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Chapter 9

'Knowing How to Go On': Towards Situated Practice and Emergent Theory in Social Work

Jeremy Kearney

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through '*experience*'.—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.--This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgements. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating-rules.

What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words.

(Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 227, emphases in original)

One of the key themes in this book is the complex relationship between research, theory and practice in social work, and in this chapter I want to consider this issue from a perspective which draws on the later work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, particularly his notion of 'language-games', and also on social constructionist thinking. In the approach which I propose, research and theory are regarded as being neither in opposition to practice nor foundational to it, but rather as weaving into and emerging out of forms of situated practice experience. In such particular situations the issue is not only – or not so much – the application of the right rule or procedure, as being able to answer the question 'how should I act in this specific context?'

Wittgenstein described our everyday ability to understand the meanings of words and to use them correctly in context as 'knowing how to go on' (1953, para. 154), seeing this as involving a relational–responsive approach in which we act not only out of our own experiences and ideas but also respond in a moral way to the actions of others. In similar vein, John Shotter describes such practices as a 'social poetics', succeeding not in the sense applicable to theories worked out beforehand, but in terms of 'certain practical uses of language, at crucial points within the ongoing conduct of practice, by those involved in it' (Shotter and Katz, 1996, p.

213). I shall attempt to explore the implications of these ideas in relation to social work.

The debate on the relationship between knowledge and practice in social work has been described – with very good reason – as 'interminable' (Sheppard *et al.*, 2000, p. 466). It has also been, for the most part, rather repetitive, in that the same 'oppositions' emerge at different times and in various contexts in different guises – theory versus practice, the 'thinkers' versus the 'doers', or the 'academy' versus the 'agency'. However, this creation of oppositions is neither a specific characteristic of social work, nor a recent phenomenon.

Vernon Cronen (2001) puts the notion of theory/practice dualism in a historical context, noting John Dewey's view that such dualism is neither original nor primitive. Dewey saw its roots in the ancient European and Middle Eastern disparagement of labour, where work was 'associated with a curse and done under the pressure of necessity, while intellectual activity [was] associated with leisure' (Dewey, 1960 [1926][1], pp. 4–5, cited in Cronen, 2001, p. 15). In our own day this is reflected in the common idea of a split between those reclining in 'ivory towers' and those getting their hands dirty 'at the coal face'. Greek philosophers from Parmenides onwards looked for the certainty behind appearances and regarded direct participation in everyday life as a poor source of reliable knowledge. What was needed to secure this was a method that put the inquirer in an independent, external, or objective position, so that he or she could look behind appearances to unchanging laws of nature. Some influences of this tradition can be seen in the positivist approaches of our own era, with their search for objective truth (although there are of course important differences between ancient and modern understandings of science). However, Cronen also identifies an equally long-standing but less influential alternative tradition, with philosophers like Heraclitus arguing that the world was constantly changing and that human actions had an impact upon it.

Cronen notes that Aristotle regarded the behaviour of human beings as intrinsically contingent and not fully determined by the laws of nature (Cronen, 2001). The distinctions that Aristotle made in the *Nichomachean Ethics* between the physical world and the world of human activities have been described as involving the difference between a world where things 'have to be as they are' and a world where things 'can be other than what they are' (Pearce, 1994, p. 12). As regards the domain of what was universal and invariable, the appropriate mode of cognition was, for Aristotle, *theoria*, detached (though not passive) contemplation, through which pure and certain (including 'scientific') knowledge (*epistēmē*), was possible. In the world of human affairs, things were contingent upon each other and changeable through *praxis*, to which the appropriate form of knowing was practical wisdom or good judgement (*phronēsis*). *Praxis* and *phronēsis* involve mediation between the universal and the particular, and therefore deliberation and choice; thus they have a moral quality. Aristotle used politics and public speaking as key examples of these contingent and uncertain aspects of human experience; in

the process of being involved in these activities people's views might change, so affecting the outcome. For Aristotle a third domain of human experience could also be distinguished, that of *poiēsis*, in which things (i.e. artefacts) are made and knowledge takes the form of *technē*, skill.

In some sense the debates on knowledge in social work can be seen as reflecting these three ways of knowing, or types of knowledge, outlined by Aristotle. Evidence-based approaches and procedural and regulated models of practice see the social world in rationalistic terms, as open to understanding, explanation, prediction and control by using the logic and methods of science (*epistēmē*). Approaches based on competencies assume that change can be brought about by the use of the right skills and techniques and that people can be trained to apply these correctly (*technē*). Those who see social work as uncertain and ambiguous feel that social workers need the wisdom to make good judgements in particular case situations (*phronēsis*).

