Humanising Managerialism: Reclaiming Emotional Reasoning, Intuition, the Relationship, and Knowledge and Skills in Social Work

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This paper develops Professor Eileen Munro’s coverage of ‘emotional dimensions’ in her Review of Child Protection in England. It argues that managerialism has failed to recognise the importance of the emotional life of human beings and the importance of the relationships we build in social work and that this failure seriously hinders the quality and effectiveness of social work. The paper begins with an account of what an ‘emotional dimension’ might encompass and, drawing on conceptualisations mainly from neuroscience, looks at what is meant by the words emotions and feelings, affect, attunement and empathy. A second section looks at the skewed representation of logical thinking as innately superior to emotional and intuitive reasoning and the part played by conscious and unconscious elements within judicial decision-making. It then analyses the dangers evident in the more extreme and rigid forms of managerialism that can be found in some areas of social work and a final section argues that for managerialism to be humanised it calls for an emotionally responsive relationship-based practice to be located at the heart of social work.

Keywords emotions; feelings; affect; attunement; empathy; logical thinking; reasoning; intuition; conscious; unconscious; managerialism; neuroscience

Introduction

This paper will develop a number of key issues relating to the phrase ‘emotional dimension’ covered by Professor Eileen Munro in the four reports produced as part of the Government-commissioned Review of Child Protection in England (Munro, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012) and some of the implications for the future of social work. Although Munro’s reports are specifically focused on child protection in England,
many of the observations and points she makes are relevant to adult services in the UK and abroad — and can be broadened to other disciplines. In order to identify the landscape encompassed in the phrase ‘emotional dimension’, this paper begins with coverage of what is meant by the words emotions and feelings, affect, attunement and empathy. A second section explores the part played by emotions in the tension, highlighted by Munro, in relation to logical thinking and intuitive reasoning, and the part played by conscious and unconscious elements in the judgements we make and the actions we take in social work. A third section focuses on the extent to which rigid forms of managerialism tend to ignore the degree to which emotions govern our lives as human beings, and also the extent to which emotions shape and steer professional decision-making and action. A final section draws on my knowledge and experience as an academic and practitioner to look at what changes need to be introduced to embed an ‘emotional dimension’ into social work practice. As I have highlighted in an influential paper on this subject (Trevithick, 2003), these changes must place the relationships we build at the heart of practice if we are to enhance the quality of help we provide and further the well-being and life chances of the people we seek to support. This calls for managerialism to be humanised and for us to challenge the myth which states that we cannot afford quality services.

The extent to which relationships and an emotional dimension have been stifled is evident in Munro’s vivid summary of the impact of the reforms introduced in social work:

In the extensive reforms that have shaped today’s work environment, the professional account of social work practice in which relationships play a central role appears to have been gradually stifled and replaced by a managerialist account that is fundamentally different. The managerialist approach has been called a ‘rational-technical approach’, where the emphasis has been on the conscious, cognitive elements of the task of working with children and families, on collecting information, and making plans. The focus of reforms has been on providing detailed assessment forms, telling the social worker what data about families to collect and, how quickly to collect it. Less attention has been given to helping frontline staff acquire the skills to analyse the information collected. (Munro, 2011a, p. 36)

An ‘emotional dimension’ and its importance

The most important doorway into the ‘emotional dimension of working with children and families’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 91), and one that is significant in all areas of social work practice, is the relationships practitioners work to build. The emotions that underpin meaningful relationships can be found in the work of earlier eminent scholars writing on this subject, such as Perlman who notes:

Relationship is an emotional experience. We are moved when our emotions are touched, motivated by the push or pull of feelings. Those feelings may be transitory, of varying intensity, and may, of course, be invested more in the problem situation than in the helper. But if a would be helper is to influence a help
seeker to cope with his [sic] problem in some more personally satisfying and/or socially satisfactory way, he will need to connect with and be sensitively responsive to the emotions with which the person’s problem is charged. It is no mere word play to recognize that ‘motivation’, ‘movement’, and ‘emotion’ all stem from the same Latin root, movere. (Perlman, 1979, p. 51)

The quotes from Perlman and Munro highlight the range of emotions that can be experienced in relation to a particular problem – and the opportunity that a meaningful and sensitive relationship can provide when attempting to understand the emotional make-up of service users – their intellectual, practical and emotional capacities, strengths and limitations. Yet it is important to note that for a significant period in the UK, the role of the relationship in social work tended to lose its impetus as an approach that links our understanding of people with ways to work creatively with the difficulties and challenges being presented (Trevithick, 2003). However, in recent years there has been a growing recognition of the need to ‘build positive relationships, and go on to use the relationship to create change’ (Munro, 2010, p. 54), although in some social work settings this perspective has barely influenced the managerialist agenda that continues to shape direct practice. This is despite the fact that the importance of human relationships has been confirmed time and again in the research findings of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1951, 1979; Howe et al., 1999; Fonagy, 2001; Howe, 2011) and in neuroscience (Schore, 1994; LeDoux, 2002; Damasio, 2012; Siegel, 2012). Both disciplines highlight the extent to which relationships are central to human growth and development throughout the lifespan, but particularly in the early years of life. Hence, the importance placed by Munro and others on early intervention and prevention services for children and parents (Aked et al., 2006; Field, 2010; Allen, 2011; Brown & Ward, 2012; Care Inquiry, 2013). The importance of relationships is summarised by Siegel and Perry who state:

