Uncovering precariosity using a circle conversation with counselling practitioners

The institutions are training the people but where is the work for them?

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Abstract

Ethics approval was obtained to audio-record an adapted form of circle conversation involving a group of counselling practitioners who attended a professional development workshop in 2015. The goal of the study was to examine what emerges when participants open themselves, through structured conversations, to affecting and being affected by others. The participants chose to focus on their working conditions, and what emerged in these discussions became the focus of this paper. The participants' stories provide rich insight into how a group of practitioners have become caught up in precarious circumstances in their professional lives. This article includes four narrative accounts that derive from this guided conversation. Through the process, new lines of thought for consideration and new ways of analysing what action might make a difference to their current situations emerged. These are briefly summarised in two further narratives. The article ends with a call to all professionals to provide a critique of the implications of precariosity in their own work, and to begin to explore possibilities for developing new ways of being and doing within the constraints of an uncertain labour market.

Keywords: precariosity, counselling practitioners, circle conversation, critique, Judith Butler

In 2014 the first author was invited to talk to branch members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC) about a discursive form of circle conversation initially developed as a method of managing interpersonal conflict in secondary schools (Kecskemeti, Kaveney, Gray, & Drewery, 2013; see also Hamilton & Kecskemeti, 2015,

for use of circles in tertiary settings). Counselling practitioners present during this session expressed interest in experiencing this kind of circle process at first hand. In early 2015 an invitation was extended to run a 90-minute discursive circle conversation at an NZAC professional development day. Several branch members were keen to see how they might adapt the process for their own work contexts. Some were also keen to explore whether this kind of structured conversation might offer the opportunity to facilitate a more productive exchange on sensitive topics within the branch membership itself.

As both authors wanted to explore the potential of discursive circle conversations outside of educational settings, it was agreed that the professional development session could be recorded and analysed for research purposes. Ethics permission was granted to the first author to record and analyse data generated during the workshop. Participants were asked to choose a topic that had personal and professional relevance for them. The group collectively chose the issue of payment for their counselling work. All members of the group were informed about the purpose of the research and the process in which they would be participating. Each signed a consent form, which included an agreement to remove participants' names, ages, and places of residence and employment from the data so as to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Fifteen counsellor practitioners completed this workshop. All were women. Two rounds of focused conversations were concluded and all participants were able to share their stories uninterrupted. What emerged were rich yet very worrying insights into how a group of practitioners had become caught up in precarious circumstances in their professional lives and how they had tried to make sense of what was happening to them. Only three reported having paid employment. Many had recently either trained or retrained to become counsellors. Some were working without being paid, while others, unable to gain any employment, paid or otherwise, had begun the process of becoming self-employed. As the second round progressed, participants moved from offering their own stories to a more relational view of the issues and positions the first round of conversations had uncovered. The sense of despair that had been evident at first now gave way to feelings of solidarity. The workshop concluded and the participants moved on, leaving us, as researchers, with a deeply unsettling question: How could or should we tell the stories we had gathered?

Circle conversations

Circle conversations have their origins in restorative justice practices (Costello, Wachtel, & Wachtel, 2010). The particular circle conversation format used for this workshop was

a consciously facilitated exercise that included a focus on uncovering hidden discursive positionings that can place people in conflict with each other (Davies & Harré, 1990). Deliberately focusing on the workings of the power effects of these positions rather than on individual faults or deficits can generate an intra-active or affective flow within a group (Barad, 2007; Hamilton & Kecskemeti, 2015). Possibilities for deep discussion of personal issues, and patterns of interaction without shame or self-consciousness, can be opened up. Through the use of this process in the workshop, we had stumbled into a complex sociopolitical as well as personal issue. The possibility that such narratives might emerge was signalled by the topic chosen by the participants. Yet what emerged demanded more than just use of the data to illuminate a point about what possibilities can be offered through a discursive approach to circle conversations. A critique of the sensitive issue of precariosity uncovered in the process also became necessary.

In considering what sort of critique we could offer, we drew on the work of Judith Butler (2001), who suggests that critique involves us in asking questions about "our most sure ways of knowing" at times when "one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives" (p. 3). This means that no discourse is available within the field to adequately describe what is happening.

