

Think piece

Policy making: does anyone care?

What Works Scotland Research Fellow Rosemary Anderson examines the emotional aspects of public servants' work, highlighting the issues involved in presenting a professional face whilst also dealing with the emotional content of dealing with real people on a day to day basis.

What Works Scotland aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

What Works Scotland is working with Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and stakeholder partners to achieve its aims, namely to:

- Identify and better understand what is working and not working in public service delivery in Scotland, and how we can translate knowledge from setting to setting.
- Contribute to the development of a Scottish model of service delivery that brings about transformational change for people living in different places across Scotland.

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This is one of a series of papers that What Works Scotland is publishing to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.

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Summary points

- Public servants are expected to be impartial and objective and to not bring their emotions to their public work. Yet they are also expected to work for the public good in a way that is caring and respectful.
- Policy makers seek opportunities to attend public events to see reality, which is essential to effective and just decision-making. At the same time, they are seen as representatives of the State.
- The requirement for public servants to ‘run two scripts’ – professionalism and empathy – can be emotionally demanding and distressing.
- Unsupported emotional work and distress is linked to burnout. Those interventions that could help support emotional well-being in policy teams include: reflective practice, Schwartz Rounds and the Samaritans’ debrief system.
- Working with public servants to explore emotion in their work, and how well-being can be supported, is needed.

Does anyone really care in policy work?

There is some cause to think that care is a matter for policy. Motivation and commitment is important to activist and professional identities in politics (Goodwin et al. 2001). There is also a body of literature exploring the idea of the State, its employees and its citizens as carers as expressed through (often gendered) descriptions of policy implementation:

‘Is the state becoming too much like your nanny? Does it act like your dad or more like your uncle? Does it tell you what to do, protect you from harm, or nurture you like a mother? Which familial figure should the state aspire to be in relation to the cultivation of citizens and the appropriate extent of government regulation?’ (Pykett, 2012)

Perhaps it is time to think about expanding the list of people and institutions who are expected to care in return for some other reward into the world of policy work.

Policy work is generally understood as “more than” work; (unpaid) activists, third sector workers and professional representatives participate, often out-of-hours, because they care, but this care is also expected to be shown in the commitment of politicians to similarly gruelling working lives and their willingness to experience a lack of personal privacy in the course of their duties. The Civil Service Code north and south of the border is clear about the way the “public good” is meant to motivate civil servants. Policy workers may do ‘emotional work’, but few of them are there because they are employed primarily to care. Those whose work involves caring may potentially be immensely powerful or they could be extremely vulnerable in that context or beyond.

Emotion and performance in policy making

This paper draws upon a finding from my doctoral research; that public servants described pressures and patterns of work

strikingly similar to those reported in studies of ‘emotional labour’¹. I had expected to find that my research collaborators would identify certain behaviours as stereotypical, and that certain people would be sanctioned to behave more “emotionally” than others; for example women, or the very young or very old, perhaps. What surprised me about the way emotion was articulated to me was the absolute primacy of function and occupation in determining who was considered “emotional”. By my informants’ own insistence they and their fellow policy participants were grouped into set categories of stakeholders, each with different “roles” that symbolised something about their relationship with emotion. One of the most direct descriptions of these roles was provided by an activist, Carla, about six months into my field work. I asked Carla for her practical input in spotting the “emotional” and she was very clear and unhesitating in her reply: I needed to watch the activists – the ‘people experiencing poverty’. So the other people involved don’t “do” emotion, then, I asked? She affirmed this:

‘You’ll get more truth from the community activists. [...] I think they know from experience, where other people only know from what they’ve read or heard, but I think the actual person who experiences it can tell it proper.’

Carla made it clear that people who worked for NGOs or in Parliament or Government would not be bringing any emotional content to the events I attended; ‘I think they just go by what they have written down’ she said. She believed that this was the only way that people who worked as “professional” policy makers had access to the “reality” of the issues they talked about; this was in fact a hallmark of their professional status and part of what made them what they were. Emotion was not just a set of behaviours; it was a way of being-in-the-world which certain embodied experiences could provide, and others by definition could not.

I observed that the civil servants involved in the Partnership’s policy work tended to describe the emotional dimension of their work in consistent ways. I also noted that others described their expectations of civil servants and their actual behaviour in equally consistent terms, and that these thoughts and behaviours were considered to be a key part of “professionalism”. Specifically public servants were not supposed to display outward signs of partiality to any one individual, and they were meant to remain “neutral” in their physical self-presentation as possible. One civil servant I discussed this with put these expectations in these terms:

‘It’s almost like there are rules drawn up around these things, there are like patterns of behaviour, which [we] have learned, whether it be business which is you know about controlling yourself and trying to get people to listen to you or whether it be ... Yes, how to reflect that passion but also how to use it effectively and the like.’

