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Colley, Helen

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Not learning in the workplace: austerity and the shattering of *illusio* in public service work.

Abstract

Purpose

This paper discusses the impact of UK government austerity policies on learning in public service work, specifically youth support work. It argues that austerity policies intensify 'ethics work', create emotional suffering, and obstruct workplace learning in a variety of ways.

Methodology and approach

The research adopts narrative methods and a critical interpretive paradigm to investigate practitioner perceptions within a broader analysis of neo-liberal change. It draws on Bourdieu's sociology as an interpretive framework.

Findings

Austerity is shifting the 'stakes' of the youth support field from a client-centred ethos to the meeting of economically driven targets. This shatters the *illusio* of practitioners committed to client-centred ethics, resulting in emotional suffering, difficulty in learning to cope with new demands, and an erosion of professional capacity.

Research limitations and implications

A particular limitation is the lack of longitudinal data. There is a pressing need for more research on ethics work, emotional suffering and (not) learning in public service workplaces facing austerity; and to continue theorising this nexus more thoroughly.

Practical and social implications

There is a need to promote a feminist ethics of care in such workplaces. There is also a need to stimulate public debate about the ethical impact of austerity on public service work as a whole. These might allow workplaces to encourage learning more effectively.

Originality/value

This paper departs from traditional discussions of workplace learning to consider instances of 'not learning'. It introduces the innovative concept of 'ethics work'; discusses ethics as a form of work, through a sociological rather than philosophical lens; and utilises Bourdieu's key concept of *illusio*, not previously addressed in workplace learning research.

Keywords: Workplace learning; ethics; emotion; austerity; neo-liberalism; youth transitions; Bourdieu; illusio; habitus; field.

Article classification: Research paper

Austerity, ethics and emotional suffering: a crisis for workplace learning

As I was first drafting this paper, UK newspapers reported the suicide of David White, a senior legal officer for an English borough council (Butler, 2011). Following a 30 per cent reduction in council funding imposed by government austerity measures, he had been obliged to oversee severe cuts in local services, despite the fact that he had serious concerns about both their legitimacy and their legality. In his suicide note, White wrote 'I have been unable to cope with the demands being placed on me'; a colleague claimed that 'his ethical beliefs and absolute desire to maintain the integrity of the council were being compromised' by the cuts. Other colleagues linked his death to the 'unbearable pressure' put on staff by senior council managers pursuing a radical version of the Conservative-led government's 'Big Society' agenda: a strategy to reduce the remit of the state and devolve public service provision to charities, voluntary organisations and social and private enterprises (Alcock, 2010). Typically in workplace learning research, problems and challenges – including strong tensions between, for example, practitioners and managers – are viewed as spurs to innovative action and learning (e.g. Engeström, 2001). In David White's case, however, we see an unprecedented situation and the pressure of untenable ethical comprises combining to spur the act to end all learning: suicide.

This tragic story resonates strongly with similar cases documented in Christophe Dejour's *Souffrance en France* (*Suffering in France*, 2009), which analyses the pervasive growth of such pressures, evidenced in a wave of workplace suicides across France which peaked in 2007. Drawing on Hannah Arendt's notion that evil can come to permeate a society through its banalisation in everyday life, Dejours' research shows that managers of enterprises increasingly pressurise staff to act in ways that conflict with their sense of ethical practice and, as a result, produce emotional turmoil:

The conditions created in the new, re-structured work organisation place workers in an extremely painful psychological situation, one which throws them out of kilter with values of high-quality work, their sense of responsibility, and professional ethics. (2009, p.37) [1]

Any open opposition by employees is largely met by managers and policy-makers with denial and 'institutionalised lying' (p.81), along with the threat to silence any objections by dismissing those who speak out from their jobs. Dejours argues that this climate has intensified greatly over the last 20 years, justified by an appeal to economic competitiveness – the mantra of globalisation – which obfuscates the ethical issues involved:

The rationality invoked [*in these institutional lies*] is, of course, economic reasoning, but we shall also see that this almost always insinuates itself into other considerations related to social rationality, by virtue of principles which are highly dubious on a moral and practical level. (2009, p.100)

Suicide represents the most extreme emotional price that some have paid: but others suffer too, through various forms of mental and emotional ill-health. Marie Pezé, another French expert in workplace suffering, sums up the situation of her many clients and research subjects in the title of her book: 'Not all of them died but all of them were stricken' (2010) [1]. This recalls the classic work of Salzenberg-Wittenberg *et al.* on the emotional experience of teaching and learning. They showed that being confronted with 'unfamilar ways of thinking, relating, behaving' (1983, p. 16) can create deep disorientation that makes

4

learning very difficult, if not impossible. Learning requires a context of at least some

security, of trust in the environment and other persons who populate it.

However, the workplace may be becoming more inimical to learning in these

respects. There can be little doubt that the current global economic crisis has sharply

accelerated tendencies already driven by neo-liberal policies since the 1980s: the

deregulated marketization and/or privatisation of public services, along with their

downsizing; the construction of such services as commodities, and of service users as

individualised consumers; and the flexibilisation of workers in ways that degrade their

conditions of employment (Mooers, 2006; Hanieh, 2006; Furåker et al, 2007). All of these

confront workers with disorienting levels of change. Furthermore, the imposition of harsh

austerity measures across a number of European countries, as well as in North America, is

creating unforeseen situations in public service workplaces as resources and staffing levels

are slashed more deeply and rapidly than before. In the UK, for example, 140,000 public

service workers lost their jobs at the end of March 2011; by March 2012, a further 340,000

job losses in the sector are expected, as the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition

government attempts a rapid reduction of the national debt, much inflated by the bail-out

of failing banks in 2008. In addition, youth unemployment has risen to record levels, whilst

harsh 'welfare-to-work' measures have seen benefits reduced further still for the

unemployed and those incapacitated for work by disability.

