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Doing emotion, doing policy; the emotional role of ‘grassroots’ community activists in poverty policy-making

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Abstract

This paper examines different understandings of the emotional role played by activist or 'grass-roots' participants for those involved in policy-making. Drawing on findings from an ethnographic study of an interrelated cluster of anti-poverty policy-making forums in Scotland it considers both what informants understand by 'emotion' and its role in policy-making from the point of view of informants themselves. In particular it focuses on discussions and observations from the inception phase of this research project in which the nature of emotion was considered and some of the explicit and tacit 'rules' about who may be 'emotional', when they may do that and how emotion is to be expressed socially. This paper looks at two key aspects of informants' practice; the special expectations policy forum participants have of activists and community organisation representatives around behaviour and language associated with 'the emotional'; and participants' understandings of the relationship between emotion, authenticity and legitimate decision-making when making policy. It concludes by considering how this examination of grassroots emotionality could assist in conceptualising emotional practice and power in policy-making and suggesting some key challenges for both researchers and practitioners.

Keywords

Participation, policy making, community activist, emotion, grass roots organisations.

Contents

- Introduction: emotion and the making of public policy 3**
- Methodology and site..... 4**
- Describing emotion 7**
- Emotions and the grassroots..... 9**
- Emerging analysis 15**
 - Feeling rules and roles 15
 - Splitting and projection 18
- Conclusion: truth and consequences 18**
- References 22**

Introduction: emotion and the making of public policy

The rationale behind this research agenda is rooted in a concern for the way policy is done in practice, but this interest in the everyday realities of policy-making poses a conceptual challenge to the researcher and the practitioner. The way the study of public policy evolved in the academy for a long time privileged a conception of policy as a sort of applied science. This tradition can be traced through the policy science and public administration literature of the post-war years (Lerner and Lasswell, 1951; Lasswell, 1958; Ostrom and Ostrom, 1971). In this literature public policy is usually seen as rational, linear and located in a process. Rationalist approaches to policy-making propose a model which identifies problems or opportunities at the most productive level of analysis, identifies the community's interests in the matter as clearly as possible and makes decisions based upon as much relevant data that optimise those interests. 'Basically, [a rationalist approach] assumes that policy emerges via a logical path; and issue moves through the political system in a processual way from point of entry, through decision and implementation, until a final choice is made to proceed with or terminate a course of action' (Jenkins, 1997: 35). Despite many revisions since the Second World War the Civil Service Code in the UK still echoes much of policy science's language, normative project and conceptualisation of good governance; Scotland has its own, very similar, code for civil servants in the Scottish Government. It identifies four key values that public administrators should uphold: integrity, honesty, impartiality and objectivity (HM Government, 2010). In particular, 'integrity' is understood as 'putting the obligations of public service above personal interests, 'objectivity' as 'basing advice and decisions on rigorous analysis of the evidence' and 'impartiality' as 'acting solely according to the merits of the case' (HM Government, 2010: 1), the 'case' presumably having been identified by the aforementioned rigorous analysis of evidence. This clearly describes a public administrator who conforms very much to the ideal of the rational decision-maker, unmoved by personal ties and empathy but persuaded by objective, verifiable analysis. The process is crucial to the success of this administrative project, as it is by proceeding through logical steps that the interests of the community are guaranteed to be maximised.

Yet there is a considerable empirical evidence base which questions the validity of this rationalist conceptualisation of what is being done when policy is made. The 'argumentative turn' in public policy as described by Fischer and Forester (1993) foregrounded 'close attention to the actual performances of argumentation and the practical rhetorical work of ... analyses' (Fischer and Forester, 1993: 5). If we are interested in looking at the speech and acts that go into doing policy work and understanding what policy really means to participants it becomes apparent that other things besides instrumental rationality are present too. In particular the relational, the argumentative and the emotional emerge as things that really matter to the course of public administration. The need to address the silence on these issues in public planning and policy has been forcefully asserted by the sub-discipline of 'emotional geographies', outlined by Anderson and Smith (2001) as being concerned with the recognition of forms of knowledge beyond those produced by objective reasoning. With these relational, emotional qualities foregrounded policy takes on a much less teleological, product- and

process-oriented appearance. The meaning and value of policy becomes less about creating a final, perfect product and more about maintaining a fragile ongoing debate about what is to be done *next* more in the tradition of Lindblom's 'muddling through' (1959). Once its claims to perfectibility, objectivity and naturalness have been compromised, policy-making becomes available to the researcher as a culturally- and historically-situated cultural practice. To borrow Lasswell's (1958) famous phrase, societies may need a system for deciding 'who gets what, when and how', but there is nothing inevitable about the public administration or policy process we have created. If policy serves a symbolic and emotional cultural role as well as a rational, distributive one, it makes sense to consider how non-rational, non-instrumental ways of knowing and intervening in the world are brought to bear on the decision-making process.

If we are to understand what public administration consists of it is essential to understand the practice of policy-making in all its non-rational, non-linear complexity, and 'emotion' as defined and understood by policy participants is an integral part of this silenced side of public administration.

In this paper I will investigate the meaning of emotion in policy work in the context of an interrelated series of policy forums in Scotland, with a particular focus on how the emotional is understood to relate to the role of community representatives and activists. I will begin with a detailed description of my ethnomethodological approach and the site(s) themselves, followed by an examination of the forums' participants' descriptions and definitions of emotion, the emotional and emotionality and how the emotional is seen to connect to the role of the 'grassroots' in policy-making. I present some emerging analysis of these findings and then conclude by considering what implications reconsidering emotion in policy-making might have for practitioners and researchers.

