, face the prospect of becoming a trust and losing control of their children's services (Jones, 2015).

Although reforms to social work have always been an integral part of its history, in recent years this ever increasing top-down direction and regulation has contributed to an intensification of organisational restructure and an over standardised response to the varied needs of children (Jones, 2015; Munro, 2011). Indeed, a recent briefing entitled, "Do it for the child and not for Ofsted" which is critical of social workers resentment towards completing paperwork, demonstrates how Ofsted inspectors believe social workers have lost sight of the child when in the midst of completing standardized assessments (Schooling, 2017). This is the context in which the CFA department was situated at the time this study took place. All of the factors outlined above had a noticeable impact on the department as it became evident that in attempting to navigate external pressures, internal discursive confusion amongst frontline workers and managers ensued. This was even more pronounced when the agency heard it was due an Ofsted inspection as managerial attention became excessively focused on the process rather than the practice of social work.

3. Understanding organisational misbehaviour

It is widely accepted that organisational misbehaviour is constructed within discursive contexts but it is also recognised that individuals are able to negotiate and shape these contexts in different ways (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Broadhurst et al. 2010; Carey and Foster, 2011). In fact, Lipsky (1980: xii) argued that policy on the ground rarely bears any resemblance to the formal public policy enacted, mainly because 'street level bureaucrats' will interpret it to establish routines and strategies that help them cope with uncertainty and

work pressures. Howe (2009), however, disputed Lipsky's argument as he felt that social workers' discretion had been curbed as the power they once had shifted into alignment with the framework of the legal and managerial authority that now governed their practice.

In a neo-liberal context where organisations require social workers to comply with their expectations and standards, it is hardly surprising that practitioners feel they have to do what is necessary to align with their institution's directives if they are to avoid managerial scrutiny. Sociological literature is rich in examples of how the ability to perform, or comply, effectively in some capacity is apparent in settings or situations where competence is a desirable outcome (McLuhan, Pawluch, Shaffir, Hass, 2014). Edgerton's (1967) concept of the "cloak of competence", or the presentation of a competent self, has been an enduring theme in studies of professional or occupational socialization that focus on how new recruits acquire the skills, values and attitudes expected of those in the profession (Hughes 1958; Kleinman 1984). However, it has been noted that the cloak of competence has often been translated into the 'cloak of conformity', serving to jeopardise innovation and creative potential of professionals during meetings and at work (Puddephat, Kelly and Adorjan, 2006).

Yet the desire for workers to conform may do more than stifle innovation especially when they find they are persistently scrutinised. For example, in his ethnography of a local authority, Gibson (2016: 125) found that children's social workers who were capable of keeping up with the administrative requirements were seen to be "doing a good job" whereas those who resisted, or could not keep up, were policed through shame and humiliation tactics. This naming and shaming process not only served to defend the institutional expectations but also deterred workers from taking part in any form of deviation.

However, other studies in social work have found that there is a fine line between competence and recalcitrance as workers demonstrated their competence by complying with

organisational directives, whilst simultaneously displaying acts of resistance. Such situations again relate to the administrative expectations of front line workers to meet the demands of the Integrated Children's System (ICS) (see White et al. 2010). However, in these cases, rather than wholly comply or resist, social workers and team managers developed deflection strategies to deter the high number of child protection referrals turning into assessments. Creative techniques such as 'signposting' were employed where referrers were redirected to another service (see Broadhurst et al. 2010) or 'strategic deferment' which involved putting cases on hold while more information was obtained (see Pithouse, Broadhurst, Hall, Peckover, Wastell and White, 2009). These simple methods were designed to create an appearance that the work-force was competent and in control despite the fact that in reality workers were struggling to find the time to deal with their open cases.

So far, the studies which have focused on children's social welfare departments have questioned whether professional discretion, or indeed subversion as a tactical device, is compatible in the relational world of practice as social workers endeavour to appear competent in the neo-liberal context. Yet, in adult's social work, Carey and Foster (2011: 585) interviewed social workers who purposefully used their position to bend 'the rules' to help the service user rather than just meeting the needs of the system. Some even went as far as using a "cloak of incompetence" (see McLuchan et al. 2014) and minimized their displayed level of competence by "whistle blowing" to the local media about planned cuts to support services [seemingly via an anonymous fax], encouraging informal carers to challenge local authority decisions to refuse support services or encouraging service users to exaggerate or provide false information when applying for support services (Carey and Foster, 2011: 588). However, not all participants were inspired by such acts of altruism, as some admitted to using deviant behaviours simply to relieve boredom from overexposure to regulation,

bureaucracy and resentment towards patronising colleagues, managers or higher professionals.