We examine this "crisis" of precariosity through an assemblage of individual participants' comments, brought together to provide a series of narrative accounts. These are adapted from the aggregate of the conversations recorded. The method used refers to research within an oral-history-gathering tradition, where personal reflections of events and related causal factors are captured from an individual or group of individuals by researchers in the field (Plummer, 1983). These are typically reproduced as "stand alone" accounts of personal experiences, hitherto hidden, which are brought to the attention of the reader (Hamilton & Atkinson, 2009). By using the oral-history-gathering method, we bring together participants' narrative accounts to reveal the substance of their lived experiences. These accounts also reveal the inadequacy of the conceptual tools available to them to make sense of these experiences.

Precariosity in the labour market

While precarious labour has been a feature of economic and social life in euro-western countries since the 19th century, the presence of precariosity in the 21st century has taken on a number of new dimensions (Standing, 2014). Those now regarded as "at risk of becoming precarious" include young people, women, immigrants, and highly trained professionals. Since 2008, this group has also included what has been termed

the "new precariat," or "well-educated young people with few prospects of attaining secure careers" (Jordan, 2013, p. 390). Precariosity has been linked to the future prospects of members of this group in particular, who carry levels of debt that approach the unpayable (Butler, 2013). Further, as Standing (2014) indicates, women have been more vulnerable to precariosity than men (see also Jordan, 2013), although this has proven difficult to verify empirically over time. Assessments of precariosity in affluent societies can be a complex business, made all the more so when it is customary to consider social groups as people first, and women and men as an "additional demographic variable" (Stephens, Alpass, & Towers, 2010, p. 51). There is now an increasing amount of hard evidence to suggest the presence of precariosity particularly among older, working women. However, a more complex understanding of the social and economic realities that place educated women at risk of financial hardship and precariosity is needed (McFerran, 2010).

Contemporary definitions of precariosity also focus on the ever-changing requirements of a capricious global economy. What the market values now overrides more traditional ideas of what might be in the public good in terms of labour offered and payment for hire (Varga, 2013). Security of employment under unionism has been eroded and workers are forced to compete with each other for a reduced number of jobs. Individuals must develop multiple ways to use their skills, while labour contracts with any legal protection become harder to find (Turrini & Chicchi, 2013). Those who remain in work find themelves being paid less for an ever-increasing number of hours. The myth that full employment with an adequate and sustainable income remains possible for everyone continues to underpin the quest for economic growth. But precariosity or "the operation of capitalism where labour is dispensible" (Butler, 2013, p. 34) has become the reality in the lives of many. This point can most readily be seen in the deteriorioration of the prospects facing younger people who, if employed at all, remain in transitional "entry level" jobs for much longer periods of time (Jordan, 2013).

Precariosity in the counselling profession in New Zealand

We are interested here in how the notion of precariosity/the precariat, or workers "whose labour is regarded as dispensible" (Butler, 2013, p. 34), can help us interpret the reflections shared with us by counselling professionals, in respect of current movements in the counselling profession in New Zealand. Government-funded counselling services have been particularly hard hit in the last five years. In May 2015, Relationships Aotearoa (RA), New Zealand's largest professional counselling and family therapy

provider, was closed with the loss of 183 jobs (Relationships Aotearoa, 2015). The decision to withdraw funding followed a succession of direct funding cuts to RA of approximately five million dollars over a three-year period—a 37% funding drop.

Indirect funding cuts have also been experienced. Withdrawal of state provision for six counselling sessions for couples approaching the Family Court for separation, and a change in Ministry of Justice domestic violence contracts, including contracts for counselling sessions in 2012, saw RA losing "millions of dollars" in operational grants (Radio New Zealand, 2015). These changes anticipated implementation of the New Zealand Domestic Violence Amendment Act (2013). Cuts were enacted to enable "new providers the opportunity to bid for work and current providers to seek greater service delivery levels" (Ministry of Justice, 2014, p. 2). At the time of writing, new providers for RA's case workload are being sought. New state expectations for how service providers will develop and deliver programmes in the future are also being written (State Services Commission, 2015). The allocation of funds to these new providers is yet to be decided. Increasing precariosity may well be one outcome of these political decisions.