¹Emotional labour is consciously acting in ways which we feel are at odds with our true emotions, in order to conform to those ways of acting expected of professional roles.

He went on to explain the double-bind of being a policy “professional”; ‘I can’t answer those questions [about someone’s personal life] because they’re individual experiences. I need to respond as an individual but I’m not there as an individual’.

This civil servant was presenting the “personal” as being in direct opposition to everything that he must embody as a “public” figure, at the loss of his individual presence. His bodily and vocal behaviour at the conference was in some way a performance of this absence, the reading from Government documents a stratagem for faithfully suppressing his knowledge that wasn’t rational professional knowledge; he was quite literally “reading from a book” as Carla had put it.

When I asked the same civil servant why he came to events like the one we’d just been at if he expected to get shouted at, he explained that they enabled contact with people experiencing poverty – not studying poverty, or analysing poverty, or representing those in poverty – and that this was essential to uncovering “reality”, echoing Carla’s language. ‘It does make it more real,’ he said. But he went on to explain that these encounters with “reality” were essential for making not just effective but just and right decisions, for acting as a moral agent, ‘otherwise you don’t really get a sense of what you’re doing, or why you’re doing it’.

This puts public servants in an interesting and potentially stressful situation in which they are effectively “running two scripts”, as I came to think about it. Their professional status and legitimacy rests on being able to present a professional self which enacts the civil service code of impartiality and objectivity – precisely the opposite of the immersive, empathetic experience of listening and responding to an individual’s story about their experiences. But at the same time there appeared to be an expectation among public servants and members of the public alike that “good”, that is caring and respectful, decision making takes the human experience of a policy into account as well as the utilitarian evidence of cost-benefit analyses or metrics. Public servants are human beings too and are likely to feel powerful emotions about those experiences, but are supposed to maintain a certain distance from those emotions and behave in such a way as to distance them in the minds of others. As another civil service informant put it:

‘The civil servants, the idea was always to retain a certain level of impartiality and not to get ... too drawn in ... to the emotion of the situation. Em ... Particularly because you might, em, end up ... making suggestions or making hints of commitments that you can’t ... or the ministers haven’t ... approved. You can’t get cornered too much’.

When I asked how civil servants in particular acquired this sense of balance and how to go about establishing it in the minds of others, I was told that it was a learned set of behaviours as part of demonstrating you were a competent member of the team. At the same time it was not openly acknowledged as a critical part of the work done in the

Scottish Government. My own observation was that this could be a stressful and distressing performance to try and pull off, and the public servants I spoke with agreed with me. As one said, after his personal ethics and capacity to care about other people had been called into question during a fractious public meeting; “It’s just... hard doing it every day... Like it is for anyone here I suppose. But we just have to take it and how do you take it?” His “professionalism” did not permit him to respond as an individual and defend or even display his personal beliefs or empathy. However, when I asked if they discussed this aspect of their work with their superiors and if they received any support in dealing with this particular form of stress, all the public servants I spoke with said that they did not.

Professional status has been defined as ‘occupations based on advanced, or complex, or esoteric, or arcane knowledge’ (Harris 2002); in the post-managerial state this describes the status of the professional policy worker quite well. Whenever civil servants in particular have to manage their feelings and emotional behaviour to conform to the codes of their profession they could be said to be doing emotional work as part of their paid employment. This includes situations in which they must present themselves as seemingly “unemotional” or emotionally distant. Civil servants who do policy work invoke commitment to “public good” to enforce these thoughts and behaviours.

In that it implies being in an inferior status position to those around you, it has been interesting to consider that “emotional labour” doesn’t seem to be the concern of community activists but rather civil servants. The civil servant and sometimes the NGO worker’s role resemble “emotional labourers”. The community activist would be the customer, with their expectation of being able to express their emotions to their service provider without expectation of similar treatment in return, and where “the customer is king” uneven emotional exchanges come to be expected and normalised (Hochschild, 1983). Indeed, I have sat through policy forum meetings in which service users and even people involved in participatory governance initiatives were referred to as “customers”. This could be seen as a cause for concern in terms of the political status of the citizen, a passive and patronised recipient of the State. However looked at in emotional terms, this description implies an obligation on State employees to labour emotionally for the citizen/client/consumer.

Weathering these emotional hazards is the professional burden of the civil servant or NGO worker. The sometimes very personal attacks on individual NGO workers or civil servants are maybe facilitated by the fact that they are cast as servants of the grassroots activists and paid for their efforts. While ‘the ledger is supposedly evened by a wage’, the emotional assault is attacking a place a financial compensation cannot reach (Hochschild, 1983).

When you send someone out to face the public, they become the representative of the State – not just your bit of it – in a very personal way. Which, when you think about

it, is precisely the point of such face-to-face meetings: the employee of the State is expected to be the human face of the State. But these people can be attacked in very personal ways as a result. They can have their own personal integrity or values questioned in an extremely direct manner.