Relationship experiences have a dominant influence on the brain ... Interpersonal experience thus plays a special organising role in determining the development of brain structure early in life and the ongoing emergence of brain function throughout the lifespan. (Siegel, 2012, p. 33)

The very nature of humanity arises from relationships ... essentially everything that’s important about life as a human being you learn in context of relationships. (Perry, 2003)

Given the growing interest in relationship-based practice in social work (Ruch et al., 2010; Munro, 2011b, p. 88), it feels timely to revisit what this term means in the light of the scholarship and new thinking emerging from theorists who argue that isolating and overemphasising ‘rational thought’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 120) at the expense of more intuitive elements in decision-making can skew judgement and skew priorities (Munro, 2012, p. 5). The findings of neuroscience, particularly neurobiology, have been an important source of knowledge in this area and many of the authors cited in this paper, including Munro, have been influenced by this body of research. For this reason, and in order to understand the points that underpin some of the themes explored by these theorists, the following is a brief summary of main findings offered by neuroscience, with particular regard to the importance of relationships.
The findings of neuroscience

Neuroscience is the study of the brain and ‘how our brains make us who we are’ (LeDoux, 2002, p. 1). Like many disciplines, there are different interpretations among scholars about the human brain and nervous system but many agree on the following points:

- The brain is said to have over 1 hundred billion interconnected nerve cells called neurons and each is thought to have roughly 10,000 connections to other neurons. This equals approximately 1 million billion connections, making it ‘capable of such wonderful and diverse tasks’ (Howe, 2008, p. 71).
- Nerve cells or neurons are composed of a cell body, an axon which carries messages to other cells and dendrites which are the receiving end of neurons.
- Synapses are connections that link neurons to one another. The ‘plasticity’ or neuroplasticity of brain circuits means that synaptic connections are strengthened by repeated activation – ‘cells that fire together, wire together’ (Hebb, 1949).
- The brain stays healthy through synaptic pruning where synapses that are not used wither and die away – the ‘use it or lose it’ principle (LeDoux, 2002, p. 79).
- The ‘lower’ structure of the brain, such as the amygdala, constitutes our evolutionary or ‘mammalian brain’ and is ‘wired’ to ensure survival, such as fight, flight or freeze reactions. The ‘upper’ structure, particularly the cortex, is where thinking, reasoning and reflection takes place.
- Emotional arousal travels faster to the amygdala (action) than to the cortex (thinking).
- Human beings are born with (i) genetic potential shaped by (ii) environmental experiences – a situation where ‘relationship experiences have a dominant influence on the brain’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 33).
- Neuroscience confirms the importance of an infant’s first relationship with his or her primary carer/parent as central to brain development and the child’s adaptive and maladaptive capacities.
- We learn through our emotions so that when we ‘learn something new associated structures in our brain change and grow’ (Gilgun, 2005, p. 856). This learning can be both positive and negative.

To understand the importance given to ‘emotional dimensions and intellectual nuances of reasoning’ by Munro (2011b, p. 20), the following section looks at what is meant by the words emotion, feelings, affect, attunement and empathy and how these terms are conceptualised from a neuroscience perspective.

Emotions

Emotions involve internal sensations that are evident in terms of different bodily responses. One of the best examples is the way that fear triggers our innate survival instincts and leads to changes in blood flow, heart beat, breathing, muscle energy and skin temperature and produce flight, fight or freeze reactions. The unconscious, primitive and often involuntary nature of these innate responses is highlighted by LeDoux:
... emotions did not evolve as conscious feelings. They evolved as behavioural and physiological specializations, bodily responses controlled by the brain, that allowed ancestral organisms to survive in hostile environments and procreate. (LeDoux, 1998, p. 40)

These bodily responses are aroused or triggered by cues and, once felt, this aroused emotional state can ‘monopolise brain activity’ (LeDoux, 2002, p. 320), which means that ‘what we see, what we think, and how we behave are deeply influenced by that emotion’ (Howe, 2008, p. 31). Both the amygdala and cortex send signals to different parts of the brain. Signals from the cortex allow us to perform multiple functions and to control our response, whereas the survival focus of the amygdala indicates ‘a primitive brain region almost wholly impervious to conscious control’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 155). The fact that we are ‘wired’ to act before we think highlights the importance of self-regulation — also known as emotion regulation (Siegel, 2012, p. 267) or affect regulation (Applegate & Shapiro, 2005, p. 40) — a subject covered later.