It is this notion of 'things being contingent' that I wish to explore here; such thinking is very much part of a social constructionist approach to knowledge, which sees a fundamental, interactional relationship between meaning and action, knowledge and practice. It is an approach that emphasises the 'activities of makings and doings' and that 'the reality of the social world is continually made and remade in conjoint activities ...' (Pearce, 1992b, p 137). In this approach language and meaning are 'matters of use and doing in conjoint action' (Cronen and Lang, 1994, p. 6), rather than conveying 'representations' of 'the real world' (so to speak). This is of course different from the Cartesian account of knowledge still dominant in the modern West, which separates the individual from what is observed, with knowledge seen as the recording of objective reality and language as a means of representing that reality. From a social constructionist perspective 'reality' or 'truth' is not *represented by* language but is *constructed in* language. Therefore we need to look at the situated contexts in which particular forms of language are used. And consequently, rather than attempting to separate them radically, one would see theory, research and practice in social work as intertwined, and as historically situated and emerging forms of acting/living rather than timeless, fixed entities.

Language-games

The later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein provides one way of thinking about these ideas that can also suggest ways to move forward in action. For Wittgenstein, to know the meaning of a word, a phrase or a sentence is to know how to use it and how to respond to it appropriately (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 43). Take the word 'mean' for example; it can be used to describe someone as miserly or ungenerous, or the middle point between two extremes, or the sense or significance of something. The word can only be fully understood when one knows the context in which it is being used, and a person shows they know the meaning of a word by the way in which they use it coherently to continue – or 'go on' – in conversations.

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[1]   Dates given in the text for Dewey's works are those of the editions cited, followed (in square brackets) by dates of original publication.

Wittgenstein uses the term 'rule' to describe how people develop coherent patterns of behaviour in their interactions with others. People do not get up each morning and start from scratch thinking about how they should behave throughout the day; they have certain rules to guide them. The rules that a particular conversant is able to bring to bear on an episode constitute what are described as that person's 'grammatical abilities' (Cronen and Lang, 1994). For Cronen and Lang, 'both the terms – "rules" and "grammar" – refer to words, sentences, paragraphs, gestures, emotions and patterns of behaviour. These are inter-related in the process of co-ordination' (*ibid.*, p. 18).

For example, the various professionals attending a case conference have certain ways of acting which make sense in relation to their own general work contexts and the more specific contexts of case conferences. The case conference itself has a form, a grammar, which people usually act into appropriately, which in turn allows the meeting to continue. However, there can be times when the grammar(s) of the individual professions/professionals can clash with the grammar of the wider shared context. For example, at one case conference the parents of the child involved were invited in to discuss the situation, and in response to a question one of them acknowledged injuring the child. Immediately, the representative of the police who was present arrested the person concerned and the normal process of the conference was temporarily thrown into confusion. At that point the (specific) grammar of the police in dealing with criminal offences had overridden the (shared) grammar of the meeting in discussing the child in question.

Wittgenstein calls 'the whole, consisting of language and the actions into which it is woven, the "language-game"' (1953, para. 7). He uses this term, 'language-game', analogically, and not to suggest that language is always or necessarily playful but rather to bring out the way in which language is characterised by a diversity which may be grasped especially well by reflecting on our notion of a 'game' (1953, paras 65–6). He points out that there is a great range of different activities, all of which we call 'games', for example board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, etc. However, we mislead ourselves if we think that because these are all called 'games' they *must* all share certain characteristics in common. Rather, they are related to each other in many different ways, each sharing some characteristics with some others and others with yet others:

> Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. ...
>
> And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. (1953, para. 66)

Wittgenstein crystallises his point by reminding us of the idea of 'family resemblances' – the ways in which 'the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. [*sic*] overlap

and criss-cross ... "games" form a family' (*ibid.*, para. 67). To counter any idea that this makes language appear weak in some sense, he also draws attention to the way in which the strength of a thread woven of many fibres consists not in the fact that one fibre extends throughout its length but in the overlapping of a changing plurality of different fibres at each point (*ibid.*).

The wide variety of language-games in human social life exhibits this characteristic diversity and people have to work out how to act appropriately in each different context. In the example I gave earlier the action of the police representative was coherent within the language-game of law enforcement but was incoherent within the language-game of case conferences. Along similar lines we can understand the variety of discussions and activities in social work indicated by 'theory', 'research', and 'practice' in terms of language-games. For example, evidence-based practice and user involvement could be described as current language-games within social work research. Each has its own grammar and rules, which different researchers act into in different ways. Some aspects of the grammar of evidence-based practice, for example the emphasis on the importance of randomised controlled trials, may make it difficult to co-ordinate coherently with the grammar of user-based approaches. So while it is possible to reflect that a group of users may decide to enter the grammar of evidence-based practice in order to carry out some particular research project, it is probably less easy to imagine advocates of evidence-based approaches adopting a user-focused philosophy. At this point it becomes a question of the different moral orders within which the two approaches exist, and whether adopting another grammar would change that moral order.

Wittgenstein makes clear that his use of the idea of language-games expressly seeks to highlight that speaking language is part of an activity; language is embedded in broader patterns of actions and objects, which he calls 'forms of life' (1953, para. 23). Gergen comments that '[l]anguage, in this sense, is not a mirror of life, it is the doing of life itself' (Gergen, 1999, p. 35).

