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Atmospheres of mistrust and suspicion: Theorising on conflict and affective practice in a child protection social work agency.

Abstract

Organisational conflict is normally recognised as a disruptive activity which interrupts relational dynamics and productivity. However, this paper will argue that in addition, if conflict is not resolved carefully, it can trigger negative affect which will in turn unsettle and destabilise a whole workforce. Based on findings from an organisational ethnography the author examines how conflict emerged in a child protection social work agency by theorizing on the concept of affective practice. In doing so, the author makes the argument that although affect emerges in interaction it can be exacerbated by the unintentional pursuit of problematic strategies. Examining affective practice in such a way enables studies to bring into play the atmospheric factors which impacted on those who were present at that moment so that readers can understand how people were moved, attracted to or pained by certain social interactions. This is important when trying to comprehend how coercive power approaches in social work prevent care objectives from being met. The paper will conclude by suggesting that when practitioners are preoccupied with trying to survive in the workplace they will find it difficult to meet the needs of the children and families they are working with.

Keywords: affect; child protection; ethnography; managerialism; organisational conflict

Introduction

[Dog barking]
SW: I do hate visiting families with dogs.
HF: Pardon?
SW: I do hate visiting families with dogs. It's my biggest bugbear. Why does everybody who's got a dog think that people like them?
HF: Yeah.
SW: That's [house number]. I think it's down there.
[Dog barking]
SW: Oh.
HF: I think this is the back door.
SW: Yeah. [Dogs barking loudly] Can we go round? [More barking] And remembering people's names is a challenge as well [small laugh]; especially if it's the first visit, like the first I've read about them.

The above extract is from a study carried out by Harry Ferguson (2016: 153) in which he used ethnography to explore the face to face practice of child protection social workers. Although Ferguson zooms in on several 'on the move' encounters with social workers, this one stands out from the rest as it brings the reader into a particular moment when both he and the social worker are about to knock on the door of a house. The extract opens with the social worker admitting her dislike of dogs. However, it is through the layers of added detail, the additional words, the movement and the turn-taking that the social worker's fear and apprehension of meeting an aggressive dog is eloquently captured. What Margaret Wetherell (2012) would say we are seeing in this moment is the unfolding of affective practice because rather than emotion moving to 'land' on an individual, here we see how it develops in a joint, coordinated, relational way between the unknown family, the dog, the social worker and the researcher.

Examining affective practice in such a way enables the researcher to bring into play the atmospheric social interactions of those who were present in that moment. Indeed, Wetherell proposes that social analysis should focus on the 'affective practice' of an individual and their wider group so that researchers can attempt to understand how people

are moved, attracted to or pained by certain social interactions (2012:78). She settles therefore on the concept of 'affective practice' as the most promising way forward for understanding affect as it tries to follow what participants *do* and *feel*. In this paper, by drawing from a recent ethnographic study of a social work organisation, I intend to explore how affective practice can emerge within an agency and then physically and emotionally, destabilise and unsettle social work practitioners.

Although Ferguson (2016) has clarified well why getting close to practice carried out by social workers helps to advance understandings of what they do and do not do on home visits, this paper will focus on why it is also crucial to produce knowledge that can contribute to understandings of what goes on 'inside the office' of an agency which aims to keep vulnerable children safe. In doing so, I will argue that affective practice emerges from intra-agency conflict and when it does it can have a negative effect on the performance (and objectives) of all those who are part of that organisational culture. However, my aim is to do more than describe the affect that arises from social interactions, rather to theorise the reasons for such reactions. The paper will conclude by outlining key contributions to the current debates on conflict and resolution in social work studies of organisation.

The theory of affect

The notion of affect first emerged as a theory in 1677 when Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza highlighted the difference between an 'affect' and an 'emotion' in his work on '*Ethics*'. An affect, for Spinoza, was different to an emotion because it was something which was produced by the body, or the mind, when an interaction occurred with another body or mind. This interaction subsequently increased or diminished the body's power of activity. This does not mean that the mind can determine the body to act, or that the body can determine the mind to think (Hardt, 1999). Quite the reverse; Spinoza identified that the

body and the mind are independent of one another but the powers of both are constantly corresponding with each other in some way.

