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Failure, Communities of Practice, and the Value Base of Social Work

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Abstract

The concept of failure tacitly present in the value base of social work is either contentless, is a residual category, or is wholly negative in content. By applying the concept of 'community of practice', however, it is suggested that practice educators and practitioners operate, in practice, a positive conception of failure. Impending failure may actually be functional because of the values with which social work is aligned. If this is so, then the predominantly negative valuation of failure must be reassessed. The problems to which this gives rise are considered, with the conclusion that by considering social work as a community of practice, it is possible to acknowledge and utilize the sharing of failure.

KEYWORDS: Communities of practice; professional errors; social work values

Introduction

'...he who does not understand failure is lost. The importance of failure is capital. I do not speak of what fails. If one has not understood this secret, ...this ethic of failure, one has understood nothing...'

~ Jean Cocteau, *Opium. The Diary of a Cure* (1937), p.99-p.100.

In the current debate about the fitness of social work training for preparing social workers for the difficult task of child protection decision-making, some voices that will probably not be heard are those of the failing student (in essays, placements and the course of qualification as a whole) and of the failing client. It is our contention that these voices have something valuable to contribute to this debate. In particular, they can help to put social work education back in touch with a neglected aspect of social work, one that has been partially obscured by the 'success ethic' of the 1990s: an aspect of a more humanistic and compassionate ethos, we will argue. We refer to the recognition of the existential value of failure, at all levels within the social work community, and it is through this existentialism that we intend to start a dialogue between two different 'ethics of care', namely those of success and of failure.

What, from the standpoint of social work, can be valued in the student's response to failure, if anything? If a 'stiff upper lip' in failure is to be expected of budding social workers, what does this say about our attitude towards failure amongst established professionals? Similarly, does the social worker's commitment to building upon the successes of the client preclude the analysis of failures? Overall, can social work education's negative valuation of failure at the present time be reconciled with the profession's longstanding mission to heal social ills and a divided society (Hill, 1913; Lees, 1971)?

An important caveat, here, is that there are several facets to failure in social work education, and it would be disingenuous to focus upon the learning value of the individual experience of failure without acknowledging that there are other very significant dimensions to such failure. White & Featherstone (2008), for example, note that, although the recruitment of diverse applicants has continued since the introduction of the social work degree in Britain in the early years of the current decade (with 61% mature students, for example), nonetheless students with top post-compulsory education qualifications are currently under-represented amongst applicants. Moreover, standards on some programmes are low by comparison with other programmes. Therefore, although the link between academic success and social work excellence has yet to be established, this picture perhaps suggests that failure might have as much to do with selection, resourcing, and perceptions of social work, as it has to do with the organisational culture of training and existential experience. In short, failure is objectively a complex matter, and part of any response must be the consideration of such factors as pre-training programmes of study, and selection (Holmstrom & Taylor, 2008).

The professional body (currently the General Social Care Council) necessarily adopts a strict attitude to failure, generally not tolerating it. Students are not permitted to fail their placement or they are removed from the course, and they need to pass all modules, in contrast to many other degree pathways, which allow for compensated passes. While in one sense this high level of academic rigor is important considering that success is linked to working with vulnerable people in society, there is no guarantee that a degree in social work will automatically lead to success as a practitioner, as some high-profile failures may have shown. Indeed, it is how we conceptualise 'success' and 'failure' that is our central concern here, and whether or not success mutually excludes failure. In the next section, we will look at this issue from an historical point of view to examine how 'success', as an ethic, has been constituted, and how it has gained ascendancy over an alternative ethic of compassion.

The Success Ethic and Social Policy

In terms of 'failed' clients, one consequence of the 'safety net' approach to welfare seen in recent years has been a change in the relationship between the provider and the recipient of welfare. Indeed there is a sense in which welfare has ceased to be a matter of services impartially administered to the general population (if this was ever more than an ideal), and has become a relationship between those who have failed in life's struggle and those who have not. It might be said that success has become normative, and a value to be espoused in social and educational policy, rather than something that sometimes happens and sometimes doesn't.