In this paper, I argue that such changes are throwing up new ethical challenges for

practitioners in public services; that these challenges demand learning, but that learning to

deal with them is very difficult in the current context; and that emotional suffering can

therefore arise, eroding the workforce and professional capacity within it. I do so by

drawing on findings from a research project investigating practitioner roles, identities and

practices in Connexions, an English public service supporting young people in their school-to-work transitions. As a small service, operating on the margins of mainstream education and youth welfare provision, Connexions was one of the first to be targeted for major budget reductions from 2008. Nevertheless, its experience is much more broadly relevant than this marginalised position would suggest: individual cases such as this one can reveal a great deal about social, political and economic processes that also impact upon many similar services: 'A particular case that is well constructed ceases to be particular' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 77; see also Flyvbjerg, 2006). Connexions is therefore highly likely to represent a harbinger of the future facing other public services as austerity measures deepen.

The paper continues by outlining the perspectives on learning, ethics and emotion in the workplace that will serve as conceptual frameworks for the project data, particularly Bourdieu's notion of *illusio*. In the light of these frameworks, the research data are then presented. I draw in detail on one narrative, that of Beth, a Connexions practitioner who expressed in powerful ways her concerns about ethical pressures within the service, and associated these concerns with a strong sense of emotional suffering. This narrative is a strong exemplar of much of the project data, and is supplemented by brief accounts from others we interviewed to demonstrate that Beth's is not an isolated story. Finally, the theoretical interpretation is summarised, and implications for research, policy and practice are outlined.

Workplace learning

Research on workplace learning has developed in a range of disciplines, from higher and adult education to organizational psychology and human resource management, and it

would be impossible to attempt a comprehensive review of these literatures in the remit of this article. However, it is essential to contextualise the ethical challenges described above, and the emotional suffering associated with them, in relation to dominant models of workplace learning.

Many organizations, including public services, are now largely oriented to the conditions of the 'audit society' (Power, 1999) and the 'managerial state' (Clarke and Newman, 1997). 'Occupational professionalism', based on client-centred values, isincreasingly supplanted by 'organizational professionalism', in which practitioners' autonomy is sharply restricted by micro-level managerial control (Evetts, 2009). Within this overall culture, policy models of learning in the public service workplace are founded on the theoretical assumption that learning consists of acquiring knowledge and skills as if they were products. These 'products' are now commonly represented in sets of technicised national standards or competences (cf. Avis, 2005, 2007). Practitioners must not only acquire these during initial training; these standards are also continually monitored through practices of 'hyper-productivity' (Pezé, 2010) and performance management (Dejours, 2008) which place employees under pressure. Practitioners have to learn to align themselves to the mission of their organization, defined by its measurable targets. As Power argues:

> The advent of the so-called knowledge society has no doubt intensified demands for metrics to represent, and make somehow accountable, new knowledge-based categories of value. (2004, p. 779)

Workplace learning can therefore become focused on meeting managerial requirements, being accountable (although this tends to mean 'auditable' rather than democratically accountable [Power, 1999]), and learning to fit within such an audit culture. At the same time, this new orientation has been accompanied by an overwhelmingly dominant discourse of 'lifelong learning', in which an individualised imperative is placed on workers to ensure their continuing employability through both formal and informal learning (see, for example, European Commission, 2001).

Much of the recent academic literature on workplace learning has challenged the unproblematised notion that learning consists of the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Socio-cultural theory has advanced the more holistic notion that learning is a *process* rather than a *product*; that this process depends on social participation; and that it is at least as much about issues of identity and belonging as it is about knowledge and skills (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Hughes *et al*., 2007). Colley *et al*. (2003) use the concept of 'vocational *habitus*' to discuss the importance of 'fitting in' to a community of practice, and how learners whose social characteristics do not share that 'fit' can be excluded. Vocational *habitus* both draws on socially inculcated pre-dispositions – in caring work, gendered, classed and racialised – and is powerfully inculcated by occupational cultures and training. The relationship between the learner and their environment is therefore seen as a relational one, in which both influence each other: any analysis of learning must therefore centrally integrate 'a systematic and coherent analysis of the wider structuring of society' (Daniels and Warmington, 2007, p. 389), and address political dimensions of power and inequality (Malcolm *et al*., 2003).

Such a perspective suggests that we need to consider the impact of the audit culture on learning beyond its role in technicising formal training and qualifications. If a sense of

becoming and belonging in the workplace are essential prerequisites for learning (Fuller, 2007), this poses important questions about the potential for less formal learning in the workplace if these processes are challenged or reversed. Colley *et al.* (2007) showed, for example, that shifts in Further Education policy resulted in processes of 'unbecoming' among deeply committed tutors, who felt the remit of their work had been restricted unacceptably by these changes, and as a result quit their profession. Their study radically challenged the unidirectional perspective that dominates socio-cultural theories of learning, with its almost universal assumption that participation in a community of practice simply deepens more fully over time and then endures among expert practitioners. But this raises thorny problems: within a dominant rhetoric of lifelong learning, 'not learning' surely becomes a taboo. Although workers may resist being branded as 'learners', seeing the term as a diminishment of their acquired competences (Boud & Solomon, 2003), the label of 'non-learner' is likely to be even more unacceptable.

This context raises some important questions. If the domination of work by 'counting, control and calculation' (Power, 2004, p. 765) conflicts with practitioners' professional values, and if their sense of identity and belonging is disrupted as a result, what impact does this have on their ability to learn to meet new challenges – including how to deal with ethical conflicts? How are austerity policies intensifying this disruption? And what are the consequences if practitioners find themselves unable to learn in such a context? These are empirical questions which will be discussed in relation to the research data. For now, let us turn to consider more closely the matter of workplace ethics.

