Playing the fool: Activists' performances of emotion in policy making spaces☆

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon dramaturgical concepts from performance studies scholarship to examine how situated performance and context enmesh with the emotional content of the practices of policy making. Drawing on sociological dramaturgical perspectives, the cultural and literary criticism that inspired them, and in particular Bahktin's concepts of the grotesque and heteroglossia, I investigate the subversive use of humour in policy work as a way of revealing "emotional knowledge" about the issues under discussion. First I set out the way "emotion" was understood by participants in an NGO's programme of policy activities as a mode of knowing the world, and how emotion and rationality were embodied in the forums by activists and civil servants respectively. I take as a case study activists "playing the Fool" within a programme of policy work in which I conducted ethnographic research. These performances, once set within a *mise-en-scène* that includes furniture, smells, lighting and the physicality of the people involved, create complex, unsettling and intersecting networks of meaning about power and knowledge in policy work. I argue that such a dramaturgical approach to interpreting the work of making policy challenges scholars to accurately represent the multiplicity of meanings of "emotion" at play in any context.

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1. Background

This paper is about a series of performances of a well-known role: playing the Fool. Fools literally act "out of turn" through their gauche or naïve speech, dress or conduct. They are traditionally intellectually and socially subordinate, however Fools differ from mere simpletons or butts of their superiors' jokes in the unsettling ambiguity of the innocence with which they transgress "correct" speech or behaviour as 'social figures of antistructure' (Koepping, 1985: 193). In their disruption of social order and alignment with the non-rational they are placed, or place themselves, in opposition to learnt knowledge (Welsford, 1968). This paper is about the effect that the performances of Foolery in question had on me and the other people who watched it and what it was like to be there in the moment, participating in it. It is about the things we thought differently about afterwards, the experiences they aroused in us, the way they shifted our relations between ourselves and within

ourselves. This role didn't happen to be being played out in script, on a stage. These performances were contributions from the activists and "grassroots" professionals to a programme of policy activities I was a participant observer in for 15 months, acting as an unpaid part-time policy worker at an advocacy NGO. This NGO will be referred to throughout the paper as "the Partnership".

This field work was part of a research project that set out to investigate the emotional practices of policy work. Before this I had been a policy manager in the voluntary sector for four and a half years. I had become interested by the gap between the way emotion in policy was understood in practice and in the models I had for explaining policy making and governance. I had studied Political Science as an undergraduate, and had absorbed the canonical idea — seldom challenged in the world of work — that public policy is usually seen by those who study it as rational, linear and located in a process. Rationalist approaches to policy making propose a model which identifies problems or opportunities at the most productive level of analysis, identify the community's interests in the matter as clearly as possible and makes decisions based upon as much relevant data as possible to optimise those interests. This understanding of policy 'assumes that [it] emerges via a logical path' (Jenkins, 1997: 35).

There is a considerable empirical evidence base which questions the validity of this rationalist conceptualisation of what is being done when policy is made. A sustained focus on practice in the delivery of policy and governance in services or the built environment, has been provided in the emerging field of "emotional governance" (Froggett, 2002; Richards, 2007). This recent scholarship has pursued empirical inquiry that recognises 'policy may have to be small in scale, humanising in intent, embedded in context and enacted through bodies and so on' (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7) through, for example, exploring the materiality of governance as a relational practice through user experiences of ICT (Hardill and Mills, 2013) and residents' experiences of cityscapes (Jupp, 2013). Pykett (2012) has explored how a focus on the relational in governance is revealing of gendered accounts of behaviour as "rational" and "irrational". Ultimately attending to embodied and enacted relations disturbs and disrupts conceptions of rationality and "good" governance in radical ways (Roelvink, 2010).

While the work of *implementing* policy has been reconceptualised as a fundamentally relational and emotional practice, the same cannot be said of the "work of [*making*] policy" (Colebatch, 2006). A key factor is the discipline of policy analysis' dominant understanding of the policy making process as fundamentally based in text and dialogue (Majone, 1989). Even in interpretive or critical policy analysis the legitimate practices of policy tend to be conceptualised as exclusively residing in that which can be captured through words. In this scholarship emotion is largely addressed through analysis of language, particularly as captured in transcripts of interviews (Barnes, 2008; Davidson and Orsini, 2010; Newman, 2012b; Durnová, 2013). This literature's focus on text and textual analysis has had serious consequences for the consideration of the non-verbal and non-textual in policy work. Argumentative and communicative theories of policy suppose constructive meaning-making and written accounts of reasoned argument to be the objectives of policy making; deviation from this is at best left unconsidered and at worst thought of as 'non-productive sidetracks' (Fischer, 2003: 177).