In developing his 'analogy between language and games' (1953, paras 83–8) to illuminate his ideas about meaning as use, and to elucidate the particular sense in which understanding and speaking a language involve following rules, Wittgenstein observes that some games, such as chess, involve following definite rules, and these rules are unchanged by the playing of the game. As social constructionist writers such as those discussed in this chapter (notably Shotter, Gergen, Pearce, Cronen and Lang) have suggested, these may be called fixed rule language-games. In the example of the game of chess there are rules about who can play, how many can play together and how each piece can be moved. By playing, people reconstitute the game and reconstitute the rules that give it its coherence (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 197). The chess pieces and the board would just be pieces of wood outside the game. As Gergen says, 'each piece in the chess set acquires its meaning from the game as a whole' (1999, p. 34).

In interactions with long-term users of services who have considerable experience of talking about their problems and who exhibit repetitive patterns of 'problem' behaviour over time, to ask them to retell the story of what their problem is can risk reconstituting a fixed rule language-game of 'problem talk', which can

quickly become frustrating for the social worker (and often for the service user) involved.

Wittgenstein draws attention to the fact that there are contexts in which rules are not fully fixed or definite, using informal ball games as an example: 'And is there not also the case where we play and—make up the rules as we go along? And there is even one where we alter them—as we go along' (1953, para. 83). He emphasises that the rules of conversation and social interaction differ in important ways from the rules of chess or algebra. In everyday conversations rules have much more of an emergent quality, arising from the process of conversation; they are not pre-given as in chess. As Stevenson and Beech say, 'emergent rule language games are those in which the person's ideas about how to create meanings, put words, sentences, gestures, emotions and patterns of behaviour together, arise from the playing of the game' (1998, p. 791). Wittgenstein gives the example of telling someone to 'Stand roughly here' (1953, para. 88), which although it may be regarded as inexact in fixed rule language-game terms may yet be quite usable. The statement may work perfectly as an instruction or explanation in the context of the specific conversation that is taking place. The meaning of 'Stand roughly here' emerges from the context in which it is spoken. In emergent rule language-games, the rules emerge from within the language-game itself; they are not pre-given or fixed.

Some of these ideas can be useful for thinking about our ways of acting. For example, procedures for dealing with cases of child abuse are formalised in organisations and intended to be applied consistently to appropriate cases, and so can be seen as a kind of fixed rule language-game. Workers are expected to act in set ways within fixed parameters. As a result, whenever there is an inquiry or investigation into a failure of the child protection system, it is often argued that the procedures were not followed properly and the action is then to tighten up the procedures. However, as Wittgenstein says, knowing a rule is very different from following a rule, and in an important sense use is primary. Moreover, 'to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule' (1953, para. 202, emphasis in original). For Wittgenstein, grasping a rule is not an individual psychological task or problem, but rather a question of co-ordination with others. On this understanding, it is doubtful that there is much more to be learned at this stage from further child abuse inquiries of the conventional kind, as the basis for these in the first place is that the formal 'rules' (i.e. the regulations and procedures) have not been followed. The issue at stake in these cases is rarely lack of knowledge of the 'rules'. The regulations and procedures exist and are almost certainly well-known to the professionals involved, so that revising them or adding extra ones will not in itself improve practitioners' or managers' 'ability' to use them in specific circumstances. This is because, as Wittgenstein points out, '"obeying a rule" is a practice. ... Hence it is not possible to obey a rule "privately": otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it' (1953, para. 202). The ability to use the rule is shown in the doing of it.

It is more likely that in those cases where there has been a 'failure' of the system, meanings emerged from the interactions between the adults, children and workers within the actual circumstances of the situation which were not covered by

the rules and procedures. The process became an emergent rule language-game, in which rules of behaviour developed unique to that particular situation. Of course, in the cases that become subject to public scrutiny, the result of the emergent process has generally had a negative outcome. It might in fact be more useful to have an 'inquiry' examining some successful cases of work in child protection, in order to see what 'emergent' practices made a difference.

Similarly, from the perspective of language-games it might be said that the debate about theory and practice in social work has mostly been conducted as a fixed rule language-game. It is often suggested that there is a particular grammar of theory, involving academic contexts, research, writing, conferences, and complexity, and a particular grammar of practice, involving lived experience, working in the field, and listening to the voice of users and clients. These grammars are very widely seen as incommensurate, and people often feel that they need to be either on one 'side' or the other. However, if we consider social work as more of an emergent rule language-game, where theory is embedded in and emerges from social work practice, then the emphasis shifts away from fixed outcomes to possible and potential 'ends in view' (Dewey, 1958 [1921]). Such outcomes are – or would be – constructed jointly in the process of negotiating how to go forward.

