Emotion and discourse: analysing social work up close

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EDITORIAL

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This issue brings together two topics that are often discussed separately and from other perspectives. First we consider emotion, and then turn to discourse.

Emotion is a major topic in social work as clients and professionals often discuss difficult and challenging subjects that generate powerful feelings. Although we may expect social workers to respond empathically to service users, we know that this is often not the case, either face-to face (Ferguson, 2016) or in 'back office' discussions (see Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). Emotions may hamper or elicit certain organisational processes that are crucial for social work to proceed, while personal processes of necessary change may be blocked or supported by the presence of emotions. In this special issue the way that emotion arises in social work is reviewed, for example shame in group therapy, and frustration and irritation in child welfare. Authors do not discuss what professionals ought to do, but seek to understand what is happening in its own right.

Definitions of the terms 'emotion', 'affect' and 'feeling' often concern the individual's inner experience, seen as a product of bodily sensations, neural networks or thoughts and interpretations, stimulated by internal or external realities. Additionally, psychodynamic approaches treat individuals' emotional responses as influenced by past experiences, with accompanying explanations and interpretations. Some systemic approaches focus on how system members, of a family for instance, understand one another's feelings in particular circumstances. The papers in this special issue differ from these approaches, and it is notable that authors use the words emotion and feeling in slightly different ways from one another. They do not examine reported inner experiences of emotion, or speculate about the origins of emotion. Instead, the focus is emotion as it arises in the context of here and now, and how it is responded to interactionally – what happens next.

On this basis emotions become especially relevant when they are articulated verbally or expressed non-verbally, so we are interested in the role of emotion made visible, *communicated* emotions. As Messmer stipulates in his contribution, affects, feelings and emotions are a social practice, modulated by the social environment. The notion of emotion markers is useful here. Emotions may be freely displayed, when people use explicit emotion markers, such as declaring that they are angry or ashamed, or openly crying or shouting. In other instances, emotions go unnamed and are at least partially concealed, when they are embarrassing or otherwise unwelcome for one or more speakers. Emotions therefore appear in disguise and are hard to observe and recognise. Laughter, sighing, and longer-than-usual silences can be emotion markers. Shame may not be named, but shown obliquely by speaking about inadequacy or failure, for example (see Scheff, 1997).

Equally, the expression of visible emotion does not always become a subject for discussion within the encounter; in the language of this special issue, emotion may not be *made relevant* by the interactional response, and may not be addressed directly at all. Its

appearance and ensuing responses can be understood as 'seen but unnoticed' elements of social encounters (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 36) that only become 'noticed' through the detailed analysis that the authors for this special issue supply.

Turning now to discourse, the studies here all take place in professional contexts and are thus examples of *institutional talk* (Drew & Heritage, 1992), which both resembles and departs from informal everyday talk. Institutional talk in health and social care is often said to be *asymmetrical*, one example being that when a service user tells a story about difficulties, professionals rarely offer a *second story* from their own experience, as they would with friends and relatives. This asymmetry reflects a differential power balance between service users and professionals. Professional talk is influenced by absent *overhearers* who are brought into the room in the professional's mind. What will my supervisor or manager or colleagues or the courts say? Furthermore, professional talk has an institutional orientation – to the norms and expectations that are part of institutional culture. Professional practice is *talked into being*, co-created in the encounter itself.

The contributions in this issue are interactional studies, examining *naturally-occurring talk, as it unfolds, turn-by-turn, sequentially*. The data for interactional studies consist in video and/or audio recordings, which require strict protection for the privacy of the participants. Recordings permit repeated listening/watching to make fine-grained analyses. Discourse and conversation analysis are characterised by the microanalysis of written and spoken conversation and of non-verbal expression. They focus on what is said and not said, and how it is said, to see and hear what actually happens in the conversations between professionals and clients. Researchers are no longer dependent on participants' interpretations of what happens in the encounter, or on their subsequent memories.