Methodology and site

The site of my field work is a series of wide-ranging forums around the broad theme of poverty in Scotland that differ in structure and hence in the way that they go about influencing policy. They are facilitated by one non-governmental organisation (NGO) which provides a secretariat for all of them. This is a commonplace practice for the various forums for discussing a policy area that exists in the UK; most cross party groups in the Scottish Parliament¹ and many All Party Groups in Westminster² have some non-governmental organisation of one description or another fulfilling that role. Furthermore, non-parliamentary forums usually have one or maybe two 'host' organisations that coordinate agendas and facilitate meetings. In the case of my research site, the organisation providing this is an umbrella membership group which has poverty as its broad remit. It operates at a mainly Scottish level, but as necessity dictates it engages with Westminster and European policy agendas. This was the 'gatekeeper' organisation through which I accessed the field and collected my data. This paper will focus on two forums I observed and participated in; one is an ongoing forum that has a relatively stable membership of around thirty participants, drawn from what are regarded by the host

¹ Cross Party Groups, Scottish Parliament Website, <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/msps/1696.aspx>, accessed 04/12/12

² Register of All Party Groups, Houses of Parliament, 2012

organisation as the key categories of stakeholder in this field³ of community representatives, civil servants and NGO workers. The other is an annual Scottish showcase event that is open to all comers each year, although there is usually considerable overlap in attendees and content each year. In a sense this is a multi-site ethnography, with attendant problems of site identification and feasibility. To use a cliché, policy work is about being in the loop, and that is not as mechanical as merely being in the same place on a regular basis for a suitably 'immersive' period of time. You cannot simply just go and 'hang out' as classic ethnographies often demanded. As Ulf Hannerz puts it,

the relationships between [these sites] are as important for this formulation as the relationships within them. One must establish the translocal linkages, and the interconnections between those and whatever local bundles of relationships which are also part of the study. (Hannerz, 2003: 206)

But multi-site fieldwork is actually a gift to someone wanting to treat policy-making as an interpersonal cultural practice; it draws attention to the relational (and as it turned out, emotional) dimensions of making policy. In paying attention to the relationships between sites you also pay attention to the relationships between people, since so much of the work of these forums is about face to face meeting and the building of mutual understandings.

I am currently about two thirds of the way through a period in the field that will last about fifteen months in total. I have joined in the events and activities that have gone under the banner of these two forums during that time as they have been arranged on an ongoing basis. In the case of the stakeholder group I am a non-participant observer. In the case of the showcase event I am a participant and non-participant observer (I am providing policy officer-type support, coordinating speakers, briefing and rehearsing community groups giving evidence, assisting the senior management in practical and strategic planning and so on). To begin with, I observed the meetings and public events relating to the two forums under discussion in the paper. I have also followed two participants from each stakeholder group, interviewing them at the inception stage of my work, mid-field work and I will interview them as part of my exit from the field. More recently, I have spent two days a week on average attending meetings or other activities in which I meet others to work on these projects, but for perhaps the majority of my field work I have come and gone as the activities of the forums required. This rather sporadic engagement is actually perhaps the only meaningful way to experience these forums as it is the experience of my colleagues too. Policy work is necessarily 'in-between work'. That is to say it is episodic in nature because there is always more than one strand of it that you will be required to engage with happening at any one time. Policy work is what happens when you or your organisation needs to negotiate, debate, protest or collaborate with another individual, group or institution. In particular, the fact that this policy field involves conversations with volunteers and activists (the 'grassroots' delegates this paper will focus on) only makes this approach to field work more inevitable, as they have families, jobs, healthcare issues and all the other business of life to attend to before they can attend to making policy. Policy-making does not belong to one place or time, but many, held together by threads of interest and relationships in common.

³ Louise Interview 2, 02/10/12

This poses particular challenges for the participant observer and their status within their field and their research. To be involved in making policy is to be involved in a space where engagement with activism of one sort or another is expected and essential in order to participate. This complicates the traditional role of the dispassionate academic researcher in ways well understood by the ethnographic community (Mosse, 2006). Furthermore, in policy work in NGOs of the type I have been involved with your motivation for your paid work is expected to spring from your personal convictions, and inevitably these convictions are political too. The idea of being able to have a work life and a home life that are discrete is usually impractical and unrealistic; so it has been for me as an academic researcher with a background as a charity policy manager who also volunteers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to do justice to the complexity of the emotional heavy lifting that this 'always on' culture entails for policy workers. We would have to add the conflict that is produced by their status as 'hired guns' who lose jobs, change jobs and try to make a living selling their contacts and expertise. I note this complex status as policy worker here because it is a set of problems relevant to my position as an ethnographer of policy and politics, one that is underexplored within the academy perhaps. I have been involved in shaping the way that the annual forum does policy work, since that is the work that is available to me as participant observer, but it should be understood that my involvement has mostly been limited to a couple of evidence sessions and a keynote roundtable. The people I work with and for are politically confident and sophisticated, they are ready to say no to things they are unsure of and I am not a powerful or high-status person within this context. In all my communications with them and with other informants I have stated that my aim is to build relationships of mutual respect and trust;⁴ most are extremely experienced contributors to policy debates who actively manage their complex public-private personas, including the community activists, and they have been clear that they expect confidentiality and recognisability from the data that I gather from them but not complete anonymity. For this reason all the names in this paper apart from my own have been changed and their exact job title and organisation is not recognisable to the general reader.

As an ethnographer I try to uncover the understanding my informants have of emotion in their working lives. My work is not aimed at answering the scientific or philosophical question of what emotion is and is not, but rather at understanding the socio-cultural meaning of emotion for my informants and myself, particularly as it relates to the practice of policy-making. It seeks to interrogate what is contained by the cultural category of 'emotion' and how emotion is practiced in policy-making. This indicates that I believe that, irrespective of the 'natural' physical mechanics of the phenomena we label *emotion*, what we understand that phenomenon to be and the meanings we give to it are what matter to those that experience emotion. In this sense I am interested in the ways we may interpret emotion using the cultural tools available to the social researcher with, or in parallel to, the cultural tools available to informants. This interpretive approach has been prompted by a concern for policy as it is practiced, outlined earlier in this paper, that was the inspiration for this research project, and the claims made in this paper are rooted in a particular epistemological stance.

⁴ As explained, for example, in my *Emotion and Policy Pamphlet*, distributed to participants in the 'closed' forum as an introduction to the research and to my ethnographic practice.

Interpretivist approaches to research are often considered to be both constructivist and ontologically realist (Kubik, 2009: 42). However I would consider my approach to be founded on more qualified claims about knowledge; following Wittgenstein's theory that, instead of societies creating abstract ideas, in fact use precedes meaning; 'the meaning(s) of a sign (word, picture and sound) is best determined through studying its use, its employment in social practice' (Kubik, 2009: 36). As a researcher I consider my understanding of the social practice I study to be created through everyday practice *with* other people.