Workplace ethics

Discussions of professional ethics have largely been located in the discipline of philosophy (e.g. Higgins 2010), and have centred on three major theoretical perspectives: consequentialist theory, concerned with utilitarian outcomes; deontological theory, concerned with duty and obligations; and virtue theory, concerned with personal integrity; all of which offer important criteria by which to judge the ethical culture of institutions (Cribb and Ball, 2005). In initial and continuing professional education, however, these have typically been applied through the teaching of formal codes of practice and technically rational models of decision-making, which may bear little relation to workplace realities (Eraut, 2004), and encourage simplistic rule-following rather than fostering a culture of ethical practice in the workplace (Banks, 2010). Any narrow focus on rights and rules in traditional ethical theory has also been challenged by a feminist ethics of care, which instead advances relationships and responsibilities as its central tenets (Tong and Williams, 2009). From origins which have been critiqued for essentialising feminine roles (Gilligan, 1982, Noddings, 1984), later feminists have associated the ethics of care with a wider and more radical anti-oppressive agenda, for carers as well as the cared-for (Jaggar, 1991; Tronto, 2010).

More recently, a sociological literature on the ethics of day-to-day practices in public service workplaces has begun to emerge, and is deeply relevant to the issues raised in the introduction to this paper. Critiques of new managerialist policies (Clarke and Newman, 1997) have highlighted the way in which such policies have generated deep-running conflicts between different sets of values in such services. Lynch (2010), writing on this trend in higher education, draws on Bourdieu's notion of '*doxa*' (the tacit, taken-for-granted and unquestionable presuppositions that dominate any particular field [Bourdieu, 2000]). She argues that new managerialism has intensified a 'careless doxa' (p.60) that entails a

fundamental 'indifference to values' (p. 60), yet has been 'endorsed as morally worthy' (p. 63) within a commercialised market environment. This *doxa* increases the pressures of performativity to meet targets and prioritise what 'counts' for audit, and therefore to avoid caring for students, colleagues or the self.

Other authors have explored the temptation for public service institutions to 'cheat' and engage in 'creative accounting' to show that such targets are being met, although often with the alternative ethical justification that they are doing so in order to preserve the meagre resources they are allocated to support their often disadvantaged clients (Cribb 2005, 2009; see also Lee 2010). Cribb *et al*. (2008) argue, in the realm of health care, that the burden of ethical responsibility in such a field is always distributed according to particular responsibilities associated with different roles. They term this pervasive phenomenon the 'division of "ethical labour"' (p. 353). Professional roles are understood to be more than a matter of personal identity formation. Rather, they are pre-constructed by policy-makers before individual practitioners come to occupy them, and have ethical functions inscribed upon them according to the normative structures of organisations and institutions in the field. This pre-construction of ethical responsibilities can, however, confront practitioners with serious ethical conflicts, if it clashes with their own dispositions and objectives. They must decide whether to pursue conscientious objection, compliance, or adopt a stance of 'principled infidelity' (Cribb, 2005, pp. 7-8). Such conflicts differ considerably from what we normally understand by 'ethical dilemmas'. Dilemmas suggest a choice between two equally valid courses of action; conflicts evoke choice between right and wrong, in the face of duress to pursue the unethical.

Banks (2009) and Colley (2010) develop this line of thought further, suggesting that we need to pay far more attention to what they term 'ethics work'. By this, they refer to

the day-to-day, even hour-by-hour, work of maintaining an ethical stance and confronting ethical dilemmas or conflicts in professional practice. This perspective is compatible with notions of role pre-construction and the division of ethical labour (Cribb *et al.*, 2008), but makes fully explicit an understanding that the maintenance of ethical practice is itself a form of work, an element of the labour carried out by front-line practitioners.

These concerns link back to a feminist, anti-oppressive ethics of care which considers practitioners' as well as clients' well-being, and draws attention to issues of employees' emotional malaise. Colley (2010) argues that ethics work is being sharply intensified under austerity, as crucial decisions about service provision and access are devolved onto individual practitioners; and that situated sociological inquiry is needed to investigate the impact of this trend on frontline practice. Whilst viewing ethical practice as a form of work is a very new conceptualisation, and as yet under-theorised, it nonetheless points to the value of social theory in deepening our understanding of it. It is this sociological lens, then, through which the research data will be viewed. Before turning to the project findings, though, let us finally consider how emotions might be understood in this context.

Emotion in the workplace

Emotion as a collective rather than individual phenomenon has become an important subject in social studies of organisations and learning over the last 25 years (Fineman, 2004). Hochschild's seminal work on 'emotional labour' (1983) argued that, in a wide range of human service work, employees have to learn to manage their own feelings in order to convey a particular emotional style of service and evoke particular feelings in their clients. These feelings are commercialised – and therefore dehumanised and alienating – because they must be sold on the labour market, and are prescribed by employers in the

interests of profit rather than persons. Emotion – like learning – has become increasingly subject to prescription, control and measurement within organizations. Whilst organizationally desirable emotions are made more visible in such contexts, other more painful feelings on the part of practitioners are rendered inadmissible (Fineman, 2004).

However, we can see emotions not only as a work product, but also as constituting the environment of the workplace and of society more broadly, through dominant rules of 'appropriate' feeling which are tacitly but so thoroughly learned that they appear entirely natural and cannot be challenged (Heller, 1979). Fineman (2010) develops this understanding through his concept of 'emotionologies' underpinning the emotional culture of an organisation: 'politico-ideological constructs … [that] encapsulate emotions' stocks of knowledge, vocabularies, feeling and display rules' (p. 27). These are promulgated through a wide range of sources, including home life, teaching, journalism, and all forms of the media: 'they provide a vocabulary, rationalization and "place" to feel or express attitudinally "appropriate" emotions' (p. 27).

