

The Language of Siege

Military Metaphors in the Spoken Language of Social Work

Summary

This article discusses the language that is used by social workers in the children and family field when talking about their work, and specifically the metaphors that such language draws upon. The question of the relation of language and reality that has been raised by postmodernist theory is considered, but it is argued that it remains sensible to see language as 'a reflection of reality', however partial. Drawing on ideas about metaphor from other disciplines, it is suggested that by identifying the sources of metaphors used in spoken language it is possible to gain insights into underlying mental concepts. The sources of metaphor in the language of social work are found to come from several sources, including medicine, business and industry, but attention is drawn here in particular to terms with military connotations, implying underlying conceptual metaphors which equate social work with war. The implications of this are discussed.

Introduction

When French social workers participating in our study first walked through the doors of a London area office, they were astounded by the fortress atmosphere of the reception area. (Cooper et al, 1995: 111)

In this article I will argue that it is not surprising that the French visitors quoted above felt as if they were entering a fortress when they walked into a social work office, because the very language that British social workers use at work carries embedded within it metaphors of war. I will also make a more general point about language and social work – and indeed about language and *reality* - taking the position that, contrary to currently fashionable thinking, examination of the language used in a given context tells us something about underlying structures and phenomena that are prior to language itself.

Language, Reality and Social Work

The importance of paying attention to language has been a theme in social work literature for a long time. Timms (1968) for instance exhorted social workers to pay more attention to the nature of words and language. Questions of language have always played a central role in the debate about anti-discriminatory practice, because of the role played by language in ‘constructing and reinforcing discrimination’ (Thompson, 1993: 13). More generally, across a wide range of academic disciplines - literary theory, sociology, linguistics, philosophy - debate about the nature of language became increasingly central during the latter part of the twentieth century. In particular a viewpoint that can loosely be described as ‘constructionist’ or ‘postmodern’ has become prominent, in which the ‘common sense’ assumptions about the relationship between language (or ‘talk’ or ‘discourse’) and reality seem to have been reversed. Instead of language being seen as a representation of an outside reality, ‘reality’ becomes something that is created (‘socially constructed’) by language: a kind of story or narrative. The influence of this

constructionist/postmodernist position has increasingly made itself felt in social work theory, notably and comparatively recently by Nigel Parton and Patrick O'Byrne (2000) who offer a 'Constructive social work'. (For discussions of postmodernism in social work see also Howe, 1994, Walker, 2001).

However the constructionist/ postmodernist stance in general seems to me to be very slippery on the question of *external reality*. Sibeon (1996: 13), for instance, points out 'postmodernists' contradictory tendency to argue on the one hand that discourses *produce* (or "determine") social contexts, and to argue on the other that discourses are largely *determined* by the context!' At times what constructionism seems to be saying is that there *is* an external reality, but that language and discourse powerfully shape our *interpretation* of that reality - and the meanings we ascribe to it - to the point that we can only ever have a partial and provisional view. Thus Parton and O'Byrne (2000: 17), discussing the work of Potter and Wetherell (1987), write that 'social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories existing in the natural world, they actively *construct* a version of those things.' (Their emphasis: what I wish to emphasise is the word 'version'.) At other times, though, the constructionist approach seems to deny altogether the existence of an external reality and to suggest that reality and truth are *entirely* the products of social interaction (and specifically from *linguistic* interaction, which for some reason is privileged over other kinds of social interaction, such as touch, acts of violence, body language, sexual acts, trade and so on.) Thus Parton and O'Byrne (2000: 22) write that reality 'emerges from the linguistic acts of persons.'