Describing emotion

Despite an ethnographic commitment to understanding emotion through the meanings that are implied in the practice of my fellow forum participants, some statement of what this paper understands 'emotion' to contain as a category is necessary. Looking back to the starting point for this research, it is important to ask: what do we mean in these forums when we talk about emotion? Tellingly, asking this question directly usually produced baffled silence in interviewees or participants; '[I ask] "Could you tell me about an emotional moment... [...] Any moment?" (Jenny looks completely taken aback, as if she doesn't understand the words I have just said. A very long silence follows);⁵ '[I say I've been asking what informants] thought I should look for at meetings as I go about doing my job. "I bet they said, 'I've got no idea, I've got no idea what you're doing,'" she says'.⁶ Descriptions of emotion were always situated and in reference to actual behaviour, to the point where I have come to doubt if there is any easily grasped abstract concept referred to by the label 'emotion' in the context of these forums. It seems to belong more to a way of relating to experience, very much something you do as an embodied form of knowledge (Hardill and Mills, forthcoming: 3). Overall emotion could be summed up with what my initial contact at my host organisation, Louise, called "knowing it rather than just reading it in a book".⁷ She explained:

'You get that empathy and that sympathy more from knowing the pressures [...] I think you could just read it [in a report] and still be just like "Yeah, well they still shouldn't be spending money on that" but until you actually see what that person's life is like and the decisions that they have to make I think it's hard to get that better... understanding.'⁸

In this way, emotion as a cipher for personal experience emerged as a category of knowledge (Anderson and Smith, 2001: 7), a way of both knowing the world and representing it and being in it; you have emotions, your own relationship to a personal, lived experience. But you also behave emotionally, in ways that demonstrate to others a reliving of that experience, as opposed to what might be called a calm recollection of it through description. Anything that showed that you were personally experiencing or reliving a phenomenon in another's presence was labelled 'emotional'.

⁵ Jenny Interview 1, 26/10/12

⁶ Observation 3, 02/11/12

⁷ Louise interview 02/10/12

⁸ Louise Interview 02/10/12

These included finger-jabbing to emphasise otherness or blame;⁹ changes to your voice, such as shouting or crying;¹⁰ foot stamping and other exaggerated physical gestures.¹¹ As one civil servant explained, the relationship you enacted between yourself and this personal experience was the crucial difference between the emotional and the rational, which he regarded as residing somewhere beyond your own direct experience. You could tell by content and by physical delivery which ‘mode’ a participant was in. Referring to an incident at one of the forums in which he had been given an extended and somewhat disjointed verbal assault by a woman recounting her experience of life in a deprived Glasgow housing estate,¹² he reflected:

‘That’s the kind of place you’ve got to start the conversation, I think. So it’s not to say you can’t... you’re not angry and you’re not passionate and you’re not frustrated and upset, all that emotion there... And I think we all go into that with our jobs sometimes, but you have to understand that if you’re going to get anywhere you’ve got to start with your circumstances and start thinking what the solution might be’.¹³

As this last quote suggests the logical likelihood that everyone involved in the forums has emotional knowledge, whether they acted on it or not, was rarely disputed by informants. However emotional knowledge is also frequently described by informants as ambiguous, unreliable and potentially overwhelming knowledge – in contrast with ‘rational’ knowledge, which is the prerequisite for ‘professionalism’ in policy-making and a necessity for making policy decisions. The same civil servant went on to explain the double-bind of being a policy professional; “I can’t answer those questions [about someone’s personal life] because they’re individual experiences. I need to respond as an individual but I’m not there as an individual.”¹⁴ This last statement was striking in the way the realm of the ‘personal’ emerges again, this time presented by the civil servant in question as in direct opposition to everything that he must embody as a ‘public’ figure, at the loss of his individual personhood. For a world in which sharing of subjective, personal testimony is stated as the focus of much of the policy forums’ face to face and written activity, it was interesting how often people, particularly from NGO’s or in brokerage roles, would exhort each other to ‘not make it personal’ while telling these stories; “[The chair] asks that people stop attacking the guy from the Government personally”.¹⁵

To my informants emotion is rationality’s antithesis and yet, according to all three of the categories of forum participant, the only thing that makes rationality usable and morally good.¹⁶ So the realm of the emotional is essential but difficult territory for even the most bureaucratic of participants in the policy forums. Emotion clearly poses a problem for social order within the forums and therefore also problematises the presentation and experience of individual participants. Even Louise, a great

⁹ Jenny Interview 26/10/12

¹⁰ Carla Interview 31/10/12

¹¹ Observation 02/11/12

¹² Observation 23/03/12

¹³ Donald Interview 28/03/12

¹⁴ Donald Interview 28/03/12

¹⁵ Observation 15/03/12

¹⁶ Donald Interview 1, 28/03/12 and Carla Interview 1, 31/10/12

advocate for the transformative power of emotional encounters, describes personal testimony of direct, lived experience as having the potential to be both “passionate” and deeply moving and also as “just ranting and raving”, depending on its presentation and its recipient audience.¹⁷ Emotion demands meticulous and constant management in the ongoing work of the forums.

Emotions and the grassroots

Perhaps because of the ambivalent status of emotion, largely unspoken but complex rules about how to express it and the duty to express it seem to have evolved among the forums’ participants. In particular, it became apparent that emotionality (in the sense of displaying behaviour and language associated with the emotional) was considered to have a special relationship with the ‘grassroots’ or community activist participants. In the first instance, at the most superficial level of reflection, activists were presented to me during interviews as people who could “get away with” displaying their emotional connection to the issues under discussion in a way that others just couldn’t;

‘It’s almost like there are rules drawn up around these things, there are like patterns of behaviour, which [we] have learned, whether it be business which is you know about controlling yourself and trying to get people to listen to you or whether it be... teaching, the teaching unions, which are all about passion, but those mechanisms are put in place so they’ve got a space... at the table... they’ve had to learn how to get the message across. Yes, how to reflect that passion but also how to use it effectively and the like. [...] You know we all do it in our everyday lives, and in community groups maybe less regularly, compared with somebody who [is a ‘professional’]’¹⁸

This statement could be read as implying an essential property of being ‘grassroots’ is a lack of sophistication or a naivety about policy and political life, and that emotionality is a symptom of that. If they were to lose this naivety they would become insiders of some description, but because they ‘know no better’ they may say things others simply wouldn’t or couldn’t. When Louise had been to a meeting at which she had been very personally and angrily accused of wanting to ‘use’ a community group and their life experience in what they called her ‘academic’ work (in reality her policy work), I asked her:

‘Rosie: Was that a more typical encounter between you and a [community group]?’