In summary, organisational misbehaviour is not as straight forward as it may initially seem as it presents in different guises depending on where the performer is situated and what kind of performance is desired. Although these performances appear to emerge from the interactions between the organisation as a directive system and the self-organisation of its workers, they are further exacerbated by wider contextual issues which affect the way in which the social worker and the agency functions. In the current social work context, exercising professional discretion appears to be continuously compromised as a result of increased bureaucracy, surveillance and monitoring. Those who comply, or operate inside the constraints of rules, do so to appear competent and to avoid being shamed (Gibson, 2016). However, the other argument, that practitioners are still able to use their own discretion when negotiating and implementing formal policy (Lipsky, 1980) is apparent as we see social workers covertly 'bending the rules' or overtly, 'ignoring the rules' (Carey and Foster, 2011; Broadhurst et al. 2010; Pithouse et al. 2009).

In the next sections, I want to explore how the phrase "just nod and smile" arose within the CFA department and was employed to signify to social workers that they should accept and agree with the organisational directives even if they disagreed. However, although the term was used in a similar manner to that of the "cloak of competence" (see Edgerton, 1967), as it foreground the worker's competence and concealed their incompetence, it was also used to disguise a form of tactical resistance to the agency's standards and expectations.

4. Methods

4.1 Introducing the case and method

This paper is based on data drawn from a yearlong ethnographic study of a safeguarding children and families social work statutory agency. At the time this study began, the

Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, had just been elected to form a coalition government and all local authorities across the country were subsequently faced with having to reduce their spending (Jordan, 2011). The CFA agency dealt with both child in need (low level intervention) and child protection referrals (when a child is at risk of significant harm). All the managers at the CFA, from the Assistant Team Manager tier up through the managerial hierarchy to the Assistant Director, were qualified social workers. The CFA consisted of four safeguarding teams which had in total 36 social workers, ten middle managers (team managers and assistant team managers) and three senior managers (two service unit managers and one assistant director). The West Team consisted of 7 social workers, 2 senior practitioners, 1 Assistant Team Manager and 1 Team Manager. Post qualification experience ranged from 1 to 10 years.

4.2 **Data collection and analysis**

The aim of the larger study was to explore how organisational culture affected the social interactions of workers within a social work department. Although data was collected from all four safeguarding teams, for the purpose of this paper due to limited space I will focus on the findings from one of these teams which I will refer to as the West Team. This particular team was chosen for this paper to explore why individuals from the same team responded differently to the same managerial directive.

A multi-method ethnography was used to analyse the way in which different social workers interacted with the work place discourse at CFA. As in Goffman's work on Presentation of Everyday Self (1959) and Stigma (1963) a variety of documentary sources enabled him to see incongruity in certain situations and as a result, develop insights, metaphors and hypotheses as to why these may have occurred.

The main ethnographic approach used was that of participant observation as this method allowed for the exploration of participants' activities, beliefs, meanings, values and

motivations and in doing so, develop an understanding and interpretation of the members' social world (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Participant observation allows the researcher to focus on the less explicit aspects of organisational life which can often include the kind of phenomenon that is only apparent in the back stage regions of an agency such as jokes, complaints and arguments. The West Team was observed in the CFA for a total period of 630 hours.

In order to be immersed in the field and yet maintain a sense of free thought and movement, I adopted an observation-orientated fieldwork role which enabled me to pay close attention to dialogue in informal and formal meetings. As well as observing interactions between social workers and their managers in the office, my observations also included team meetings, ad hoc meetings and a team building day. During this time I made detailed observational notes and also tried to capture the contextual features of spoken interaction. This enabled me to record 'bodily orientation and tone of voice' which is important when trying to understand behaviours and self-presentational displays (Goffman, 1981: 127).

My observations were supported with additional resources such as semi structured interviews and document analysis (policies and procedures; emails and case notes). I carried out in-depth interviews which lasted from 1 to 2 hours with five social workers on the West Team and one manager. I also interviewed two senior managers who oversaw the work of all the teams within the department. Interviews were developed from my own observations and were focused on understanding the individual's interpretation of events, their sense of self and the team dynamics. All interviews were taped and transcribed.

