

# Exploring workforce retention in child and family social work: Critical social theory, social pedagogy and action research

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*Abstract: Child and family social work in the United Kingdom is facing a staff recruitment and retention crisis in many areas. Occupational stress, burnout, heavy workloads and insufficient resources combine to make the social work role highly demanding and unattractive to prospective recruits. This paper explores one approach to the problem which synthesises Giddens' philosophical ideas on discursive consciousness, Habermas' precepts on moral discourse, Boal's use of empowering theatre and Lewin's rendition of the action research cycle. These theoretical, philosophical and methodological components, when combined, offer a radically different approach to staff retention strategies within child welfare organisations by centring on the transformative power of human agency. It is concluded that the approach described can be extrapolated to the management of other human service professions experiencing similar recruitment and retention difficulties.*

*Key words: staff retention in social work, critical social theory, pedagogy, action research*

## **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom many social work educators will be familiar with the penultimate stage of qualifying training when final year social work students consider their employment prospects. A brief review of the local newspaper reveals that the majority of posts advertised fall within child and family social work - the so called 'hard end of the market'. For the social work student an immediate

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tension arises: on the one hand economic necessity dictates that application forms are submitted for these jobs while, on the other, fear cautions against a precipitate move into this area of social work. This latter reaction is likely to be driven by conjoined images of the social worker hung out to dry for acting in an overly zealous manner (following the legacy of the Cleveland, Rochdale and Orkneys child abuse inquiries) and, by way of contrast, the social worker impaled for failing to act at all or at least minimally (in the wake of the Beckford, Carlisle and latterly, Climbe inquiries).

Economic necessity (as Marx reminded us) often prevails in such situations leading many newly qualified social workers to assuage their fears by taking up child-care posts. It is only then that the grim reality of heavy caseloads embroiled with child protection value dilemmas fully takes hold, with dissatisfied clients and procedurally led management systems added for good measure. The attrition rate for such workers is likely to be high though. Some may stay for several years at the 'coalface' but a significant number will look to (what they perceive is) the more insouciant domains of social work with adults and the voluntary sector.

Although it would be misleading to suggest that a career in child and family social work is inevitably traumatic, there is a serious point to be made concerning this issue of workforce stability as Barak et al (2001) remind us in their meta-analysis on staff turnover in child welfare and human service organisations:

The bad news is that employees often leave not because of personal and work-family balance reasons but because they are not satisfied with their jobs, feel excessive stress and burnout, and do not feel supported by their supervisors and the organisation. (p.655)

A raft of literature focusing on occupational stress, turnover and 'burn out' amongst social workers in the United Kingdom supports these gloomy findings. Gibson et al (1989) interviewed a large cohort of social workers in Northern Ireland. They found that the respondents were experiencing exceptionally high levels of stress due to occupational rather than personal or domestic reasons. Bennett *et al.* (1993) investigated levels of stress and coping mechanisms in social workers in three different programmes of care. They suggested that childcare workers' relatively high scores on the stress subscale were due primarily to a lack of support and isolation in the workplace. Jones *et al.* (1991) discovered that, while social workers found their work satisfying, they perceived it as very pressurised. Balloch *et al.* (1998), in a major survey of the social services workforce, reported that staff working in the statutory sector experienced more stress and violence compared to their colleagues working in other sectors. Bradley *et al.* (1995) suggested that a myriad of factors contributed to staff turnover and stress within

social work including relationships in the workplace and contact with service users. Smith *et al.* (2004) found that social workers routinely experienced fear of violence, losing control, disapproval and rejection.

Important as these findings are in their own right, they need to be grounded within a socio-political context. This context is one that locates child and family social work at the epicentre of a whirlwind of governmental reforms on the public services. Central to these reforms is the need to maintain the public's trust and confidence in the State (Smith, 2001).

However, this imperative has had negative consequences for professionals working in the frontline of service delivery. Thus, Parton *et al.* (1997) discovered that social workers succumbed to a *modus vivendi* that they termed 'risk insurance'; that is, they developed strategies to protect themselves from censure in cultures where blame featured strongly. In a different vein, Spratt *et al.* (1999) highlighted how humanistic discourses shaping social workers' practices had ceded to a forensic ideology in order to satiate a moral panic over dangerousness in society. Alternatively, for Webb (2001), the bureaucratisation of child and family social work was strangling social workers' use of discretion and undermining their professional efficacy.