Louise: Yeah. Definitely. Like generally yep, people are very “this is what I’m going through and it’s shocking” and just an anger, a real anger.

Rosie: They said some pretty... pretty harsh stuff... (giggles)

Louise: Hm. (Giggles) I’ve not had that before, I have to say. I mean, been in a discussion and that’s happened. I mean, that’s happened in big conferences and people are just sort of flipping the finger.¹⁹

¹⁷ Louise Interview 2, 02/10/12

¹⁸ Donald Interview 28/03/12

¹⁹ Louise Interview 20/02/12

Given the perceived importance to so many academics and certain policy workers of predictably rational behaviour in the smooth functioning of ongoing policy formation (Hill, 2005: 147), you might expect that such breaches of the established grammar of being 'professional' in this context would be experienced as diminishing and embarrassing lapses of judgement by community informants themselves. Interestingly, this was not the case. Community activists spoke approvingly of their 'emotional' behaviour. Carla, a woman living with complex health and financial problems, reflected on the way she presented herself in a video that was shown at a big poverty policy conference: "I was saying, 'This is killing me, this illness'. And my emotions, well, you don't really realise how bad it is until you start talking about it, and then when you've seen it back, I thought 'God, I didn't realise it was that bad!'"²⁰ She was frequently moved to tears during the short film, her voice trembling with what she identified as profound sadness in our discussion. She reported that the reaction from the audience was the best she could hope for: silence. She interpreted this as having had a resonance for the audience far beyond her expectations. She felt that it was actually a moment of great power for her; "I was thinking I was glad that it was having an impact and I was thinking maybe now they'll actually look at some of the written stuff and actually do something about it. Take into account that this is reality."²¹ This silence could have had other roots – embarrassment for example – but Carla located it within the emotional realm of policy work and interpreted it accordingly. This reflects a discourse of the power of emotion found elsewhere among my informants. For instance, while confrontation from an emotional perspective was not exactly relished by NGO workers or government representatives, it was regarded as a desirable thing as a sort of crucible for getting at the heart of a problem:

'I think there has been lots of learning from, from these really destructive points where people come together. [...] On some occasions that can be really, really effective. You know, where you've got a duff policy and policy makers need to know about it and they need that kind of direct action so they can sit up and take notice and really do something about it, you know?'²²

So although these outbursts and irruptions of emotion were often described as disruptive and 'unprofessional', a sort of tacit permission seems to have been granted to community activists and the 'grassroots' to break with protocol. There is clearly more going on here than naivety. By looking beyond the sometimes rather trivialising descriptions of activism and grassroots emotionality in policy forums and focusing on their participants' practice, it emerges that their license to behave in this way serves a range of purposes for the entire policy-making community.

Having the permission to bring the emotional to bear upon decision-making is seen as serving a deliberative function, and perhaps a moral one as well. A sort of folk sentimentalism is very much in evidence when you ask informants what makes a good policy decision or document, that is to say having an emotional (first-person and experiential) relationship to a phenomenon or an issue you need to make a decision about, gets at a sort of truth that is not accessible by any other means. Participants of all backgrounds often speak about the forums' power residing in its ability to enable contact with

²⁰ Carla Interview 31/10/12

²¹ Carla Interview 31/10/12

²² Jenny Interview 26/10/12

people *experiencing* poverty – not studying poverty, or analysing poverty, or representing those in poverty – and that this was essential to uncovering ‘reality’; ‘It does make it more real. And that, that’s the danger of working in policy, you stay in the ivory tower, as the classic cliché goes, and you stay away from all that,’ said Douglas. But he went on to explain that these encounters with ‘reality’ were essential for making not just effective but just and normatively right decisions, for acting as a moral agent, “otherwise you don’t really get a sense of what you’re doing, or why you’re doing it”.²³ It is fascinating to think that, from Douglas’s perspective, without that emotional shot in the arm, your technical expertise is at risk of not just being lacking in impact, but also at some deep level being meaningless.

Carla echoed his language when talking about who I should look to for emotional displays in the forum; “You’ll get more truth from the community activists. [...] I think they know from experience, where other people only know from what they’ve read or heard, but I think the actual person who experiences it can tell it proper.”²⁴ In this way, emotional knowledge emerged as the special and almost exclusive preserve of community activists. Not only are they the only ones who are allowed to display emotional knowledge or act upon it in the forums uninhibited, but they are the only ones who ever *could*, according to my informants. So while emotionality excludes you from ‘professional’ status, it also gives you the right to be at the table and have your role in deliberations and is a powerful riposte to the perceived knowledge shortcomings of ‘professionalism’ that causes anxiety to NGO and government workers informants. In short there is a peculiar, almost talismanic power held by the publicly emotional person in a process contrived to crush subjectivity and individuality.

Emotional knowledge is also considered to be an essential raw material in producing good governance and policy, and considerable effort is put into finding, nurturing and presenting individuals at these forums who have a powerfully emotional story to tell. This is very much the work that I as participant observer have been involved in. The various ways in which the host organisation manages, translates, deletes and creates with these stories is not really the focus of this paper. But it is interesting that for NGO informants this is where it all starts, for them as policy lobbyists and for the people they wish to influence. I have observed meetings and workshops where activists directly experiencing poverty or a related problem are encouraged to share stories and then, through various processes, reflect upon what the key messages are that policy makers will be able to grasp and how best they should present themselves.