I have no quarrel with the position that social texts construct *versions* of reality - but I believe a view based on the proposition that 'linguistic acts' construct reality itself is in danger of degenerating into a kind of self-indulgent solipsism which may be attractive to those of us (I include myself) who enjoy the play of rhetoric, but can easily be used to avoid difficult questions about evidence - and about politics and policy. Indeed I wonder whether the now generally accepted use of the word 'construct' in these contexts is *per se* a source of misunderstanding. To give an instance: the sociologist Clive Seale has written a book entitled 'Constructing Death' (1998), but in it he of course does not deny the biological fact of death, or suggest that this biological fact could be banished simply by a change in the way we talk. What he is suggesting is that *upon this prior fact* we construct a range of different narratives in order to try and make sense of it, or come to terms with it, or reduce the anxiety that it causes us. I have no quarrel with this, but perhaps 'Constructions *around* Death' would have been a more accurate title?

My own position is that it is unhelpful to try and manage without the notion of a prior reality that is 'out there'. By all means I accept that it is in principle impossible for us ever to grasp this external reality in its entirety, but it seems to me that we get into a conceptual muddle if we do not explicitly acknowledge that the language we use is influenced *by the reality itself* as well as by the kinds of social, discursive factors that the constructionists have rightly identified. Thus, while there may be a very wide range of different narratives that different societies and individuals construct around death, the nature of those narratives are still powerfully influenced by the nature of death itself.

I appreciate that I may seem here to be taking things too literally – and perhaps to be labouring a rather obvious point - but I do think that there is genuinely some confusion around this. Specifically in social work discourse there is sometimes a certain naïveté about the extent to which changing the names of things (using anti-oppressive language for example) can change the world itself. Oppression is not just a matter of language, although undoubtedly language plays a role in legitimating or concealing it.

To return to the main subject of this article, my proposal is that by looking at the metaphorical language that is colloquially used by social workers, we are not *just* looking at how social workers *choose* to construct reality. We are also glimpsing a reality that is external to them. One of the reasons that they choose certain metaphors as against others is that they provide the best fit against their own experience of the context in which they find themselves.

About Metaphor

O’Hanlon maintains that we tend to underestimate the prevalence of metaphor. Take the world of banking, for example: they [sic] *float* loans, have *liquid* assets and *slush* funds, *hard* cash, *frozen* accounts and *rising liquidity*; the bank is the *bank* of a river. (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000: 81, discussing Bertolino and O’Hanlon, 1999: 21)

The language that social workers use, like all language, is infused with metaphor to an extent that we are often not aware. What is interesting about metaphor is what it tells us about our underlying thought processes. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) suggest that many people see metaphor as essentially a literary ‘flourish’ but that in fact ‘human *thought processes* are largely metaphorical... Metaphors as linguistic expressions are possible precisely because there are metaphors in a person’s conceptual system.’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 6, their italics). Their view is that we do not just use metaphors to explain things in words but that metaphors represent a mode of representation which is actually prior to words – and that by looking at metaphors we can illuminate the ways in which we think and organise our thoughts.

In particular Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors in common use about a particular topic often reveal a more pervasive *underlying* ‘conceptual metaphor’, which may not itself be given verbal form. For example the expressions ‘...How do you *spend* your time these days?...I’ve *invested* a lot of time in her... He’s living on *borrowed* time.’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 8), all depend on the underlying metaphor ‘TIME IS MONEY’. (Lakoff and Johnson adopt the convention of denoting these underlying metaphors with capital letters.) Another group of expressions in common use reveal the conceptual metaphor ‘IDEAS ARE PLANTS’: ‘His ideas have finally come to *fruition*. ...That idea *died on the vine*... She has a *fertile* imagination.’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 47) In fact the precise nature of metaphor remains a matter of debate across a number of academic disciplines (see for example Ortony, 1993), but I intend in this article to make use of the following two ideas:

1. A number of different verbal metaphors may reveal the existence a single underlying *conceptual metaphor*, such as 'IDEAS ARE PLANTS', if a common theme emerges.
2. Metaphors reveal how we think. As George Lakoff has more recently put it: '...the locus of metaphor is not language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another.' (Lakoff, 1993) This idea is not incompatible, it seems to me, with the constructionist insight that our choice of metaphors will be powerfully influenced by self-interest and/or by the interests of powerful groups.