There is a danger, though, of succumbing to simplistic explanations for what is a complex problem. Clearly, other structural factors contribute to disaffection and disgruntlement within the workforce. For instance, Harlow (2004) attributed difficulties to recruiting female social workers to managerialism and a postfeminist context which offered women alternative occupational choices. Conversely, for Jones (2001), the problem of staff morale needed to be seen in the context of the Labour government's neo-liberal social policies.

These organisational and socio-political factors have contributed greatly to a recruitment and retention crisis in many areas (Prasad, 2001; Parker, 2002; Taylor, 2000; Harlow, 2004). For the managers the crisis is palpable. Vacant posts or staff absent on sick leave can lead to fire-fighting responses that create dissonance with the rhetoric of the mission statement or the latest strategic plan. Indeed, the burden is often most acutely felt by the immediate supervisor who becomes the subdued 'meat in the sandwich' caught between the murky swamplands of practice and the rarefied air of strategic planning.

Faced with the after effects of such organisational malaise it is little wonder that many users of the service end up feeling alienated, misunderstood and angry (Powell & York, 1992). How could it be otherwise when the social worker visiting your home changes every three to four months? The temporal and fractured form of intervention that is the inevitable result of a profession in crisis will find it near impossible to meet the needs of distressed parents or to truly work in partnership with them despite the latest human rights rhetoric issued from on high.

What is deeply depressing about this situation is that it appears so stuck in many areas. While the answer might lie partly in better terms and conditions negotiated nationally, or modernised pay structures, we must ask what can be done by managers and staff, in a more immediate and practical vein, to offset the problem?

This paper argues that practitioners and managers in child welfare organisations need to develop new and creative responses to these issues because, as Pottage and Evans' suggest (1996), the locus for organisational change lies within the ambit of informed and committed operational staff. This view has been echoed by a number of management theorists (Senge, 1990; Covey, 1992; Handy, 1994; Simmons, 1996) and studies on occupational stress in human service organisations (Barak *et al.*, 2001; Bellarosa & Chen, 1997; Dollard *et al.*, 2003).

Such responses build on the philosophical premise that human beings, whatever their station, are actors who possess a circumscribed degree of freedom and intentionality to affect and shape structural constraints in a social world where reflexive action has reached a critical premium (Giddens, 1992).

To give flesh to this skeletal argument I will outline an approach to tackle the issue of workforce retention that synthesises ideas within critical social theory (Giddens, 1984; Habermas, 1990), social pedagogy, (Boal, 1979) and action research (Lewin, 1951). All three components share a common philosophical view of the social actor as an agent of change regardless of situational inhibitors. The turn to critical social theory, which is addressed mainly in the next section, supports the approach ontologically by arguing that staff and managers are professional agents within the organisational sphere of child welfare. For far too long the social professions have languished within perceived organisational constraints not realising their power to shape outcomes through creative endeavour; and, while staff maintenance programmes have suffered from a poverty of resources, they have also been affected by a poverty of imagination.

Social pedagogy and action research ground the approach within a methodological framework embracing Boal's use of empowering theatre with oppressed groups and Lewin's ideas on social change. These ontological, philosophical and methodological components, when combined, offer a radically different approach to recruitment and retention strategies within organisations.

## **Professional agency and workforce retention: Channelling discursive consciousness in child and family social work**

Giddens' vast corpus is illuminated by one central, philosophical tenet: the irrepressible force of human agency in social life. We can think of agency as the power of social actors to think and act independently of the determining constraints of the social structure within which they operate. More specifically, the concept invokes the volitional, purposive, creative, intentional, inspirational and imaginative faculties of human endeavour which by implication place the individual at the centre of inquiry and highlight issues relating to moral choice, existential freedom and political capacity. This emphasis on human agency is in marked contrast to structuralist accounts (for example, Levi Strauss, 1963) and post-structuralist thinking (for example, Foucault, 1970) which de-centre the human agent by elevating the constraining force of language or discourse. Giddens' work also shows how organisation theory's current preoccupation with culture is misguided because it neglects the impact of social structure (Willmott, 1997).

Many social theorists have developed the idea of agency within their grand theories (for example Bourdieu, 1984)) but Giddens has arguably contributed a unique slant on the concept by way of his abstract theorising, his work on political philosophy and his view of the social currents shaping what he terms the post-industrial world. It is therefore important that we explore his work on the subject and its relevance for professional action in the face of determining social structures.