For example, early in 2012 I accompanied Louise on a trip to a community centre in North Glasgow to prepare testimony – or ‘evidence’ in the quasi-judicial language of the event in question. The centre’s users were going to present to a breakout session in an open annual showcase event. It was imperative that we start from personal and emotional knowledge; ‘Louise says that she wants Linda to tell her story as a basis for putting words to needs. She reminds us that the assembly is about pinpointing what the goals are - that we need to move from vague feelings to material demands’.²⁵ In practice this process of moving from the particular and emotional to general and impersonal, so

²³ Douglas Interview 28/03/12

²⁴ Carla Interview 31/10/12

²⁵ Observation 13/02/12

simple-sounding on paper, is actually very difficult to get right in the eyes of policy practitioners because of emotional knowledge's ambiguous status in policy. We spent over two hours returning to the same stories, working over the same ground. I am not going to misrepresent the stories that get told and the emotion on display from community activists in policy forums as simplistic, unrehearsed or unmediated. Indeed they are the focus of considerable attention for NGO workers. Such testimonies are often employed as the route in and through what are otherwise either inhumanly complex or boring matters and as such are considered to be the key to a productive discussion by Louise and her colleagues. There is plenty of technical information about areas of deprivation and the built environment, but the problem may be better understood in some way if the centre manager, sitting a couple of feet away from you, looking directly at you, tells you that, "The emotional, psychological side of watching things go to shit is devastating, particularly when those buildings were important to the community"²⁶ Within this statement is not just an unsparing diagnosis of a problem, but also conveyed within his personal experience of this problem is an uncompromising challenge about the injustice of things. You feel, and as a result get a suggestion of where and how to act. This is what the users of that community centre were being encouraged to bring to the forum.

Thanks to their special license to express powerful, personal emotions and experiences, community activists also seem to have acquired a role as emotional avatars who express an emotional and personal relationship to the process and content of policy on behalf of those who may not because of expectations for them to behave as 'professionals'. This is not something that has been brought up by the community activists themselves, but has been mentioned several times by professional practitioners, in particular the NGO workers, and it is also one way of interpreting the way professionals react to emotionality in community activists in certain situations. One episode in particular illustrated this rather murky function of community activists for 'professionals'. A small sub-committee of the ongoing stakeholder forum had run a series of workshops to feed into a Scottish Government review of a relevant policy strategy. These had consisted of sessions at which civil servants and a wide range of people directly experiencing the issue in question had met in a variety of locations across Scotland. The event was considered to be one of the better planned and more exhaustive policy interventions the forum had undertaken, and had been suitably affecting, according to the Director and policy workers of the host organisation and of other partner organisations.

However, at the end of the summer recess when the strategy came to be published, none of the forum's input seemed to have made it into the final edit or be directly reflected by the content. This omission was described as being professionally embarrassing and a kind of failure by the policy workers involved, but for Louise, who had coordinated the submission, it had personal significance. Not only did she look unreliable or misleading to the community activists she had persuaded to give up their time and participate in the workshops, a source of great sadness and anxiety to her, she also felt betrayed on what can only be described as a very personal level by her civil service contacts. When I caught up with her after summer, I found her to be visibly fuming;

²⁶ Observation 13/02/12

“They never bloody well used any of our material” she says. “I’m telling you, it’s going to be hard to keep my own emotions under control. To be honest I’m hoping that the community activists there will do the shouting for me”. [...]

Have you told them [the civil servants] how upset you are, I ask? “No”, she says, because she can’t just go around getting upset about things like that, “I’ve got to be professional”.²⁷

In the event, the public meetings between the community activists and these civil servants were remarkably polite. Two of them occurred the following month; the first was a plenary session of the ongoing stakeholder forum, the other was a feedback session specifically for the subcommittee and the evidence givers from community groups. During the plenary I had expected a far greater level of hostility from the floor to the individual civil servant, Craig, who presented to us the overall strategy document’s contents. This didn’t really happen, but I do know that more than one meeting had been held between the host organisation and the civil service team in question and by this time some appeasing measures had been suggested in private, such as making these discussions a semi-formal permanent part of the team’s work. Nevertheless, dissatisfaction was given voice during the panel session where Craig and a community research participant who gave evidence to the strategy review reflected on the process and the document.

“The feeling I got from last night [a meeting of the subcommittee] was that some areas got dismissed [by Government]”, he [the community researcher] says. People take a note of this on their agendas and so on. Coming after such a bland, un-pin-downable account of the process as the previous one by Craig, this seems almost shocking to me. I am also aware that the two speakers are sat right next to one another. I’m intrigued that the second speaker was comfortable saying this about Craig in public. To me, from what I have learnt, this is not what you do. [...] It’s not ‘professional’; ultimately embarrassing your colleague is worse somehow than not airing the grievance, even in front of a sympathetic audience.²⁸

During the panel discussion I also observed that Louise and other NGO workers’ behaviour was following an interesting pattern which in some respects echoed the blankness of Craig’s delivery. In particular, Louise had a job that needed to be as unobtrusive as possible in the debate;

[She] has been circulating with a Dictaphone, recording everything. I actually hadn’t noticed her until now. Her behaviour is [...] contained, expressionless, pared down to what is needed for her to fulfil her function. Only the very smallest smile or frown crosses her face in response to what the activists are saying; but it does still cross it, and it is still there for others to see.²⁹

In this way, the NGO workers played a very subtle chorus to the main performance of the supposedly unspeakable truth being told by the community researcher. My earlier conversations with Louise threw new light on what she might be signalling to others through this very contained performance of emotionality herself; that she was indeed present and found it pleasing that they were expressing

²⁷ Observation 02/10/12

²⁸ Observation 13/11/12

²⁹ Observation 13/11/12

certain things that she did not want to express or did not feel able to express herself. Because of their unique emotional role in the life of the forums, it could be argued that community activists may be tacitly recruited into preserving others' professionalism by being emotionally present on their behalf. The arrangement seems to preserve the expected order of social interactions and others' status as professionals and to contain and express safely what otherwise might threaten the social order of the forums.