By contrast, the study of social movements and activism has a more integral interest in emotion, through attempts to take account of the importance of motivation and the creation of enduring and cohesive relations to and in voluntary groups (Goodwin et al., 2001; Polletta, 2006). In general, activism has perhaps been more identified by scholars as an inherently emotional undertaking than other political activity. This association is reflected by the contents of the special edition of Emotion Space and Society (July 2009) on activism. In these articles the consideration of activism, perhaps because it is a wide ranging critique of supposedly "neutral" political structures and processes, makes especially visible the emotional dimensions of spaces (G. Brown and Pickerill, 2009; Gruszczynska, 2009) and the everyday practices and micro-interactions (Askins, 2009; Horton and Kraftl, 2009) of doing politics "otherwise".

This paper takes a similarly practice-focussed approach to understanding activism, but in the context of policy *making* at the interface between people identifying as activists and as non-activists. In doing so I wish to contribute to the understanding of activism as an emotional practice not just for activists themselves but as one which also has symbolic emotional significance for non-activists. I make use of sociological dramaturgical perspectives and performance criticism to map out the different emotional roles played by each of three policy "stakeholder groups" identified by the NGO I worked within, and use these approaches to *re-present* a particular performance of a common role for activists and other "grassroots" participants: the Fool.

2. A multiplicity of dramaturgies: conceptual resources

In setting out to explore the practices of emotion in political life, the research I reflect on in this paper drew upon two key interrelated strands of ethnographic methodology and conceptual literature; dramaturgical perspectives in symbolic interactionism; and the interdisciplinary cultural criticism-cum-ethnography of performance. The dramaturgical perspective of Erving Goffman (1990, 1986), which heavily influenced the development of Arlie Russell Hochschild's work on emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979, 1983) and therefore the sociology of emotions literature more generally (Cohen, 2010; Franzway, 2000; Korczynski, 2003; Mann and Cowburn, 2005), provided a powerful analytical tool for structuring my analysis of everyday and apparently largely insignificant interactions.

Central to Goffman's dramaturgical perspective was the proposition that micro-interactions reveal wider beliefs through the roles and rules used and improvised upon by those performing those interactions. I was aware that Goffman's own work on this interactionism had been influenced heavily by the cultural criticism of Kenneth Burke (1969, 1966) and Raymond Williams (1958), especially their drama criticism. Dramaturgical approaches to the analysis of policy have recently received considerable attention among interpretivists, notably becoming the theme for the seventh International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis in 2012 (De Graaf et al., 2013), although dramaturgical approaches to narrative in policy have been pursued for some years (Fischer and Forester, 1993). Some scholars have focused on mediatisation and spectacle, using the metaphor of theatre to understand modern citizen's role as audiences (Manning, 1996; R.E. Brown, 2005). Another strand of scholarship has looked at performativity as relating not just to what words are said but also at the settings in which they are said in some detail (Hajer, 2005a, 2005b; Freeman and Peck, 2007). It is nevertheless relatively rare that policy work has a dramaturg's eye cast over it, in the sense that such analysis considers that 'the emotions and the imagination are key dimensions of contemporary audience activity' (Bagnall, 2003: 87) to the same degree as is found in performance studies literature.

The cultural criticism that built upon Williams' cultural materialism broke down the distinctions between expression in art and expression in everyday life to provide a social critique in which politics and political work were an expression of systems of meaning. However its ontological and interpretive commitment to understanding drama and social order on the basis of material social relations, particularly class, race and gender, has led to criticism that this approach runs the risk of 'sounding glumly pious or holier-than-thou' (P.J. Smith, 1995: 4) in its emphasis on a single, total way of understanding human relations. As an interpreter not just of text but of context I draw on other traditions of cultural criticism that make more space for multiplicity and for ambiguity, in particular Bakhtin's theories of heteroglossia and poetic stylistics (Bakhtin, 1981). Bakhtin's insistence that 'verbal discourse is a social phenomenon' (Bakhtin, 1981: 259) and the acknowledgement that speech was a social act led him to refute the homogeneity and concreteness of systems of meaning, and therefore the production of meaning, within a text. In whatever speech they encounter, 'the investigator is confronted with several heterogenous stylistic unities, often located on different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic controls' (Bakhtin, 1981: 260). This way of seeing the text, in its social context, opens up not just the possibility that an enactment of a self can consist of many things *including* material social relations, but also that many ways of making meaning can be at play.

Art Borreca, a professor of dramaturgy himself, urges students of political work to consider the overall *mise-en-scène* and the way