A review of New Zealand literature in this area reveals that researchers have been hard-pressed to keep up with the implications of these changes for work, education, and training. The issue of precariosity has yet to be investigated as a subject of interest within the counselling sector. Of the 125 articles published in the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* between 2004 and 2014, none directly addressed the issue of precariosity with regard to the counselling profession as a whole. Two articles, however, one describing a survey by Cornforth and Sewell in 2004 and the second a survey by Campbell, Fraser, and Horrocks in 2011, offer some indication of a trend over time in payment for work. Between 1997 and 2002, Cornforth and Sewell (2004) tracked a cohort of counselling graduates from the greater Wellington area in order to gather information about graduate occupational destinations. They determined that most graduates had found work post-training, primarily in health-related fields. However, 30% noted some private-practice-related component to their employment. While 66% earned more than the New Zealand median income (in 2004, $18,500), a marked difference in income was also noted, as follows:

> *Sixty-four percent of the male respondents were earning over $40,000 p.a. in comparison with only 36% of the female respondents. At the other end of the scale, 23% of males earned less than $20,000 p.a., as compared to 41% of the female respondents.* (Cornforth & Sewell, 2004, p. 39)

In 2011, Campbell et al. also surveyed 160 former counselling students graduating between 2005 and 2009 about work destinations. Many of the questions were similar to those asked in Cornforth and Sewell's earlier study. Overall, this survey found that work opportunities and income had become more limited for these responders than those experienced by the earlier cohort. The following point raised in the discussion section of this article was significant, as seen in the following quotation:

> *There must be some doubt about the capacity of counselling graduates to look forward to an income upon graduation that is significantly greater than the national median income. The reported earnings of this particular group have, moreover, declined by comparison with those in the 1997–2002 cohort. The decline is seen both in absolute terms and in relation to the national median income. These graduates also needed to wait longer before finding work in a counselling context, especially full-time work. These findings alone suggest the need to reconsider the viability of training counsellors in the absence of an adequate analysis of workforce requirements.* (Campbell et al., 2011, pp. 119-120)

Accounts emerging in the circle conversation

In this section we present four narrative accounts that emerged from the circle conversation. These echo significant "key conditions for precariosity" found by international researchers. Participants' transformative moment responses to these conditions are then summarised.

Narrative #1: Entering the workforce

> I specialised in working with children with special needs, doing language programmes, and then moved on from that when that kind of job sort-of evaporated due to funding issues.… Last year I completed a three-year degree at [name] in counselling.… I had the happy experience of graduating and not getting work.… I remember one of our tutors saying "No one's going to give you work, you've gotta see the gaps," but it's quite hard for a newbie—what the gaps look like and how to fill those gaps.… I look for gaps and I talk to other professional people about gaps…[finally] starting work as volunteer using my practice placements…working for a year and a half voluntarily and having what I consider quite bizarre reasons for not being able to have [paid] work because the funding dried up for one person…and suddenly it's the wrong job for another person.… Applications and interviews…pick me, pick me!…

Then I decided not to put myself through that interview and application process any more.… I am just looking at how to go forward and so I am doing some volunteer work with [organisation]. It is not counselling as such but I am still using skills…

Narrative #2: I'm starting a business

[I'm] starting a private practice, which everyone says don't do unless you have been doing counselling for years but for some of us that's been the way to go.… First it was really exciting with the logo and then just getting a web page going…[then] it all came to a halt.… I have got this half of a web page that is actually live…my girlfriend phoned me up the other day trying to do her web page and I thought I need to go back and look at that, but I just ground to a halt.… I'm trying to get myself advertised and out there…phoning up medical centres…all those phone calls, you know…they say what skills have you got and sorry, we aren't actually taking anyone. Have I not asked the right questions?… If you are starting your own practice you really have to be a business person. It isn't a counselling thing, this is a real business thing…having to find work on an hourly rate. How do you do that? And people saying, "Are you negotiable?" And you keep going, "What does negotiable mean?"

