

'The Lion's Den': The Epistemic Dimensions of Invisible Emotional Labour in Service-User Involvement Spaces

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Abstract

There has been an exponential growth in Service-User Involvement within mental health services. However, little attention has been paid to affective costs, or the ethical consequences of bringing 'service users' into professional spaces as nominal equals, spaces sometimes hostile and fraught with interdisciplinary power struggles. This paper will draw on existing theory about the emotional labour required of marginalised people in unequal and invalidated positions; epistemic injustice and the hermeneutical lacuna of silenced or unnamed struggles; and Critical Race Studies' illumination of everyday micro-aggressions. I will build on this literature by presenting the empirical findings of my PhD research in Ireland on the emotional cost for service users of entering into contested spaces. These empirical findings also reveal different resistance strategies used by activists to both disrupt and survive in these emotionally challenging settings. It is imperative to focus an ethical gaze on the invisible emotional labour occurring in these contested spaces.

Keywords: Emotional labour of service user involvement; silenced and unspoken emotional labour; sanist microaggression at meetings; epistemic injustice and hermeneutical lacuna

Introduction

As someone who was active in mental health service user involvement (SUI henceforth) in Ireland for over fifteen years I wish to discuss a hidden dynamic – a hermeneutical lacuna (Fricker, 2007) - in regards to SUI. SUI is promoted as a means to effect culture change, and indeed it has done so when embraced wholeheartedly by leaders within mental health services, as my PhD research reported (Brosnan, 2013). Critical interlocutors of SUI highlight the barriers to involvement and the requirement to address the conditions for effective involvement (Beresford, 2010; Chamberlin, 2005; Faulkner, 2017; Sweeney, 2016). Yet, an often unproblematised reform impetus ignores the emotional labour involved for people who participate in highly unequal and contested spaces. This work is often unsettling for all concerned, as at its core is an unsettling of power relations associated with an expert-driven, bio-medical hegemony. The emotional labour involved is often silenced, unacknowledged, and invisible. Following examination of some relevant theoretical concepts, this paper presents empirical findings about the emotional labour reported by service users around the work of SUI in an Irish case study. It concludes by highlighting the ethical and political imperative to correct the hermeneutical lacuna underpinning epistemic injustice around the emotional labour of SUI.

Methodology

My PhD research unpacked the experiences of service users (N=20) and professionals (N=13) engaged in SUI work, and reported the many tensions involved for those committed to improving service delivery (Brosnan, 2013). Survivor Standpoint Epistemology (Rose, 2009), grounded in Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (Harding, 2006), informed the methodology. My fieldwork included 33 in-depth semi-structured interviews plus six months of participant observation at a case study site: a multidisciplinary team actively incorporating SUI into their team meetings.¹ I interviewed eight service users active with this team (three employed as peer-advocates, the others volunteers) and triangulated these with the experiences of twelve people who were active in the national user/survivor movement (five volunteers, the others in various paid positions). The transcribed interviews were thematically analysed for emergent themes and subthemes. The findings illustrated the conditions of

¹ Space does not permit presentation of findings from the professional participants. They were allies and supporters of local service user participants and sought ways to improve practice around SUI.

participation and the power dynamics surrounding the inherent tensions of SUI. This paper will focus on the conditions of participation regarding emotional labour and associated epistemic injustices. Therefore, findings around power dynamics cannot be discussed in necessary depth here, but have been explored elsewhere (Brosnan, 2012).

Emotional and Epistemic Labour

This paper considers the emotional labour of service users attending meetings at which there is resistance to their very presence. Those who use mental health services or experience psychosocial distress are by definition positioned as the irrational, the emotional, the 'other' (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Voronka, 2017). Such positioning of the service user identity vis-à-vis the professional is fraught with tensions and uncertainties when service-users express passionate convictions rooted in the unconstructed raw ontology of painful experience and past traumas. Or equally when dry, officious procedures and overt power inhibits passionate expression and manages it via business-as-usual.