This climate of manufactured optimism is historically contingent. It gathered pace under the target-setting culture of New Labour in the later 1990s. It contrasts with, for example, the 'beat' ethic of the early 1970s, where the success criteria of the wider society were to an extent bypassed (Pearson, 1973). Pearson described social work in the 1970s as a kind of primitive political rebellion, and an opportunity for social work recruits to work against the dominant power elites of the time. The *raison d'être* for the social work recruit was empowerment of the disenfranchised, motivated by a political compassion and humanism. Significantly, however, Pearson pointed out that the professional structure of social work at that time presented such idealism as a form of immaturity to be overcome, rather than encouraging it as an ethic. The point for us, however, is that the 'beat ethic' had a clear space in which to compete with a careerist ethic.

By the 1980s and 1990s, Pearson's 'beat' ideal for the social work recruit had switched to a celebration of individual success, substantially conceived in terms of earning - power and security (Solás, 1994). This view is supported by research on the relationship between idealism and the 'service ethic' professions since the 1960s (Miech & Elder, 1996), with the egocentrism of the 1970s perhaps giving way to the success ethic by the 1990s.

A glance at the literature of the profession since the later 1980s reveals an undergrowth of glossy, logo - headed, two - and even four - page advertisements in the appointments sections of 'trade' journals, richly colour - illustrated and offering such inducements as accelerated career progression, 'generous' relocation enhancements, high quality of life and low cost of living to social work recruits. Even those just entering courses of study are offered financial inducements. The casual reader could be forgiven for thinking that double - glazing franchising or life - insurance sales might be involved here, rather than a sympathetic service to the disadvantaged, and admissions tutors could hardly be surprised if they encountered a cohort of curriculum vitae polishers, playing to the same rules of image management and determined to disown their failures (Berggren, 1995).

Lessa (2006) has pointed out that social welfare discourse has moved increasingly away, in recent years, from an assumed universal subject, to an explicit emphasis upon excluded identities (Lessa, 2006, p. 285). Within this approach, the researcher pinpoints as far as possible the specific identity of those regarded as 'failing'. Therefore, for example, Kane (2006) has studied a group of school - excluded pupils in terms of working class, heterosexual masculinity, and looked at the ways in which the negotiation of this identity led to their exclusion from school. Clearly, this allows an intervention programme to be accurately defined and precisely targeted.

However, whatever advantages may lie in moving away from an assumed universal subject in this way, we may in so doing be sacrificing the hermeneutic common ground of the social work encounter (Stretch, 1969). It is worth reflecting for a moment upon the implications of this.

If we stand upon this putative shared ground of the social work encounter, we may question how the social worker recognizes failure and responds to it. Upon which side of this watershed does the social worker stand (expert on circumstances, or equal participant in life),

particularly when considered as the agent of social services? Clearly, those who are the recipients of services might no doubt ask themselves if they are society's failures. Have they, for example, failed in some way as parents ('where did we go wrong?')? Or have they failed to make sufficient provision for themselves in their retirement, or failed to adequately insure against disability? Have they failed to obtain employment, failed to protect their own health or that of their families, failed to secure independence, or failed to obtain a foothold in the housing market?

Social workers are of course taught the sociology of disadvantage: those patterns of separation between the winners and the losers, the stacked jeopardies. They are taught sympathetic listening. It may reasonably be asked, nonetheless, if those who have limited experience of failure can have any real understanding - and this includes teaching staff - of what it is to look failure in the face and live with it. More to the point, it may be asked if social work education itself has any more tolerance of failure at present than the rest of society. This is not to say that social workers reject failure, or clients' failures, or failing clients; it is rather that, in combating low self-esteem, building upon clients' strengths, and generally 'talking up' available opportunities, social workers tend to operate in a climate of manufactured optimism.

Of course, professional qualification must not bring sloppy standards; no-one could seriously advocate that. This does not mean, however, that it can have no place for the experience of failure, or for those familiar with it (Turner, 1984). Below, the nature of failure will be examined further, and suggestions made for recognising it within courses without compromising the standards or the anti - discriminatory aims of social work and social work recruitment.

The Social Construction of Failure

There is a similarity between the denial of failure and the denial of death, and indeed the refusal to recognise ageing, insofar as all three have a compulsive character. If by a culture is meant a tacit or explicit agreement to valorise some aspects of shared existence and to avoid allusion to other aspects altogether, then it is possible to speak of a success culture in the same way that we speak of a culture of youthfulness. One consequence of this is the absence of dialogue about failure: it is not owned, and is dismissed, without examination to see if it contained anything of worth or even of interest.