Recently, some writers have been attempting to outline possible understandings of the production and use of knowledge in social work which have some affinity with the notion of emergent rule language-games. Parton (1998; 2000) has discussed the need to address issues of uncertainty and ambiguity in social work practice. Fook (2000) talks about the 'theory of knowledge which is implicit in action, the hidden assumptions enacted in practice', and the type of theory which 'practitioners use ... which is built up in their own private store, devised, developed and adapted from a variety of sources' (p. 10). Sheppard (1995) focuses on the difference between 'knowledge as product' and 'knowledge as process'.

The importance of process

The contemporary ideas about the form(s) of knowledge appropriate to social work mentioned at the end of the previous section fit very well with certain developments within social constructionist thinking which are themselves particularly useful to those who are engaged in various forms of practice.

Pearce (1992a) sees the key distinction among different social constructionist thinkers as being between those who foreground the products of the formative process, focusing on the events and objects of the social world, and those who foreground the process of formation itself. The focus on socially constructed products involves concentrating on the creations of language such as age, the self, gender, child abuse, the family, as units of observation (i.e. as data) rather than as units of analysis. This 'product-orientated' constructionism can be useful in that it allows entry to the standard academic discourse in terms of what is understood to constitute a 'theory' or 'research project', while at the same time maintaining a social constructionist perspective. However, it also involves certain difficulties, as

there is something of a disjunction between the focus on the 'product' and the centrality of the idea of process characteristic of social constructionism. For although the process is felt to be open to change by experience, the end product is regarded as sufficiently robust not to change too much during the process of, or as a function of, being observed. For example, it is now commonplace to talk about social work being socially constructed. Howe (1987) and Payne (1997) have used an overall constructionist frame to look at theories in social work and the words 'social construction' are appearing in titles of social-work-related texts (Harding and Palfrey, 1997; Symonds and Kelly, 1998). In publications over a number of years Parton and his colleagues (Parton, 1985; 1996; Parton *et al.*, 1997), among others, have discussed the question of the social construction of child abuse and the implications for practice in the field of child protection. However, in general these writers have utilised the approach as a framework for their thinking rather than as a 'form of practice'.

An explicit focus on the *process* of social construction involves examining 'specific, local, situated *activities* in the social construction of reality, not as data points or illustrations of more general matters, but as themselves appropriate objects of enquiry' (Pearce, 1992a, p. 151, emphasis in original). This approach is consciously self-reflexive in that it focuses both on the process of (our) enquiry and the end result of that enquiry. On this view social work is not something that *has been* constructed and so can be examined objectively, but rather is *constantly being* constructed and reconstructed both by the way it is talked about and in the sites where this talk takes place. So the fact that people often talk about 'social work and social care' as a pair nowadays, or that two new Government bodies are called the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the General Social Care Council (GSCC), illustrates that the 'talk' about social work is in the process of changing; it is being reconstructed. Recently it has been suggested that whereas many of the practices engaged in by people involved in Government-funded initiatives such as Health and Education Action Zones and economic and social regeneration schemes would in the past have been called social work, current political discourses surrounding social work – which are mostly negative – mean that these practices are now not so described (Jordan, 2000).

Pearce (1992a, p. 152) notes Wittgenstein's view that language, the way we talk, ensnares us: 'a *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably.' (Wittgenstein, 1953, para. 115, emphasis in original). In this sense it is our way of talking 'as if' theory was foundational, and/or 'as if' research produced eternal truths, that hinders our ability to grasp what is taking place before our eyes and to acknowledge the part we play in it. For this reason, Wittgenstein says we should abandon the effort to see behind appearances to the truth, i.e. 'theory' (in the dominant/traditional sense): 'We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place' (1953, para. 109, emphasis in original). We should, therefore, describe the 'actual use of language', which in an important sense 'leaves everything as it is' (*ibid.*, para. 124). To take this approach with respect to social work focuses our attention on the sites where the latter is being constructed and reconstructed, which is in the 'talk' and practices of governments, academics, practitioners and service users. To understand what social work 'is' is to examine the diverse contexts where this talk and action takes place: institutions, offices, conferences, meetings, books, user groups, and so on.

Constructing forms of practice

To concentrate on situated practices as practices, for their own sake, is to be willing to live with uncertainty, in situations where meaning is always emerging. As Branham and Pearce (1985) write, the relation between 'texts' (actions performed in a given moment) and 'contexts' (the circumstances in which those actions take place) is inherently unstable. Each derives meaning from and constructs the other in a reflexive co-evolutionary process. To treat either individually as a product leads to problems. On the one hand, in family therapy for example, the foregrounding of 'texts' (specific actions) as if they existed independently, floating in space, has led to notions of neutrality in relation to such political issues within the family as abuses of power, violence and exploitation, which are thereby left unchallenged and so are perpetuated, to the disadvantage of women, children, minority groups and older people (Dale *et al.*, 1986). On the other hand, always to foreground 'context' (the wider picture) as the arbiter of possibilities may serve to disempower individuals and fail to recognise the importance of personal interactions.