For Giddens (1976), human agency involves the skilled performance of actors as they (re)produce society. More fundamentally, creative, transformative action is existentially inherent within our identity: as actors we are therefore pre-destined to act, to shape and mould the social world. Action of this kind, suggests Giddens, is realised within three kinds of consciousness: unconscious consciousness, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness.

Unconscious consciousness refers to action that flows from primal sources such as instinct. The parallels with Freud's work are clearly evident here. Thus, we are motivated to act on the basis of deeply ingrained drives that may be libidinally sourced or which flow from the exigencies of basic survival. By way of contrast, practical consciousness refers to the taken-for-granted know-how or ways of approaching tasks in daily life. We drive to work without conscious realisation that at any one point of time our limbs are performing complex movements to propel a metal vehicle towards a given destination. Similarly, in the familial domain our domestic routines become so habituated that little effort is required to perform them. Discursive consciousness differs

from the previous forms in the sense that it is marked by reflection or the capacity to think critically about our actions so that we can give a rational account of them. A demanding task – such as completing a written social report – requires the actor to think critically about its content and form and how it might be received by its intended audience.

It is important to point out, though, that Giddens does not promote a model of unconstrained action. For him, social actors live within established routines all of which limit or constrain the capacity for action. In social life there are prescribed rules for performing activities such as courtship and parenting. Giddens prefers to use the example of language to put forward his case. All languages are determined by complex sets of rules concerning the content of speech otherwise confusion would quickly arise. The rules become *instantiated* (or realised) through the practice of language. However, over time the rules become modified as new forms of colloquialism, jargon or slang develop. Thus, human agents reproduce and transform the rules or the structures of social life. The latter, when instantiated, both constrain and enable the practice of agency. Critically, for Giddens, agency and structure are like the two sides of a coin and primacy should not be given to either; rather, they act in dialectical interplay producing both intended and unintended consequences in society. Yet, even within the most harrowing of situations, it is clear that social actors can resist determining social structure. Thus, Berger (1995) reported on how Jewish inmates of concentration camps during the second world war survived the structural conditions of extremity through ‘crucial moments’ or epiphanies demanding the exercise of creative, adaptive responses.

Despite the highly regularised world of child protection social workers also enact Giddens’ views on social ontology by often managing to respond creatively to day-to-day structural imperatives. For example, Spratt, (2000, 2001, 2003) in his research on family centres and the child protection system, concluded that many social workers and their managers enter into negotiations with referrers and service users to conceptually re-frame child protection duties as family support practice. In other words, they step outside their practical consciousness and move into the discursive mode (as Giddens defines these terms) to modify social structure as embedded in the rules and requirements of the child protection system. These findings are amplified by the considerable differences in rates of child protection investigation and registration (Department of Health, 2000) across the United Kingdom. Such differences show how child abuse is socially constructed by professional agents who use their interpretive discretion to re-frame what on the face of it are child protection concerns. More generally, Fook (1999, p.199) sees this discursive activity in social work as ‘a type of responsibility, an ability to recognise personal influence and to develop a sense of agency .... with this

sense of agency .... each person integrates, in a very interwoven and easy way, analysis with action, personal experience with political awareness and macro and micro analyses’.

However, Giddens reminds us that the exercise of discursive agency in social life is often incomplete, partial or, in some cases, suppressed by unreflective, practical consciousness. Mapping this point to child welfare, structural imperatives (driven by accountability) are often refracted through a bureaucratic lens giving rise to proceduralised responses that militate against the application of social workers’ discursive consciousness (Houston, 2001; Buckley, 2002).

So, to summarise the argument so far, social workers in child protection operate on the basis of both practical and discursive consciousness and there may be times when unconscious consciousness dominates in the form of instinctual fear when, for example, risk to children is severe. But if there is evidence that social workers’ (and their managers) use discursive consciousness in their day-to-day work, could this faculty be harnessed in relation to the exigency of workforce retention? Arguably, an affirmative response to this question might pivot on a range of prerequisites such as *modus operandi* (the availability of relevant methods), motivation (reasons for involvement) and occupational space (the time and permission to engage in such work). Encapsulating each of these prerequisites, the next section outlines an approach for taking this work forward based on Boal’s (1979) ‘theatre of the oppressed’ stratagem. This pedagogical model serves to provide a practical demonstration of discursive consciousness and, in doing so, grounds Giddens’ abstruse theorising on agency. Moreover, by involving social workers and their managers in organisational change, it accentuates ownership of outcomes, stimulates dialogue and generates enabling, organisational cultures.