This broader perspective seems closer to the suffering described by Dejours (2009) and Pezé (2010) than to the concept of 'emotional labour'. Such emotions are not learned and commercialized in the way that emotional labour demands: they are not sought by an employer as part of the service provided. In the climate for workplace learning already outlined above, there may be an expectation that such emotions will not arise, or will be suppressed. Emotionologies may also play their part, for example through discourses of 'loyalty to the organisation', or the simple but powerful fear of losing one's job. How, though, can we more fully explain emotional suffering over ethical conflicts in the workplace? How can we link the intensely personal nature of such distress to the meso- and macro-level context of organisations undergoing austerity? Why do people find themselves

stricken by extreme emotional pain in their work? Here Bourdieu's sociology, and in particular his concept of *illusio* offers us some helpful tools for thinking about emotion, ethics and learning. As we shall see, his theoretical framework offers us a way of integrating an analysis of the wider power structures in society to workplace learning and practice.

Bourdieu's sociology and the concept of *illusio*

The most fundamental and commonly used concepts from Bourdieu's social theory are those of *habitus* and field. Importantly, they are inseparable within his relational framework (Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009): each incorporates aspects of *both* agency and structure, and each designates 'bundles of relations' (Wacquant, 1992, p. 16). Bourdieu often uses the metaphor of a game to illustrate the concept of field, the role of *habitus* within it, and the unequal power relations that shape them (Hodkinson *et al.*, 1996). On the one hand, the field is constituted by a particular terrain, by the way that the playing-field is configured, and by the (largely tacit) rules of the game. It is imbued with a *doxa*, the established order which engenders an unconscious, unquestionable acceptance of the *status* quo and fashions our categories of perception (Bourdieu, 2000; Golsorkhi *et al.*, 2009). Emotionologies, as described above, may be seen to be part of the *doxa*. On the other hand, *habitus* – our 'socialized subjectivity' which reflects socially structured predispositions as well as structuring dispositions (Bourdieu, 1986) – also plays a part. The game is competitive, since it concerns social positioning, and those who participate in the game use their *habitus* to deploy strategies to influence the game in pursuit of their own interests and goals. They can do so more or less successfully, depending on their initial socio-economic position; the volume of capital (economic, social and/or cultural) they bring to field; and the degree of

conscious fit between their *habitus* and the dominant *doxa* (Colley *et al.,* 2003). It is this 'fit'

to which Bourdieu refers as *illusio*.

The concept of *illusio* is rarely discussed beyond Bourdieu's own work, although it is

central to Bourdieu's thinking (Wacquant, 1992). It does not so far appear at all in the

literature on workplace learning, and very rarely in wider educational research (Widin's

[2010] work on global English language education being one notable example). Yet the

concept of *illusio* is pivotal to understanding the articulation Bourdieu envisages between

the socialized subjectivity of *habitus* and the objective determinations of the field, and

offers important insights into the ways in which ethics and emotion are linked in his logic of

practice. Although *illusio* is frequently but mistakenly interpreted by the English term

'illusion', Bourdieu uses it to convey a quite different meaning (Costey, 2005). *Illusio*

denotes how we are caught up in the game, our belief that it is worth playing, our

commitment to it, and our investment in its stakes (the '*ludes'* or '*enjeux*'): those objects

that are considered of value in the field (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). *Illusio* is therefore

more explicit, conscious, and agentic than the underlying *doxa*; it resonates with theories of

workplace learning which emphasise identity and belonging in professional communities of

practice, as well as with an 'occupational' model of professionalism that foregrounds a

client-centred ethos; and it provides a sense of the emotional investment – caring about

what happens at work – that a professional *habitus* may entail.

Widin (2010) highlights three key aspects of how Bourdieu sees *illusio* playing out

within a field and between different groups of actors in that field. First, we need to

understand that these different groups may bring multiple interests to the field, some of

which dominate others; in educational fields, for example, the 'grand interests' of

governmental policies and institutions' commercial interests may dominate the *illusio* of

professional practitioners. Second, it is essential to probe beneath the often rhetorical

expressions of the goals and value-objects of a field to identify the actual stakes that players

are pursuing. Third, one of the main ways in which dominant groups mask their actual,

partisan interests in the field is through rhetorical 'disavowal of interest'. This is regularly

the case in bureaucratised public services, which claim to act only for the public good, whilst

in fact promoting the specific interests of their own leading cadre (Bourdieu, 1998).

The stakes of the game include ethical values and beliefs, and must be learned

through participation in the field. If we do not share the *illusio*, if we are distanced

observers or disbelievers, the game will make little sense to us, and will not engage us in

playing for its stakes (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). There will be no possibility of 'fit'

between our *habitus* and the field. Equally, this suggests that any fundamental change in

the field (cf. Grenfell & James, 2004) which transforms the established stakes in the game is

likely to disrupt the *illusio* of some subordinate players within it – for example, practitioners

– and create emotional suffering, since it disturbs deep-seated and long-term commitment

and investment of oneself, especially in caring public service work.

This paper has drawn together a number of contextual and conceptual themes thus

far. First, policy approaches to workplace learning are often dominated by audit-driven

models of skill and knowledge acquisition. Second, these ignore more processual

understandings of learning as the development of identity and belonging in communities of

practice. Third, the same audit culture is creating ethical conflicts in the workplace which

may generate emotional suffering. Lastly, it has also argued that Bourdieu's sociology, in

particular his concept of *illusio*, offers a powerful tool for analysing the relational nature of

this learning-ethics-emotion nexus in the wider political and social context of neo-liberal

managerialism. Let us turn now to the research project and its findings, in the light of the theoretical frameworks outlined above.