At the time of this study I worked as an Out of Hours social worker (emergency duty cover during nights and weekends) for the same organisation but in a different building to that of the CFA. My position within the authority proved to be useful because although I was considered an 'insider' to the social work setting and members of the CFA were familiar with

who I was, I was also seen as an 'outsider' because I was not a member of the teams I was observing. I was what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 90) have referred to as a 'marginal native'- where the researcher can gain both 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives of both front and back stage regions of the West Team. However, a limitation of this approach was that I soon realised that the findings were more emotionally active than I had originally anticipated (see Author, 2013). Both Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 90) have warned that the marginal native needs to always retain 'a sense of social and intellectual distance' from the field setting if they are to avoid 'becoming' affected. In order to develop into a 'marginal reflexive ethnographer' I used meetings with my research supervisor as means of gaining the required analytic space.

The field notes, documents (emails and case notes) and interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto NVivo, a software assisted data management and analysis tool. I was particularly interested in how the team of social workers at the CFA interpreted and responded to the senior managerial directive that was perhaps seen as the cause of the conflict. As recommended by Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) a modified grounded theory method was used to analyse the ethnographic data which enabled me to explore particular key incidents and use memos to develop common themes and categories across the data produced from the whole study. Different situations occurred regularly across the department.

In order to deepen my analysis and explore alternative meanings, I coded key incidents as they emerged. This process involved breaking down the data into units, which usually consisted of a few sentences. Code labels were used for field notes, interviews and documents which were developed from reading and re-reading the data. Once initial coding had taken place, this led to the development of broader descriptive terms which were later used to produce themes and categorise the data.

At this stage, key categories were identified and named for example 'resisting', 'complying'. These variants helped shape the preliminary analytic framework but later I returned to the whole dataset and used focused coding. This was in part to be rigorous with the analysis but also to explore why an inconsistency between members of the same team had occurred. Drawing from Katz's (1982) method of analytic induction I compared the differences between the different individual's situations to deepen my analysis. Each shift required a reanalysis and reorganisation of my data.

In the findings part of this paper, I also draw from dramaturgical and misbehaviour theory perspectives to examine the emerging themes and to ensure that the interpretations are clearly grounded in these theoretical perspectives. By moving back and forth between the data, the analysis and the relevant theories I have thus gradually developed an empirical framework for what follows (see Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Ethical approval was granted by University [name]. To conceal and protect the identity of participants, names have been changed.

5. Results

5.1 Changing landscapes

When this study began the agency was experiencing new changes and although social workers were aware there would be "cuts" it was not until they received an email from the Assistant Director that they became fully informed of the extent of these cuts.

> **An email arrived today telling staff that no more children are to come into care because the [local authority] has gone £5 million over budget. It said "if we do not reduce spending we will have to look elsewhere to recoup our losses". This comment seems to have created panic as the rumours suggest that redundancies are on the horizon.**
> **(Field notes, Day 5).**

Although social workers pride themselves in attempting to empower, discuss and resolve issues (Ferguson, 2011), this ideology was not always apparent in the CFA and it was instantly observable that this email had a significant impact on the social work department. It was sent by a senior organisation leader without any prior discussion of this serious issue.

Although the email appeared to have been sent with the aim of highlighting to all staff that the CFA had suddenly accrued a very large debt, it was interpreted by Debbie, the team manager of the West Team, as a "veiled threat" because she feared that all managers' jobs would be at risk if the debt was not reduced. As each team had two managers, a team manager and an assistant team manager, the belief was that it would be easier for managers to be released from their posts than social workers.

It was not long after this email was sent that it was then announced that the organisation was due to expect an Ofsted visit. As the date of the Ofsted inspection drew nearer senior managers informed team managers from each team that they would receive an individual rating which would be awarded following close examination of individual and team performances. Drawing from Goffman, I will explore the crucial and discrepant roles of the performers of the West Team. Goffman (1959) made it clear that when establishing where performances take place, one needs to clarify the reference point of a particular performance and the function that the place happens to serve at that time for a given performance. In the West team therefore, the front region will refer to the heart of the office where senior management would circulate when they visited the team. This front region would become a back region when the audience was not present. It became a place where a tone of informality would prevail.

5.2 N**egotiating new territories**

As managers started to become concerned with how their performance would be measured and interpreted by their audience (senior managers and Ofsted inspectors), a number resorted to using different tactics to ensure that social workers would turn assessments around on time. In the next extract Beth explains one method which was used by her manager:

> **Me: A star chart?**
>
> **Beth: Yes, a star chart was put up last week by Debbie so we can see who is meeting targets on time. Those of us who complete an assessment on time, get a gold star. Those who don't get a red one. If you get one red star then you have a meeting with the**

manager, two red stars then you're sent to [service unit manager] and could face disciplinary procedures.