At the same time, it is of course by no means inevitable that social workers 'swim with the stream' of the wider culture (Robinson, 1972). Yet the organisational culture of social work training is underpinned by power relations in a way that makes it difficult for student social workers to swim against it (Mansbach & Bachner, 2009). It is therefore appropriate to consider some of the sociological dynamics involved in the construction of failure within consumer societies. We will then move on to consider some of the personal and existential meanings of failure before returning more specifically to social work training practices and how they might be better understood.

Sociological/Social Psychological Features of Failure

Rose (1996) makes the point that a feature of contemporary neo-liberalism and modern day consumerism is a focus on decision making and individual autonomy. The individual is faced with a myriad of choices, with associated discourses such as self-improvement and self-actualisation. Rose argues that these powerful discourses constitute the 'psy complex'. Following a lead from Foucault, Rose contends that the psy complex works very well in contemporary societies because it enables an internalisation of the social. Instead of referring to class and inequality of opportunity, individuals are encouraged to think of personal failures and personal success due to in-born character traits such as determination, perseverance or even insanity in the case of failure. Individuals are often placed in a 'double-bind' between these discourses of personal success and failure and structural inequalities within the playing field.

This is not to say that the psy complex is entirely negative, however. As Foucault (1980) argues, power is productive as well as repressive. The psy complex, as a mechanism of contemporary consumerism and neoliberal democracy, with its focus on heightened degrees of self-reflexivity also works to deepen individual consciousness and to foster an awareness of selfhood and identity. Encouraged to think of the self in terms of agentive possibility, individuals are now given choices over what kind of discourse to accept and what to resist.

Drawing on Bourdieu's (1984) concept of habitus, Heath and Potter (2004) have recently pointed out that even discourses of resistance to dominant cultural forms (e.g. discourses of counter-culture including the 'beat' culture) are wrapped up in consumerism. Such choices can be marketed and appealed to as a higher form of cultural taste distinct from 'mass' taste. An obvious example of this is the marketing of 'Che Guevara' products and even of aspects of the 'organic' movement. When viewed under this sociological lens, 'failure' as a social construction attains value only insofar as it allows social distinction and exclusive taste. Here, a 'failed' member of society can be viewed as occupying a desirable position of outsideness.

Additionally, Lave and Wenger's (1991) work draws on Bourdieu's ideas, to argue that learning is a process of participation in a "community of practice". The more mastery the apprentice learner gains over the language and technologies of the community, the closer (s)he moves to the centre of that community. Learning, in this sense, refers to a practice of increasing participation and mastery over the resources of the community. This model of learning has gained increasing recognition in pedagogical circles (e.g. Rogoff, 1990) and in its applicability to social work education (see for example Moore, 2008), which is particularly interesting considering the tendency towards regulation of the culture by the professional body.

Social workers learn 'to be' particular identities within the community of their practice. They become successful experts, hierarchically separated from their clients through their degree. While this can be very positive insofar as they introduce a solid value base that clients can touch on, problems may arise when perceived implications of this value base (e.g. a success ethic) may be experienced as alienating or dogmatic—both by practitioners and clients. In the context of teacher-training, Hodges (1998), for instance, describes how the 'community of practice' can alienate and exclude value systems that do not fall within the values of the community of practice (e.g. heterosexual norms can be valorised).

In contrast, to a certain extent, Moore (2008) refers to the potential of Community of Practice (CoP) within social work education to move away from 'linear' models of expert-student learning, to 'bi-directional' teaching and learning with both groups contributing to the community's knowledge base. In addition, Moore notes the 'dialogic' exploration of alternative ways to solve problems in a CoP, and, perhaps most important for our argument here, to the ability of a CoP to bestow 'legitimacy' upon newcomers, enabling them "to make mistakes, stumble, and commit violations as a part of the learning process" (Moore, 2008, p.596).

Hodges (1998) and Moore (2008) clearly give us different sides of the community of practice in terms of its pedagogical potential. As Linehan and McCarthy (2000) argue, the community of practice is useful only insofar as one participates in it. The community is marked by shared values which appeal or alienate. It is our argument that the current community of practice valorises success over failure. However, the community is dynamic and fluid rather than static and it our hope that by identifying some of the experiential benefits of failure, the value of these within the community of practice can be recognised. For this reason, we will next move to looking at the existential and experiential contours of failure.