The Languages of Social Work

The language that social workers use can be looked at in a number of ways. Andrew Pithouse (1998) offers a sociological analysis of the way in which social workers talk about their work and the role in which this talk plays in making visible what is normally an 'invisible activity', in that social workers do not usually observe one another's interactions with their clients. (This need to 'make visible', incidentally, is presumably one reason why we 'conceptualise one mental domain in terms of another': the conceptual metaphors 'IDEAS ARE PLANTS' and 'TIME IS MONEY' are both examples of the abstract and invisible being converted into the concrete and visible.) Pithouse's study is based on transcripts of conversations with social workers about their work and of supervision sessions where social workers discuss their work with their line managers.

Hawkins et al (2001) also used transcripts of interviews carried out by the authors. They look at the language used by social workers in discussing their work and conclude that:

Individuals, their families (and less commonly, their situations) are 'interviewed', 'assessed', 'treated' and 'intervened in/with' using a variety of 'strategies'. Rarely do workers talk about 'empowering', 'advocating for', 'collaborating with' or even 'changing structures'. Social workers' language use appears to be quite incongruent with our stated mission of social justice. (Hawkins et al, 2001: 10)

The present article differs from these studies in that it is not based on transcripts (though the approach which I take could be applied to a systematic analysis of transcripts of social work talk). It also differs in that it focuses specifically on conceptual metaphors and considers in particular the way that social workers talk to one another at work, rather than the ways in which they talk *about* their work to others.

I start from the position that social workers – like any other group of human beings – evolve a distinctive language which differs from the language used elsewhere. In fact, I would go further and say that the language used by social workers could be divided up into several distinct languages. Aside from the specific jargons which grow up in the various different areas of specialism and the more general terminology which

social work shares with a number of other helping professions, one can identify at least three different types of social work language, which might be referred to as 'sacred', 'official' and 'colloquial', by analogy with the different types of language which a society as a whole typically adopts for different purposes. (I have appropriated and adapted this three-tier classification from a discussion on language and nationhood in Anderson, 1991). The *spoken* language of social work, I suggest, is an amalgam of different elements, mainly the 'official' and 'colloquial', just as spoken English typically contains both formal and informal elements.

The 'Sacred Language'

The term 'Sacred language', as used by Anderson (1991), refers to languages such as classical Arabic, Latin or Church Slavonic which are not used in everyday speech but are vehicles for the transmission of traditional beliefs and values (respectively in Islam, Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy). In the social work context, I suggest, we might use this term to refer to terminology such as 'Anti-oppressive Practice', 'Empowerment', 'User participation' and 'Non-judgemental'. These are names for concepts that are instilled in social work courses. Any social worker would recognise and have some understanding of them. However their meaning might well be obscure to a member of the general public and their use quite limited in day to day conversations in social work offices. Many of these expressions are what Hawkins et al (2001) call 'social justice terms', terms which – in concordance with my own impressions – they found to be little used by the social workers in their study.

The 'Official Language'

Social work agencies use a specific language to refer to the various categories and functions which make up their work and I would suggest that an appropriate analogy for this is the official language of a country, the language of administration. A letter from the Inland Revenue, for example, is written in official English. In the social work context the 'official language' would include words and phrases such as 'intake team', 'supervision', 'core assessment', 'care plan', 'case', 'case load', 'planning meeting', 'care order', 'placement' or 'review'. This language is used in writing, in government guidance and in textbooks, as well as in the everyday speech of social workers, though its meaning would again often be obscure to a member of the general public. What is meant by 'supervision' in social work is something much more specific, for example, than what is generally understood by the word. The official language also draws to some extent on the 'sacred language'. An expression such as 'needs-led assessment' might be said to belong to both the 'sacred' and the 'official' languages, though one might debate whether the meaning is the same in both cases.