Narrative #3: How to stay in professional membership

You finish your qualification…you don't step into work…but you need to keep up your counselling practice, to get your hours, to get your registration [full membership] because you only start off at provisional…[then] you can't get your registration so there is that issue.… I'm trying to get the hours so I can get full [Counselling Association] membership, keep my skills fresh, because I find that if I have a break I'm rusty going back.… Sometimes you don't get your hours because you are still sitting in your room but the clients don't turn up.… If you keep on volunteering then you keep volunteering…you're still not getting paid…sometimes I end up paying for myself to be doing the counselling.… It's the expectation that you work in a profession that has a value…we are there to service others and that might be exploited.… I worked with a parent whose child has multiple problems and they were sort of offering me petrol vouchers and tried to give me money the other day for the [voluntary] work that I am doing. They said they really appreciated the work that I am doing and I said I can't accept that from you…and they were saying but how does this

work?… They were feeling terrible because they were two people in professional roles. They said, "We are paying professionals and you cannot be paid?" I said, "I cannot ethically take anything from you."

Narrative #4: Ethical dilemmas in (negotiating) payment

[T]here is a big need out there for young professionals coming out of training and the expectation is that they will get work.… There is no work out there in the paid sector.… I never mind doing pro bono work if they ask me to do it but there is a huge ethical dilemma there.… I've got a Master's degree now and about 15 years of experience and I am not earning as much as a 17-year-old who is working on a dairy farm with no education whatsoever, apart from three or four years of school.… Even though I am employed as a [social services advice centre] manager, what I am given to pay my staff is just an insult and doesn't reflect in any way the need of the community that I am in.… The funding that we're getting isn't even enough to pay the low wages let alone pay the rent and the power and all the other things.… There are people there who are queuing up for counselling and social work.… Once upon a time people entered a profession and worked all the way through to what should be the end: retirement and maybe even a superannuation would come with that.… I feel like I am at a fairly disempowered place at the moment…

Discussion

Key elements in these four narratives reveal the presence of a sizeable disjunction between the dominant idea of a smooth and seamless transition from training to long-term participation in the paid workforce and a discomforting reality of funding complexities, voluntary labour, increasingly frustrated efforts to secure and retain fulltime waged employment, and a shift to self-employment. The participants' narratives reveal that occupational areas that had employed counsellors in fulltime positions in the past are no longer so readily accessible. A willingness to diversify and to use skills in whatever way might be required is not always enough to overcome the barriers. Yet, the burden of responsibility for achieving workplace success is still seen as belonging to an individual alone (Davies, 2005). Being unable to gain employment is put down to personal inadequacy and/or deficiency—seen in particular in the questioning of self, captured in the second narrative.

The dominant view of the counselling profession that substantiates these narratives, and that these participants seem to have drawn on in planning their careers, reflects

an earlier phase of the profession characterised by centralised planning of labour and collaboration between government departments and training institutions (Crocket, Flanagan, Winslade, & Kotzé, 2011). However, while the participants have remained caught up in this earlier model, the labour market itself has moved on. The resulting disjunction can be seen most clearly in relation to participants' comments about the current professional membership process required of all counselling professionals. In order to have the hours necessary for full membership, participants report having to accept voluntary or unpaid work. However, this only further undermines their value as professionals in the marketplace. For those moving into self-employment, this catch-22 prevents them from having a clear sense of what their work might be worth.

In this regard Turrini and Chicchi (2013) report similar experiences in their study of performing-arts workers. Based on their participants' experiences, these researchers suggest that contemporary work is increasingly becoming an "immeasurable activity" (p. 508). As they remark, in a wage society the value of labour can be measured through the units of time individuals spend on a task. In contemporary work, with its multiplicity of forms and uncertainty of labour value, "the conceptual categories that traditionally described its relationship with value now appear practically unusable" (p. 507). For these counselling professionals, what part of their work can gainfully be counted as one for which they can charge has become a question that is increasingly difficult to answer.

Opening up transformative moments

The particular assemblage afforded by the circle conversation supported the participants to begin to be open to being affected by others' narratives of their lived experiences (Davies, 2014). The intra-active flow, as Barad (2007) would term participants' capacity to be open to being affected by others, revealed the commonalities in their experiences and began to shift the burden of responsibility for their lack of employment away from individuals. Participants entered a process of self-reflection in relation to what they had heard, as seen in the following narrative.