The term emotional labour originated from the research of Hochschild (1979, 1983). She distinguished between emotional work (managing and regulating feelings in the private sphere) and emotional labor (an occupational expectation of service workers). Emotional labor is '...the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7), such as air stewards are expected by their employers to produce for passengers. She described the 'feeling rules' codified by management, which delineate the acceptable expression of emotions. These are similar to the rules of engagement for SUI observed by Church (1996). The rich and contested literature arising from Hochschild's work (Brook, 2009) has been applied by Mad Scholars to the efforts of people who engage with the psy-complex as paid employees to serve other people as supporters or role models (Voronka, 2017).

Church first identified emotional labour as an issue in her analysis of SUI in Canada in the 1980s (Church, 1996; Church & Reville, 1988). She asserted that SUI is never unemotional but always about the re-distribution of power. She described how bureaucratic procedures were unsettled by the presence of politicised survivors, who insisted in having the lived experiences of service-users heard by bureaucrats. The officials found this challenging and referred to survivors' engagement style as 'bad manners': a reaction to disruption of the dry, officious, unemotional processes of business-as-

usual. The most affective dimension to officials' work occurred as they listened to narratives of service-users at public consultations. Service-providers spoke of 'decentralisation, local authority, mandates, funding mechanisms, professional autonomy'. Service-users talked about:

"hate, prejudice, poverty; about self-help, capacity and power; about loss, suffering struggle. They asked to be included. They paid tribute to each other. Some of them cried or were openly angry about the quality of their lives." (Church, 1996, pp. 33-34)

Church (1996, p. 38) argued that: "emotion was the deep-structure of power". Power manifested at the emotional level of control over what was permissible in meetings. Church (citing Lyman, 1981 and Giroux, 1983) constructs a code of implicit etiquette for service-users around SUI: "Don't give offence. Don't be unpleasant or adversarial. Don't complain or fight. Be nice. Be reasonable. Be considerate. Be cooperative" (1996, p. 38). These unspoken rules construct and limit the rules of engagement. She concluded that the pivotal struggle was over whether emotions and personal experience are considered valid forms of knowledge.

The struggle for validation of marginalised knowledge aligns with the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007; LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Medina, 2013) and its two components: testimonial and hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when people are not deemed credible knowers or witnesses because of associated stereotypes, for instance, the associations attached to having a psychiatric diagnosis, which can be understood as sanist oppression (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Poole et al., 2012). Psychiatrised people are not deemed credible, are not believed if they report crimes perpetrated against them and, thus, are denied testimonial (and legal) justice. The second category (hermeneutical injustice) occurs when there is no language or available discourse around the denial of epistemic agency. For instance, if someone is experiencing sexual harassment but lacks a vocabulary to explain what is happening because the culture around them regards women as sexual objects without rights to define their own boundaries vis-à-vis unwanted sexual attention, then naming invasive sexual comments and/or touching as assault may not be possible for the victim. Because she is unable to interpret and explain her experience, she is left deeply troubled, confused, isolated, and vulnerable to further assault.

Racial micro-aggression theory also holds explanatory potential for service users' experiences. The term micro-aggression, coined by Pierce (1970), a Black psychiatrist, has been used extensively

by Critical Race scholars (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Sue, 2010). Sue (2010, p. 3) explains microaggression as the “everyday verbal, non-verbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership”. Sue (2010) identifies three forms of microaggression: microinvalidations, microinsults, and microassaults, experienced regardless of the instigator’s intent or awareness. Microassaults are explicitly derogatory, insulting slurs or overt discrimination, not explored in depth by Sue and colleagues because the explicit nature means the perpetrator cannot be unaware of their impact. Microaggression theory instead focuses primarily on the other two. Microinsults are subtle slurs, perhaps unintentional, but clearly convey an insulting or hurtful message to the victim, e.g. ‘how did *you* get this job?’ Microinvalidations operate to deny the reality of the person’s experience, e.g. asking an Asian American where she is ‘really’ from. Microaggression theory asserts that perpetrators are usually unaware of the impact of their communications, and so deny the harm or become defensive if challenged. Critical Race insights are also emerging in Mad Studies literature, as Mad Scholars name the anti-sanism and racism experienced by black and minority ethnic people (Gorman, 2013; Gorman et al., 2013; Griffiths, 2018; LeFrançois, Beresford, & Russo, 2016; Kalathil et al., 2011; Meerai, Abdillahi, & Poole, 2016; Tam, 2013).