Research project and methods

The research was undertaken from 2008-2010, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Colley *et al.*, 2010; Lewin and Colley, 2011). Its original aim was to investigate changes in the roles, identities and practices of practitioners who had been seconded from a specialist careers service into a new, national, generic youth support service, Connexions, described in detail below. The service also employed youth workers, social workers and other former specialists, but all staff were designated 'Personal Advisers' (PAs), and expected to undertake a broad, generic remit far beyond their existing professional expertise.

The study sought to foreground the perspectives of the practitioners, whose voices had been little heard in the few previous studies of Connexions. We therefore adopted a narrative methodology (Moustakas, 1990) recommended for the investigation of continuity and change in professional careers (Collin & Young, 2000), within a critical interpretive framework that allowed us to address the wider societal context as well as lived experiences (Anderson, 1989). We generated data through a series of career history interviews with 17 PAs working in three local Connexions services in the north of England, and with 9 former staff (ex-PAs) who had left the service. This provided accounts from 11 of the 43 local Connexions services existing at the start of the project. The sample consisted of volunteers, but was stratified to reflect different lengths of professional service in youth support work, from two to twenty years' experience. It also reflected the gender composition of Connexions staff, around 80% female.

In addition, we interviewed two senior managers and two local stakeholders in each of the three sample services, and 5 national stakeholders. Ethical approval was confirmed by my university, and the project was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of the British Educational Research Association, and with the informed consent of all participants.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymised, and the data were transformed using two methods. On the one hand we conducted a categorical analysis, coding according to themes derived from our initial research questions and arising from the data themselves. However, it often proved extremely difficult to code data about ethics and emotion separately, as they tended to be inextricably intertwined in PAs' accounts. This led us to realise that ethics work was an unexpected but central theme arising in the data, and that it was closely imbricated with emotion. Alongside this, then, we conducted a narrative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990) of individual accounts, seeking a holistic understanding of individuals' experiences and their micro-level responses to meso- and macro-level change.

For the purpose of this article, a detailed narrative has been constructed for one PA, Beth. Whilst most of the PAs' accounts could have been chosen as detailed exemplars, I have chosen Beth's because she was one of the 'newer' PAs in Connexions, having joined the service only three years before we conducted the research. Her account not only highlights issues of learning and not-learning for a less experienced professional. But also it avoids the objection which could be raised (whether justifiably or not) that more experienced professionals might simply be defending the interests of their own former professional 'silos' in the new 'generic' service (cf. Artaraz, 2006). Beth's story is then supplemented by some brief summaries of other PAs' accounts, to demonstrate that hers is not an atypical narrative. In this way, the complex drawing together of theoretical accounts

of workplace learning, ethics and emotion is illustrated by data which is representative rather than extensive.

The limitations of the research, in part deriving from the limited funding available, include the small size of the sample, although this should not necessarily be viewed as undermining its validity and broader generalizability within this methodological paradigm (Sparkes, 1992). Rather, this kind of research, drawing on individual case studies, provides us with exemplars that link theory and practice, and are essential to the development of any field of social science (Flyvbjerg, 2006). A key limitation is the lack of a longitudinal element, however, which meant we were unable to go back to our respondents after analysis of their interviews and explore further the themes they had raised; nor were we able to trace the further development of their careers inside or outside of Connexions. Additionally, it is extremely difficult to write about 'not learning', that is to say, about something which is *not* happening, since it is far less tangible than something which *is* happening. In this respect, although transformation of the data requires all three elements of description, analysis and interpretation, interpretation here plays a central rather than a secondary role, as it must sometimes do (Wolcott, 1994).

Before presenting the narrative data, then, I first offer an analysis of Connexions and the field (in Bourdieu's terms) of youth support as the context for the individual accounts.

Youth support work: under pressure from austerity

Founded as a national service in 2001, Connexions was central to the New Labour government's policies on socially excluded youth. Despite claims that the service would continue to offer information, advice and guidance universally to all young people aged 14-19 (as the former careers service had done), it was in fact targeted predominantly at those

not in education, employment or training ('NEET'). Policy-makers emphasised heavily the supposedly holistic nature of the newly-created PA role, and the long-term trusting relationships they would establish with disengaged young people in order to support their transitions. This rhetoric fitted well with the professional training undergone in career guidance, which largely draws on a humanistic, client-centred ethos informed by the work of Carl Rogers (1967) that strongly informs the *doxa* of the profession. Accordingly, the Connexions proposal was warmly welcomed at first by many practitioners.

However, as with many other New Labour initiatives, there was a serious contradiction between the rhetoric and the reality (Hall, 2005), which later led to widespread disillusionment. Connexions was severely understaffed and under-resourced, employing only 8,500 PAs: less than half the total number promised by the government. Front-line practitioners had unfeasibly large caseloads, insufficient time to work in a holistic way, and inadequate access to support facilities such as housing, drug rehabilitation or mental health care for young people. Annual staff turnover from 2001-2008 averaged around 10%, relatively high for a public service, and in some areas reached 50%. Devolved in April 2008 from national funding to local authorities, just as the economic crisis resulted in sharp spending restrictions for councils, Connexions went through a chaotic restructuring and further budget cuts. Yet as youth unemployment increased rapidly in this period, even higher targets for 'NEET' reduction were introduced, making funding for the service more precarious still. This was the state of the field that contextualises the narrative which follows.

Beth: ethics, emotion, and not learning

Beth was one of the 'newer' PAs in our sample, having worked part-time at Connexions for just three years. Her caseload comprised mainly young people classified as 'NEET'. She began her account by discussing the pleasures of her job, rare though they might be:

> I really like going out and finding clients out and about, and then gradually building up that relationship and actually getting them into something. It doesn't happen a huge number of times but when it does, it's so rewarding. I really enjoy that.