The 'Colloquial language'

As well as the 'sacred' and 'official languages' there are, I suggest, words and expressions which are commonly used informally by social workers among themselves in ways which are distinctive to the profession. As with the 'sacred' and 'official' languages, their meaning might be obscure to outsiders but, unlike the sacred and official languages, the colloquial language does not on the whole find its way into print. The analogy is with the informal or street language which in every country is distinct from the official language. In English most of us move instinctively

from colloquial to official, as we move from a social context to a context such as a job interview or a court appearance. The colloquial language of social work, I suggest, includes a range of words and expressions such as ‘bombardment rate’ or the verb ‘to blow’ used in expressions such as ‘all my cases have blown this week’

The ‘Spoken language’

Just as everyday spoken English includes both ‘official’ and ‘colloquial’ elements, the ‘spoken language’ of social workers includes elements of both the official and the colloquial language. Thus, in the following (fictional) instance of ‘spoken social work language’ there are both ‘official’ and ‘colloquial’ elements, which I have marked ‘O’ and ‘C’ respectively:

Judy said that the intake team [O] is falling apart. John and Fran are still on long-term sick leave and the bombardment rate [C] is ridiculous. They’re stacking up referrals [O] and they don’t have time to do proper initial assessments [O] let alone core [O] ones. Judy’s got this big CSA [O] case blowing [C] and she says she’s had enough and she just wants to get out.

It is with this spoken language of social work – this hybrid of the official and the colloquial - that I am concerned.

Collecting a ‘Sample’

In looking at any other aspect of language, we need a sample of language to work from. Students of language from a range of disciplines - literary theory, sociology,

social psychology and linguistics - have adopted a variety of methods to select the object of their study, of which the simplest method is for the researcher to simply rely on his or her own intuitions as a native speaker. The American linguist Noam Chomsky, for example, adopted this approach to decide what constituted a 'proper' English sentence and from this to derive his theory of transformational grammar. The problem with this method is that intuitions are (of course) subjective and researchers can consciously or unconsciously exclude data which might overthrow their theory. 'Against this background,' write Potter and Wetherell (1987: 11), 'the idea of looking at naturalistic speech data (transcripts of everyday conversations or documents of various kinds) as discourse analysts suggest, is a radical one.' Students of language now tend to draw on a 'corpus' of written text, or transcripts of spoken language, in order to provide a more objective and quantitative basis for their analyses.

One could certainly use social work text-books and journals as the basis for a corpus of *written* social work language but I am not aware of any corpus of spoken social work language (the quotations in Pithouse, 1998, are probably the nearest thing to it). In trying to assemble a sample of language for this study I experimented with the idea of asking social workers to generate lists of words and terms that they and their colleagues used, and which were distinctive to social work. However in practice it was difficult to be specific enough about what I wanted without, in effect, asking 'leading questions' which would bias the lists generated and therefore defeat the object of the exercise.

I have therefore ended up relying on my own knowledge as a ‘native speaker’ of the oral language of social work to come up with expressions used in the everyday speech of children and family social workers. In one sense I believe this method is entirely reliable. I worked in children and families social work for eighteen years up to early 1999 (latterly as the manager of a children and families fieldwork team) and can say with confidence that the words and expressions I discuss below are genuine instances of the spoken language used in that context, in the same way that I can say with confidence that the words in this article are genuine instances of English. What it does not allow me to do, though, is to comment on the *frequency* of military metaphors vis-à-vis other kinds of expression, in the way that Hawkins et al (2001) were able to do with the words they considered, or to claim to have produced a comprehensive list. This I acknowledge to be a limitation, though essentially the same limitation would apply to any academic article whose argument was based on the author’s selection of a series of extracts from texts.

Categories of Metaphor

Metaphorical expressions have been adopted into the official and colloquial language of social workers from a variety of different areas. Historically medicine has been a major source, bringing in words like ‘treatment’, ‘therapy’, ‘prognosis’, ‘trauma’, ‘dysfunctional’ and ‘pathological’, many of which remain in common use and most of which originated in physical medicine and have probably reached social work at third hand via their metaphoric use in psychiatry. To adopt the method of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) I would suggest that, when such metaphors are widely used in social work discourse, they imply the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors on the

lines of 'SOCIAL PROBLEMS ARE ILLNESSES', 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE DOCTORS'.