It is interesting to note that there is no universal agreement about what constitutes the basic emotions that all human beings experience. Also, how these emotions are defined can differ. For example, some authors draw a distinction between fear and anxiety, where thoughts, feelings or actions that trigger fear can be identified and talked about, whereas for anxiety, which is considered to be a more general emotional state, the trigger for the sense of danger or threat that people experience can remain unknown (Reber et al., 2009, p. 48). Often both fear and anxiety are at play — making any meaningful or helpful distinction difficult to achieve. Plutchik (1991), an influential psychologist in this field, identifies eight basic emotions: fear, anger, disgust, sadness, surprise, joy, trust and anticipation. A similar list of ‘basic’ or ‘primary’ emotions can be found in the work of Ekman (2003) and Damasio (2000), respectively, although both replace the term joy with that of happiness. Howe (2008) lists 14 positive and negative emotions, namely: fear, shame, disgust, embarrassment, terror, jealousy, anger, loss, rejection, abandonment, surprise, love, joy and happiness.

Damasio considers ‘primary’ emotions to be innate, universal and ‘wired’ into human beings as well as animals. What he defines as ‘secondary’ or social emotions, such as embarrassment, jealousy, guilt and pride, tend to be developed and encouraged — or prohibited or suppressed — by experience and the interactions taking place within a particular family, community, workplace or other context. The way that different contexts influence the display of emotions links to social learning theory (Bandura, 1977). It also links to Ekman’s (1999) account of display rules which describe the different conventions or ‘rules’ within cultures that indicate who, when and to what extent certain emotions can be expressed:

... culture greatly influences the sense we make of and the meaning we ascribe to our experiences. In the realm of cultural learning, display rules influence the ways we visibly express our emotions, and feeling rules influence how we experience and label our emotions. (Levenson, 1994, pp. 125–126)

One example is the expression of anger, which may be more permissible within working class than middle class cultures or contexts — or more permissible among men than women. In a different example, LeDou (1998) notes that in Western
cultures, ‘there is a grief hierarchy at funerals’ (p. 116) where people considered closer to the bereaved have a greater right to grieve. Some emotions may be hidden, suppressed, or subtle bodily changes go unnoticed, such as the feeling of love which ‘generates a general state of calm and contentment, facilitating cooperation’ and considered almost opposite to the highly charged ‘fight-flight mobilisation’ (Goleman, 1996, p. 7). Given the hidden nature of some emotional states, considerable emphasis is placed in psychology and neurobiology on the emotional message that is conveyed in non-verbal cues, particularly in people’s facial expression – a point taken up by Siegel:

The study of emotion suggests that nonverbal behaviour is a primary mode in which emotion is communicated. Facial expression, eye gaze, tone of voice, bodily motion, and the timing and intensity of response are all fundamental to emotional messages. (Siegel, 2012, p. 146)

Siegel goes further to state that ‘we are hard-wired to have meaning and emotion shaped by the perception of eye contact and facial expression. We are also hard-wired to express emotion through the face’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 176). However, to understand the emotional state or emotional messaging of another human being calls for a degree of self-awareness and emotional insight to ensure that the emotional content of an exchange can be picked up – a point taken up by Thiele that I return to later in this paper:

... we have a duty to cultivate emotional capacities such that they might become available to us in the right measure, at the right time. Untutored emotions will not afford judgment the sensibility and motivation it requires in changing circumstances, nor, generally, will such emotions be utilized with intelligence and care .... In this regard, practical judgment involves preparing the heart and mind to work in unison. (Thiele, 2006, p. 191)

Feelings

The term feeling is more confusing because of its general and popular usage. For example, it can mean (1) being touched physically, (2) the sense of being moved by something or someone, (3) to denote a tentative thought or an idea that is not usually supported by evidence or hard facts and (4) to denote an awareness of an emotional sensation. For this reason, and to emphasise the link between emotions and feelings, LeDoux (1998) prefers the term emotional feelings that occur ‘when we become consciously aware that an emotion system of the brain is active’ (p. 302). Put more simply, ‘feelings bring emotions to the conscious mind’ (Damasio, 2012, p. 108) with the result that all conscious emotional experiences constitute a feeling.

For Siegel, feelings can involve energy (I feel excited), meaning (I feel misunderstood), behavioural impulses (I want to run and hide) or ‘discrete categories of emotion’ (I feel sad ... angry ... happy) (Siegel, 2012, p. 292). Once we are consciously aware and able to recognise our feeling state at a particular point in time, or in a particular context, our capacity for self-reflection allows an appraisal of the emotions felt – their good, bad or uncertain features – and to adapt our options for action accordingly. For
example, being aware that we have been insensitive or abrupt with a colleague allows us to make contact and to apologise, whereas if our insensitivity remained unconscious, that is outside our conscious awareness, we are unlikely to repair our mistake in this way. An appraisal of this kind introduces thinking or cognition into our feeling states and can also elicit the kind of reasoning that shapes and encourages the response to be made because ‘feelings are a powerful influence on reason’ (Damasio, 1995, p. 245). That is, in order for reason to be prompted and put to work, some emotion must be evident, however subtle, because ‘reason requires emotion to stimulate its use, to recruit and direct its abilities, and to execute its commands’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 176).