Beth believed firmly that a holistic approach was vital to supporting young people who might need to overcome social problems before being ready to move on in education, training or work. This belief, along with her commitment to helping young people, is part of her *illusio*. However, she went on to discuss the increasing pressure of targets that year, alongside a lack of resources, and the impact this was having on her work as well as on herself:

> The funding has all changed … We've got targets for getting young people out of the 'NEET' group – what seem like absolutely crazy targets for next year – and so we're quite focussed on that, to be honest. That's the message that we get from above is: 'You focus on the targets', not to the detriment of the people--, it's hard to explain. This is quite confidential, really, isn't it? Obviously, you have got to bear the person in mind, but if that person needs huge amounts of help and there aren't huge amounts of help out there to draw on, then we can't be doing it all, because everybody else suffers. It's hard to explain, but do you know where I'm going with this one? You can't put what that person might need into that person because you

haven't got time and you haven't the resources … If you can help the majority a bit, it's better than helping one person a lot when they might not even move into something positive which, yes, sometimes I find that very hard. If I know that with a certain amount of work I could help that person and they could probably move on to something, but I can't get the resources to support them, or I haven't got the time to put into it myself, I find that tough, sometimes.

Here Beth's narrative shuttles – nervously, it seems – between the managerialist message that targets must be met, the impact of austerity on resources within and beyond Connexions (despite the level of some clients' need), and her own professional ethos. The stakes of the game have become the 'crazy' targets, and she cannot buy into them: 'I find that very hard… I find that tough…' Her vacillation seems to indicate difficulties in learning how to respond to these competing objects in the field. Moreover, her disquiet is felt as something inadmissible (cf. Fineman, 2004), as she checks: 'This is quite confidential, really, isn't it?' We have a sense of an 'uncaring doxa' (Lynch, 2010) being imposed in the field by policy-makers and managers. Beth's *illusio* in helping more needy clients is becoming dislocated from the game, and it is 'very hard … tough' for her to learn how to respond to the game's contradictory objective.

Policy appears a powerful influence here, but is also powerfully resisted. As she described in detail her work with a particular client, it became evident that – more or less consciously – Beth was adopting a stance of 'principled infidelity' (Cribb, 2005) rather than compliance towards managerial prescriptions:

22

I spent most of last week with one client who is homeless and has got lots of issues, and no one seems to want to help him, because they've tried before and they say he doesn't engage and goes round and round in circles. That was most of my week. I've just taken him over because the person who worked with him before had worked with him for about two years, and she had got him into all sorts of places and he's come back out for various reasons, and she was just exhausted. This is about my second or third week with him. I mean, he's in every morning at nine o'clock, and most afternoons are spent trying to sort him out. This child is desperate.

In a policy context dominated by a rhetoric that 'every child matters' (DfES, 2004), Beth found herself confronted with a 'desperate' child who did not seem to matter to a range of support services any more, possibly because their own resources were being reduced by austerity at this time. But thanks to her *illusio*, her investment in and commitment to her own professional values, Beth herself had just spent 'most of her week' with him, contrary to the managerial discourse which suggested that this would undermine targets. There is, however, an alarm sounded here: a colleague had given up, 'exhausted', after two years working with this client, suggesting that she had not learned how to overcome the obstacles to improving his situation.

At the same time, after just two or three weeks, Beth was feeling a severe emotional toll from this work:

Last week, I went away on Thursday having got to the point where he was going to spend the night on the streets, and I felt dreadful, absolutely dreadful, because I

don't work Fridays, and I thought, 'Shall I `phone my colleague on Friday?  No, don't `phone Friday, I might hear worse', so I didn't. I had a couple of bad nights, but we sort of agreed between us that we'd have each other's mobiles because there was someone else working with him, and if we feel bad, say 'Oh, I feel awful', whatever, we'd text back: 'You've done the best you can and more' and sort of support each other way … So, at the moment, this is just like a new experience and I'm thinking, I'll take it for a few weeks, see where we're going, but if I need more support, then I'm going to ask for it. So I can't put myself at risk, and my other life, because this is the sort of case that could wear you down.

Although she did not think *she* had done anything unethical or wrong, and hoped she had done the best she could, Beth still felt 'dreadful' and 'awful' at the boy's abandonment by other services, and had sleepless nights worrying about his situation. The burn-out his previous PA had suffered loomed as a threat to Beth's own well-being, reminding us of the feminist cautions raised about carers' own needs within an anti-oppressive ethics of care (Jaggar, 1991; Tronto, 2010).

The mobile texting agreement with her colleague suggests a need for peer support in learning to cope with these ethical and emotional tensions. Line managers in Connexions were supposed to offer clinical supervision and support to PAs to assist their professional learning, especially in response to difficult cases; but like most others in our sample, Beth found this inadequate:

My manager says he's always there, and sometimes he is … I talked to him about this homeless client. He said, 'Oh, you must do a CAF. They need a CAF', so I did a CAF

and nothing came of that and you just think, OK, what am I doing with this? The CAF

is the new Common Assessment Framework that's supposed to be in place, that you

set up. You get all the different professions and you have this meeting but, as far as I

can see, that went nowhere and did nothing, and I'm thinking now: should I be

following that up? Who should I be ringing? Manager's gone on holiday. Other

manager, it's his first day back. OK, what do I do now?

Beth seemed at a loss in learning how to take her client's case forward. Her

manager is available 'sometimes' to support her learning – yet his advice seems to ensure

that managerial requirements are met (the CAF is organised), whilst Beth has still not

learned anything of use in progressing her client's case positively. She is left with repeated

questions, with not-learning. It might be possible that she also felt inhibited from seeking

further advice from managers, given the 'message from above' to focus on targets and not

spend too much time on the neediest youth. Principled infidelity (Cribb, 2005) to that

message might not allow for productive opportunities to learn in discussion with managers,

but result in a disciplinary rather than educational exchange. It might also be shameful,

given the emotionology of lifelong learning, to admit that she had not learned how to

'resolve' this case from the supervision she had. (Beth may of course be seen to have

learned something, namely the uselessness of the CAF process, and the inadequacy of her

manager's supervision). So she explained how she would try to learn more from other

colleagues:

We have kind of an informal supervision, sometimes, when we all get together, our

team, about 12 people, and we can just talk things through, if we've got any issues,

but nothing kind of formal. I think we rely on each other. I know that if I think 'I don't know what I'm doing with this person', I will go and talk to someone who I think will know, and we'll have a kind of chat about it.