However, for a variety of reasons the medical model seems to have been in decline in social work. Thus Nigel Parton observes that 'If child abuse had previously been constituted as a disease, and thus a socio-health problem, the focus now [from the late 1980s] was child protection, which was constituted as a socio-legal issue' (Parton, 1991: 146). Perhaps it is as a result of this shift that the use of the phrase 'intermediate treatment' to describe programmes of diversionary activities for young offenders, now seems rather old-fashioned, although in the early eighties it was a term in general use. Indeed the word 'treatment' was then quite widely used to describe what is now more often referred to as 'intervention'.

Management theory has also, of course, latterly been an important source of terminology such as 'goals', 'targets', 'outcomes' and so on: what Hawkins et al (2001: 9) refer to as the 'language of managerialism'. Many of these terms are metaphors which managerial discourse has in its turn borrowed from other sources such as sport, 'goals' and 'targets' being obvious examples. Thus, we have the metaphors 'SOCIAL WORK AGENCIES ARE BUSINESSES', 'SOCIAL WORK MANAGERS ARE BUSINESSPEOPLE' being linked in turn to the metaphor 'BUSINESS IS SPORT'.

Another, less well-known source of metaphor would seem to be industry and engineering. The word 'intake' for example, is commonly used of teams providing an

initial response to referrals, but surely referred originally to parts of machines that take in liquids or gases. A jet engine has an intake at the front to suck in air, a power station has an intake to draw in water for its cooling system from a river or the sea. (However, as we'll see, 'intake' does also have a military link.) The phrase 'burn out' and perhaps also the use of the word 'core' as in 'core group meeting' or 'core assessment' may perhaps also have industrial origins.

The rhetorical effect of terms like 'intake' and 'core' is to objectify - that is: turn into objects - the subject matter of social work. Family conflict and distress, the mistreatment of children, emotional collapse become through the use of words like 'intake' and 'core assessment' something external, homogeneous and emotionally neutral. This could be seen as a defence mechanism for social work staff who might otherwise be overwhelmed by the amount of distress they are faced with and/or by their own very limited ability to assist with it. It could also be seen as a manifestation of what Parton and O'Byrne (2000: 31) call the '*rational-technical* approach', an approach which entails 'the *application* of rigorous social science in the same way as engineering becomes the *application* of engineering science.' (Their emphasis.) The underlying metaphors here seem to be on the lines of 'SOCIAL WORK AGENCIES ARE MACHINES', 'SOCIAL WORK AGENCIES ARE FACTORIES', 'HUMAN PROBLEMS ARE INDUSTRIAL RAW MATERIALS' - or even 'HUMAN PROBLEMS ARE INDUSTRIAL WASTE'. As a social work manager I at one time used to produce a weekly summary of new referrals and the actions I had taken in each case and I headed this list 'Disposal of Cases', no doubt feeling that this sounded appropriately tough and managerial. Oddly enough it did not immediately strike me

that the everyday meaning of the verb 'dispose' is more or less the same as that of 'discard' or 'throw out'.

Legal language is another source of social work language but not as far as I can see of specifically *metaphorical* expression: I can find no evidence in the language of social work for the existence of a 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE LAWYERS' metaphor.

There is also not much evidence in the spoken language of social work of any conceptual metaphor on the lines of 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE POLICEMEN', in spite of the policing role carried out by child protection social workers and in spite of their close collaboration with police officers.

Military Metaphors

I believe, though, that there is good evidence of an underlying metaphor 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE SOLDIERS' and I now want to examine a number of words or expressions which are part of the spoken language of social work and which have military connotations. Not all of these words are military in origin and many have other connotations (industrial, surgical, or business-related). However, although few of these expressions taken on their own could be firmly categorised as evidence of military metaphors at the conceptual level, taken together they do seem to me to strongly suggest the existence of underlying conceptual metaphors of that kind.