Supporting emotional well-being in policy teams

Unacknowledged and unsupported emotional work is linked to “burnout” in both individuals and teams. Far from being a nebulous or intangible thing, burnout as a suite of thoughts and behaviours can lead to very specific unwelcome outcomes for an organisation; increased staff turnover; increased intention to leave; negative staff attitudes; and reduced levels of performance (Brotheridge and Gandrey 2002). That burnout is at least in part a symptom of emotional exhaustion.

Few organisations have tried to systematically address this aspect of working life and provide support to their staff in negotiating their own emotions. Those interventions that have been developed are all designed to:

- a. make emotional labour visible within an organisation and acknowledge it as labour
- b. provide practical, everyday support and coping strategies for the stress of doing emotional work
- c. embed those strategies within the wider team, in particular the managers of such workers
- d. minimise the deleterious effects of “burnout” and other issues related to emotional labour on the organisation

These formed the basis for a “burnout”-themed focus group conducted by Sawbridge and Hewison (2013) which discussed three possible interventions around emotional labour in the NHS with senior nursing staff, and which I propose might provide a model for beginning a discussion about the existence of emotional labour in public service more generally and the Scottish civil service particularly and what might feasibly be useful to practitioners in managing that emotional labour:

1. **Reflective practice** is commonly associated with the teaching and nursing professions. Both student teachers and student nurses are often required to keep a “reflective journal” or similar written reflections on their everyday experience, with the view to using these to think critically about the way that they carry out their work (Thorpe 2004). This reflection can be of a very practical nature. Alternatively it can be about purely internal or emotional reactions.
2. **Schwartz Rounds** are regular meetings in which any member of a healthcare team may attend and discuss their care of a particular patient, and these “rounds” are convened in such a way as to ensure that all who attend feel safe, respected and free to express their feelings.
3. **Samaritans’ debrief system**: during the spaces between calls volunteers are encouraged to share their

experiences with a partner. At the end of every three- to five-hour shift every volunteer will “unload” to the shift supervisor, who has been trained to carefully monitor the emotional wellbeing of his or her team.

These three models represent some of the most popular and widespread attempts to address both emotional labour and the issue of “burnout”. While they are quite different in some ways, common elements include:

- All require commitment from senior managers and line managers to have traction; where this does not happen, the project will not have impact. This is partly due to the need to respect the intervention – and the emotional labour discussed – as non-optional, non-negotiable work in its own right. It is also about signalling that this aspect of working life is taken seriously or indeed is not stigmatised by the organisation. In each model managers and specialists participated with their supervisees.
- All involved some regular, face-to-face reflective time. The exact frequency of these meetings and which and how many workers were involved varied, but this informal, regular contact was important for building trust between participants and making these interventions a part of the working culture of the organisation.
- Disconnecting reflective practices from formal appraisals and performance reviews was very important. Reflective practice journals in particular were found to have the opposite effect of what was intended when used to monitor nursing staff’s performance and professional development.
- Whole teams participated in whatever is put in place to support emotional labour, not a few people who were “designated emotional labourers”. This is significant because it acknowledges that most work involves some emotional labour, but also that care and support within the team may be provided by different people at different times, using a range of skills and experiences.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Policy work is emotional work; it involves a demanding inner and outer performance of detachment and control from public servants and as participatory approaches grow in popularity it increasingly involves listening to sometimes very distressing stories from members of the public. It can also place public servants in painful situations in which they are personally attacked as the “face” of the State without being given any license as a professional to defend themselves as a person or to even show that they are distressed. This is a recognised pattern of emotion management in other “status professional” groups, and is associated with staff burnout: essentially switching off from work altogether as a way to manage distress where no other options are offered.

This paper has presented some ways in which other workplaces have tried to address the personal and organisational risks of burnout and emotional fatigue among workers, sometimes with positive impacts for the services

users or clients of those organisations. The Scottish Civil Service currently suggests that its employees might like to keep a reflective practice journal, but this is framed very much as part of a CPD agenda. In order for such a journal to address the issue of “burnout” and emotional labour employees would have to be encouraged to reflect upon their emotional experiences of working with the public (and each other), and be reassured that these reflections would not be used to assess their wider performance. Some teams also engage in 360 feedback, but again this is not an appropriate forum for exploring the issues of emotional work or providing support to employees. Research suggests what is required is a reasonably regular face-to-face support meeting to

discuss what has gone well and not so well within a team explicitly from an emotional wellbeing point of view.

This is a new and maybe controversial research agenda in policy and political studies, and the first priority must be to have a series of conversations with policy professionals who work in “frontline” contexts about their understanding of the emotion work they do. It may be more or less urgent and appropriate for different types of team within the Civil Service. A series of focus groups to talk about the literature and interventions presented in this paper and to discuss how far participants recognise the concept of emotional labour in their own workplace would be a logical place to start.

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