> *I am two years down the track with retraining. A lot of what you said is my journey.… People are doing voluntary work which is actually preventing people getting paid work so if you didn't volunteer they would have to pay but they know you'd volunteer because you want to get something under your belt—how do you break that? [Counselling] was really something that I felt was going to be my*

vocation so at the moment I'm just questioning myself where I am going…in my case sometimes I end up paying for myself to be doing the counselling, that's kind of what has happened.… I still love doing the counselling but I really need to weigh it up. It's costing me to do the counselling. That's not how it's meant to be.… I even look at this circle today and the amount of women: I wonder about gender, gender issues, and I'm thinking about women's work…even in the work I'm doing, a voluntary job, I'm doing at the moment, I'm seeing it and I am internalising it and it's something that I have got to work through…

Participants began to establish clear linkages between their individual stories, recognising how their lives were mixed up not only with each other's but also with the problems/issues their profession was facing. They also recognised how they were being affected by what others were doing, a position that had previously been unavailable to them. New lines of thought for consideration and new ways of analysing what action might make a difference emerged, as the following narrative reveals.

[A]ll our training institutions are run as businesses so something seriously needs to be done politically to limit that and that needs to be done at higher levels.… I'd like to see NZAC get through and make us a registered profession as soon as possible because I can't apply for a lot of jobs because I am not a health practitioner…I can't be seen to be setting a precedent by saying, "Well, I'll see that client for nothing and you know, but you will have to do your own negotiations;" that is not fair.… I'm putting the line in the sand and actually the line in the sand this year is, all that counselling, it has to pay its way.… I want the political lobby, I want to see three free sessions for women who transition, from the moment they are pregnant to the first year of the child…I want to have that politicised so that families can get three free EAP [Employee Assistance Programme] sessions.… How would this sort of collaborative conversation generate that collaborative voice?… We would save women-centred work and get the consumer behind that.… I'm really glad for this conversation. It's given us the space to hear our stories…the stories of many people [are] my story…know that I am not alone, somebody cares, and that we have hope together.

The circle format opened up the comforting potential of a relational view of issues and circumstances. Participants saw that they were caught up in a system they could now question. From there it became possible for them to consider whether they wanted to

take up the positions offered or not. But much more than this, the conversation opened up a political dimension for action that addressed systemic issues faced by the profession. We address this point below.

Concluding remarks

In Butlerian terms, these participants could be seen to be experiencing "a crisis within the epistemological field" of counsellor practice. They were able to begin to question, at a fundamental level, what counts as being a counselling professional. At the end of the session they experienced a sense of freedom in the possibility of new thought and action opening up. We had provided a methodology that helped uncover a series of relationships with the concept of precariosity that had not been visible either to us or to the participants before the workshop. In our analysis we offer the concept of the precariat, though for the participants this descriptor was not yet available as an epistemological resource that would help them analyse how systems work within the context of their profession, and how these have changed.

However, the affective flow created by the conversation worked differently on us. We initially felt confronted by our helplessness in the face of their, and subsequently our own, links to precariosity. For us as researchers, there was also a strong call to critique and to be part of some transformative action, which is what this paper has become.

We conclude with Butler's words on how critique works on us and through us as a mode of action. Critique makes visible the nature of the problem and, further, opens up to consideration possibilities for civil action that go beyond the more traditional rejections of modes of governance, which can lead to anarchy. Critique opens up the right to question, without censure, the particular *forms* that governmentality is taking. It asks "[why] be governed *like* that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such-and-such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures?" (Butler, 2001, p. 5).

The counselling professionals who participated in the circle conversation described in this article performed a critique of their own precariosity. They were then able to problematise the "most sure ways of knowing" they had about their work and to begin searching for new categories that would more adequately describe, confront, and transform the systems of governance they were caught up in. For us as researchers, the writing of this article has also enabled us to question "particular forms of governance" that produce and maintain the precariosity of work, not only for counselling professionals but for members of other professions as well. As professionals we all need

to have public conversations about how precariosity affects us, and how we might turn the insights gained from these questions/critiques into transformative action.

Acknowledgements

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