Since Spinoza, several alternative connotations of affect have emerged. Some scholars have used affect to focus towards a more vitalist, 'post human' and process based perspective (see Ahmed, 2007; Blackman and Venn, 2010) or on becoming, potential and virtual (see Frogett et al., 2015). Both Jeyasingham (2016) and Ferguson (2016) have used the concept of affect to explore how social workers negotiate space and place *outside* of the office. Whichever perspective is adopted it is collectively agreed that affect can be considered a psychosocial concept because it interferes with our emotions and our interactions with others (Brennan, 2004).

However, Wetherell (2012:3) contends that ordinary 'basic emotion' terms such as sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust and happiness do not adequately describe the range and variety of affective performances, affective scenes and affective events that take place in life. Instead she proposes that studies should focus on 'affective practice' to explore the way people chunk and pattern their embodied conduct because it is this dynamic of research that often disappears when scholars take up affect as a topic. Affect theory should therefore draw attention to the ways in which 'bodies', combine, assemble, articulate and shift into new formations (Wetherell, 2013).

To explore the moments of affective action where something distinct and recognisable happens, Wetherell's perspective of affect will be drawn on in this study when attempting to explore different social workers' interactions. Part of this paper's purpose is therefore to contribute to further investigation of affective practice because doing so could help researchers understand the precariousness of neo-liberal workplaces (see Hardt, 1999; Negri, 1999).

Although drawing from affect has been recognised by some as an anxious business as we will see shortly, authors who do employ it do so in conjunction with psychosocial or psychodynamic theory to explore both discursive and affective implications of conflict in the workplace. Wetherell's (2012) method demonstrates how 'affective practice' can be used in ethnography to highlight how embodied sequences of action occur alongside the spoken word.

Context

Although Ferguson's (2016) earlier example shows how the concept of affect emerges between people, affect is not always limited to direct social interaction but also influenced by processes, structures and wider society (Fotaki and Hyde, 2014). I therefore begin this section by exploring the wider context of child protection social work.

Many authors, in England and internationally, have noted that every time a child abuse tragedy grips the news social workers face strong criticism for having failed to communicate with other agencies effectively and for making the wrong decisions (Butler and Drakeford, 2012; Jones, 2015; Warner, 2015). Yet, what has also become apparent, especially with more recent inquiries, is that in many cases the agency in question has been troubled by certain organisational issues. For example, after the death of Victoria Climbié in 2003, Lord Laming noted that widespread organisational malaise had contributed to several practice failures in Haringey. Social workers at the agency described the organisational hierarchy as being like a school: one which left them too frightened to challenge the headmistresses for fear of being remonstrated (Ferguson, 2011).

In 2009, following the death of Peter Connelly, the government asked Professor Eileen Munro to carry out a review of children's services. Munro found that incongruent organisational issues prevented good practice from taking place as managerialist

approaches, which demanded transparency and accountability, introduced targets, performance indicators and a purchaser-provider split. Rather than, therefore, carrying out direct examinations of actual social work practice, audits were being used to scrutinize practice instead. Although these 'artificial incentives' provided simple data about service processes and performativity, they failed to understand the emotional dimensions and intellectual nuances of reasoning (Munro, 2011: 20).

Although Munro provided a good argument as to why such incongruent behaviours needed to cease, there is evidence to suggest that such organisational issues are still prevalent. In 2014, the public became aware of another child abuse scandal where up to 1400 children were subjected to sexual exploitation and senior council staff of Rotherham (RMBC) were found culpable of 'blatant' failures because of underplaying the problem (Jay, 2014: 1). Although media sensationalism focused predominantly on practice failures, another story emerged which provided back stage stories of a seriously dysfunctional culture (Hefferman, 2014).

Reports carried out by Jay (2014) and Casey (2015) both revealed that due to government cuts RMBC was acutely understaffed and over stretched. Subsequently, a similar kind of organisational malaise as the one experienced by Haringey social workers surfaced as practitioners spoke of feeling anxious if they tried to challenge managerial decision making (Jay, 2014). With fear and shame remaining powerful, if largely unarticulated, features of children's social workers' experiences (Ferguson, 2011), it is hardly surprising that practitioners struggle to focus on their practice when preoccupied with the matter of surviving in the workplace.