Emotions and feelings form ‘part of a tightly bound circle’ (Damasio, 2012, p. 109), and as human beings, it can be possible to experience several feelings at any one time and at different levels of intensity. However, the limits of people’s emotional vocabulary can make it difficult to name or describe their feelings, making it essential to check the meaning given to the emotional signs and signals being conveyed or assumed if a misunderstanding is to be avoided. In this process, we need to draw on all our senses — sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste — to inform our thinking. This can take time and is likely to be easier if the communication is taking place in a setting where a meaningful encounter is possible and also where people feel less defended. Here it is worth remembering that home visits can provide an opportunity to observe people in a setting where their behaviour, and the behaviour of others, is likely to be more natural and spontaneous (Trevithick, 2012, p. 190), although entering into a family’s intimate and private terrain can often be emotionally daunting for practitioners (Ferguson, 2009, 2014).

**Affect**

At this point, I want to introduce the word *affect* — a term not often used in social work but one that can often be found in neuroscience, and in the area of mental health, political philosophy, psychoanalysis and attachment theory. Although easily confused with the verb *to affect* (to influence/change) and the noun *effect* (the result/consequence), an added confusion is that some authors use *affect* as an alternative to the word *emotion*. When used more rigorously, affect or *affect expression* conveys ‘the way an internal emotional state is externally revealed’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 389) and can include how feelings of sadness, fear and anger are communicated non-verbally. For example, in professional circles the term *flat affect* may be use to describe a withdrawn or depressed state where there is little or absent facial expression or vitality in a person’s posture, tone of voice or general demeanour. Affect can also be used to refer to a person’s *mood*, which tends to be used to describe the more enduring tone of an individual’s emotions where there is often no recognised triggering event to give rise to a sensation or emotion being conveyed (Siegel, 2012, p. 155) — in short, a gloomy or miserable disposition. An insightful practitioner may be able to sense a person’s ‘affective emotional state’, whereas in other situations this may be signalled by its physical manifestation:

The physiological components of affects find expression in such autonomic nervous system responses as blushing, elevated pulse, sweating, and crying, and such
voluntary nervous system manifestations as changes in facial expression, posture, or vocal tone and rhythm. (Applegate & Shapiro, 2005, p. 26)

A major difficulty with the word affect is the fact that it has no common usage outside professional circles and is most often used in settings that exclude the participation of the person whose emotional state is being described in this way.

Attunement and empathy

A term that is often used in social work is attunement, which describes the ability to look beyond an individual’s overt or external behaviour and to ‘feel’ another person’s emotion — their inner world of sensations. Attunement indicates an emotional resonance or affect attunement and the ‘quality of feeling that is being shared’ (Stern, 1985, p. 142). It is a concept that closely resembles that of empathy, which describes the ability to imaginatively feel the world from the other’s point of view and to successfully communicate that understanding (Trevithick, 2012, p. 194). However, for Stern, an influential writer in this area, empathy is conceptualised as indicating a conscious awareness of another’s feeling state, whereas affect attunement indicates an unconscious awareness:

The evidence indicates that attunements occur largely out of awareness and almost automatically. Empathy, on the other hand, involves the mediation of cognitive processes. (Stern, 1985, p. 145)

A similar perspective on the unconscious features of attunement is put forward by McCluskey (2005, p. 77). For Siegel, attunement is more conscious and embodies concepts that include tracking, alignment and mirroring, all of which are designed to ensure that we are open, receptive and capable of being changed by the emotions being conveyed. However, resonance is considered to have a more enduring quality and describes how the mutual alignment between people ‘persists within the mind of each member after direct interaction no longer occurs’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 315). The emotions and feelings that move between people are also conceptualised in psychoanalysis — in concepts such as transference, counter-transference, projection and projective identification — and whilst here-and-now features in an interaction are important in psychodynamic thinking, considerable additional emphasis is placed on the extent to which a person’s past or present relationships and conflicts are a feature of the emotions and feelings being conveyed (Bower, 2005; Howe, 2008; Trevithick, 2011). Whatever concepts are preferred, even with differences in the definition given they provide a conceptual language that can help us to begin to understand and articulate the emotions and feelings being conveyed or picked up, consciously and unconsciously. However, it is important to be tentative when attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings and actions of others and to seek confirmation of our perceptions in order to minimise the likelihood of bias and error that can so easily ‘intrude on rational decision-making’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 120). This is particularly important when ‘display rules’ — or the context — influence the ability to feel and express certain emotions.
Munro highlights the importance of practitioners being able to read and understand their own emotional responses, and to use this self-awareness as a basis for understanding others:

When a social worker visits a home and the father behaves in a threatening manner, his or her body reacts automatically, generating stress hormones in response to the perceived threat. Similarly, when an experienced social worker meets a family, he or she can quickly pick up an intuitive awareness of the state of the dynamics in the family, the warmth of the relationship between members, or the level of fear felt by a child. Appreciating the importance of both logical and intuitive understanding and the contribution of emotions offers guidance on the different training needs in using them to best effect. (Munro, 2011a, p. 37)

In this quotation, Munro highlights the extent to which conscious and unconscious processes may be evident and communicated non-verbally in the face, eyes, tone of voice and body language of service users and practitioners. For Thiele, it is how emotions are expressed in the body that offer an insight into the unconscious processes at play:

There is no ‘direct route’ by which we can access the unconscious mind. But the body provides the surest indirect route. Just as we can measure unconscious reactions by way of changes in the galvanic skin conductance and heart rate, so we can access other unconscious states by attention to affect, gesture, posture, voice, and facial expression ... For those who can read its signs, the body serves as a palimpsest of the mind. (Thiele, 2006, p. 285)

The ability to recognise the emotions and feelings being communicated verbally and non-verbally, and to work with this awareness is a central feature of relationship-based practice – and one that highlights the importance of the concept ‘use of self’. However, it is an approach to practice that calls for changes in social work education and training, good supervision, ongoing peer support and an understanding of the part played by conscious and unconscious processes – a theme explored briefly in the following section.

Logical thinking and intuitive reasoning

In Munro’s second and third report, there is a considerable focus on the tension between logical thinking and intuitive reasoning and the part played by conscious and unconscious influences in ‘professional reasoning’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 11). In her coverage of this subject, where at times the same wording is used in both reports, Munro draws on a range of eminent writers from the area of neuroscience, psychology, psychiatry, political theory and social work to present her argument, which is summarised as follows:

Conscious logical thinking has quite rightly been highly valued as a human attribute, but the traditional view that it is inherently superior to intuition and emotion has been overturned by developments in neuropsychology. Hammond ... argues convincingly for the need to see logical and
intuitive thinking on a cognitive continuum where we use a different balance between them depending on what task we are carrying out. Solving a maths problem is at the analytic extreme while calming a frightened child uses intuitive understanding. The importance of our intuitive reasoning capacity is also illustrated by the difference in size between our conscious and unconscious capacities. (Munro, 2011a, p. 37)

The conscious and unconscious capacities of the mind

When speaking about unconscious processes, it is important to note that in the field of neurobiology this term does not refer to those aspects of the unconscious conceptualised in psychoanalysis. For this reason, Thiele suggests the alternative term ‘cognitive unconscious’ to describe the extensive range of mental capacities of which we have little or no awareness or conscious control (Thiele, 2006, p. 14). Similarly LeDoux’s conceptualisation of the unconscious describes ‘the many things the brain does that are not available to consciousness’ (LeDoux, 2002, p. 11) – the fact that when we walk, talk or eat most of our actions are not conscious and deliberate. For example, an experienced driver can often drive between one place and another with little conscious awareness of the journey, whereas a novice driver is likely to be highly conscious of the fear and exhaustion that learning to drive can engender. For LeDoux, these unconscious processes include:

Almost everything the brain does, from standard body maintenance like regulating heart rate, breathing rhythm, stomach contractions, and posture, to controlling many aspects of seeing, smelling, behaving, feeling, speaking thinking, evaluating, judging, believing and imagining ... much of the time consciousness is informed after the fact. (LeDoux, 2002, p. 11)

Thiele agrees and notes that our conscious mind carries only ‘a small share of what is made available to us’ and that ‘memory, like perception, is not fully, or even primarily, within our conscious control. We remember much more than we can ever recall’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 121). This point is emphasised by Wilson (2002) who describes in some detail the limited capacity of conscious perception when compared to the extensive contribution of our unconscious mind, and the role of all our senses – hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste – when processing information. At the same time, the brain is involved in processing and analysing information recalled from prior experience in order to ‘categorise the sensations into a perception’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 224). The conclusion drawn by several scholars, and articulated by Thiele (2006), is that our ‘conscious perception represents only the smallest fraction of what we absorb from our worldly encounters. It is the tip of an iceberg’ (p. 121). Within this storing and retrieving process, the ability to remember – and to learn – is enhanced when the brain evaluates an event as being ‘meaningful’ (LeDoux, 2002, p. 9; Siegel, 2012, p. 46) – a point I return to later.