## **Boal, theatre and change**

Augusto Boal was born in Rio de Janeiro on 16 March 1931. He is a theatre director, dramatist, theorist, social pedagogue and author. These activities reflect Boal’s indebtedness to his mentor, Paulo Friere. To acknowledge this legacy his first major work, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), mirrors the title of Friere’s book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972); and when the latter died, Boal said: ‘With Paulo Friere’s death, I lost my last father’ (1998, p.129).

Boal’s *oeuvre* is essentially about empowering the passive spectator to become the active performer in the rehearsal for change in his (*sic*) own life. Of fundamental importance for Boal is the idea that everyone is an actor in the social world performing to different scripts. Thus, the roles we play in everyday



life vary according to the audience we are addressing and the context in which we are operating. Furthermore, like Giddens, Boal believes that everyone has the capacity and therefore the right to be creative. Creativity is seen as beneficial to the health of the individual and also the community. However, for Boal, the majority of people eschew their capacity for creative action and delegate their responsibility for representation to others. Again this view resonates with Giddens' (1998) assertion that citizens in social democracies need to be more active in communal life not leaving the responsibility for reform to the centralised State.

Boal's approach seeks to remedy such passivity by sharing communication skills with those whose creativity has been silenced, encouraging them to find their own voice and tell their own stories. His theatre is therefore located in deprived communities and involves the active participation of ordinary people seeking solutions to problems in their own lives. The key to Boal's success and popularity in disadvantaged areas lies in ordinary people taking ownership of theatre and using it in a transformative way. Typically, 'Theatre of the Oppressed', as it has been termed, teaches participants how to listen, first of all to themselves, and then to others. This is achieved by allocating fictional roles to allow participants the necessary distance to debate risky issues in safety, thus liberating creativity and discursive consciousness (as Giddens has defined it) in the search for new solutions to difficult problems. Through identifying and applying the problem-posing role of theatre, Boal argues that we can create and own a tool to transform ourselves and our communities. He captures the essence of his approach in the following terms:

Dialogue should be the rule for humanity. All relationships can tend to become a monologue, a man and a woman; one of them tends to become the actor and the other the spectator. Races – one race tends to be the one who imposes the standards of beauty, etc., the other race submits to that ... Countries should dialogue but one is the actor the other is the spectator. Human relations, love relations should be dialogue but one of them sometimes becomes active and the other passive. So oppression is this – all dialogues that become monologues. In the theatre this is sacralized – there is a fixed place for actors and a place for spectators. Theatre at least has the virtue of being clear about the rules of the game – actors are there and spectators are here. The first monologue that you have to break is theatre itself. It should not be spectators specializing in listening and looking at the actors specialising in being super-human – we should all specialize in being human. Because to act is to be human. (Boal, 1992, p.45).

In building on these principles – participation, ownership and dialogue – Boal developed a process for engaging and transforming oppressed social groupings. The starting point in this process is the need to create trust



and solidarity in the group. Boal, recalling an earlier quote from Guevara, believes that 'solidarity means running the same risks'. In effect, this requires the facilitator to lead the group by example, to admit his vulnerability and experience of oppression. Through a range of trust exercises participants are then encouraged to work together, to rely and support each other, and engage in the mutual exchange of feelings and ideas.

The process of mutual sharing is facilitated through 'Image Theatre' – a collection of body-focused performance techniques acted out by small groups without words, where meanings, related to specific concerns, are signified corporeally through 'freeze-frame', still images. Once produced, the images portray graphic representations of complex meanings, ambivalent feelings, hidden nuances (of meaning) or conflicts. The exercises encourage the use of the imagination and the non-verbal expression of ideas to stimulate dialogue.

More specifically, image theatre comprises the creation of three core sculpts by the participants: the present scenario, the preferred one for the future, and the transitional image. Taking the former, participants agree on a common theme to be explored. The theme can be far-reaching, abstract or concrete but invariably involves some form of oppressive experience. In Brazil, for example, it may involve a local problem such as the unavailability of water or, alternatively, a structural issue such as the impact of imperialism on local farmers. Importantly, the range of applications is wide including cross community work, social skills training, building self-esteem and youth work (Magill, 1995).