Existential Features of Failure

For us, there is something a little dissatisfying about an exclusively sociological reading of failure. While we recognise the dynamics that may surround the desirability of a counter-culture or the attainment of social distinction, the phenomenological dimension to the experience of a counter-culture and in particular failure within a culture also needs to be explored. If, as Foucault (1980) argues, power is productive, what then are the contours of the 'failed' consciousness, and how can this be experienced as enriching? To explore this question, it is useful to turn to some of the existential literature, where a major failure can be a crisis which temporarily interrupts everyday concern. Being is not able to 'round itself out' (Jaspers, 1931); it unravels, to an essential structure. In failure, "the cipher of being is read" (Jaspers, 1931, p.195).

In his discussion of the existential - ontological foundations of conscience, Heidegger (1927) contends that most of the time one's lostness in the idle chatter of the 'They' means that one 'fails to hear' the voice of conscience. This may be taken to imply that although a failure in the world of 'means' may bring one up short, the real failure, at this point, is the failure to hear the voice of 'ends', of ultimate values, of conscience (the interpretation of Berdaev, 1931). Jaspers' (1931) use of the term 'Foundering' is not altogether different. Here it seems to mean both coming up against a wall, and transcending it existentially, or attempting to. Being caught in the insoluble antinomies of rational thought, it is at this moment that Existenz calls out to one (see Thyssen, 1957). The relations in the world of means, fail; what then comes to the fore is the existential relationship. Foundering is built into existence because Being overflows these worldly relations on all sides, it races ahead of them, continually reaching beyond them.

Jaspers (1931) looks to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as the philosophers of failure *par excellence* and Jaspers' idea of 'foundering' is clearly influenced by these philosophers. Jaspers speaks admiringly of Kierkegaard, and comments that he would have been greater were it not for the devaluation of his currency due to market turmoil. Moreover, both Kierkegaard and Nietzsche see their embodiment of failure (lack of friends or a good social life, or rejection by

their peers) as the price they must pay for working outside of current systems of thinking and morals, and to reach a powerful understanding of existence from a position of alienation. However, neither thinker wants to be idealised or exemplified (against what we are doing here, perhaps) for others to follow. Each must find his or her own unique failure, one might say.

More particularly, however, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche draw attention to ‘reason’ as containing what is rational as well as what is irrational. Reason gives us understanding but failure puts us personally into contact with the idea. In other words, an ‘ouch’ moment is as, if not more, immediate and powerful to consciousness than any abstract understanding – where consciousness encompasses the idea. The idea, following the Socratic tradition, can be embodied in the individual’s life struggle. That is, when Socrates was trying to come to grips with the mortality or immortality of the soul, or the duty of the citizen to the state - he did so from a point of personal investment in the question – after being arrested and sentenced to death for ‘corrupting the youth’ (Vlastos, 1991).

If there is an idea common to these writers here, perhaps it is that a failure in the everyday pursuit of “means to an end” may precipitate a crisis in which, sometimes, a thoroughgoing recall to and scrutiny of ultimate ends and values may occur. That a relationship can be found between existential experience and social work values in particular has been argued by numerous writers (e.g. Brown, 1980; Sinsheimer, 1969; Stretch, 1967; Thompson, 1992). For instance, Jaspers wrote of the values of disinterested love, openness to communication, decision, and agency; and the concepts of unconditional positive regard, effective listening, and empowerment are clearly related to these values.

Social Work Implications of a Social and Personal Reading of Failure

A ‘Community of Practice’, with a common value base, cannot be created in a top-down sense (Wenger, 1998). We can acknowledge their existence; we can bring other groups of employees into contact with them, and hope for the best. However, some organisational settings will not possess strong CoPs, which mean that if they are being relied upon for training social workers, the backup of the classroom may be even more important. Lesser & Storck (2001) argue that really CoPs in an organisation are a form of social capital: they are part of the value of the organisation, and enhance its performance.

Can CoPs be fostered, encouraged, or evolved? Wenger (1998) saw them as having a life cycle, and Gongla & Rizzuto (2001) seem to have used this to argue that CoPs can be supported and evolved to sustainable levels of functioning, a sort of capability – maturity model of the ‘building capacity’ family. Yet they acknowledge that at a certain level of importance they are apt to be turned into organisational units or teams by the organisation, at which point they reveal a more formal and less fluid side.