Another aspect of this emotionalised role is the way activists can often be observed saying what others may not, thereby exposing latent assumptions or values or disrupting social order through breaches of tact which others may then make use of in various ways. This is often done through the mobilisation of humour to expose absurdities or merely to satirise the non-personal, technical position of 'professionals' and politicians. This behaviour could be argued to fulfil a role similar to a Shakespearean Fool; the clever peasant in whom 'society's anxieties about itself find an outlet; yet the laughter which he arouses is at the same time a profound criticism of the forces that have made him what he is' (Ellis, 1968: 245). This may sound like a dismissive way of looking at community activists' emotional presence, but this interpretation of fooldom underestimates satire's depth and power. In a meeting where I and the steering group were meant to be planning the next big set-piece event for one of the forums, a community activist, Iain, asked quite different questions to the rest of us, in such a way that disrupted the flow of the conversation. These questions were tolerated by the body of the group and in fact took us down paths we might not have felt comfortable initiating ourselves. When discussing the report from an evaluation of the entire project that had just been handed in to us, Iain asked a question that at first seemed out of place and childlike;

"Were there any elements that you were unhappy about?" [he asks], which seems to strike [the Director] momentarily as a slightly unexpected question – what does it matter if he's happy or not? - but he answers slowly, '...No...' and then goes on to consider that the Evaluation Report made out that the project didn't change relations between Government and the 'grassroots' as much as it set out to.³⁰

I had never seen the Director express anything other than satisfaction about the report, and I wouldn't have known how to prompt him to reflect upon this in front of others in a way that wasn't socially clumsy. At the same meeting Iain also punctured some rather long and technical discussions about taking forward the recommendations in the evaluation report;

Iain suggests that we "catalytically synergise" with some people around this issue, particularly other NGO's. [The Director] joins in the joke, saying, "I can't understand you when you use language like that. I'm fine with the old Seventies jargon, but not that," and we all laugh. I suppose it's mocking our own language, our own jargon as practitioners, a self-consciousness that we're faintly mockable.³¹

Community practitioners and their license to relate to the issue, the process and other people as emotional and situated individuals freed of the 'rules' of earnest impartiality give them an interrogatory power that most practitioners relish and wish to engage with, or even keep close. In this way

³⁰ Observation 12/11/12

³¹ Observation 12/11/12

community activists seem to be able to perform a ‘remember you are mortal’ function to even the loftiest contributor, and serve to remind us of both the differences in status, power, experience and so on between participants and of the fragility of the power claimed by professionalism. Even in the most carefully managed events with august decision-makers present, this power does not seem to be revoked for community activists. The way the physicality of emotion gets mobilised to this effect could be seen in the way community activists questioned a Scottish Government Minister at a plenary meeting of a long-standing forum for policy stakeholders:

An elderly man sitting on the far side of the room to me is picked [to ask a question]. “Let me point the finger” he begins, and then in a slow, exaggerated way he does, and asks a question about how the elderly are affected by the current economic climate, budget changes, etc. When he uses Scottish Government terminology to describe things, he uses exaggerated ‘bunny ears’ gestures with his hands. He speaks very quietly, very slowly and he uses no big gestures apart from these. The overall effect is quietly mocking and incredulous.³²

Emerging analysis

Feeling rules and roles

When taking part in the ongoing life of these two forums, some of which I have described above, the sense of being part of a performance is often overwhelming. Watching someone shift from being a private person as they interact with, say, just you or a couple of trusted colleagues to delivering a stand-up performance in front of a different group of people, with separate props, scenery and circles of attention is to be taken from behind a curtain and walked across an immense stage, then whisked off to the wings again. This impression is only heightened by the fact that these particular forums have actual semi-official ‘rehearsals’³³ in which community activist contributors can run through their presentation of their concerns and indeed themselves. This theatricality is also present in the way that in full meetings you can watch the participants go ‘on air’ as they move from meeting and greeting each other, laughing, having coffee, catching up, to taking their seats and being much more subdued during the official ‘meeting’.³⁴

This theatricality of micro-social interactions is a well-observed phenomenon in sociological literature, and in particular Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis (1990) is brought to mind by the way the forums’ participants negotiate the expectations they consider to be on their conduct and attitudes. This perhaps matters so much in the context of these forums, has become exaggerated even, because it furnishes a highly structured way of engaging with something that is incredibly process-driven and gives everyone a ‘way of being’ when in a room with forty other bodies that is intelligible to others when the tools they are using – policy documents, social scientific data, Parliamentary process – are by their nature disembodied and insubstantial. To act in this way is to provide everyone with enough relevant experience – not necessarily of this particular performance –

³² Observation 13/11/12

³³ Observation 13/02/12 and Observation 02/11/12

³⁴ Observation 13/11/12

with a predictable set of moves and roles; thus we all know each other and know ourselves, who exactly we are meant to be and therefore, for now, who we are (Goffman, 1990: 30). 'There will be a response to the role that each presents as his mantle for the moment,' (Goffman, 1986: 298) but since we are aware of the performance we also get to see the 'person beyond the role' through small embellishments and lapses that each of us improvises. Instead of detracting from the confidence with which they play their roles, so long as they are done confidently these small improvisations instead reassure us of the existence of a person beyond the local context. Thus we do not need to concern ourselves with discovering who anyone 'really is', so long as they competently manage performing their current role.

This complex relationship to sincerity and authenticity takes on a particularly sharp focus when considering emotion in the context of a group of people who are preoccupied with legitimacy, power, and just governance. In the way that informants describe in detail what emotionality they may or may not perform under which circumstances, it is not unreasonable to regard this as a form of managing feeling. Hochschild (1983) developed Goffman's dramaturgical perspective to examine the roles and rules around feeling in social interaction, drawing the distinction between 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' (Hochschild, 1983: 36). Where surface acting is something that we consciously do or 'put on', at odds with what we feel to be our true emotions, deep acting can either be achieved by 'directly exhorted feeling [or] by making indirect use of a trained imagination' (Hochschild, 1983: 38). The former is about persuading yourself to feel things that others expect you to, or that you feel your current circumstances demand, such as crying at a funeral. The latter is more about using a 'trained imagination' to mine your past experience for a scenario that gives you an appropriate emotion to relive in order to fulfil your current emotional obligations.

These expectations are scripted by a complex set of 'feeling rules', which 'guide emotion by establishing the sense of entitlement or obligation that governs emotional exchanges' (Hochschild, 1983: 56). In the context of the two forums I have been discussing in this paper, there were arguably very sharp feeling rules – in particular around the close connection between emotional management, a lack of first-person perspective and the idea of 'professionalism'. Notice, though, that these are all feeling rules around NGO workers and civil servants. These were groups of people with elaborate sets of behaviours determining what kind of emotional knowledge was permissible and where, and also around the way you signalled that you were doing the work of managing your emotionality in public. The emotional labour of civil servants and NGO workers is not the primary focus of this paper, but its existence does present an analytical problem in that the emotion rules around community activists, as grassroots people, in fact revolved around their perceived *lack* of rules and ungovernability.

