

Thesis Opposition: Behind Closed Doors: Exploring the Institutional Logic of Child Protection Work

**Åse Wagli: Behind Closed Doors:
Exploring the Institutional Logic of Child Protection Work.
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'Enter a room divided by a glass wall and a counter forming half a wall. Have to wait here for someone to open other doors. It is very silent at first - a heavy silence. Then there is the sound of a woman behind the counter. The woman cries and tries to talk. After a while, I also hear another woman's voice - a quiet, calming, empathic, explaining voice...I sit there and have to listen - I cannot be protected from knowing about the woman's private problems. And the woman crying has no chance of being protected from my knowing (p18)

Asa Vagli's thesis addresses the institutional discourses and rhetorical practices of social workers employed in a child protection agency in Norway. It is an institutional ethnography inspired by Mary Douglas' 'How Institutions Think' (1986). Vagli's focus is on interprofessional talk and sense-making. She has not looked in detail at the interaction with clients, but rather at how the workers in the agency go about making the institutional world together. Data are presented as excerpts of everyday talk of the child protection workers, often in informal settings. Alongside these data extracts "vignettes" of recurring situations are presented, providing vivid glimpses into the world of child protection in Norway.

Vagli begins the thesis in an engaging and powerful way, taking the reader straight into thick ethnographic description. In this sense, the work is firmly in the ethnographic tradition described by Goffman thus:

[A]ny group of persons - prisoners, primitives, pilots, or patients - develop a life of their own that becomes meaningful, reasonable and normal once you get close to it, and... a good way to learn about any of these worlds is to submit oneself in the company of the members to the daily round of petty contingencies to which they are subject.
(Goffman, 1961: ix-x)

However, she has used an interesting, and perhaps a little controversial, conceptual approach, asserting throughout that representation and analysis cannot be separated. As we can see in the quotation from the thesis at the start of this piece, the work is intensely personal, with the analytic flowing from the lived experience of the fieldwork. Vagli's experience as a woman and a mother is embedded in the narrative of the thesis.

Conceptually, the thesis makes use of the notions of embodiment associated with Merleau-Ponty (and other phenomenological influences) to describe her own visceral responses to talk. However, she blends this with an ethnomethodological focus on the action- performative nature of talk. For Vagli, talk is both *produced* by and *reproduces* the institutional life of the agency. For her, the human actors have 'agency' but not in conditions, or time space contexts of their own making.

Ethnomethodology provides a means to analyse and explore the ways in which people make sense of and reproduce ordinary, everyday social practices. It seeks to move away from judging whether a particular practice is right or wrong, to look instead at how that practice gets done and what practical action(s) makes it work. This approach has had a very significant impact on ethnography as Maynard notes:

[Ethnographers have traditionally asked - 'How do participants see things?' - [with] the presumption that reality lies outside the words spoken in a particular time and place. The [alternative] question - 'How do participants do things?' - suggests that the micro social order can be appreciated more fully by studying how speech and other face-to-face behaviours constitute reality within actual mundane situations (Maynard, 1989: 144, emphasis added).

That Vagli has combined this approach with a more visceral, personal account of the work of the child protection agency would not necessarily be approved of by the strongly inductive, data driven ethnomethodological purists, in the sense that interpretation does not straightforwardly rise from the data, but is in a constant iterative interaction with Vagli's own subjectivity. However, for me this dialogue between the empirical and personal achieves a very powerful effect, which Vagli self-consciously describes in the work.

The findings show that child protection is ripe with paradoxes, ambivalences and moral dilemmas. The family is both sacred and dangerous. Vagli describes the institutional categories of dangerousness: the dirty, messy, unorganized and undisciplined lower class family; the bad mother who is unwilling/unable to follow the cultural prescriptions of acceptable 'responsible' 'self-sacrificial' motherhood; the sexually abusive father or stepfather; the family imprinted with a social inheritance of mental disorder, drug use and other markers of deviance. These dangers she argues are constructed as moral shortcomings, constructing the family and its members are potential candidates for the technologies of the child protection agency. Here Vagli steps into the political. The material and social situation of poverty and social deprivation, is "forgotten" and silenced.

Vagli details a number of interpretive couplings in child protection work, the tension between the public and the private, the association between dirt and danger; the interplay of the workers' emotions and the forensic 'evidential logic', the work as a burden and simultaneously an act of kindness. I have spent the last fifteen years studying everyday child protection practices in the UK and I recognise many of the tropes she describes. On this basis, I feel confident that the work has validity and that 'members' would no doubt also recognise what she has described. Indeed comparing the work with other ethnographies of social work we can see sharp resonances. For example, the following extract is from an ethnography of social work conducted in Canada:

Social workers know how to inscribe everyday or mundane occasions as proper instances into institutional categories. Such inscriptive work quiets the tumultuous noise of drunken shouting between husband and wife. It cools out a child's hot tears. It manages the welts from a beating. Simply put, it modulates the noise, multiple dimensions and uncertainties of an immediately experienced reality. It substitutes regulated tonal symmetries provided through professional categories and texts for the noise of daily life (de Montigny, 1995: 28)

It is when Vagli describes her methods that I would like to have seen some more detail. Crucially, we are not told *when* this fieldwork took place. This is a vital piece of information, as I suspect it was some time ago. For example, in most Western European countries in the last 5-10 years there has been a significant shift to the use of electronic recording in welfare agencies. This has tended to lead to the imposition of 'workflow' models and an increased concern with bureaucracy and process. Maybe Norway has escaped this, but I suspect not entirely. This said, certainly my own empirical work shows that the sorts of institutional narratives and sense making the candidate describes continue along side these tyrannical technologies, but they do nevertheless exert an influence on the 'systemworld' as it were (Broadhurst et al 2009; 2010, Wastell et al, 2010).

I would also have liked to see a little discussion about the process of translating the talk from Norwegian into English—some of the talk looks a little idiosyncratic in translation. This is unavoidable, but I think it needs to be acknowledged as a methodological decision with consequences.

That said, I like the way that the candidate has given us the empirical findings and then layered her own concepts e.g. Burdens and Kindness onto them. This gives the work a properly inductive feel. In conclusion, Vagli has produced a powerful work and she is absolutely correct - institutional categories have *material* effects in child protection work.

References

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