In recent years, a growing number of authors have recognised that organisational issues play a significant part in affecting the identities of social workers and the culture of

agency practice (Broadhurst et al. 2010; Ferguson, 2011; Gibson, 2014; Jeyasingham, 2014). This paper aims to contribute to this research by using the theory of affect to extend on the knowledge of conflict in organisation. Although the notion of affect is becoming a popular feature in studies of organisation, it is underdeveloped in the discipline of social work. Due to there being, to my knowledge, a lack of studies exploring how affect emerges *within* the social work organisation, in the next section, I briefly review literature which does do so to explore how influential norms and discourses can contribute to internal conflict.

Literature review: Conflict and affect in studies of health and social care organisations

Historically there has been extensive theoretical debate about how conflict emerges in organisations. Bissell (2012) has suggested that Taylorism, a philosophy which promotes a system where the 'science of productive efficiency and management' takes precedent over a discourse of care (Clegg et al, 2006: 46), is still largely influential of managerial approaches within statutory social work today. Taylor's 'power over' approach emerged during the early 1900s and was better known for teaching managers how to improve worker productivity by reducing individual autonomy (Bissell, 2012). However, what Taylor failed to acknowledge was that a side effect of disempowering the worker was that it led to intra-agency conflict as workers felt subjected to a disciplinary system (Clegg et al. 2006).

After Taylor's inauguration, other organisation scholars began to argue that if managers were to avoid internal conflict then organisational directives needed to carefully consider dynamic interplay between agency, structure and purpose (see Clegg et al. 2006). Although it is now widely accepted that conflict is constructed within discursive contexts, it is also recognised that individuals will respond to, negotiate and shape these contexts in different ways depending on the situated activity (Clegg et al. 2006; Ferguson, 2011).

More recent studies of organisation have attempted to explore how intra- agency conflict affects its workers because it provides human relation scholars with an opportunity to examine how future progress could be made. This research has predominantly taken place in healthcare contexts which share many similarities with social work environments. For example, health and social work professionals both report significantly higher levels of employee stress than other workers do (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002). This is evident in the classic Menzies Lyth (1960) study of hospital systems which explored how nurses used defences against anxieties which emerged from organisational conflict and caring for patients.

Drawing from Melanie Klein's (1986) theory of projective identification, Menzies Lyth found that a social defense system developed over time through a form of collusive interaction and often unconscious agreement. These structured defense mechanisms led to instances of detachment and denial amongst staff and in turn created affected atmospheres, or conflict scenes, as student nurses complained seniors did not understand the emotional stress they were experiencing. However, of interest, Menzies Lyth found that in personal conversation with senior nurses they did feel distress for their juniors but employed techniques to avoid confrontation and emotional agony.

This from of detachment was not an isolated event but affected all seniors, prompting the concept that the hospital atmosphere thrived on a 'them' and 'us' culture. It was this kind of culture that Gabriel (2012) observed in his ethnographic study of a health organisation. Gabriel employed the term 'organisational miasma' to explain how affect spread and impacted on all professionals in the agency (2012: 1137). He used the term miasma to describe 'a contagious state of organisational pollution', one which Gabriel argued was not only material but also psychological and spiritual (2012: 1138). This miasma

emerged from the way in senior managers handled an organisational restructure. Frontline became affected by feelings of disgust, worthlessness and corruption when they were left behind following a series of dismissals of valued colleagues.

This notion of organisational dysfunction is a concept which was also studied by Fotaki and Hyde (2014: 1) when they used vignettes to identify how different organisational tiers in the National Health Service developed 'blind spots'. Drawing from Klein's projective identification theory, they found that affect was active because all staff members were unable to acknowledge that they were working with unworkable strategies. Fotaki and Hyde argued that this form of denial affected all processes within the agency as it spread and destabilised working practices at organisational, systemic and individual levels.

Collectively, these studies assert that although organisational issues are often exacerbated because of regulation, governance and change, affective activity is nonetheless encouraged by those who recognise, endorse and develop the problematic practice. This not only leads to troubled social interactions but also contributes to the mobilization of intra-agency conflict. However, although there are similarities between health and social work contexts, there are also several differences. One is the strong criticism social workers face when a child abuse tragedy grips the news (Warner, 2015). To understand the inner world of social workers, it is important therefore to consider the context within which social work is situated.