The following are the military-related terms which I am going to discuss. I have marked them 'O' and 'C' respectively to indicate whether I see them as being 'official' or 'colloquial'.

Strategy [O], operations [O], duty [O], field [O], intake [O], intervention [O], staff officer [O], front-line [O], going in [C], bombardment [C], to blow [C], to hold [C].

Strategy, operations, duty, field, staff officer

‘Strategy’ was identified by Hawkins et al (2001) as one of the commoner terms used by the social workers in their study. It is defined in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, 7th Edition (C.O.D.) as: ‘generalship, the art of war, (lit[eral] or fig[urative]); management of an army or armies in a campaign, art of so moving or disposing troops or ships or aircraft as to impose upon the enemy the place and time and conditions of fighting preferred by oneself...’ and it comes from the Greek *strategia* meaning generalship. It is therefore very clearly an expression that has a military origin. One might object that it is a word which is now so widely used in so many areas (‘marketing strategy’, ‘political strategy’) that its military origin is purely of historical interest. I would argue, though, that its military origin remains widely known and therefore continues to form part of the resonance of the word.

In children and family social work, ‘strategy’ is used specifically in relation to the ‘strategy discussions’ between key agencies that, under the ‘Working Together’ arrangements, are supposed to precede immediate action to taken to protect a child protection investigation (Department of Health, 2000: 49). It is interesting to consider whether the purpose of such deliberations could indeed be described as: ‘to impose upon the enemy the place and time and conditions of fighting preferred by oneself...’

‘Operation’ does not have a specifically military etymology, but one of the three definitions offered by the C.O.D. is ‘strategic movement esp[ecially] of troops, ships, etc.’ and it mentions the term ‘operations room’ derived from this meaning. The use of ‘operations’ in social work management in conjunction with the adjective ‘operational’ suggest that the military, rather than surgery, is the source of the term. As with ‘strategy’ the term is also widely used in business, and this may be the source from which the term entered social work language, but again I submit that it does have a distinct military resonance.

‘Duty’ is certainly not a specifically military term (its etymology relates to the word ‘due’). Nevertheless it again has some military resonances, particularly when used in the context of ‘duty officer,’ a clearly military expression which was once widespread in social services offices, though this term seems now to have been generally supplanted.

‘Field’, used in social work in the expressions ‘field work’, ‘field social worker’, is likewise not specifically a military term, although the second definition given in the C.O.D. is ‘ground on which a battle is fought’, and this seems a much more likely source for the word in social work than its agricultural meaning.

‘Staff officer’ is a term used in some, though not all social work agencies, to describe an ‘off-line’ manager, acting in support of a more senior manager. Its origin is unambiguously military.

'Front-line,' used to refer to staff in direct contact with service users is another expression which is clearly military in origin, although it is now used in a variety of contexts.

Although, none of these words is purely military in both its origin and current connotations, it seems to me that the cumulative effect of words such as these is to begin to suggest the existence of an underlying metaphor 'SOCIAL WORK AGENCIES ARE ARMIES'.

Intake

I have already discussed above the industrial connotations of this word which, for me, form its main metaphoric thrust. However my colleague Steve Ambler, who served in the army, informs me that 'intake platoon' is a well-established military expression to describe a platoon used for new recruits, and it would be interesting to know whether this was the origin of the widespread use of the term 'intake team' in social work.

Intervention and 'going in'

Again identified by Hawkins et al (2001) as one of the commoner words used by the social workers in their study, 'intervention' is also used extensively on social work courses (I myself teach a module entitled 'social work assessment and intervention') and so arguably forms part not only of the 'official' and 'colloquial' languages, but even of the 'sacred' one. It is, though, a curiously aggressive word to use to describe the actual work done by social workers with service users. We would not speak of the work done, say, by a teacher as intervention and, if I were to go to see a therapist or a

counsellor, I would not describe this as an intervention by the counsellor, since that word would imply to me that the service was something that *they* were actively imposing on me, rather than something which I had sought. Why then do we speak of intervention being the consequence if a member of the public seeks the assistance of a social work agency?