Me: What?

Beth: Yes, it's bullshit, it's patronising and demoralising. We don't sit on these assessments for fun. I'm way over my recommended allocation already.

(Beth, 8 years qualified)

Debbie, Beth's manager, was a team manager and the mother of a three year old. She told me that her reason for using the 'Star Chart' method was because it worked well with her son. However, it also served another purpose as it enabled Debbie to maintain face in front of senior managers. By showing deference for and affirming their objectives, which specifically required teams to reach performance targets within timescale, Debbie presented her 'self' as competent and turned the office into a field of strategic gamesmanship (see Goffman, 1959). Debbie brought the back stage into the front region by placing the Star Chart in the main office for both her team and the audience. Debbie's Star Chart was seen as a coercive performance tactic by her team, one which named and shamed those social workers who were failing to meet targets whilst praising those who did. This tactic acted as a "cloak of competence" in that it allowed Debbie to still appear competent despite the performances of her 'failing' staff (see Edgerton, 1967).

It also concealed the lack of support Debbie was offering her social workers because rather than trying to reduce her team's caseloads with deflection techniques (see Broadhurst et al. 2010; Pithouse et al. 2009), social workers found their case allocation had increased. Debbie's tactic in turn served to divide her workers as some accepted it and others challenged it. The Star Chart may have highlighted how many social workers were meeting targets within timescale but for Beth it did not take into consideration other impeding factors that were affecting those who were not, such as: time constraints, rising caseloads and other daily unexpected emergencies that practitioners have to deal with.

5.3 Just nod and smile: an individual approach

Beth later told me that she had voiced concerns to Debbie that her focus on reaching targets was being "prioritised over spending quality time with families". However, there were others in the team who rather than challenge the party line developed their own strategies:

> **Kenny: ...at first Tina came here as an agency worker and then I find out she has been made permanent and promoted to senior practitioner without being interviewed which a lot of us are not happy about. When Beth was complaining about it she said "I can't believe they've done that. It was never advertised. She has just literally been offered a senior prac post on a plate". Well I started laughing. I said "You know why they gave her that, don't you? It's 'cos she just nods and smiles".**
> **(Kenny, 10 years qualified)**

It was around this time that the term "nod and smile" became a popular colloquialism within the agency. It referred to the way in which management expected front line staff to toe a particular party line. In this instance, Kenny used the term to describe how a former agency worker, Tina, was promoted to senior practitioner because she did meet performance targets without challenging management directives.

The gold stars on the office wall openly praised Tina for her performance and showed senior managers when they visited the team that it was possible to achieve desired targets despite the struggles other social workers were known to face. The credibility of performances, however, depends on the segregation of social space because although the 'front region' was where the desired performance was provided, in the 'back region' the suppressed facts about Tina were revealed. This knowledge created conflict amongst some of the team.

It was well known within the team that when Tina carried out an assessment she took a support worker with her on the visit. While Tina talked to the family, the support worker would make notes and on return to the office would type up the assessment. Tina would then read the assessment and sign it off. Yet as members of the team often reminded me, the role of the support worker was to implement the plans created by the social worker not to act as a

personal assistant to the social worker. Also, legally, social workers are expected to personally complete assessments so that their own appropriate training and knowledge can be used to analyse the family's situation carefully (Working Together, 2015).

Nonetheless, in the CFA, meeting the requirements of the organisation often came before the needs of the family and Debbie promoted Tina as she could be trusted 'to perform properly' (Goffman, 1959: 95). And by discreetly promoting Tina, Debbie confirmed to Beth and Kenny that it did not matter how you carried out your assessments, because if you did complete assessments within timescale, you would receive praise and recognition. In contrast, Beth and Kenny felt that they were overlooked for promotion, most probably because they were failing to fulfil what was expected of them. Instead of toeing the party line, Beth and Kenny regularly challenged their managers and their organisation's ideology.

The "nod and smile" term gained more levy within the team after Beth was suspended. Beth had accrued 30 days of TOIL (time off in lieu) for all the overtime she had generated in recent months. However, after receiving two red stars, her extra work was not acknowledged. Instead she was told by Debbie that she needed to meet with the Service Unit Manager because there were concerns about her fitness to practise. Beth refused to go to the meeting. She told Debbie that she would be able to catch up on her assessments if her caseload was reduced and she was given the opportunity to complete her assessments. When Debbie did not agree to this proposition, Beth informed Debbie that she was going to use her accrued TOIL to complete her work. She then walked out of the office and went home. Beth was later informed that her actions were considered to be representative of gross misconduct and she was subsequently suspended.