Introducing the case and the method

This paper is based on data drawn from an ethnographic study which took place between 2011-2012 of a safeguarding (also referred to here as 'child protection') children and families' statutory agency (CFA) situated in England. The CFA department's responsibilities

lay with early intervention and the prevention of child abuse. At the time this study began, the coalition government had just been elected and all local authorities across the country were faced with having to reduce their spending. Under the New Labour government, senior management at the CFA were of the view that they could create and implement new services which were targeted at improving early intervention measures. In recent years, the CFA had increased staff numbers to make stronger links between services and practice. Senior management believed these changes had, consequently, led to a 'good' Ofsted rating. However, when this study began the CFA was awaiting another visit from Ofsted. This time senior managers were expressing concerns that the impending cuts would not only affect service delivery but perhaps also alter the agency's 'good' Ofsted rating.

The CFA consisted of four safeguarding teams which had in total 36 social workers, ten managers (team managers and assistant team managers) and three senior managers (two service unit managers and one assistant director). The CFA dealt with both child in need (low level intervention) and child protection referrals (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.

Data collection and analysis

The main aim of my study was to explore how organisational culture affected the social interactions and identities of social workers within the department. Ethical approval was granted by the University and the organisation. The main ethnographic approach used was that of participant observation as this method allowed me to explore 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 (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

While in-depth ethnographic approaches are common in organisation studies, this method does still have its limitations. At the time of this study I worked as a social worker for the same organisation but in a different service to that of the CFA department. I had worked as an Out of Hours social worker for two years before the field work began. This position was beneficial in terms of access and prior familiarity with practitioners and systems. Although I did not work directly with all involved in the study my role within the organisation did mean that I had contact with them at some point prior to the research.

Taylor (2011: 8) has acknowledged that being an 'intimate insider' is beneficial but when the narrative of the researcher and the researched become entwined it does mean that assumptions may be made by the author about what was meant by the other actors involved. Yet Labaree (2002: 102) has recognised that being on the inside does provide the researcher with a key to delving into the crevices of an organisation to gain access 'to hidden truths that the public is unaware of'. The findings of this study, therefore, need to be considered in the context in which they are presented, from a practitioner who was carrying out research whilst working in the same agency (see Author, 2013).

To 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. I recorded fieldnotes during the day, and typed them up the same evening. However, I realised during this time that the findings were more emotionally active

than I had originally anticipated. I was also concerned that the questions I asked participants may have shaped their behaviour in further intra-agency interactions. 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. To develop into a marginal reflexive ethnographer I used supervision meetings with my research mentor as a means of gaining the required analytic space.

My observations were supported with additional resources such as unstructured interviews and document analysis (policies and procedures; emails and case notes). I carried out in-depth interviews over the course of the year with participants who consented: 12 social workers, 3 managers, 2 senior managers and an assistant director. Interviews focused on participants understanding of how different events affected social interactions and sense of self. Interviews were audio-recorded and tended to take place in a private office in the organisation and at different stages throughout the research.

The principal method for analysis was not to produce generalised results from a large widespread sample that would then apply to the whole population (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) but to interpret the affective discursive repertoires which came from a small micro culture situated in an organisation. The fieldnotes, documents and interviews were transcribed and uploaded onto NVivo. As recommended by Charmaz and Mitchell (2001) a modified grounded theory method was used to analyse the ethnographic data which enabled me to explore key incidents and use memos to develop categories. Following a process of open coding, I first identified common themes across the data produced from the whole study. Different situations occurred across the department and therefore to deepen my analysis and explore alternative meanings, I coded key incidents as they emerged. One of the main themes to emerge was intra-agency conflict and it will be this

area of focus which will be now be discussed. To protect the identity of the organisation and those who worked for it, all the names have been changed.

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 must 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).**

This email had a significant impact on the department. It was sent by a senior organisation leader without any prior discussion. Although the email appeared to have been sent with the aim of highlighting to all staff that the CFA had suddenly accrued a large debt, it was interpreted as a "veiled threat" because workers feared their jobs would be at risk if the debt was not reduced.

This email was shortly followed by an announcement that Ofsted was due to arrive.

> **The whole office has gone into meltdown. I saw team managers crying and making regular trips to Helen's office as Helen seemed to be the only one who can console them. I asked Helen why this is and she said it's because they don't see her as "a threat" as she is the manager of family support team and not a child protection team.**
>
> **Field notes, Day 10.**

Although this was the second 'crisis' the CFA had to deal with within a relatively short period, the way in which managers were attempting to manage both situations is distinguished neatly in this extract. Rather than pulling together to overcome adversity, the opposite occurred. Team managers from different safeguarding teams were seen seeking

consolation from Helen, someone they felt was not in competition with them. As Ofsted was planning to assess the performance of each individual safeguarding team, team managers were informed by their seniors that their ratings would be used as a form of comparison to measure the department's overall performativity.