Here, learning through social participation – the sharing of work and its burdens – seems key, as in the practice of peer support texting, but it is limited. Importantly, as all of our data suggests, other frontline practitioners were likely to share Beth's *illusio* in stakes associated with client-centred values and a commitment to supporting young people. Collectively, her team may have been more able to maintain their occupational *illusio* in opposition to stakes determined by organizational professionalism (Evetts, 2009) and austerity, allowing them a 'buffer zone' in which to survive and learn – at least to learn how to cope – within the field.

Not an isolated case

We do not know the longer-term outcome of Beth's engagement with this particular client, nor of her future in Connexions, but a number of others we interviewed either lost or quit their jobs over very similar issues.

Ex-PA Barry, who had worked for Connexions for five years, carried a caseload four times larger than had been discussed in his recruitment interview. He spoke in detail of management instructions to engage in unethical practices in his Connexions service: to delay recording clients who had entered the 'NEET' category in the run-up to audits; to submit young people to training courses in which they had no vocational interest in order to get them off the 'NEET' register; to coerce young people unhappy in their placements to remain in them, rather than leave and become 'NEET'; and to engage in 'creative

accounting' practices, which he felt verged on the fraudulent, to claim that targets had been met. Throughout his interview, Barry referred to the clash between the emphasis on targets as the key stakes of PAs' work, and the dedication of himself and his colleagues to very different stakes, the client-centred support of young people's best interests. He spoke passionately of his opposition to unethical practices, and of the disillusion they created among PAs, using strongly emotive terms: 'bloody pissed off', 'fed up', 'bashing our heads against a brick wall', 'this is crap'. He described how he had become ill with stress because this situation 'got on top of him', suffering from irritable bowel syndrome, and claimed that other colleagues also found the situation untenable:

> You only do that work [*with disadvantaged young people*] if you feel it's a vocation. So you've got dedicated staff who want to deliver a service, but … they're not allowed to deliver that service, and you then lose that experienced staff because they either become burnt out or very disillusioned and think: 'I can't do this anymore'.

Barry himself reached the decision to quit Connexions after a series of incidents which left him feeling that staff were being used as 'puppets' – a powerful metaphor for a lack of autonomy and agency, for being played rather than being a player in the field. He could no longer invest in the game as it had become, nor share the requisite *illusio* in its stakes. Consequently, the 'fit' between his *habitus* and the field was so disrupted that he could not learn to live with it. He resigned immediately, without any job to go to.

Wendy, who worked at the same Connexions service as Beth, withdrew from the research project when she quit her job, feeling she 'just couldn't take it any more',

according to a colleague. Several other respondents talked about ill-health resulting from the stresses of their job. Vince, a PA elsewhere, raised constant objections with his managers about very similar issues to those discussed by Barry. He was on a short-term contract which was not renewed, and believed this was because of his outspoken opposition to unethical practices. Helen, another ex-PA, spoke of the under-funding of Connexions and the very large caseloads which resulted. This had made her ill with stress and contributed to her decision to leave Connexions:

[*I was*] killing myself, spreading myself so thin that there was hardly anything left of me … I just felt like I was being stretched too thin, doing a really poor quality of job everywhere, and actually not being particularly effective with anybody, and that was really stressful, and I thought that I'm not going to continue doing this. It's not me.

In her account, the many tensions and conflicts over practice, and the impossibility of learning how to reconcile or avoid these, created a crisis of identity and agency that suggests a *habitus* stranded in an inimical field, without any congruent *illusio* to ground her within it. Helen's practice painfully negates her *habitus*: 'I was killing myself … there was hardly anything left of me … It's not me'. Her words resonate strongly with Dejours' account of practitioners 'thrown out of kilter with values of high-quality work, their sense of responsibility, and professional ethics' (2009, p. 37).

Most other participants raised similar issues in their narratives, often sharing Beth's fear of their views being divulged. One ex-PA withdrew her data entirely from the research project because her service introduced a 'gagging' clause in employment contracts to prevent staff raising any criticisms of Connexions: she feared losing her job. Again, we are

reminded of Dejours' findings about managers' and policy-makers' threatening responses to any non-compliance on the part of employees.   We can see, then, that Beth's is not an isolated case. But how can we theorise the complex relationship between ethics and emotion in workplaces dominated by austerity? And what are the implications for workplace learning?

Not learning: the shattering of *illusio* by changes in the field

New workplace situations are usually thought to call forth learning – but this research confronts us with the possibility that change may erode or even prevent learning. Professionals in education and other public services are increasingly finding themselves under pressure from austerity policies which seek to reduce public expenditure sharply, and devolve responsibility for inadequate services onto individual practitioners through the use of often unfeasible targets. The emotionology of accounting and accountability has 'begun to supplant professional missions of service, care or calling in the public services' in ways that undermine not only practitioners' autonomy, but also their confidence and their learning (Fineman, 2010, p. 30). This represents a significant change in the field (Grenfell & James, 2004), as the *doxa* is shifted away from caring towards instrumental control (Lynch, 2010), and new stakes are imposed. These stakes are concerned with expanding the quantity rather than enhancing the quality of work conducted by practitioners, in a form of 'hyper-productivity' (Pezé, 2010); whilst also prioritising the economic needs of dominant social groups over the educational and welfare needs of subordinate groups. These changes may well constitute an example of 'cross-field effects', where the power of dominant fields – the global economy and ruling class politics – pervade and curtail the autonomy of subordinate fields (Lingard *et al.*, 2005; Rawolle, 2005). They also resonate with an analysis

of how the more powerful groups within a field – policy-makers and institutional managers – are able to impose their interests by subordinating those of less advantageously positioned others – PAs and young people (Bourdieu, 1998; Widin, 2010).