After losing a good colleague, Kenny became disenfranchised with the team's objectives and in a team meeting had a disagreement with the assistant team manager, Mark, about how social work practice should be conducted. It was during this disagreement that

Kenny announced his distaste for both Tina and Debbie's inappropriate practice. This disagreement continued by phone and email after the meeting concluded. Kenny informed me that one evening, Mark emailed him and warned him, "Your cards are marked". This comment annoyed Kenny and so he forwarded it to all of the senior managers and the Assistant Director of the organisation in the hope that they would follow the matter up with Mark and Debbie. However, Kenny did not hear back from anyone. A few weeks later he was suspended from his post for allegedly not following correct procedure when undertaking a section 47 investigation about a child at risk of significant harm (see Children Act 1989).

An overall objective of any team is to appear credible and competent but to maintain that appearance it requires the whole team to over-communicate some of the facts and under-communicate others. These 'facts', or team secrets, are often concealed from the audience as they pertain to the intentions and strategies of a team (Goffman, 1959: 141). Yet the impression that Debbie wanted to give could only be deemed credible if all members concealed the secrets of the team. When Kenny revealed what was happening back stage to senior managers he broke the team loyalty rules and was seen as a 'traitor' or 'turncoat' (Goffman, 1959: 164). It was because of his performance, because he did not "nod and smile", that Kenny believed he had been suspended.

5.4 Just nod and smile: A team approach

The remaining team members had observed the interactions with Beth and Kenny over the previous few weeks. The impression and understanding fostered by Beth and Kenny's performances, and those of other managers, had saturated the back region and positioned the others in a situation which forced them to contemplate their next move. Although they were unhappy with the way in which Beth and Kenny had been treated, they were also fearful that they would be suspended next if they challenged their manager's practice. With Ofsted inspectors' arrival expected at any time soon, the atmosphere in the agency was particularly

anxious as senior managers took a more aggressive approach towards ensuring that social

workers completed their child protection visits on time. In this next extract, Jane, another

senior practitioner from the West Team, explains to me how she and the others devised a plan

together that would ensure they completed visits to the children on their child protection

plans within timescale to avoid receiving their 'summons'.

> **Jane: Our summons is like what we get at the end of each month if our team under performs. We get a list from [name of senior manager] summoning those who haven't completed their CP (child protection) visits within timescale to the office.**
> **Me: No way, that's like you're at school.**
> **Jane: It's worse than that. If you get called in more than once you're out so we've started covering for each other so no one gets called. I download all the CP visits that are outstanding one week before the month's end and then one of us does them all in one day and we cover for that person while they're out.**
> **Me: Have you thought of talking to someone about this?**
> **Jane: We've talked to the union about what's been going on but they are no use, they don't understand what it means. It's just easier to nod and smile.**
> **(Jane, 5 years qualified)**

Statutory provisions dictate that children who are subject to a Child Protection Plan should be

visited at least once every four weeks (Children Act, 1989). This is one of the performance

indicators that Ofsted examines during an inspection and therefore an area that is of concern

for senior management in the local authority. With all social workers struggling to meet this

target, senior managers had started calling in those who did not reach it to discuss reasons

why they had not. This meeting was referred to as "The Summons" and represented the

gravity of the situation because if social workers were called more than once then they were

threatened with suspension for practice issues.

Goffman (1959) has suggested that an important element of team collusion is found in

the system of secret signals through which performers can surreptitiously receive or transmit

pertinent information. These staging cues typically come from, or to, the director of the

performance who in this case was Debbie. The West Team were fully aware that 'aggressive

face-work' was at play as both Beth and Kenny had challenged this protocol and were

suspended (Goffman, 1959: 90). To prevent this from happening to the rest of the team, Jane,

came up with a strategy that would ensure the remaining members of the team could carry out child protection on time.

This form of team collusion meant that although the child was seen by a social worker, it was not always the same social worker who was allocated to the case. Although this should not have been agreed to by senior managers, it was a strategy that no one from that organisational tier had yet, apparently, picked up on. It was nonetheless a method that the team manager Debbie was aware of but which she later informed me she had turned "a blind eye" to because it met "everyone's needs". By this she meant the needs of senior managers and her own performance targets. As a 'go between' Debbie was in the position where she was aware of her team's secrets but because they fostered a good impression front stage, she was willing to overlook them as they produced mutually agreeable outcomes for all involved (Goffman, 1959: 103). Apart from, perhaps, the children who were subject to the child protection plans.