LeBlanc & Kinsella (2016, citing Poole et al., 2012), tie microaggression to sanist oppression. Sanist oppression is that based on having, or being associated with, mental health problems. Sanism privileges ‘sanity’ over ‘madness’; one enjoys the benefits of assumed sanity unless this is removed by being labeled insane, irrational, or crazy. Sanist oppression is one of few remaining forms of identity-based oppressions not generally understood as problematic for victims, unlike racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and transphobia (Diamond, 2013; Fabris, 2011; Poole & Ward, 2013). The microaggression lens can illuminate the experiences of psychiatrised people around the minute, apparently inconsequential but ubiquitous remarks, looks, and gestures accompanying references to mental health issues (from the perspective of the ‘sane’ speaker who can deny any negative intention). However, the person on the receiving end feels the effect of the microassaults, insults, and invalidation related to their service user identity (Keller & Galgay, 2010; Gonzales et al., 2015; LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Liegghio, 2013). People who are ‘out’ as service users or survivors feel a constant barrage of microassaults in the casual, pejorative use of words such as: ‘schitzo; lunatic; crazy; psycho’ that pepper everyday language in contexts that have nothing to do with mental health issues. These terms

feel like a personal attack and denigrate by associating mental health problems with violence and aggression, making it feel unsafe to disclose experiences of mental distress. The second two forms of micro-aggressions, insults and invalidation, can be seen to operate in the domain of hermeneutical injustice, as subtle and barely perceptible insults to respect and credibility are unknowable to those not on the receiving end, thus elude easy communication. Yet, those who experience these slights have a tacit knowledge gained through constant exposure and feel a 'aha moment' when this behaviour is called out by someone else experiencing it. The injury to hermeneutical justice of micro-aggression occurs when the experience is unnamed and invisible. Both these concepts are applicable to the reports of participants describing what it is like to be positioned as the irrational, the emotional, the 'other', and the 'service-user' in high-powered committee rooms. Mad Scholars (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016, p. 70) have identified such processes as operating in a hermeneutical lacuna. They cite Fricker's description of hermeneutical lacunae: "absences of proper interpretations, blanks where there should be a name for an experience which it is in the interests of the subject to be able to render communicatively intelligible" (Fricker, 2007, p. 160, cited by LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016). The peril of hermeneutical lacunae is that the injustices are invisible, and so both the perpetrator and victim are unable to make sense of the injustices taking place. These dynamics were very evident in my interviewee accounts of what it is like to participate in SUI. Some of my findings are presented below as they relate to emotional labor at hostile meetings, and the coping strategies deployed as resistance.

Findings: Emotional Labour at Hostile Meetings

Participants' accounts illustrate the affective labour involved in unsettling power relationships. All participants spoke of the difficulties of embodying the 'service-user' identity. They were all given pseudonyms to preserve anonymity. Even when committee meetings were welcoming of users, it was a daunting experience, especially when people were new to this work. A national activist described how at his first meeting he knew he was an outsider because everybody else carried diaries. He continued:

"...the first thing I remember is going into the room and being frightened ...it was like going into the lion's den ... when I think back to it still conjures up that sense of fear and panic and sort of almost demeaning myself in the sense of feeling that I was the least qualified ... the

least educated to sit in that room, I had no concept of what they were talking about, they were using language I had never heard of ...it was a frightful experience.” (Brosnan, 2013, p. 227)

Many of the participants believed their education and knowledge to be inadequate in these settings. Some reported feelings of paranoia as a result:

“I think I was naïve ... totally at sea, totally ill-equipped and it brought back feelings of paranoia ... you could see yourself feeling threatened by what people said ... and questioning yourself, am I being paranoid, was that being directed at me?” (Brosnan, 2013, p.228)

For instance, several mentioned the need to validate with professional allies their interpretation of the unspoken tensions and interdisciplinary power struggles at meetings. Many spoke about the difficulty of being the sole service-user at meetings, of doubting the micro-aggressions experienced.