Intuition

The same complex relationship between conscious and unconscious features can be seen in relation to the part played by intuition and the self-awareness that underpins the
use of our intuitive capacities (Trevithick, 2012, p. 112). Munro describes this quite generally in terms of ‘an unconscious process that occurs automatically in response to perceptions, integrating a wide range of data to produce a judgment in a relatively effortless way’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 37). Intuition has to involve some cognitive elements because our brains are involved in this activity but most judgements call for both intuition, which largely draw on unconscious processes and analysis, which involves conscious, logical, identifiable and defensible processes, such as calculations or rules (Hammond, 2007, p. 235). However, in situations where thinking is the dominant mental activity, Hammond (2007) argues that we are not ‘engaging in intuitive cognition’ (p. 147). The importance of integrating logical thinking and intuitive reasoning, and the part played by conscious and unconscious elements, is succinctly portrayed in the following account from Munro:

... engaging with, and understanding a child and their family, involves far more than logical reason. When social workers are talking to a child and family in their home, they are drawing on several sources of information and making swift decisions and changes as the interview progresses. Their conscious mind is paying attention to the purpose of their visit; at an intuitive level they are forming a picture of the child and family and sensing the dynamics in the room, noting evidence of anger, confusion, or anxiety. This feeds into their conscious awareness and helps shape the way the interview progresses. Their own emotional reaction is one source of information; the despair, for example, that some parents feel evokes an empathic response in others. It will be argued that previous reforms have concentrated too much on the explicit, logical aspects of reasoning and this has contributed to a skewed management framework that undervalues intuitive reasoning and emotions and thus fails to give appropriate support to those aspects. (Munro, 2011a, p. 35)

One of the common ways to describe intuition is in terms of gut feelings (Trevithick, 2012, p. 12) which can be valuable because ‘they take advantage of the evolved capacities of the brain and are based on rules of thumb that enable us to act fast and with astounding accuracy, shown, for example, in our ability to recognise faces’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 90). However, ‘gut feelings’, like the use of intuition, can be untrustworthy and vulnerable to error particularly when used to replace reflection and analysis and when the importance of context is ignored (Thiele, 2006, p. 142). Munro, drawing on the work of Hammond and others, gives the following example to illustrate the importance of conscious and unconscious awareness, and intuitive and analytic thinking in social work:

There is now a considerable body of research on how expertise, in whatever field, is developed. This provides valuable lessons for social work. Intuitive and analytic reasoning skills are developed in different ways, so child protection services need to recognise the differing requirements if they are to help practitioners move from being novices to experts in both dimensions. Analytic skills can be enhanced by formal teaching and reading. Intuitive skills are essentially derived from experience. Experience on its own, however, is not enough. It needs to be allied to reflection – time and attention given to mulling over the experience and
learning from it. This is often best achieved in conversation with others, in supervision, for example, or in discussions with colleagues. (Munro, 2011a, p. 87)

In terms of the link between logical thinking and intuitive reasoning, a theme that runs throughout Munro’s four reports is the impact of uncertainty and how this is addressed through policies and procedures, many of which reflect a ‘defensive management of risk’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 78). This defensiveness can become more pronounced where the drive is for positive outcomes: ‘professional judgment, however expert, cannot guarantee positive outcomes for children and families’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 107) – a situation where problems can be made more complex through the involvement of ‘multiple stakeholders and multiple perceptions of the same problem’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 79). For Hammond (2007), sound judgements become even more important when presented with ‘uncertainty that is irreducible — that can’t be reduced or eliminated’ — an unpredictability which tends to create anxiety or stress in individuals and organisations (p. 16). In a somewhat surprising comment, Hammond argues that given the nature of uncertainty, some judgements may need to be defended on the grounds of common sense, which can describe an ‘ability to order ideas and experiences in an intelligent and reasoned way’ (Trevithick, 2012, p. 92) or ‘as analytical as time and knowledge permit’. Thus, for Hammond:

it will be common sense (robust flexibility) that replaces rationality as the desirable cognitive tactical response to problems involving uncertainty that stem from fallible indicators, entangled causality, and other elements of our task environment that induce our judgement. (2007, p. 234)

Munro links the impact of uncertainty to the defensive stance adopted by some practitioners in child protection for whom ‘following rules and being compliant can appear less risky than carrying the personal responsibility for exercising judgment’ (Munro, 2010, p. 6) and also to organisational defences in the management of risk:

Uncertainty pervades the work of child protection and trying to manage that uncertainty is central to the way the system has evolved since the 1970s. Many of the imbalances in the current system arise from efforts to deal with that uncertainty by assessing and managing risk. Risk management cannot eradicate risk; it can only try to reduce the probability of harm. The big problem for society (and consequently for professionals) is working out a realistic expectation of professionals’ ability to predict the future and manage risk of harm to children and young people. (Munro, 2010, p. 19)

For Hammond (2007), the anxiety and fear that accompanies uncertainty in relation to organisations can be found in the defensive need to gather more and more information and to set up newer and better systems, policies and procedures for this purpose (p. 22). It can lead to an overconfidence in systems and the danger that ‘procedures may be followed in a way that is technically correct but is so inexpert that the desired result is not achieved’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 40) – a situation that can be found in other professional contexts. There is no doubt that adhering to prescribed, standardised and approved procedures may be appropriate in some situations. However, where these
are deployed to defend individuals and organisations from criticism, they can impede the opportunity for important information to be acquired and sound judgements to be made, for as Thiele notes: ‘If we are to improve human judgment, there is no alternative but to grapple with the rich, multi-layered ... and always vital interaction between reason and emotion’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 166).