It was during this period that social workers started to talk about seeing their manager change in their approach towards them as individuals and as a team. In the following section, extracts from interviews undertaken with participants will be explored in more detail to understand how conflict was triggered. As recommended by Wetherell (2012), bodily actions and noise will be included in analysis to explore the social affective processes of the interactions that took place.

Sensing an atmosphere

Me: What do you think is going on here?
Jack: [coughs] You mean what do I think of this culture?
Me: [laughs] Yes, why are managers acting odd?
Jack: [small laugh]. Well [clears his throat] when I first came here I thought it was lovely. People were friendly [laughs]. I thought people were quite kind [gets up to make sure the door is closed then starts to whisper]. There didn't seem to be too much bitching or back stabbing, you know what I mean?
Me: [laughs] I do
Jack: [gets up and closes the blinds] I mean there is always a bit but nothing too bad. I thought the senior managers were approachable. There wasn't much of a hierarchy. I didn't get a sense of reality really [scratches his head]. I think there is something very disguised here [long pause] because actually within a short period of time you realise it is a veneer and there are managers here, um, errr, things are not as they appear [almost inaudible].

This extract is from an interview which took place in the office of a relatively new manager who had been in post a month. Although I am trying to make sense of the team managers' behaviours that I had recently observed what became apparent when later listening to this interview was that there was something more unfolding. It began with a cough as Jack

started to share his thoughts about his recent disillusionment of social interactions within the workplace but it continued with his awkward laughter and movement. Jack appeared to feel uncomfortable sharing these thoughts with me, another social worker in the role of researcher, but at the same time he did not appear to want to stop either. Instead he tried to ensure that our conversation was not heard by checking the door was closed and shutting the blinds.

Once he felt safe that the room was secure he changed his tone to a low voice so if anyone was passing by outside the content of this conversation would be concealed. He then went on to explain how he had noticed that although others' actions are not explicitly unfriendly or untoward he still got the feeling that things were not well in the agency. His own actions and movements not only created an ambience of unease for the two of us but appeared to also arouse suspicions for those social workers who were sat outside his office in the main office; those who had observed the blinds close, the door shut and noticed our voices become inaudible. These are the kinds of 'affective characteristics' which can arouse or disturb encounters in the workplace (Froggett et al. 2015: 2). Indeed, when I left the room, after the interview had concluded, a couple of practitioners asked me what the meeting had been about and whether I knew anymore about the redundancy situation.

Team Meeting

> **Mark: We're not reaching our targets, we are well below in fact.**
> **[silence]**
> **Mark: I keep hearing "Well what are they doing? Why didn't they do that yesterday? Why haven't they done that yet?"**
> **[silence]**
> **Mark: It's getting me down.**
> **Kenny: [folds his arms and leans back in his chair] Jesus, this is shit. I'm sorry I've got to say it 'cos no one else is but this is shit. Meeting targets is not important but you're making us feel like it's the end of the world and I'm not having it [frowns].**

Mark: [takes his glasses off and folds his arms] It's not me, it's the elected councillors who are putting on the pressure and you know, err [coughs] and, but what I do know is that life would be easier if we could just meet these targets then they may say "Wow, that was a good piece of work that has been done".
[laughter].

In this extract we hear from a different manager who is trying to inform the team that assessments are not being turned around in time for the deadline. Although Mark did begin the meeting informally with general chit chat, the meeting became formal with the news that the team was not performing well. This information was initially met with silence. Although speech is often the focus of qualitative research often what is not said may be as revealing as what is said (Poland and Pederson, 1998). In this context, the silence felt uncomfortable and it was perhaps this awkwardness which prompted Mark to expand on what had exactly been said by other more senior members of the agency. However, when this clarification was again met with silence Mark then tried to explain how he felt.

But Mark's attempt to gain sympathy from his team appears to annoy Kenny as he moves into a defensive position and announces his own feelings about the situation. But what is noticeable is that even though a 'them' and 'us' narrative is constructed by Kenny, one which reflects Menzies Lyth (1960) findings when nurses felt seniors did not understand their position, in contrast, it does not bring the practitioners 'together' against 'them': the managers. Kenny's revelation did not encourage others to speak up, it instead created discomfort as I observed heads go down. Some social workers started to doodle on their pads and others looked out of the window.