All had some accounts of hostile reception at SUI committee meetings. One woman described difficult meetings where she felt: “...belittled and it bloody well hurt” (Brosnan, 2013, p. 128). Another elaborated on microinsults: “I’ve been to meetings where the consultant psychiatrists, and nurses, have completely ignored me; I mean you would not be there for them” (Brosnan, 2013, p. 129). The dynamics of exclusionary microinsults were subtle and so could be denied or minimised by others at the same meetings: “...it’s not tangible but you know the way you’re being excluded, that there’s no eye contact.” She described the emotional impact: “I’d be quite frightened, my self-esteem would get lower and lower, I’d be powerless...sitting in a big blob of fear, not able to talk.” Her sense of fear and intimidation at these meetings undermined her in contributing what she knew were valuable ideas. A third described specific instances of microinvalidation: “I have experienced cases where psychiatrists especially, have come into meetings and just taken the whole attitude of ‘you don’t know anything’” (Brosnan, 2013, p. 129). Although less common, there were accounts of microassaults. A national activist gave a vivid account of her strong visceral reaction to a microassault: derogatory remarks about the peer advocacy movement made at a meeting by a very senior professional. She described the trepidation she felt waiting for a chance to challenge comments about the integrity of peer advocates: “Oh God, I’ll never forget it, I’m telling you, I shook and I was sick and I could feel the tears coming and everything but I did it” (Brosnan, 2013, pp. 228-229).

Emotional Labour: Coping Strategies

Given the emotional labour of managing microaggressions, my participants displayed resilience and personal strength. Many spoke of learning to leave their personal feelings aside and moderate how they communicated in order to further their advocacy agenda. They used various strategies. Two participants used the metaphor of removing professionals from their pedestals. One woman described learning through experience, growing into personal power:

“I’ve learned that most of the anxieties and fears that I had sitting around the table...were my [own]. I was putting the professionals on pedestals. I think they’re on them, but certainly when I took them off in my mind, then it was okay.” (Brosnan, 2013, p. 130)

Other participants described how they dealt with difficult meetings by preparation in advance ‘to prevent nasty surprises’. Some dealt with feelings of intimidation by keeping the purpose and simplicity of service-users’ demands to the forefront in their minds. In fact, this advocacy role, of representing the concerns and experiences of people enmeshed in services, e.g. long-term in-patients, was often mentioned as the primary motivation for their SUI work, providing a necessary sense of purpose which sustained them in challenging situations. Many discussed the importance of debriefing with SUI-ally professionals or other service users after meetings, especially when they had been the sole service-user present. There were a few accounts of shared laughter at the disparity between the reality of service-users’ lives and the concerns of service-providers. All participants referred to the importance of a strong support network. Such support occurred both informally, through phone conversations or meet-ups with other involved service users, or the more formal line-manager arrangements of the peer-advocates. Other participants referred to the importance of support from people in their personal lives to deal with the emotional labour of SUI. Participants actively involved with the case study multidisciplinary team reported much more positive support and recognition. They spoke of this support as important in contributing to their sense of achievement and feeling appreciated in their SUI work. However, this supportive relationship with professional allies was the exception rather than the rule for most participants.

Discussion: Breaking the Silence

These findings illuminate the ethical and political dimensions of emotional labour, especially for people who experience the ‘othering’ and consequent microaggressions occurring in SUI spaces. Novices to

SUI must learn to navigate emotional presentation in committee spaces. Participants were 'initiated' into the unspoken bureaucratic codes regulating self-presentation at meetings. This included the emotional self-checking people engaged in as they learnt the rules of engagement in official spaces. This concurs with the description of service workers' emotional labour (Hochchilds, 1983) and that of service users around SUI (Church, 1996). Emotional expression is silenced by the rules of bureaucratic engagement (Church & Reville, 1988; Lewis, 2010). And, yet, there are very real emotional reactions in these unequal spaces where marginalised people enter unschooled in the unspoken rules of officialdom. This is especially so when people are there because of their experience of using mental health services. Many service-users have written of resistance to their presence and the painful process of gaining confidence to overcome the feelings of self-doubt and powerlessness experienced at contentious and difficult meetings (Campbell, 1996; Chamberlin, 2005; Crepaz-Keay, 1996; Reynolds & Read, 1999; Wadsworth & Epstein, 1998; Wallcraft, Read & Sweeny, 2003).