After a range of trust building exercises have been performed one of the participants is invited to create a sculpt of the presenting problem 'using only the bodies of the other participants... as if he were a sculptor and the others were made of clay: he must determine the position of each body down to the most minute details of their facial expressions' (Boal, 1979. p.135). The sculptor must not speak under any circumstances but is permitted to show with his own facial expressions what he wants the statue-spectators to do. 'After organising this group of statues he is allowed to enter into a discussion with the other participants in order to determine if all agree with his sculpted opinion' (p.135). Following this dialogue, modifications can be rehearsed by other participants within the group presenting their differing perceptions of the problem in sculpt form. The aim of the first stage of the work is to arrive at the most acceptable sculpt to all.

The second sculpt repeats the process only this time the sculptor's task is to produce an image of the ideal state of affairs where oppression has been overcome. Thus, if the original scenario involved an image of political oppression within a local village community, the ideal image might depict a village of peaceful relations where freedom of speech is encouraged. This

sculpt, according to Boal, allows tentatively held, and often suppressed, aspirations to be expressed in a safe environment. In doing so, it sets the scene for the third sculpt: the transitional image depicting how the ideal scenario can be achieved. Once again, the process for the first and second sculpts are repeated to demonstrate 'how to carry out the change, the transformation, the revolution ...' (p.135).

As can be seen the approach rests not only on the use of non-verbal sculpting activity but also on the dialogue accompanying it. For Boal, this dialogue must foster consensus particularly in relation to the third sculpt where participants attempt to create an agreed agenda for change. There is a clear parallel with Habermas' work (1984) here. In contrast to Boal, though, Habermas has provided a much deeper grounding for consensual speech seeing it as part of our inherent ontology and transcending specific language games. In *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1990, p.89) he sets out the following rules for ethically-informed, democratised speech: every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in discourse; everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever; everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into discourse; everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs; and no speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his right to be heard. These rules can be co-opted in the Boalian approach to give greater shape and direction to its dialogical infrastructure.

To summarise this section, the power of the imagination to tackle oppression and the use of theatrical techniques to foster change should not be underplayed – as Boal's success as a social activist demonstrates. His most recent innovation – Legislative Theatre – unequivocally shows the effectiveness of his approach (Boal, 1998). After being elected as a *verador* (city councillor) in Rio de Janeiro for the Worker's Party, Boal employed his theatre company to research and present those laws that the people wanted implemented and changed. Such was the success of this approach that between 1992 and 1996, 13 new laws were promulgated in Brazil. For example, all treatments for mental illness which produced irreversible consequences for the patient were prohibited; all public telephone kiosks were required to have raised platforms to allow people with sight impairment to detect them with their canes; and all municipal hospitals were required to employ doctors specialising in geriatric diseases. In short, the approach harnesses Giddens' ideas on discursive agency to tackle issues, not only within the micro domain of face-to-face situated activity, but also within the macro domain of institutional relations.

## **Theatre and workforce retention: The application**

These techniques can be applied to the issue of workforce retention through a number of stages. The first of these is to establish a mandate to implement image theatre within the organisation. Given the hierarchical nature of many child welfare organisations (particularly in the statutory sector), agreement to take forward the work is needed by all those who are affected by its outcomes: the practitioners, supervisory managers, middle managers and senior managers. At this early stage it is imperative that these groupings within the organisation give a commitment to seriously address the strategies for change arising from the enactment of image theatre, otherwise the exercise might fall prey to cynicism.

In the second stage, a facilitator is chosen to direct the sequence of events comprising image theatre and to facilitate communication between the participants. It is preferable for the facilitator to be unconnected to the organisation so that his (sic.) independence is safeguarded. The first task for the facilitator is then to organise a venue with sufficient space to allow for the presentation of images and de-briefing activities. Once these practical requirements have been addressed the facilitator should meet with the staff and managers to elect a representative sub-group from each to participate in the image theatre workshop.

