



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



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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.

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 & 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 & Thompson, 1999). One scholar who dedicated his attention to exploring the (mis)behaviour of people was Erving Goffman (1959–1982). In his seminal study, Goffman (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 & 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 & 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

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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, & 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 & 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, & 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 et al., 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, Wastell, Broadhurst, & Hall, 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 (Leigh, 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 & van den 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). 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 standardised assessments (Schooling, 2017). It was this context that the CFA department was situated in 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 & Thompson, 1999; Broadhurst et al., 2010; Carey & 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, & Haas, 2014). Edgerton's (1967) concept of the "cloak of

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