6. **Discussion**

My main objective in this paper has been to illustrate how a Goffmanesque perspective of organisational misbehaviour can provide an interdisciplinary understanding of the way in which broader social and institutional orders can affect individuals. Individually, conceptual driven understandings of organisational misbehaviour and dramaturgy cannot account for why certain behaviours arise in teams or why individuals desire the need to be well regarded. In combination however, with the support of an ethnographic approach, a more comprehensive exploration of organisational dynamics has provided nuanced explanations of why particular social interactions take place in given regions of a social work agency.

This study contributes to the field of social work in many ways. First, despite the theories of Goffman (1959) being written some years ago it is evident that his work is still

valuable and significant when applied to the organisational setting in which social work is situated today. The individuals he spoke of are recognisable in this agency as social workers have demonstrated that they are able to negotiate and shape different contexts through impression management. However, it became apparent that although all team members recognised that meeting the required organisational directives within timescale was impossible, practitioners addressed the issue in different ways.

As a result, binary contrasting roles emerged within Debbie's team which positioned social workers as either resistant or compliant. Those who resisted were seen by management as non-compliant and unmanageable. Yet those who preferred not to overtly challenge organisational directives, used their discretion, either individually or collectively, to re-interpret the rules so that they could achieve targets and impress management. However, this practice was not without consequence. To address the needs of the organisation practitioners, and managers, resorted to a Machaveillian form of identity management to present their selves as competent. Although this approach enabled one to advance her career and others to avoid punishment, their actions had an adverse effect on the families receiving the service.

This point leads to the second contribution of the study which incorporates and extends on the literature of organisations and misbehaviour in social work. In contrast to the findings of Carey and Foster (2011) where social workers used their skills to ignore the rules and help service users, the actions of these practitioners had negative consequences for the families they were working with. The dramaturgical aspect of Goffman's theory demonstrated that regions, and regional behaviour, played crucial parts in the (in)visibility of organisational social work practice. In the front stage, it seemed as if legal framework requirements were being met and children and families were receiving the service they were entitled to. It was only back stage that the truth was known, and practitioners were able to

conceal these activities from view with the use of 'props' and 'illusions' (Goffman, 1959: 114). The two examples provided in this paper demonstrate that in both cases, despite social work targets being reached, families were not receiving the service they deserved and furthermore, they were not even aware of it.

Although Pithouse et al. (2009) and Broadhurst et al. (2010: 365) identified that team managers were 'fudging it' by taking short cuts that would protect their social workers from further burden, in this context we have seen managers depart from working with social workers to only protecting those who will conform with their desired image of competence. However, while presenting a "false front stage" persona appeared important for those who attempted to meet organisational directives (Puddephatt, 2006: 85), adopting this strategy was not only detrimental for those receiving a service but also for the cultivation of congruent culture. Rather than adopting a coactive power approach (see Clegg et al. 2006) and discussing the issues the team faced together, the team divided and a climate of mistrust and suspicion became dominant features of everyday activity (Author, 2017). These findings extend on Gibson's (2016) work by revealing how practitioners sacrificed their values and ethical principles to avoid being named and shamed.

The third contribution contributes to debates on organisational misbehaviour and how the perspective of the actor is affected according to their position and location. Although the discussion so far has been critical of the language used by social workers and its purpose in practice, it has failed to mention how the "cloak of competence" (Edgerton, 1967) can conceal misbehaviour and dupe those who are more focussed on process rather than practice. In this case, Ofsted's impending visit meant that members of management became focused on ensuring statutory duties were completed within timescale rather than the way in which these tasks were carried out.

Situated in a culture controlled by audits and technology, the team manager, Debbie, used her professional discretion to overlook her social workers' misbehaviour so that they could collectively meet statutory obligations and her role within the agency would be secure. The level of competence displayed by Debbie and her team impressed senior managers as well as Ofsted inspectors as the department passed the inspection with a 'good' grade. This narrow view of social work practice cultivated the belief that managerial control over workers leads to good performance outcomes, providing the worker followed superior cues at face value, kept in line and exercised tact (see Thompson, 1977).