The third stage concerns the workshop itself. This commences with the two sub-groups – practitioners and managers –engaging collectively in a range of non-threatening trust building activities to set the scene for the sculpting activity which is explained by the facilitator. Once this preliminary work has been accomplished, the two sub-groups then meet separately to produce the three axial sculptures. The first of these is to demonstrate the present organisational culture and relations that give rise to the recruitment and retention problems. The second, is to sculpt the ideal, organisational culture that would give rise to a contented workforce – one that would attract new staff and retain their expertise. The third sculpt – the transitional image - addresses how the ideal culture might be achieved. In each of the three sculptures both sub-groups must follow Boal's suggested process: a sculptor is chosen to undertake the sculpting activity; this work is first of all undertaken in silence; and dialogue then follows to reach an eventual consensus on the shape and form of each of the final three sculptures. This dialogue proceeds under the Habermasian rules set out earlier to ensure that democratised speech and decision-making takes place.

The two sub-groups then re-join. The practitioner sub-group presents its three sculptures to the managers in silence. The latter are asked to interpret what they see and whether they agree with its themes. The process is then reversed with the managers presenting their sculptures to the practitioners. Inter-group

dialogue then takes place. The focus of this dialogue is to achieve a *consensual understanding* of the present factors contributing to the workforce crisis, how the ideal organisation might be re-configured and lastly, the methodology for achieving proposed changes. In this closing dialogue, both sub-groups are bound by Habermas' speech rules making the process inclusive, non-coercive and reflective.

If progress is achieved on these fronts, the facilitator then introduces the final component of the workshop: the action research cycle. Although Boal makes no reference to action research in his writings, there is a close parallel between the stages of image theatre and Lewin's articulation of the action research cycle. Moreover, Lewin's ideas provide a practical template for the exercise of discursive consciousness by structuring reflection and critical analysis of prevailing social conditions. These comparisons aside, what action research adds to the approach is a cyclical component for reviewing progress. In other words, Boal's final sculpt introduces a strategy for change and the action research cycle provides a monitoring tool to assess whether it has been effective.

To expand further, Lewin viewed action research as a method of studying and interacting with people in the real world with the intention of helping them to effect desired changes. He directed participant(s) to carry out a cycle of activity involving: (a) the observation and assessment of a particular situation or interest or concern, (b) the identification of a specific, concrete goal which was desired, and (c) the formulation of an action plan to address the goal. These cyclical processes, it can be seen, correspond with Boal's three developmental sculpts comprising his image theatre. That is, the first step of assessing a situation of concern can be compared with the starting sculpt where participants are asked to sculpt their view of the present situation. Similarly, the second step, of identifying a goal, mirrors the second sculpt which embodies the participants' ideal state of affairs. The third and final step of developing an action plan finds a similar expression in the transitional sculpt.

What distinguishes the two approaches, though, is that action research repeats the cycle several times. So, the second cycle begins with the implementation of the plan (established within the first cycle). The results are then subjected to further observation and assessment followed by the articulation of a revised goal and action plan. In short, the efficacy of desired changes and the methods for achieving them are subjected to a process of continual re-examination until the participants judge that sufficient change has occurred. This re-examination can be facilitated in each subsequent cycle by again repeating the three identified sculpts. Thus, by integrating Boal's image theatre techniques with the action research cycle, practitioners and managers possess a practical tool for problematizing, dramatizing and developing strategies for action within the organisation.

The first workshop therefore culminates with the facilitator introducing the action research component and agreeing dates for the subsequent workshops to assess progress following the cycle outlined. Of course, the process might target structural areas requiring change: terms and conditions being primary. It is important to stress in this context that problems of recruitment and retention have as much to do with wider social influences as they do with organisational factors (Harlow, 2004). For Giddens, though, human agents possess power to affect and modify these structural realities. They do so by applying their discursive consciousness to understand how they might appropriate resources to realise their goals. Collective action, forming alliances, exposing contradictions, lobbying, taking industrial action, re-framing perceptions and using media outlets creatively – are all examples of how human resources and capital can be galvanised to promote structural change. The approach that has been set out provides a space for the participants to reflect creatively on these strategies through an alternative medium that differs markedly from the ubiquitous and time worn meeting culture dominating so much of current organisational life.

## Conclusion

To summarise the argument, many child welfare organisations within the United Kingdom experience continuing problems recruiting and retaining staff. Arguably, this is the quintessential problem facing child and family social work in many areas and consequently novel approaches are required to address it. This paper presents one approach which builds on the idea that professional staff and their managers possess discursive agency (which is often unrealised or maximised) to effect change despite structural impediments. Giddens' sociological theories and philosophical ideas on human consciousness are helpful in providing strong ontological arguments for the approach; in turn, they find a methodological outlet in Boal's social pedagogy and Lewin's action research method.