Arguably such parameters still constitute rules about feeling for community activists, but not about needing to conform to a set of inner emotions that they may not be experiencing as in the case of true emotional labour. Rather community activists seem to be explicitly and implicitly encouraged to break the conventions of the policy world in unpredictable ways; they are there to experience and act upon their first-person relationship to something that really matters to them, to act upon their emotional knowledge. In the setting of these policy forums that is their primary feeling rule.

This is quite different to the commodified emotional work that Hochschild (1983) describes in professional settings. In these forums a group of people, identified by others and themselves as people with a particular claim on emotional knowledge, are being encouraged to live and relive emotion not *as if* it were what they feel, but because it *really is* what they feel. This is the crucial difference between someone like an NGO worker telling a story they've seen or heard about someone experiencing poverty, and someone who is 'real'. This is the first of two reasons that makes me hesitate to whole heartedly adopt the description of emotional labour for this type of political work, particularly as applied to community activists. You could look on this behaviour as a form of deep acting, although I think the reported sincerity with which it is practiced and received by community activists and others should at least cause a researcher to pause in describing it thus. Although feeling rules are generally flexible and reflect class, gender and context (Hochschild, 1979), so community activists could be said to be living within a highly coded set of expectations to fulfil their emotional roles as gendered, socially situated people.

As an ethnographer I am hesitant to impose an internal emotional reality upon my informants that they have not reported to me. In all my dealings with the forums' members, community activists are reported as having a *freedom from* feeling rules that apply to the rest of the group. They may opt in, but are sanctioned to opt out in a variety of unpredictable ways. Weathering these emotional hazards is the professional burden of the civil servant or NGO worker, and the price they pay for a vicarious escape from the tactically productive but strategically damaging feeling rules that they operate within. The second aspect of the difficulty of describing what community activists do as emotional labour is that they are very much cast in the customer role in these forums. The salaried 'professionals' report patterns of thought and behaviour much closer to that of Hochschild's air hostesses or bill collectors; 'unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display. The ledger is supposedly evened by a wage' (Hochschild, 1983: 86). The sometimes very personal attacks on individual NGO workers or civil servants are maybe facilitated by the fact that they are cast as servants of the grassroots activists and paid for their efforts, although as Hochschild's examples illustrate, the emotional assault is attacking a place a financial compensation cannot reach.

My current analysis is that feeling rules and deep acting can account for the more transactional elements of the work of my two case study policy forums, in particular as a schema for predicting who may do and say what and when and in giving the responsibility for 'caring' to community activists. However the related concept of emotional labour doesn't seem to provide a satisfying description of what is going on when community activists are expressing widely held but inadmissible emotions or playing the 'Fool'. This seems to be the opposite of deep acting, although it is a form of emotional work; it seems to be an earnest depiction of something that others experience but are obliged by social convention to not act upon, or an incisive and sincere comment wrapped in a joke about feelings, where no one can be sure who is entitled to be laughing at who. My informants do not experience these two aspects of their interactions together as situations in which they are exhorting or imagining themselves *as if* they shared that emotional knowledge. They know they do share it, but have no legitimate options for performing it in public. For this reason the rather convoluted means they

have evolved for the sharing of emotional knowledge in these forums can be more properly understood as a gift, rather than a commodity exchange.

Splitting and projection

If we understand policy forums to be a set of practices whose meaning can only be understood as emerging through use, rather than referring to something fixed and pre-determined, they are also a product of human interaction. As such they are constantly negotiated and renegotiated constructed social spaces which, among other things, reflect the internal understandings and private worlds of many people through their relationships and the roles they are given and assume. In this sense it is 'a social system, an imaginary institution' (Lyth, 1990: 467).

One of the most striking features of the way emotion gets dealt with in these forums is the way that certain groups and people come to represent and understand this particular aspect of knowledge to be irreconcilable with and at complete odds to other forms of knowledge, for example scientific or legal knowledge. Nevertheless all individuals acknowledge the need to be both thinking and feeling decision-makers, and so certain groups become the repositories for different types of knowledge. Looked at in this way community activists carry the emotional side of everyone involved. In psychoanalytic literature these arrangements are often encountered in social systems, and are recognised as 'a collusive system of denial, splitting and projection that was culturally acceptable, indeed culturally required' (Lyth, 1990: 449). This may sound like judgemental language. It is not to say that this is abnormal or pathological behaviour, but it can have unintended consequences that causes widespread dissatisfaction and can limit people's options for social strategies and behaviour.

For example in a classic 1960 study of the distribution of responsibilities among ward nurses, Lyth observed that, 'each nurse tended to split off aspects of herself from her conscious personality and to project them into other nurses' (Lyth, 1990: 449). So a nurse's irresponsible side was given to those below her in the nursing structure. Her sense of responsibility and also her extremely judgemental attitude towards irresponsibility were passed to her superiors. One way of understanding what is happening by emotion being attributed to activists, and rationality to civil servants, is that these ways of relating to the world and the policy issues under discussion, are understood to be prone to 'contamination' from each other. Yet both necessary in making policy, are dealt with by participants in a way that minimises their sense of anxiety.

By looking at the emotional content of these forums, a picture emerges of policy-making itself as a social defence against anxiety. It is an 'imagined institution' charged with recognising the end of one regime or state of affairs and the beginning of another whose aim is to manage change in a society, with all the difficult human responses that change can generate. Policy processes are one of the hinges in our collective and personal political lives between our inner and outer worlds (Rustin, 2001), and the recurring theme in these forums of the negotiation and policing of the boundary between personal and objectively 'professional' knowledge about that change serves to highlight policy work's liminal and performative character.