What is important here is to keep the tacit values of the community in touch with the members at the periphery as well as at the centre. Following Bakhtin (1984) the dialogue of values is what may tentatively be called a ‘Socratic’ mode of inquiry that leads to robust, open communities. Socrates is a key figure, for Bakhtin as well as Kierkegaard. While for Kierkegaard, Socrates brings us into contact with living the idea, for Bakhtin he is also admired

for his capacity to challenge the dominant values and practices of his community at the time from a peripheral position. In particular, he suggests a democratic community that welcomes the subversion of dominant values while also recognising the power of those values to positively shape identity. In doing so, he moves us away from an 'either-or' dichotomy (either in the community values or out) to a 'both-and' ontology - an ontology that occasionally admits genuine dialogue between professional and client where hierarchical barriers dissolve in the issues. An example of this might be the recognition of failure as an important and transformative experience, and the critical incorporation of this dialogue into the practices of the community (e.g. associated practices around the success ethic).

In social work terms, this is perhaps a way of talking about why it is that one Area Social Services Office turns student after student into 'successful' social workers, whereas another withdraws from training altogether following a couple of poor student experiences. In both cases, however, the alienated, failed student still has capacity to engage in dialogue with their lived experience of failure. Therefore, while some are able to participate in the community of practice and the kinds of values it espouses, and others are alienated from these, there is a learning potential to both. Obviously factors such as workloads and staffing levels have to be considered in making a statement like this. Even so, we can acknowledge that some offices encourage student learning more than others.

Discussion

If those who know failure well are also those bringing academic failure to the interview panel, there will be exclusion and denial. Moreover, how can teaching staff themselves best negotiate an educational climate in which there are, as Phillips (1996) has noted, pressures to keep students in the system, award (appropriate) qualifications at all levels of ability, and replace the finality of failure with multiple attempts ('successive approximations')? How can reflection upon failure be brought into a learning process within this culture?

Clearly, the exclusive focus upon success, and attempts to ensure this by more and more stringent entrance criteria, can never eliminate all failures, but nor should it. Instead, the inevitability of failure for both student and clients can be perceived – including the shame of failure – and brought back to bear on the tacit value that deems it as failure. For example, the failed student who is distraught with the shame of failure and a broader family disappointment runs up against a limit of their existence, or founders, in Jaspers' terms. In feeling this limit, on an emotional and intellectual level, there lies the possibility of a gap opening up between the tacit value of the community and one's own critical consciousness, leading perhaps to rejection, or irony of the tacit value. In this gap lies a deep recognition of some of the pain of life and the possibility of a shaping of self along a different trajectory.

From the point of view of the community, there is also much to gain from reflecting on how the social work course failed the student, or indeed how the social worker fails the 'failed client'. The kinds of opportunities that these failures bring to bear on the value of 'success' could be examined, perhaps assisting the community to identify more than one predominant ethic. Presently, there is something of an existential denial of failure at the community and individual level that is preventing such a meaningful dialogue from taking place.

As a result, there is, finally, the question of how best to revive debate within the curriculum about the significance of failure. By conceiving of failure within the learning process as a valid CoP activity, it becomes possible to at least show that we openly acknowledge it and the dialogic relationships within which we are all learning from it.

This could be supplemented by traditional methods such as role play followed by group discussion. For example, groups of students are given written descriptions of situations and asked to role play both the situation and a resolution, as far as this is possible. The situations could range from dealing with fellow social workers and students to working with service users. They could involve confronting individual failure. Afterwards, staff might invite students to discuss the failings of the characters depicted, and this might be especially valuable to those involved in the role play: there could be real efforts to own such obvious, and public, failures and to think them through. Nevertheless we recognise that there is a profound difference between being successful at the 'role-playing' of failure, and actual failure.

Perhaps more usefully, there is also an impetus to bring the fringe experiences of failure (in a module, essay, placement or client experiences) more into the centre of the community for dialogue. The task here is to allow the informal, somewhat messy side of the community of practice, where a dialogue about failure may exist in whispered conversations, to have a more recognised and acknowledged placed within the formal organisational units.

Conclusion

Exploring the role of failure in individual and social learning has been shown to have benefits that are unlikely to arise from within a 'success' learning culture. Such benefits are especially important in the context of social work education. In particular, further exploration of the open – ended development of 'failure' dialogues seems an especially promising area for future study in social work training. Seeing social work practice settings as Communities of Practice may help to carry this exploration forward. The informal networks within which discussions of failure freely occur within communities of practice can be seen as an important component in an ethical *nomos* that exists alongside formal organisational units and alongside the 'success ethic' with which they are tacitly imbued.

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