The word 'intervention' does not have a military etymology (the C.O.D. defines 'intervene' as 'come in as something extraneous'), but it is commonly used in the expression 'military intervention' and it seems to me that this is one of the two likely sources of the word in a social work context, the other being the word's use in surgery ('surgical intervention'). Both of these usages have in common the connotation of a person or persons *violently intruding* on another, who is not a partner or participant in the process.

The expression 'going in' has a similar meaning to 'intervene'. Used for example in expressions such as 'there is a family aide going in to the X family', 'I've been going in to the Y family for the last two months', 'things were better when the health visitor was going in', this apparently small and innocuous term may at first sight seem to be perfectly ordinary English and not particularly specific to social work.

However, if one tries to apply the expression to other kinds of regular visitors to a household, one begins to notice its specificity. If a family had a piano teacher visiting on a weekly basis, we would not speak of the piano teacher 'going in'. And, if friends or neighbours were to employ someone to come and help with domestic cleaning, we

would say 'The Browns have a cleaner coming in,' - not 'A cleaner is going in to the Browns'. In fact, as this last example illustrates, the apparently trivial substitution of 'going' for 'coming' actually has the quite marked effect of objectifying or externalising the recipient of the service.

Where the expression 'going in' *is* also used, of course, is of armies on the offensive. The soldier climbing out of the trench is 'going in'. The paratrooper dropped over enemy territory is 'going in'. Tanks rolling over a frontier are 'going in'. I would suggest that this is a resonance which is very definitely present in our use of this term in social work. I believe that when we speak of a social worker 'going in' there is, on the edge of our minds, an implication that he or she is carrying out a potentially dangerous operation in hostile territory.

Bombardment and to blow

'Bombardment' is of course a military word without any doubt. The C.O.D. defines it as 'attack with heavy guns'. It is used in social work to speak of pressure on a team, which is referred to as a 'bombardment rate'.

'To blow' (or 'blow up') is used by social workers in sentences such as 'All my cases seem to be blowing at the same time.' It is not unambiguously military (explosions can occur in a civilian context also), but it shares with 'bombardment' the underlying metaphor that 'HUMAN CRISES ARE EXPLOSIVES'.

What is interesting and revealing about the word ‘bombardment’, when it is used in the context of ‘this team has a high bombardment rate’, is that it also reveals the underlying idea that ‘SOCIAL WORKERS ARE SOLDIERS UNDER ATTACK’. The high explosives of human crises are directed *at* the social work team. Recall the fort-like ambience which the French social workers noticed when they visited a British social services office.

So when ‘front-line’ social workers are ‘in the field’ they are ‘intervening’ and ‘going in’ (guided possibly by a plan agreed in a ‘strategy meeting’.) When members of the public present social workers with crises to deal with they are seen – at some level - as *returning fire*.

Held/hold

‘Held’ or ‘hold’ is used in expressions such as ‘this case is being held on duty’ or ‘we are putting in a package of care to hold things until the case can be allocated.’ This is another apparently small and innocuous term, like ‘going in’, which in fact carries a cargo of metaphoric meaning.

What is striking about both the examples I have just given is that the purpose of the service being provided, by the duty worker or by the ‘package of care’, is not represented as bringing about change or as alleviating distress. The purpose is seen as maintaining some sort of unsatisfactory but still relatively stable status quo. The duty worker or the package of care are seen as serving the purpose of preventing the case from ‘blowing’. Once again the language has the effect of externalising and

objectifying the problems of the service user (or would-be service user) to the point where they seem to have nothing to do with that person's subjective experience of distress and become instead a threat *to the agency*.