A major analytic point of attention is sequentiality, that is, the ordering of turn-taking. It starts from the idea that the turn a speaker takes is related to previous turns of this speaker and other speakers and indicates what is expected from the next speaker's subsequent turn (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Speakers can also try to control the next turn by addressing a next speaker or by not selecting a particular individual. The concept of adjacency pairs refers to how one conversational turn provokes a predictable responding turn, for example a question and an answer, or an offer and an acceptance or rejection. The analysis of the unfolding interaction reveals intersubjectivity: the way that speakers can be seen to understand or misunderstand one another. From a conversation analytical starting point, sequentiality refers to immediate previous turns. From a discourse analytical point of view, we might speak of intertextuality, as a text represents different voices (Fairclough, 1995); this may also refer to previous utterances that took place longer ago, in the same conversation or another one (van Nijnatten & Suoninen, 2014).

Intersubjectivity also emerges during conversations as people present themselves with the identity they want to assign to themselves, and the identity they think the conversation partner wants to be presented with (Goffman, 1959). Through studying the sequence of turns and the way in which utterances and other non-verbal contributions are made, the analyst seeks to derive how the participants themselves see the interaction.

A further point of interest is topic organisation, the way that issues of conversation are introduced or avoided by topic change. This is crucial in institutional communication

such as social work communication, in which certain topics have to be put up for discussion and others may best be avoided. Topic control, by introducing or change a topic of conversation, is relevant when sensitive issues have to be addressed. Studies of politeness suggest that the preferred strategy is to address delicate issues to prevent loss of face – as far as possible (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In social work this can be crucial for interventions to proceed. The use of upgraded terms, meaning that something is heightened, with 'very' for example, or downgraded terms, such as 'a little bit' are used in this way, and are often felt rather than heard in the flow of conversation. It is not just professionals who help the service user save face – these strategies also occur the other way around. For example, a service user's positive answer 'Yes' may actually be a covert expression of resistance as the person limits his or her reaction to just that word, and so conceals reluctance or disagreement. By contrast, extreme case formulations (Pomerantz, 1986) are an instance of upgrading where the speaker uses language as a resource to argue, persuade and influence others.

This special issue contains a great diversity of papers, stemming from different fields, countries, jurisdictions and cultures. They discuss social work with adults, children and teenagers.

Eve Mullins and Steve Kirkwood investigate how the emotion of shame, a social emotion, is expressed and responded to in Scottish court-mandated groupwork sessions for men convicted of sexual offences. They note that shame inhibits behaviour change, and while it is often present in the session it is seldom named directly. They find that professionals distinguish between shame and guilt and that reframing shame as guilt can contribute to therapeutic change.

In a Danish study, Sabine Jørgensen investigates strong negative emotions that often play a profound role in child welfare conversations, and are characterised by conflicts between control and care. She examines how institutional tasks and goals related to control create tensions with the care function of acknowledging clients' displays of emotion. She shows that the display of negative emotions is sensitive to the direct interactional context of the social work conversation.

Heinz Messmer offers a detailed analysis of subtle emotional display in a German social work meeting, concentrating on a single case. Client emotions appear to be related to the institutional asymmetry of power and social workers counterweigh the face-threat to the service user with upgrading or downgrading responses. Social workers are reluctant to display negative emotions as these may put the working relationship with the client at risk.

Martine Noordegraaf, Carolus Van Nijnatten and Harm Luursema's study is located in specialist foster care homes in the Netherlands. Several adolescents are fostered together with professionally-trained parents. The professional parents often use emotional incidents as 'teachable moments', explaining to the youngsters how to manage their emotions rather than involving themselves in the content of the conflict.

Johnson Chun-Sing Cheung, Elsa Ngai Hung and Grace Suk-Man Leung show the productive use of conversational analysis in fine-tuning the professional contribution in clinical social work. Their analysis of play therapy in Hong Kong with two siblings demonstrates how this analysis brings out clients' emotional reactions which may otherwise have gone unnoticed. It results in a creative combination of a psychodynamic Rogerian approach and conversation analysis.