Such a focus changes our view of what constitutes research, theory and practice, and presents each of these as always emerging and unfinished. Indeed, Vernon Cronen (1994) has suggested that we have to shift our idea of what a theory is, recommending that we think of theory as a means by which we explore the creation, evolution and change of ideas in social action. He describes his own approach as a form of 'practical theory', which he says 'offers principles informed by engagement in the details of lived experience that facilitate joining with others to produce change' (Cronen, 2001, p. 14). For Cronen the importance of a theory is to be judged in terms of its consequences; theories are developed in order to make life better. From this perspective practical theories are morally committed theories.

John Shotter (1993) has described the kind of knowledge that emerges from such a self-consciously situated approach as 'knowing of the third kind', which is a *knowing from within* in contrast to *knowing how* (a technical skill or craft) and *knowing that* (facts or theoretical principles). But Shotter does not mean that this knowledge rests wholly within oneself; it is, rather, 'the kind of knowledge one has *only from within a situation* … and … thus takes into account (and is accountable to) the *others* in the social situation within which it is known' (Shotter, 1993, p. 7, emphases in original). In this way it is knowledge of a practical and a moral kind. This form of knowing has less to do with discovering or understanding than with making, but importantly, as with Aristotle (see above), not the making of artefacts but making in a social sense and context.

As we construct together our realities in language we are involved in what Shotter calls 'joint action', where we jointly create the ongoing processes in which

we are mutually involved. This therefore places us in a moral position, where we are both responsible for and responsive to the joint actions that are constructed with others. As Pearce (1994) suggests, the form of knowledge involved here is very different from the positivist idea of unchanging factual knowledge. It is about practical wisdom, intelligence, local knowledge, and *praxis*. That is to say, what Wittgenstein has described as 'knowing how to go on' (1953, para. 154).

Knowing how to go on

As we have already seen, to use a word meaningfully is, for Wittgenstein, the same as being able to use it to 'go on' coherently in conversation. To act coherently in a particular situation is to know how to go on in an interaction with another person or persons. So when we ask for the meaning of an utterance we are in effect asking for an explanation of how to use it an ongoing situation, which in turn involves not only the use of the word itself, but also how to relate to others now and in the future, and in what contexts it is appropriate to act in this way (Cronen and Lang, 1994). It is this ability to act coherently that Wittgenstein wishes to emphasise when he says 'understanding is like knowing how to go on, and so is an ability: but "I understand", like "I can go on", is an utterance, a signal' (1980, I, no. 875). Shotter has described this responsiveness in 'going on' in the following terms:

> In this kind of activity – what elsewhere I have called joint action (Shotter, 1980, 1984, 1993) – what we do is 'shaped', not so much by us acting out of our own inner plans or desires, as by acting 'into' the social circumstances in which we must fit our actions. So, although participants respond to each other in a 'fitting' manner, to the extent that they influence each other's actions in a moment-by-moment fashion, its nature is intrinsically unpredictable and indeterminate: none of the participants will contain within themselves a complete grasp of its nature. (Shotter, 1994, p. 4)

These understandings of language and meaning offer a useful perspective on social work, which may be seen in Wittgenstein's terminology as a 'form of life', made up of many different language-games which both constrain and allow different possibilities for acting coherently. Practitioners, team members, managers, service users, supervisors and supervisees are all 'persons-in-conversation' (Harré, 1984), jointly making and remaking, through language, the social worlds in which they live. While we all bring our beliefs and theoretical perspectives, our knowledge and experience, into new situations, the actual process of engagement with the other person, if we are open to it, can lead to something new and unexpected taking place.

Meaning and action go together and by acting into situations we create meaning. When people have problems, or organisations are in difficulties, they often say they 'don't know what to do next' or 'don't know how to go forward'. Such situations are described as 'crazy' or 'stuck' or 'not making sense'. Social work, by its nature, has to deal with many such circumstances. Therefore, I want to consider the processes that can be used in social work to help practitioners and

users find better ways of 'knowing how to go on', and thence how to create more meaningful interactions (and outcomes) for themselves. If we recognise that social workers, as part of a process of 'joint action', have some power in a situation, either to maintain it or to change it, they therefore also have some responsibility for their behaviour. And if we can see how something has been put together and, more importantly, what part we have played, or do play, in keeping it the way it is, there is then the opportunity to do something different and so *make* something different.

Take as an example the use of the term 'a Section', which is common in social work duty rooms when dealing with mental health situations. Social workers say things like 'a Section has just come in' or 'I am going on a Section'. On the surface this language of course refers to the fact that approved social workers' powers to make an application for a compulsory admission to hospital in mental health cases are governed by certain Sections of the 1983 Mental Health Act. But to use such shorthand language to refer to a potentially complex situation, on the basis of the limited information provided by an initial referral and before the person is actually seen, is already to create certain meanings and to begin to construct some potential outcomes. In other words, this language limits the potential ways of 'going on' in such cases.