As a final point on the subject of uncertainty and risk, within this process of merging reason and emotion we also need to broaden our conceptual framework to take account of political and ideological developments in order to analyse the way that the concept of risk has entered our thinking and come to dominate the realm of public service provision and reform. For example, services that were once allocated on the basis of human need, that could include emotional needs, are now tending to be allocated on market-led, bureaucratic systems designed to identify levels of risk based more on practical or legal considerations. This emphasis on risk rather than need, together with funding cutbacks in service provision, now means that people designated as being of low-risk status are increasingly denied access to services. It highlights the extent to which our social work values and professional ethics are being trapped within a narrow and ideologically based marketisation of human need – a development that needs to be resisted. The same market-based emphasis on health risks rather than health needs is a feature of troubling changes taking place in the UK National Health Service (Pollock, 2005; Davis & Tallis, 2013).

The impact of managerialism on social work

Managerialism is one of the most striking examples of the way that so-called rational thinking has skewed intuitive reasoning and the importance of ‘practical judgements’ (Thiele, 2006, p. 8) – a development that has had a seriously negative impact on critical thinking, decision-making and action. This administrative and organisational system, also known more officially as New Public Management, introduced a new approach to the co-ordination, management and delivery of services, loosely based around the concepts of the three M’s: markets, managers and measurement (Ferlie et al., 1996) and the three E’s: economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Audit Commission, 1983, p. 8). Its introduction was designed to address difficulties encountered due to the considerable growth in the public sector in the UK and to improve practice and the cost of service provision (Hughes and Wearing, 2012, p. 21). It was also introduced to address professional decision-making that some considered to be ‘insufficiently rigorous’ (Munro, 2010, p. 12). As a result, a trust in professional judgements and accountability was replaced, to varying degrees, with a top-down ‘performance management regime’ of inspection and monitoring and system of ‘imposed managerial targets and regulations’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 8), characterised as a ‘tick-box’, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to service provision. For Munro (2010), the ‘skew in priorities’ that were introduced have produced ‘an over-standardised system that cannot respond adequately to the varied range of children’s needs’ (p. 5).

Managerialism’s hold as an administrative system is promoted, aided and abetted by a flawed interpretation of evidence-based practice (EBP) when compared to the original conceptualisation put forward by Sackett and colleagues. ² This definition included not only (1) research evidence but also (2) knowledge, skills, expertise and
practice wisdom that professionals bring to the encounter and, importantly, (3) the knowledge and personal experience that service users (patients) and other non-professionals contribute (Sackett et al., 1996; Trevithick, 2008). The dangers of a narrow and uncritical approach to what constitutes ‘evidence’ is noted by Munro (2011b) who calls for the ‘need to be wary for marketing techniques that mislead’ (p. 94), citing the work of Gambrill on the way that propaganda in the EBP literature can distort the findings of research (Munro, 2011b, p. 95):

We are gullible and easy prey for propaganda pitches as illustrated by the spectacular success of the medicalization of hundreds of problems-in-living as mental illnesses and promotion of drugs as a remedy . . . . If a report of research includes a picture of a brain, we are more likely to believe the article reports accurate findings. (Gambrill, 2011, p. 29)

Here I am reminded of conversation with a probation officer and the despairing account he gave of a so-called ‘successful’ cognitive-behavioural anger management programme located in a prison where the only men assessed as eligible for this provision were those considered capable of completing the 10-week programme. Significantly, the positive evaluation of this programme was not based on changes in the men’s behaviour but measured by how many men completed the course. Clearly, not all programmes of this kind are organised and evaluated in this way but an unscrupulous and unchecked form of managerialism can lead to corrupt practices of this kind.

Managerialism: the ignoring of emotions, the relationship, knowledge and skills

To the best of my knowledge, managerialism was introduced into social work with no robust research findings to indicate its superiority and effectiveness over ‘Old Public Administration’, the form it replaced (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994). Like other administrative systems, it has no knowledge of its own to offer to aid our understanding of the complex nature of human behaviour. This in itself is not a difficulty if the knowledge, skill and experience in the workforce is allowed to bridge this gap, but in the more rigid forms of managerialism within social work, the tendency is for ‘standardised processes, frameworks and procedures’ (Munro, 2010, p. 13) and cost considerations to be given precedence over professional decisions and the quality of service provided. This means that everyone influenced by managerialism – practitioners, service users, managers, senior administrators and policy-makers – are expected to work within the principles of ‘business methods’ of ‘market-style public management’ (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994, p. 15) – principles that can be found in anxieties that underpin the recording systems required to be ‘Ofsted compliant’. Munro describes the limitations of this ‘over-standardised framework’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 37) as follows:

... children’s needs and circumstances are very varied and this is not an area of work that can be reduced to a set response. Consequently, professional judgment needs to be exercised in determining how or whether to follow procedures and guidance in any specific case. This requires professionals to understand the
rationale for procedures and guidance in order to use them intelligently. (Munro, 2011b, p. 44)

This quote refers to children’s services but is relevant in many other areas of social work practice. This paper now turns to look at the particular emotional impact of managerialism on service users, social workers and organisations.