As with 'going in' the word 'hold' is of course not purely military. And yet when we look for a comparable *use* of the term a close parallel turns out to be the battlefield. We speak of soldiers 'holding the town of X in spite of heavy bombardment', 'holding out against a sustained attack', 'holding a line.' We speak of a cease-fire 'holding' or failing to do so.

When we speak of a case being 'held on duty', then, we are perhaps thinking of a situation where enemies are indeed returning fire, but where, so far, they are being successfully held at bay.

Conclusion

As I have indicated, the approach I have taken in this study does not allow me to draw firm conclusions about the prevalence of military conceptual metaphors as compared with the other metaphors that are also evident in the spoken language of social work. However, I believe the evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that such an underlying metaphor is part of the conceptual system of social workers. On social work courses we may try and teach the sacred language of empowerment to social work students - a language in which the underlying metaphors might be something on the lines of 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE BRIDGES' or 'SOCIAL WORK IS OPENING DOORS' – but social workers in their workplaces think, at least to some degree, in the very

different terms of: 'SOCIAL WORKERS ARE SOLDIERS', 'CLIENTS ARE ENEMIES', 'REQUESTS FOR HELP ARE EXPLOSIVE SHELLS'.

I would suggest that these metaphors are present for two reasons. The first is that children and family social workers are, after all, often in conflict with their clients and increasingly frequently facing them in the adversarial context of court proceedings. (In fact the number of care orders made annually is approaching three times the number that it was a decade ago, see Beckett, 2001). The second is that when demands are persistently made on human beings that they cannot meet, a normal reaction is to begin to feel *attacked*. In order to articulate and 'make visible' these experiences we naturally turn to the most visible form of human conflict - war. The military metaphors implied by the expressions 'siege mentality', 'defensiveness' or 'being on a short fuse' are not, for instance, confined to social work. The demands that are made upon child and family social workers by their service users and by society at large are far in excess of what they can deliver, not only for resource reasons, but also because of limits to what is possible in principle in the complex and unpredictable environment of the 'social' itself. (Incidentally, as Cooper et al [1995: 112] point out, actual physical assaults on social workers also seem to have become more common.)

I suggest therefore that the language of siege is most usefully seen as substantially a reflection of *reality*, problematic though the concept of reality might be. This means that, even though my observations about the language used by social workers do closely parallel those of Hawkins et al (2001) quoted above, I cannot agree with them

that the way forward is ‘to examine our current language, to consciously use social justice terminology where appropriate, or to coin new “socially just” terms to suit our purposes’ (Hawkins et al, 2000: 11)

With due respect to these authors, the approach they suggest seems to me to be an example of a mistake that we in social work far too often make: believing that we can change things simply by changing the words we use. In my experience such an approach results either in the new words falling rapidly into disuse or in their being used in a way that is incongruent with – even opposite to - their ostensible meaning (‘needs-led assessment’, for instance, being used to describe a system for rationing services.) There is surely too much of this kind of Orwellian incongruence between language and reality in social work, yet it is something that a simplistic ‘postmodern’ insistence on the primacy of language is likely to encourage. I am inclined to agree, therefore, with Smith and White (1997: 294) that a ‘postmodern analysis ... obscures significant issues of power, politics and ideology with which social workers and service users should be properly concerned.’

The existence of the language of siege in everyday social work talk is certainly worrying, for if visitors from France can pick up the ‘fortress atmosphere’ of a British social work office as soon as they walk through the door, then what messages are picked up by service users who deal the office on a regular basis? But to address this we need to tackle not just the language but the structural causes for the needs, demands and expectations which *make* social workers feel besieged. Among these I would include: the fact that services have to be tightly rationed and a high proportion

of requests for help have to be turned down, the fact that failure by social workers to read warning signs of fatal abuse is routinely assumed to constitute gross negligence and the fact that, as a result of wider forces far outside the reach of social casework, problems such as heroin addiction among parents have been steadily rising. These are problems in reality, not in language. We cannot replace besieged fortresses by building verbal castles in the air.

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