It is interesting to note that a similar process is now taking place in child protection work. As a result of the 1989 Children Act the linguistic shorthand currently employed in this field is based similarly on legal procedures, with child care referrals being described as 'a Section 17' or 'a Section 47'. Some social services departments divide up their duty system between a 'general intake team' and a 'Section 47 team', so that the likely way of 'going on' is already enshrined in these very names. These phrases, 'Section 17' and 'Section 47', are part of a process of classification and it is widely agreed that the system as it currently operates is classifying many more families than it needs to as potential child protection cases at the referral stage (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995; Parton *et al.*, 1997). A number of studies have concluded that only about 15–20 per cent of initial referrals eventually arrive at a point where they can be categorised clearly as child protection cases (Gibbons *et al.*, 1995; Thorpe, 1994). In an attempt to address this difficulty, Thorpe and Bilson (1998) have suggested some ways that cases can be identified at the initial referral stage so as not to 'create' child protection cases. They report that their approach has been implemented in Australia with very positive effects. This change should not be seen as some kind of 'disappearing act', whereby potential children at risk are 'wished away', but rather as recognising and responding to the fact that one of the ways in which the child protection system is maintained and reproduced is through systems of classification, and that it is people who do the classifying. In other words, classification is intervention and has real effects, intended or otherwise.

Research shows that social workers and their agencies 'know how to go on' in implementing the child protection system, but that they are much less clear how to work with families in need (Dartington Social Research Unit, 1995). A recent study (Kearney, 1998) into how and in what terms front-line social workers made the initial decision to classify new child care referrals, revealed that although the administrative system decreed that each new referral should be categorised

immediately, some social workers responded pragmatically to the fact that many referrals were initially ambiguous and uncertain. They constructed and maintained an 'undefined zone' for a period of time, where referrals were categorised within the administrative system yet remained uncategorised within the worker's head while more information was gathered. The construction of this 'undefined zone' was a means of creating a space separate from the options offered by the administrative system. It was a response to the circumstances that workers experienced in particular case situations, where it was 'not possible' to categorise a case within the administrative timescale and framework. By adopting this approach the social workers were open to the possibility of new information and thence to the emergence of new ways to go on that might have been closed off by a definitive categorisation of the family and its situation.

To take an example from another context, during a Masters programme workshop one of the students (who was also a senior manager in a large voluntary organisation working with young people) described her concerns about how policy on dealing with staff safety and the risk of violence was being implemented differently in various parts of her organisation. As this was explored it emerged that groups in different areas of the organisation were responding in different ways to similar violent actions towards staff by users. The issue for the manager was how to rewrite the policy document covering this issue in a way that would ensure that it was applied uniformly across all parts of the organisation. It was noticeable that the manager frequently used such words as 'staff safety' and 'consistency'. The workshop discussion focused on asking questions about the meaning of these words for the manager and the organisation, but no final position was reached. When the students met again about three weeks later the manager reported that she had decided not to rewrite the policy document herself, but to engage in dialogue with colleagues from all parts of the organisation itself and with service users on how to go forward with this issue. About three months later, at another workshop, the manager described what had taken place and with what outcome. As a result of the process of dialogue all the organisation's directly interested parties had participated in thinking about the meaning of 'safety' in the context of the organisation's work; what had emerged was a sense that the issue needed to be seen in relation to the needs of the user group. This had the effect of reconstructing the meaning of the word to include both staff and users' safety, and also so as to acknowledge the organisation's responsibility to meet the needs of those users who were being difficult and aggressive. So the (unexpected) outcome of the review process was an agreement, within the overall policy framework, that parts of the organisation could apply sanctions differently for what might seem to be the same offence, depending on the particular circumstances in each case. As 'persons-in-conversation' the staff of the organisation and its users had established what might be called a policy of 'inconsistent' consistency. As a consequence of the dialogic process it had proved possible for the organisation as a whole still to 'know how to go on' in a coherent way. The new policy was comprehensible – and worked – because everyone understood how it had been 'made'.

Social poetics as a form of practice

Having elaborated above a particular tradition of thought which focuses on language and the relationship between meaning and action I want now to consider what forms of practice might be most consistent with such a perspective and how they might be described. One possible approach is that which John Shotter calls 'social poetics' (Shotter, 1995). He proposes this as a means of developing forms of practice that at once both emerge from and influence the immediate and ongoing interactions between people. In place of professional monologue from the expert to the client/user he suggests a dialogical approach to these human inter-relations, a relational–responsive approach, which notices the responses that others' words, actions, emotions and behaviours call out from us (see, for example, Shotter and Katz, 1996). It pays attention to the possibilities of what can be constructed in the moment, rather than viewing the other's words and actions as data to be interpreted.