Although this conflict scene appeared to be between Mark and Kenny, it did not remain contained between the two. The discomfort involved everyone, perhaps because those present experienced feelings of shame, awkwardness or anxiety. However, despite

the uncomfortable interactions between Mark and Kenny, other practice issues have also emerged; one which indicates a Tayloristic managerial approach is in play as senior managers appear more interested in performance figures than 'outcomes for children and young people' (Munro, 2011: 45).

This disagreement between Kenny and Mark, over how social work practice should be conducted, continued by phone and email. Kenny informed me that one evening a few weeks after the team meeting, Mark emailed him and warned him, "your cards are marked". This annoyed Kenny and so he forwarded it, along with other emails, to all the service unit managers and the Assistant Director in the hope that they would follow the matter up with Mark. However, Kenny did not hear back from anyone and a few weeks later he was suspended from post for allegedly not following procedure appropriately when undertaking a section 47 investigation (see Children Act 1989). I later learned that this suspension took place in front of the team and the way it was handled left them disturbed. And as Gabriel (2012) argued, once 'organisational miasma' surfaces it can affect the feelings of those left behind:

> **Me: So does that make you feel paranoid?**
>
> **Jenny: YES! It might just be my imagination [laughs], my paranoia, but I feel people are talking about me behind my back [sniffs and pushes a tissue into the corner of her eyes] I walk into rooms and conversations stop [laughs]. They're probably doing what I have seen them do to other colleagues, they are building up a collection of mistakes or errors so that if I do make a boo boo they can look back at everything and tell me my time is up.**

After Kenny was suspended, Jenny also found herself in a difficult position when a colleague told her that their Assistant Team Manager, Angela, had told others that Jenny was never going to get promoted because she was an "embarrassment". Jenny, who had been qualified for ten years, had recently applied for an internal senior social worker post.

However, during the interview she became nervous and started stuttering uncontrollably. She left the interview feeling upset that her nerves had got the better of her.

Jenny told me that when she later learned what Angela had said about her, she felt compelled to make a complaint to the service unit manager. However, after she made the complaint Jenny did not hear anything for five months. During that time, she had to continue working alongside Angela. Jenny felt that Angela knew about the complaint as Jenny started to receive negative feedback every time she submitted an assessment. This had a significant effect on Jenny as it led her to believe that everyone in the team was talking about her. Jenny had been present when Kenny had been suspended and this incident had further exacerbated her own feelings of paranoia and anxiety.

> **Claire: I just don't know what to say to her, I feel so bad for her [shakes her head].**
> **Amelia: I can see she is hurting and she just needs….[stops as the door opens]**
> **Claire: [coughs] It's just not like her…**
> **Amelia: [laughs] But it's so like her [points to the ATM's office]**

In this extract, we hear how Jenny's team mates feel about what happened to Jenny. The way in which the situation was handled by the department has clearly not just affected Jenny. Seeing Jenny distressed has also upset the others who care for her well-being and along with Kenny's suspension has created an unsettling form of organisational malaise. This supports Gabriel's (2012: 1148) findings that once negative affect is triggered it can lead to a 'climate of depression, self-reproach, mistrust and suspicion'. However, in contrast to Menzies Lyth (1960) study where seniors felt unable to comfort juniors, in this context even team members are struggling to cope with the anxiety and stress of fellow colleagues. It is their detachment from the situation that Jenny senses therefore when she walks into the room and finds conversations stop. Although the conflict initially seemed to have emerged between just Jenny and the Assistant Team Manager, the whole team have become affected. It is apparent that intra-agency turbulence does not just lead to

organisational dysfunction, it has a significant debilitating effect on the relational dynamics of all those present in that milieu.

The final extract is taken from an interview with the Assistant Director, Bill, which took place in his office in another building away from where the CFA was situated. It comes in response to a question I'd posed about what the focus of social work practice should be. After explaining how much he'd seen practice change over the years Bill moved onto explaining why focus was now on performance:

Bill: (leans back, folds arms)….there is a beast of an ICS system to be fed. To a certain extent now social work has been reduced to a certain set of tasks, prescribed by the national assessment framework and input into ICS.
Me: But what about Munro's recommendations?
Bill: If you don't mind I'll change the question to 'what about Ofsted's recommendations'? There was something that cropped up in the inspection and it related to how we organise ourselves and how we focus inherently on performance that is a decision taken some years ago before me but I think what we've done is say "That's daft but hey ho somebody has decided it so we will go along with it".