Furthermore, these incongruent practices were endorsed by Ofsted inspectors, most likely because they too have adopted and fostered the neo-liberal discourse which focuses heavily on paperwork and performance targets (Broadhurst et al. 2010; Wastell et al. 2010; White et al. 2008). Ofsted's inspection would have falsely reported to Parliament that patent and standardised services could be delivered despite limited resources. Yet the story that was not told, was that these services were not being delivered in accordance with the expectations outlined in certain legal frameworks and procedures. Therefore, the 'moral lines of discrimination' that occurred in the CFA blurred what was known, with what senior managers purposefully overlooked (Goffman, 1959: 242). The dominant discourse of care in the community was contested when practice became heavily focused on appearing competent and meeting performance targets (see White et al. 2008). It was only after the Ofsted results had been published that senior managers addressed the concerns raised in Kenny's email. Shortly after inspectors left, Debbie announced to the team she had been offered voluntarily redundancy and would be leaving with immediate effect. Beth and Kenny's suspensions were revoked but although both were asked to return to the CFA department neither did. Beth went travelling and Kenny accepted voluntary redundancy and left.

7. **Conclusion**

It has been widely acknowledged that the neo-liberalist context within which social work is situated has serious ramifications for organisational culture, practice and services (Ferguson 2004; Jones, 2015). This study has contributed a different angle to the debate by moving from the macro to the micro- level, and using Goffman's (1959) dramaturgy theory to explore how social workers inside a local authority service are affected by and respond to the demands of a performance culture. By analysing the data through a dramaturgical lens a more intimate insight of intra-agency performativity has emerged and in turn, revealed how front and back stages were used by management to present idealized lines and exert expressive control.

These messages have important implications for social work organisations because they highlight how certain external factors influence intra-agency practice and subsequently contribute to the belief that deviant behaviours need to be resorted to if social workers are to survive in the workplace. This important distinction demonstrates that encouraging workers to toe a particular party line may actually have little benefit in improving productivity or quality of service but it will have a detrimental effect on the service received by children and their families. This particular insight must be brought back to centre stage especially when considering Ofsted publications. Schooling (2017) recently argued that social workers, and organisations, need to re-focus on the needs of the child and not the needs of Ofsted. But as the findings in this study demonstrate, social workers were not resentful of the paperwork, they were concerned about what would happen to them if they were not able to complete the paperwork within timescale. If social work is to re-focus on the needs of the child then serious consideration needs to be given to the impact a performance culture has on practice.

This raises a further implication for social work, especially with regards to language. Practice is mediated by language and interaction which in turn, produces inferences about

24

what to do, to what extent and what should happen next (Hall et al. 2010). The use of a colloquial term such as "just nod and smile" was a powerful signifier as it demonstrated how certain inconspicuous sayings can socialize workers into adopting particular stances within a team: do as you are told or face the consequences. Part of the problem, in this instance, was that social workers felt they inhabited subordinate positions within the organizational hierarchy. Rather than provide a safe space for practitioners to reflect on dilemmas and concerns, managers implemented aggressive performance strategies. These not only altered team relationships but prevented social workers and managers from gaining insights into the ways in which practice was being carried out. With social workers trying to impress their seniors and their seniors seeking to impress Ofsted inspectors, few paused to consider how the term "just nod and smile" had inadvertently affected the lives of children and their families.

References

Ackroyd, S., & Thompson, P. (1999). Organizational misbehaviour. London: SAGE.

Baines, D. and van den Broek, D. (2016) Coercive Care: Control and Coercion in the Restructured Care Workplace. British Journal of Social Work 0, 1–18 doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcw013

Bissell, G. (2012) Organisational Behaviour for Social Work. Bristol: Policy Press.

Broadhurst K., Wastell, D.,White, S., Hall, C., Peckover, S., Thompson, K., Pithouse, A. and Davey, D. (2010) Performing 'Initial Assessment': Identifying the Latent Conditions for Error at the Front-Door of Local Authority Children's Services. British Journal of Social Work. 40, 352–370 doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcn162

Briscoe, E. (2007) From iron cage to iron shield? How bureaucracy enables temporal flexibility for professional service workers. Organisation Science. 18 (2), 297- 314.

Carey, M. and Foster, V. (2011) Introducing 'Deviant' Social Work: Contextualising the Limits of Radical Social Work whilst Understanding (Fragmented) Resistance within the Social Work Labour Process. British Journal of Social Work. 41, 576–593 doi:10.1093/bjsw/bcq148

Charmaz, K., & Mitchell, R. G. (2001). Grounded theory in ethnography. In P. Atkinson, A. Coffey, S. Delamont, J. Lofland, & L. Lofland (Eds.), *Handbook of ethnography* (pp. 160–174). London: SAGE.