Shotter is arguing that we do not need a specific theory to 'get at' something behind appearances, but instead, as Wittgenstein says, we need to change our 'way of looking at things' (1953, para. 144) and '[give] prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook' (*ibid.*, para. 132). Shotter sees practices orientated by these ideas as having a 'poetic' quality; picking up Wittgenstein's notion of a (more) 'perspicuous representation' (*ibid.*, para. 122), this is about creating an 'understanding which consists in "seeing connections"' (*ibid.*). Shotter's approach entails a

> new, relational attitude to the patient's use of words, an attitude that invites a creative, poetic sensibility, as well as a 'boundary crossing' stance that creates comparisons useful in relating what (people) say to the rest of their lives. (Katz and Shotter, 1996a, p. 919)

Therefore it is about working with what arises in the moment and finding ways to connect it to the wider aspects of people's lives.

Such an approach to professional practice has been described in a number of different contexts, including doctor/patient interactions (Katz and Shotter, 1996a), a mentoring programme for medical students (Katz and Shotter, 1996b), and, most strikingly, in an analysis of the famous study by Oliver Sachs (1985) in which Sachs recounts the case of Dr P. – 'the man who mistook his wife for a hat' (Shotter, 1998). Shotter calls the practices that Sachs describes himself engaging in with Dr P. as 'poetic', 'as they are to do with novelty, with processes of creation … with "first time" makings and "first time" understandings – with … only "once-occurrent" events' (Shotter, 1998, p. 34). In Shotter's view it is through such events that Sachs is both able to relate to Dr P. and also to illustrate his ways of relating to him to the reader. In his analysis Shotter notes that in order to respond to Dr P., Sachs had to find a way, a means, to 'go on with him' in a practical manner:

[T]his was Sacks's [*sic*] task ... to 'go on' with him to a sufficient degree, as to be able to build up a grasp of what Dr P.'s strange 'inner world' was like, from a whole set of responses in relation both to Sacks's probes and other events. (1998, p. 41)

And what Sachs discovers through his efforts to respond to the strange behaviour of Dr P. is that 'music, for him, had taken the place of [the visual] image. He had no body-image, he had body music ...' (Sachs, 1985, p. 17, quoted by Shotter, 1998, p. 42). In fact that was the way he recognised people – by their 'body-music', when they moved. How Sachs came to understand this man was by being open to and responding to some unique moments in their interactions which gave him crucial information, which his standard neurological tests had not provided. He responded in a 'living, embodied ... [way to] Dr P.'s strange style of interacting' (Shotter, 1998, p. 44). As Shotter says:

> It is this emphasis on the living, embodied, gestural aspect of people's social practices, and the direct and immediate, sensuous responses that they call out of us, that gives us a clue as to how non-informational, 'poetic' events can give us access to worlds utterly unfamiliar to us. Their function is not so much to help us see, in contemplation, the supposedly true nature of what a certain thing or event actually is, as with drawing our attention, practically, to the possible relations and connections such things or events might have with other aspects of our lives. And it was to the 'musical' dimension in Dr P.'s life that Sacks's attention was drawn. (Shotter, 1998, p. 44)

Another practitioner whose way of working might be described as having fitted the concept of social poetics is the hypnotherapist Milton Erickson. There are many examples in his work of how he found unusual and creative ways to 'go on' with people towards positive outcomes (Haley, 1973). He was willing to accept working within metaphors, not only of a verbal kind but also working with people who live 'a metaphoric life', for example those diagnosed as schizophrenic. In one hospital where he worked there was a young man who said he was Jesus. He paraded about as the Messiah, wore a sheet, and attempted to impose Christianity on people. So one day Erickson approached him and said, 'I understand you have had some experience as a carpenter?' The man could only reply that he had, and then Erickson involved him in building a bookcase.

In another example, there was a patient in hospital who would only speak in 'word salad' – meaningless phrases – for hours on end. Erickson decided to have some of this man's speech transcribed, then analysed it for repetitive patterns in the actual, meaningless, language. Having done this he went up to the man and said 'Hello', to which the man replied in word salad for 15 minutes. Erickson then responded with similar meaningless language for 15 minutes. The man then replied for half-an-hour, whereupon Erickson in turn spoke for half-an-hour. This process continued over a number of days in the same way. Eventually the man spoke in word salad to Erickson for three hours and Erickson replied for the same length of time; at which point the man said, 'I'm tired of this, let's have a normal conversation'. From then on he and Erickson engaged in ordinary conversations, except that each of these would end with the man saying one sentence in word salad. The man's condition improved and he left the hospital, and Erickson told of

getting a friendly postcard a few years later which ended with one meaningless phrase.

In each of these cases Erickson focused on the specific detail of the patient's behaviours and used what initially seemed like senseless actions as a means of connecting with the patient's inner world. From this focus on detail he then managed to connect the patients to wider and more positive forms of living.

Stevenson (2000) suggests that the approach of Romme and Escher (1989) to people 'hearing voices' also has a poetic quality, as they find new ways to make sense of this experience without using traditional diagnostic frameworks.