My participants had developed strategies to manage the emotional impact of this work. Their accounts highlight the supportive networks and resilience developed collectively. The importance of support systems was evident in bolstering resilience in the face of hostile and difficult occasions of SUI. De-briefing provided a cathartic release after difficult meetings, and allowed them to find support and validate their experiences with each other and supportive professionals. The coping strategies deployed to deal with the emotions generated by hostile meetings are part of the journey of growing into self-advocacy, of reclaiming one's own sense of valued personhood (Lindow, 1996), and of taking back one's agency which the participants ably demonstrated. Most participants had overcome their initial feelings of inferiority and were seasoned activists: their very resilience a testimony to the hidden emotional labour undertaken to achieve such equanimity in the face of reported resistance and hostility. The resistance of powerful professionals to the presence of service-users created a strong, negative, emotional tone at many meetings, manifested in both overt and subtle microaggressions. All three dynamics in Sue's (2010) framework were present and require further attention.

Microassaults include exclusionary tactics. Powerful actors can ignore those of lesser status, by avoiding eye contact, and hence making it more difficult for them to contribute to the meeting. The evidence from some participants about eye contact being used to control speaking time is a clear tactic of power, denying them opportunities to contribute to meetings. Another instance of microassault had emotional repercussions for a participant who struggled to contain her rising anxiety as she waited

to challenge derogatory remarks about her peer colleagues. Participants experienced these microassaults as painful and exclusionary, undermining their confidence. In general, however, the dynamics reported were more subtle, less easy to challenge, presenting clear-cut instances of hermeneutical injustice, rather than outright hostility.

Microinvalidation is evident in the accounts of how some psychiatrists made participants believe that they had nothing worthwhile to contribute. Their presence and contributions were invalidated by more powerful actors unaccustomed to sharing decision-making spaces with service users. Microinsults are also evident in the dynamics recounted by participants of feeling belittled, intimidated, and silenced. Such subtle and nonverbal interactions are at the very heart of the microaggressions described and illuminated by Sue (2010). Challenging such subtle dynamics when the perpetrator is apparently unaware of the impact of their behaviour is part of the harm of hermeneutical injustice.

The essence of both hermeneutical injustice and microaggression is the invisible impact on those experiencing these dynamics, hence the difficulty challenging the dominant party. To challenge is to be dismissed (at best) as someone with a chip on their shoulder, someone who is over-reacting, 'too sensitive'. These responses are especially invalidating to psychiatrised people, as the very essence of being psychiatrised denies one status as an epistemic agent, a credible knower (Fricker, 2007; LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016). This silencing of the knower reveals the insidious nature of microaggression as illustrated in my research findings. The findings resonate with the affective labour of managing a disparaged identity role and the associated resistance to democratising practice and disability justice in powerful hierarchies described by other Mad Scholars (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016; Voronka, 2017). Such labour is rarely discussed in the literature on SUI by professionals and academics, and thus in effect operates as a form of hermeneutical injustice. If these non-recognition dynamics and micro-aggressions are not openly discussed then a hermeneutical lacuna (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016) pervades.

Conclusion

This paper has presented findings about the emotional labour of service-users engaging in SUI, findings that resonate deeply with my own personal experience in such spaces. The emotional

labour necessary to operate in these invited spaces, to learn the rules of engagement and navigate microaggression, is hampered by the hermeneutical lacuna surrounding these dynamics. For those committed to reform through SUI, it is imperative that professionals and other powerful actors recognise the required emotional labour in SUI and strive to develop epistemic receptivity. Further survivor-led research and epistemic work is required to fill the hermeneutical lacuna present in the professional SUI literature around microaggression and emotional labour. Processes must be found to enlighten professionals about the deep-structures of power underpinning oppressive micro dynamics and encourage epistemic justice through critical and reflexive listening. Discursive spaces for such work must be created to allow involved service users develop interpretive fluency around their invisible labour.

Mad Scholars are at the forefront of the 'epistemic resistance' against the silencing and invalidation of Mad knowledge (LeBlanc & Kinsella, 2016). This paper invites consideration of one such hermeneutical lacuna (the invisible emotional labour of service-users) and argues it is an ethical and political imperative to acknowledge the affective, epistemic injustices reported by the marginalised in unequal SUI spaces. Otherwise, hermeneutical injustice will continue unabated.

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