Clegg, S., Courpasson, D., & Phillips, N. (2006). Power and organizations. London: SAGE.

Department of Health (1989) *Children Act*. London, HMSO.

Department of Education (2006) Education and Inspections Act. London, HMSO.

Edgerton, R. B. (1967). The cloak of competence: Stigma in the lives of the mentally retarded. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ellingson, L. (2005). Communicating in the clinic: Negotiating frontstage and backstage teamwork. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Ferguson, I. (2004) Neo-liberalism, the Third Way and Social Work: The UK Experience. Social Work and Society. 2 (1)

Ferguson, H. (2011) Child Protection Practice. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gibson, M. (2016) Constructing pride, shame, and humiliation as a mechanism of control: A case study of an English local authority child protection service. Children and Youth Services Review. 70, 120-128.

Goffman, E. (1959) The presentation of self in everyday life. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books.

Goffman, E. (1963) Stigma: Notes on the management of a spoiled identity. New York: Doubleday, Anchor Books.

Hall, C., Slembrouck, S., Haigh, E., and Lee, A. (2010) The management of professional roles during boundary work in child welfare. Journal of Social Welfare. 19 (3), 348- 357.

Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). Ethnography: Principles in practice. Second Edition. London: Routledge.

HM Government (2015) Working Together to Safeguard Children. London, HMSO. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/419595/Working_Together_to_Safeguard_Children.pdf

Howe, D. (2009) A Brief Introduction to Social Work Theory, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.

Hughes, E. (1958) Men and their work. Glencoe: Free Press.

Jones, R. (2015) The end game: The marketisation and privatisation of children's social work and child protection. Critical Social Policy. 35 (4), 447-469

Jordan, B. (2011) Making sense of the 'Big Society': Social work and the moral order. Journal of Social Work. 12(6), 630-646.

Joseph, M. (1990) Sociology for Everyone. Second Edition. Cambidge: Polity.

Katz, J. (1983). A theory of qualitative methodology. In R. M. Emerson (Ed.), Contemporary field research: A collection of readings (pp. 127–148). Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Lemert, C. and Branaman, A. (1998) The Goffman Reader. Oxford: Blackwell.

Lewin, S. Reeves, S. (2011) Enacting team and teamwork: Using Goffman's theory of impression management to illuminate interprofessional practice on hospital wards. Social Science and Medicine. 72 (2011), 1595-1602.

Lipsky, M. (1980) Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services, New York, Russell Sage Foundation.

Manning, P. (2002) Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

McCormick, D. W. (2007) Dramaturgical analysis of organizational change and conflict, Journal of Organizational Change Management, 20 (5), 685 - 699

Melia, K. (1987). Learning and working: The occupational socialisation of nurses. London: Tavistock.

McLuhan, A., Pawluch, D., Shaffir, W. and Haas, J. (2014) The Cloak of Incompetence: A Neglected Concept in the Sociology of Everyday Life. American Sociology. 45:361–387 DOI 10.1007/s12108-014-9240-y

Munro, E. (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report. Department of Education: London, HMSO.

Peckover, S., White, S. and Hall, C. (2008) Making and managing Electronic Children: e-assessment in child welfare, Information Communication and Society, 11(3), 375–94.

Pithouse, A. Hall, C., Peckover, S. and White, S. (2009) A Tale of Two CAFs: The Impact of the Electronic Common Assessment Framework. British Journal of Social Work. 39 (4): 599-612.

Puddephatt, AJ., Kelly, B.W., Adorjan, M. Unveiling the cloak of competence: Cultivating authenticity in graduate sociology. The American Sociologist 37 (3), 84-98

Schofield, J. (2001) The old ways are the best? The durability and usefulness of bureaucracy in public sector management. Organization. 8(1), 77-96.

Schooling, E. (2017) Do it for the child, not for Ofsted.

https://socialcareinspection.blog.gov.uk/2017/07/13/do-it-for-the-child-not-ofsted/

Accessed 12th of July, 2017.

Thompson, V. (1977), Modern Organization, Knopf, New York, NY.

Wastell, D. White, S., Broadhurst,K., Peckover, S., Pithouse, A. (2010) Children's services in the iron cage of performance management: street-level bureaucracy and the spectre of Švejkismijsw. International Journal of Social Welfare. 19: 310–320

White, S., Wastell, D., Broadhurst, K., Hall, C. (2008) When policy o'erleaps itself: The 'tragic tale' of the Integrated Children's System. Critical Social Policy. 30: 405 DOI: 10.1177/0261018310367675