It was perhaps because Bill was located away from where the main interactions of social workers took place that he did not become as affected by the turbulence which was taking place in the CFA building. He would have however been aware of the conflict that had emerged between practitioners and team managers because of the various complaints he'd received. Here his focus is on wider policies and how they have created a beast (ICS- the integrated children's system) that needs to be fed. Broadhurst et al. (2010) recognised that data input demands seriously erode valuable face to face time, and here Bill's comments provide us with an understanding of why he and other managers have become consumed with performance targets.

However, even though Bill reveals that he too thinks this excessive way of working is "daft" he blames his decision to continue to do so on the previous Assistant Director. This

supports the findings of Fotaki and Hyde (2014) and Menzies Lyth (1960), who collectively found managers developing blind spots and clinging to inappropriate but familiar practices to avoid the possibility of change. Here we learn that this situated affective activity was a malpractice which was firmly in place before Bill arrived and rather than change it, he went along with it. In doing so, he inadvertently promoted and contributed to a prevailing performance culture which affected and destabilised all working practices.

Following this interview, which took place shortly after Ofsted's visit, several changes were made. One team manager was suspended after complaints of bullying were followed up; an agency team manager was given one week's notice for poor decision making and a service unit manager announced that she would be taking annual leave with immediate effect and would not be returning thereafter. Kenny's suspension was also overturned and he was offered a substantial financial payment for being "wrongly accused of gross misconduct". However, because these changes happened suddenly without proper explanation, those who remained were left distressed, divided and unsettled.

Discussion

This paper has yielded some interesting insights when considering how and why conflict emerges in social work organisations. By contextualizing the situation of the CFA, it became evident that several issues were, in part, influenced by external factors such as resource cuts and an Ofsted visit. However rather than adopting a coactive power approach (see Clegg et al. 2006) and discussing the implications of the impending problems an email was sent. This prompted rumours to start circulating amongst staff and contributed to a climate where mistrust and suspicion became dominant features of everyday activity.

Affective practice is relational, and affect performances come in conventional pairs (Wetherell, 2012) which in this case divided participants into positions of either accusation or defence. These binary positions subsequently contributed to the development of derisory organisational narratives which promoted and nurtured discourses of disempowerment, blame and suspicion. With no one stepping into resolve the conflict, the turbulence produced wider destabilising effects as managers and social workers started to disappear from their positions. But because their departures were accompanied with an uninformed silence, their exits did little to restore faith in the agency. They contributed instead to an uneasy atmosphere where feelings of uncertainty and apprehension left those who remained unsettled.

These kinds of actions have important implications for social work organisations because as revealed by Fotaki and Hyde (2014: 15) when power holders fail to recognise that trying to achieve overly ambitious policies is futile, they can inadvertently support the 'pervasive denial of undesirable realities' at an institutional level. And in this case, the desire to be well regarded by elected councillors and Ofsted prevented senior management from understanding that certain performance objectives would be unachievable without the support of all workers.

Conclusion

By drawing from Wetherell's (2012) concept of 'affective practice' a more nuanced understanding of intra-agency conflict has developed. Although Bissell (2012) suggested that the Tayloristic 'power over' approach was still largely influential in the social work workplace, these findings demonstrate that coercive power was active in this organisation as senior managers ignored complaints and recommended team managers enforce

unworkable strategies to achieve targets. However, by analysing the data through an affective lens approach a more intimate insight of intra-agency relationships and defence techniques has emerged. In doing so, an extension on previous research findings has been produced and demonstrated that conflict is not just an activity that often develops between social workers and managers; it can affect all internal relationships and make detachment and denial a common cultural feature.

These messages have important implications for social work organisations because they highlight how certain external factors influence intra-agency practice and subsequently contribute to communication break down at all levels. Internal organisational conflict can, in turn, affect practitioners who feel preoccupied with trying to survive in the workplace and thus struggle to focus on the needs of children and families. If an organisation is to work effectively then everything from society to interaction to self ultimately hinges on mutual understanding and respect (Bissell, 2012; Gabriel, 2012; Gibson, 2016).

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