At this closing juncture it is important to consider the unique contribution of this approach *vis à vis* other important methods of workforce retention such as staff induction, performance appraisal and trainee schemes. First of all, by harnessing the corporeal or bodily domain the approach provides cathartic release for the participants. It is well known that therapies such as gestalt (Perls, 1973) that utilise freeze-frame, bodily images of human experience engender the release of repressed emotions. Such release is imperative in a social world where 'power... inscribes itself on the body' (Lloyd, 1999, p.118). Moreover, for Giddens, the body in late modernity becomes 'a visible carrier

of self-identity and is increasingly integrated into the lifestyle decisions which an individual makes' (Giddens, 1991, p.31). These observations are congruent with a significant stream of existential philosophy. Merleau-Ponty (1962), for example, suggested that it is through bodily awareness that we fully engage with the world. Likewise, Heidegger (1962) argued that phenomenological reflection has bodily repercussions in the sense that thoughts give rise to fluctuations in blood pressure and levels of tension in musculature.

Second, the approach mobilises the collective. By bringing together social workers and their managers as oppressed minorities (which many feel they are), the atomisation that is such a feature of child welfare practice is reversed (albeit temporarily). Individual workers who are caught up in the exigencies of very busy caseloads have little power to effect organisational change but association brings with it a sense of collective authority providing 'bottom up' perspectives to counter-balance directives from local and central government. Third, the sculpt produces a visual, kinaesthetic representation of perceived events, patterns of social relationship, nuances of meaning and subtle inflections of mood within organisational relations. In short, it is an embodied lexicon whose value in generating information has long been recognised by different schools of family therapy. Fourth, the method enhances levels of interactive communication within organisations which, scholarship suggests, is directly linked to employee satisfaction, motivation and productivity (Parry, 1999; Alexander, 1989; Cutlip et al, 1985). Lastly, the focus on corporate, bodily sculpts takes the attention away from the individual protagonist who, for reasons relating to self-censorship, is likely to recline from raising his head above the parapet.

However, important as these arguments are, what is it about the model that makes it particularly relevant to the problems of recruitment, retention and occupational stress in social work? Let me turn briefly to some of the literature on these areas to respond to this question. Ewalt (1991), for instance, suggests that social workers' ideas and aspirations need to be acknowledged when developing retention strategies; in other words, top-down directives are likely to have limited success. Echoing this plea, Mondros et al (1986) argue for the use of a practical, participative method for recruiting and keeping social work staff while Samantrai's research findings (1992) indicate that staff leave public child welfare because of poor relationships with immediate supervisors. Rees (1999) takes a more critical line by arguing that managerialism is a prime contributor to low staff morale. He goes on to make the case for a more humanitarian organisational culture that is participative and consultative. Similarly, Thompson et al (1996) stress that participative, empowering organisational cultures are needed to offset occupational stress. Tying up these themes, Hodgkin's research (2002) found that managers and supervisors differed in their perceptions of the causes of recruitment and

retention problems and how to resolve them. She concluded that problem formulation and solution generation must occur in a coordinated way, involving all of the key stakeholders.

Collectively, these findings highlight that recruitment and retention strategies in social work must draw heavily from open, participative approaches to the problems of morale, stress and burnout if they are to be effective. In this context, Boal's method has much to offer. Moreover, it could also be argued that his practical approach to problem-solving has a direct affinity with social work's fundamental mission to enhance human agency in the face of personal and political constraints.

We might also think of wider applications of the approach beyond social work. Other human service professions – nursing, teaching, medicine – experience similar recruitment and retention problems both in the United Kingdom and elsewhere (Kyriacou et al, 2003; Meyer et al, 1991; Culley & Genders, 2003; Gleeson & Husbands, 2003). Moreover, they share, with social work, similar organisational and professional groundings. Management structures are invariably tiered and hierarchical. Consternation over terms and conditions is ubiquitous and omnipresent. These professions also face the toxic brew of performance management, Government-led modernising agendas and shrinking resources.

The approach described cannot be viewed as a panacea to these ills for, like social work, these professions are embroiled in complex political and structural contradictions emanating largely from new Labour's neo-liberal policies (Jones, 2001). Nonetheless, it at least provides a space for passive spectators – be they inhibited practitioners or down-trodden managers – to enter into a form of democratised dialogue and change.

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