Eunjung Lee, Marjorie Johnstone and Jessica Herschman explore cross-cultural therapy in a Canadian context. They examine alignment and misalignment of therapist-client goals, identifying cultural differences as a cause of misalignment. Misalignment occurs when the therapist avoids emotional content and changes topic towards goals she has identified, while alignment is achieved when she acknowledges and attunes to the client's emotions.

In the various studies that are presented in this issue, it has been shown that emotions often appear in disguise and are approached obliquely and with delicacy. Negative emotions may put the social work process at risk and are therefore avoided or 'managed' prudently. Managing emotion is about face work, using politeness strategies and preventing differences of opinion from becoming open conflicts. Communicative caution is also the key to successful clinical work in order to prevent uncontrollable and unproductive sentiments from becoming dominant. Social workers' responses are crucial in helping to balance institutionally produced inequality, managing emotion, and distinguishing between the service user's person and his or her behaviour. Finally, the display of emotion depends on the institutional, cultural and sequential context. The counselling context is different from some of the social work contexts presented here, and the client's management of emotion is directly addressed for changing problematic behavioural patterns.

Interactional studies of social work contrast with psychodynamic analyses, which presume that internal unconscious states with their origins in the individual's psychic history are revealed and can be interpreted. Interactional social work research starts from the idea that professional practice comes into being as it happens, turn by turn. It is about what professionals and service users say and keep silent about, and about how that is expressed. Social work is precision work; it deserves the detailed analysis that interactional studies can offer.

The authors use a variety of transcription types in the presentation of extracts, all of which appear in English. A list of the common Jeffersonian transcription symbols is provided at the end of the editorial.

This issue also includes Clare Winnicott Award 2019 winning entries. The student essay is by Alastair Beach. It tells of work with a Jamaican woman living in the UK with her children, who had experienced sexual trauma at a young age and lost a baby to miscarriage at the age of 15, soon after she had come to live in England, and uses both psychoanalytic and systemic theories to make sense of the circumstances and the effect of the work. The practitioner essay is by Henry Smith, using Complexity Theory and psychoanalytic thinking. It explores the evolution of a technical-rational solution to problems of unpredictability and uncertainty which unexpectedly helped provide structure and containment.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributors

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Prof. Dr. Carolus van Nijnatten was educated as a developmental psychologist at Utrecht University. After a short career in child welfare, he worked at Utrecht University, department Interdisciplinary Social Sciences. He regularly publishes in Dutch and English and is co-editor and contributor of 'Analysing Social Work Communication: Discourse in Practice' (2014).

Transcription symbols

The transcription symbols employed in some of the articles arise from the system developed by Gail Jefferson (see Atkinson & Heritage, 1984, p. ix-xvi) and authors use them flexibly, so articles present extracts in different ways. Some authors specify the transcriptions symbols they have used. Others instead use more conventional modes of presentation, using periods, commas, and questions marks to make the extracts easier to read.

Symbol explanation

[	A square bracket marks the start of overlapping speech
↑↓	Upward and downward pointing arrows indicate marked rising and falling shifts in intonation
Underlining	Signals emphasis
CAPITALS	Loud voice
°soft°	Raised circles indicate obviously quieter speech
>fast<	'Lesser than' and 'greater than' signs indicate talk
<slow>	that is noticeably faster and slower
hhh	Out-breaths
.hhh	In-breaths
ye::s	Colons show degrees of elongation of the prior sound
=	Equal signs indicate no gap between utterances
(1.5)	Numbers in round brackets measure pauses in seconds
(.)	An untimed pause (just hearable)
yes,	Commas mark a continuing intonation
yes.	Periods indicate a stopping fall in tone
yes?	Question marks indicate a rising intonation
()	Empty parentheses indicate the transcriber's inability to hear what was said
(word)	Parenthesised words are possible hearings
becau-	Hyphens mark a cut-off of the preceding sound
((laugh))	An additional comment from the transcriber

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