All these examples are in my view highly congenial to social work practice, for as Parton and O'Byrne argue, direct face-to-face work with users is 'still the core of social work' (2000, p. 3). The ideas discussed above attempt to get us to focus on what is actually emerging in the specific, interactional moment between the social worker and the service user; to be able to respond on all levels (emotional, intellectual, physical) to what is taking place and to notice, in Gregory Bateson's phrase, 'the difference that makes a difference' (1972). As Wittgenstein says, it is

> Not ... [that] we had to hunt out new facts; it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything *new* by it. We want to *understand* something that is already in plain view. For *this* is what we seem in some sense not to understand. (1953, para. 89, emphases in original)

Conclusion

The approach outlined above offers a different way of thinking about the relationship between theory and practice, along similar lines to Lang's[2] elegant notion of making theory 'lived practice' and practice 'lived theory'. Such phrasing aims to make an intimate connection between theory and practice and to illustrate that our ways of talking have practical consequences and our ongoing activities help construct our ways of talking (and thinking).

From a philosophical perspective, Wittgenstein helps us to see the effects of traditional/explanatory theorising and urges us to abandon attempts to produce such forms of theory, claiming that philosophical problems occur when '[w]e predicate of the thing what lies in the method of representing it' (1953, para. 104). However, he was very aware that the effort not to theorise in this way involves equal difficulties and does not in itself avoid these dangers, for we cannot thereby escape from language. For Wittgenstein, 'Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language' (*ibid.*, para. 109). Perhaps more immediately useful in the social work context are the ways in which Cronen draws on these ideas in developing his notion of 'practical theory'. Agreeing with Dewey (1948 [1920]), Cronen claims that 'beginning with Plato, the formalisation of inquiry took an unhelpful turn ... [which] ... moved theory itself rather than the

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2   Personal communication, cited in Burnham, 1992, p. 12.

use of theory into the foreground' (Cronen, 2001, p. 26). Cronen wishes to emphasise the practical use of theory, and with 'practical theory' he is proposing an approach that holds on to a framework which helps the *inquirer* know where to go next, while also being committed to *joining with others* in situated action. Thereby, practical theory is 'importantly informed by data created in the process of engagement with others' (*ibid.*). In this way the understanding of what to do next is open to change as a result of engagement with others' lived experience. It is this willingness to put our ways of thinking 'on the line' that can help us engage with the uncertainties and ambiguities that constitute social work.

This chapter has drawn on social constructionist ideas and the later work of Wittgenstein in an attempt to present a view of language and meaning in which social worlds are made by persons-in-conversation. In considering social work as a series of 'language-games' which can facilitate or inhibit different possible outcomes, we are always faced with the questions 'how should we act?' in particular circumstances, and 'what am I making if I act this way?' In exploring social work as a 'form of life' that is primarily concerned with relationships and face-to-face interactions, my aim has been to focus on ways in which we can pay close attention to what takes place in specific interactional moments and how we can use them as creative opportunities to help produce outcomes that those involved regard as useful, helpful or good. I have tried to present some examples of practice which illustrate some such 'moments'. I see these perspectives as being relevant to social work practice in that they acknowledge the complexity of human interaction and do not attempt to reduce it to set formulae or final definitions. As has been argued, the 'notions of ambiguity, indeterminacy and uncertainty are at the core of social work' (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000, p. 44). It should be clear that the ideas, approaches and methods sketched here constitute neither a theoretical model nor a specific guide to practice; rather the chapter is a call to acknowledge the importance of focusing our awareness on specific situated moments of interaction with others and an invitation to pay attention to what emerges or might emerge from such moments.

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Chapter 10

Habermas/Foucault for Social Work: Practices of Critical Reflection

Robin Lovelock and Jackie Powell

Taken together, the works of Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault highlight an essential tension in modernity. This is the tension between the normative and the real, between what should be done and what is actually done ... the tension between consensus and conflict. (Flyvbjerg, 1998, pp. 210–11)

... cultural practices are more basic than any theory and ... the seriousness of theory can only be understood as part of a society's on-going history. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1986, p. 115)

... the characterisations of the modern welfare state and of civil society provided by Habermas and by Foucault ... provide different ways of thinking politically about the challenges which confront us. (Ashenden, 1999b, p. 143)

... the regimes of law and power are constantly at loggerheads. To be able to address [this] adequately, we need both Foucault and Habermas ... (Kelly, 1994b, p. 378)

It is through rational dialogue, and especially through political dialogue, that we clarify, even to ourselves, who we are and what we want. ... Here politics functions as a normative concept describing what collective agency should be like. (Beiner, 1983, p. 152, quoted in Timms, 1989, p. 22)

... our unexamined assumptions block our view and our situation ... [S]ocial work cannot simply roll along in the present storm .. We need to act—contemplating, in doing so, alternative possibilities. (Chambon, Irving and Epstein, 1999, p. 266)

This chapter is about 'thinking about thinking'. More specifically, it is about thinking about thinking about social work. How are we to reflect critically and self-consciously about the discipline and profession? How are we to discuss the issues this raises, both as academic colleagues and in wider public arenas? We thus address the question 'What is critical reflection?', and (in a less detailed and a