Conclusion: truth and consequences

In this paper I have outlined how emotion is described as a particular form of knowledge in the policy-making forums that I study and how community activists are considered to have a particular affinity with it because of their unique position as people who have first-hand, personal experience of the topics under consideration. This is seen as an essential component of moral as well as effective governance and decision making, as it is seen as the only route to a very particular form of 'truth' that is often described as 'reality'. However, I have also tried to outline some of the patterns that may be emerging from this data. These patterns may have consequences for the policy-making process as a whole or for the individual participants involved. These consequences in turn could pose challenges for reflective practitioners in both academia and policy-making, myself included, and it is with these I wish to conclude.

Firstly the emotional recruitment I described, in which community representatives and activists are looked to to express what 'professionals' may not, presents several problems of power and status within the context of these forums. If a 'professional' may not behave in certain ways because it will be regarded as socially incompetent by their peers, should they be comfortable watching others forgo that professionalism to express something they themselves are not prepared to? What if these 'professionals' were to actually encourage or recruit people who will contravene these feeling rules, to effectively carry out what is to the 'professional' their emotional dirty work? The community development workers I have spoken to and observed during the course of my research have generally been greatly preoccupied with questions of voice and addressing structural imbalances in political life through their work, but their actions tend to be framed as a question of access to information and processes. I believe it would be productive to consider in discussion and through observation what an emotional framework can give these practitioners as a tool for thinking about voice, access and individuals' wellbeing in policy participation. What weight should practitioners attach to the types of status being presented as 'grassroots' opens up or closes off? The emotional and social wellbeing of those who are recruited into participating in policy is surely a concern of the policy-making community as much as questions of access and information, and concepts of empowerment should also include having the opportunity to make choices about the emotional content of your self-presentation. I do accept, however, that these are choices that policy 'professionals' are currently denied themselves.

Of all the roles given to and adopted by forum participants, the Fool was perhaps the most surprising of all, and true to the spirit of Fools throughout the ages it has emerged as a powerful one because it is so mercurial and mutable. To say what is socially clumsy to say, to act quite literally out of turn, to be given dispensation to introduce the emotional into what is supposed to be an objective, rational process is the privilege or damnation, depending on circumstance, of community activists and others regarded as 'grassroots'. These moments are often occasions for humour in the forums' events and interactions, but it is often debateable who is being teased or even mocked; is it the community activist for 'getting it wrong', or is it the 'professionals' for having got it wrong in a completely different, more morally serious way? As Roger Ellis points out, the Fool in Shakespeare and other literature is 'set in a world where he is early made aware that he is different and somehow unacceptable to the majority, he is forced to examine himself and the bases of his behaviour' and as such he commits himself to seeing human existence '*from the inside*' (Ellis, 1968: 246).

This is of course in contrast with those who have never had to examine themselves in this way; unaware of the gap between their own understanding and the rest of existence, they believe they see the world and their fellow humans from the outside. Given what emotion and emotionality is described as relating to in the context of the forums – very much seeing existence *from the inside* – it is an imperfection that cannot be admitted to by ‘professionals’ while in role. After all it is their perfectible and objective knowledge that legitimises their decisions. But they also know that this perfection is a fantasy, and foolery gives everyone an opportunity to acknowledge this and examine its consequences. Foolery is a constructive form of cynicism; aware of the limitations of some of ‘professionalism’, by disrupting its performance it encourages the professional to step beyond the role and question its usefulness. Of course, deciding to play the Fool comes with a health warning. It is an outsider role by its nature, but it carries considerable power to shift the focus of the discussion and to expose hypocrisies or debates that may have been occluded by more conventional behaviour.

In that it implies being in an inferior status position to those around you, it has been interesting to consider that the emotional labour familiar from Hochschild’s writing doesn’t seem to be the concern of community activists but rather civil servants. The civil servant and sometimes the NGO worker’s role most resembles the various emotional labourers Hochschild describes. The community activist would be the customer, with their expectation of being able to express their emotions to their service provider without expectation of similar treatment in return, and as Hochschild points out, where ‘the customer is king’ uneven emotional exchanges come to be expected and normalised (Hochschild, 1983: 85-86). Indeed, I have sat through policy forum meetings in which service users and even people involved in participatory governance initiatives were referred to as ‘customers’. This could be seen as a cause for concern in terms of the political status of the citizen, a passive and patronised recipient of the State. However looked at in emotional terms – the focus of this particular paper – this description implies an obligation on State employees to labour emotionally for the citizen/client/consumer.

Add to this that there is a kind of ‘ritual powers of the weak’ at work here, as described by Victor Turner (Turner, 1969: 102), in that these forums seem to set up the expectation that the ‘low’ (community activists) may revile and strip the ‘high’ (civil servants) of their customary status and the expectations that imposes on others’ behaviour towards them. These interactions may not ultimately threaten any wider power structures, and indeed as Turner pointed out may serve to almost strengthen them by absorbing the spiritual potency of the abject or marginalised, but I have come to be uneasy about observing these practices because of the sometimes considerable strain individuals who represent the State are put under by this quasi-ritualised reviling. They may represent a system that will be strengthened by this process, but as individuals they must do some significant heavy lifting in terms of emotional management, with apparently very little professional support, as policy work is not meant to be personal work. The emotional rules and roles that apply to NGO workers and civil servants in the forums I have observed and participated in deserve their own, full consideration elsewhere and my future work will look at these perspectives in more detail. Our understanding of the emotional culture of the civil service, for want of a better phrase, would probably benefit from an ethnographic study similar to this one, based within Whitehall, Holyrood or local authority teams.

The consequences of introducing emotion into the analysis of policy for the conceptualisation and exercise of power needs to be taken far more seriously as an aspect of political studies. It opens up new fields for exploring what is at stake and who is in a position of power and authority which do not necessarily merely reproduce the potentials and inequalities of other more established axes of influence and knowledge. Emotional knowledge may not be described as high-status or reliable knowledge by my informants, but it is described as indispensable and powerful and community activists have by far the greatest freedom of any participants to interrogate, improvise and mobilise the emotional side of policy work.

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Below the Radar

This research theme explores the role, function, impact and experiences of small community groups or activists. These include those working at a local level or in communities of interest - such as women's groups or refugee and migrant groups. We are interested in both formal organisations and more informal community activity. The research is informed by a reference group which brings together practitioners from national community networks, policy makers and researchers, as well as others who bring particular perspectives on, for example, rural, gender or black and minority ethnic issues.

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