Austerity thus not only changes the conditions of the field, but in doing so also seeks to re-orient practice within in. However, *habitus* is 'durable' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 133), and though it may be transposed by changes in the field, this adaptation is not necessarily given. Here, we see from the research data how the new stakes are experienced in harsh conflict with the stakes in which practitioners have invested their *illusio* through their personal values, initial and on-going professional education, and a caring ethos. In the case of Connexions, that *illusio* is invested in client-centred practice which seeks to support all young people, especially the most needy, and might well cohere with the 'quasi-emotionology' (Fineman, 2010, p.37) of holistic caring promoted in government rhetoric about the service. Indeed, that rhetoric can be seen to function precisely as the 'disavowal of interest' which Bourdieu (1998; see also Widin, 2010) highlights, masking the government's actual interest in reducing the costs of public services and narrowing access to various forms of welfare support that young people needed. Confronted by the emotionology of 'box-ticking', the dismissal of their professional stakes, and the imposition of economic stakes which they cannot accept, practitioners such as Beth, Barry, and others find their *illusio* shattered. The articulation between *habitus* and field is ruptured. Both values and emotions are disturbed, creating emotional suffering (Dejours, 2009). In the heat of austerity, the field has become like a warmed glacier, riven with crevasses – chasms between practitioners' ethical values on the one hand, and economic value on the other, which halt them in their tracks and threaten descent into a void. That void is one of existential crisis: PAs' *habitus* is deeply shaken, disengaging it from the field

that it inhabits: the game of 'youth support' as it now has to be played makes little sense. The destruction of fit between *habitus* and field begins to take its bodily toll through work-related stress and exhaustion. But the void might also lead to ultimately intolerable suffering, to the real rather than felt erasure of *habitus*, through a tragedy such as suicide.

This shifting of stakes in the field could be seen as a form of symbolic violence, the 'gentle, hidden form which violence takes when overt violence is impossible' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.196), which acts not *on* but *through* the body (Morgan and Björkert, 2006). Bourdieu (2001) is indeed at pains to dispel any notion that symbolic violence does not have real effects, including physical ones. However, it is difficult to see how the shattering of *illusio* evident in the data presented here might be interpreted according to more detailed Bourdieusian definitions of symbolic violence: a process of 'subtle inculcations' (McNay, 1999), which arises out of acceptance of the underlying *doxa* and entails a degree of complicity on the part of the dominated in their own domination (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). In the accounts given by PAs and ex-PAs, it is clear that they do *not* accept the newly shifted *doxa* or the austerity-driven stakes of the game; that this can lead to *open* conflict with managers; and that it can entail 'principled infidelity' (Cribb, 2005) in trying to (re)assert stakes associated with the professional ethical stance embodied in their vocational *habitus*. More overt disciplinary mechanisms are then invoked by managers and policy-makers: managerial threats in supervision sessions; dismissing staff from their jobs under cover of 'redundancies' or lack of funding to renew short-term contracts; and, ultimately, the withdrawal of funding from the service as a whole as austerity measures hit even harder. The significance of this shift towards more overt discipline (although not yet overt physical violence) is nevertheless an important one for us to note in this complex interplay of austerity with ethics and emotion.

Finally, we can note the impact of these developments on learning in the workplace, and the need to pay attention to instances of 'not learning'. As Beth and others so clearly recounted, it had become extremely difficult for PAs to learn how to work productively with clients, or how to cope with the pressures confronting PAs. First, for most of those we interviewed, formal supervision or training appeared to be less than helpful, and peer support was viewed as the only valuable source of learning, albeit limited. Second, the shattering of *illusio* and the incongruence of *habitus* with the new stakes in the field resulted in a disengagement which made it very difficult, even impossible, to learn how to practice in a manner that was both ethical and compatible with government and institutional targets. Third, we saw no evidence of practitioners prioritising their own personal interests or professional vested interests over those of their clients. On the contrary, many of our respondents had paid a high personal price, including job loss, for their *illusio* in maintaining client-centred practice. Fourth, the loss of experienced staff represents a wider reduction of learning and capacity within the profession as a whole – now further erased by the demise of Connexions. And last, this indicates the failure of austerity policy in re-shaping *habitus* – both in the sense that it failed to convince practitioners to readjust their values-based *illusio* to fit the new value-based stakes, and in the sense that it simply eroded opportunities for learning through the reduction and ultimate closure of the service itself.

As Dejours (2009) reminds us, these developments should be regarded with deep concern, potentially heralding a 'banalisation of evil' as a harbinger of more serious violent conflict within our society in the future. In policy and practice, we need to advocate for a feminist ethics of care, in which the needs and interests of care-receivers and care-givers come first (Tronto, 2010). We need to challenge the dominance of economic interests –

ideologically driven – which drive public service work away from care and towards control (Harvey, 2006). We also need more research to investigate the impact of austerity on ethics and emotions; and on not-learning as well as learning in the workplace. Where the evidence is disturbing, we need to bring it to the attention of professions, employers, service users and policy-makers, to stimulate public debate about these matters. They are far too important to be kept within the realm of academic discussions alone. Not learning undermines identity and practice, and can do so to a devastating degree: we must learn from the experiences of Connexions how to protect practitioners and their clients from the potential destruction of professional capacity as well as from personal tragedy.

Note

1. Material from Dejours (2009) and Pezé (2010) is translated by myself.

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