**Service users**

As the threshold and eligibility for services continue to rise, and the hardship experienced by people on low income becomes more severe, problems that were once relatively uncomplicated and amenable to early intervention are increasingly being neglected to the point where their features are complex, multifaceted and virtually unworkable. In addition, describing human needs and real concerns in terms of a target, an ‘output’ or a product — where the focus is on a standardised, prescribed ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach — can easily deny the personal and situational uniqueness that are evident in most problems presented. All problems have a social dimension and are rooted in a social system — and no bureaucratic system can capture the unobvious and intricate social features that lead to and alleviate certain problems. Clearly, some uncomplicated problems can be met through standardised frameworks but it cannot be assumed that meeting a target necessarily means meeting a need, not least because problems carry an ‘emotional dimension’ in two overlapping areas. First, in the way that service users feel about the difficulties they experience, such as the sense of **shame** associated with poverty or excessive debt, the **fear** carried by the possibility of eviction or sense of **terror** when a visit from the bailiffs is imminent or an abusive partner is due home, or the sense of **humiliation** and **anger** that can be felt when social workers arrive to ‘inspect’ parents’ care of their children — and to scrutinise how this is manifest in household or personal cleanliness, the condition of children’s bedrooms, food in the cupboard, etc. Some scrutiny of this kind may be essential to ensure the well-being of children but the emotional impact of asking ‘challenging questions about very sensitive matters’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 87) needs to be acknowledged.

A second interrelated dimension relates to people’s emotional capacity to deal with the problems they face or present to social workers. We know from the findings of neuroscience — and from our own experience as practitioners — that when people are struggling with feelings of stress, trauma, bereavement or depression their capacity to remember can be seriously impaired and hamper their capacity to fulfil certain tasks. For example, in relation to stress and depression LeDoux (1998) notes: ‘One of the consequences of excess life stress is depression, and depressed persons sometimes have poor memory’ (p. 243). With regard to the way that traumatic experiences can limit people’s lives, Freud considered ‘... the memory of the trauma acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work’ (Freud, 1895, p. 6). When these emotional limitations are not factored into the decision-making process, people may be drawn to agree to undertake certain tasks or meet particular targets and at the same time remain unaware of their inability to achieve these expectations — feelings that may also lie beyond the awareness of the practitioner and other individuals involved. However, these complex emotional issues are more likely to be picked up when practitioners have the time and opportunity to
use their ‘intelligence and good skills’ (Munro, 2012, p. 6) in ways that establish an open, accepting and meaningful relationship with service users – a point taken up by Howe:

One of the hallmarks of a good relationship is that our feelings, however dark and distressing, are recognized, understood and accepted by the other. If the relationship is a place where we can feel safe, then we can explore the thoughts and feelings that are distorting and disfiguring our lives. (Howe, 2008, p. 6)

Social workers

In relation to social workers, some of the concerns identified by Munro include the emotional impact of excessively high caseloads and ‘burdensome administrative tasks’ (Munro, 2010, p. 115) that leave too little time and opportunity for practitioners to build the kind of relationship that makes it safe for service users to explore the practical and material problems and emotional issues they are experiencing. This includes the opportunity to use intuitive reasoning to aid understanding and the decision-making process – opportunities that can be stifled by the ‘unintended consequences’ and demands of an over-prescriptive approach:

For example, too much prescription of practice, which diminishes professional responsibility for judgments and decisions, has an unintended consequence of reducing the job satisfaction, self-esteem and sense of personal responsibility experienced by child protection workers. This leads to the further unintended consequence of increasing amounts of time taken off absent or sick. In fact, this goes on to create a reinforcing loop . . . those still at work have to take on larger caseloads and in turn have less time to build relationships with children and families; in time, this reduces the quality of the outcomes for children and young people, which further reduces the sense of job satisfaction . . . . Another unintended consequence of prescription is that dissatisfaction with the role causes high staff turnover. (Munro, 2011b, p. 37)

In addition to these tensions and demands, social workers are required to operate within a ‘compliance culture’ which involves adherence to a system of policies and procedures that they know in their hearts and minds cannot provide the quality of help and support that service users need – and deserve. It can lead to ‘moral dilemmas’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 70) and ethical tensions. In this low-trust culture, the opportunity for learning and change is hampered by organisational priorities that are ‘focused on complying with targets and performance indicators’ (Munro, 2012, p. 27) to the point where front line workers often feel unsupported by their managers and given too little opportunity for reflection in supervision. Munro notes that these difficulties are compounded by the way the public and media respond to tragic incidents relating to children – reactions that are known to have a damaging impact on social workers’ morale when faced with no-win situations that lead to feeling ‘damned if they do and damned if they don’t’ (Munro, 2011a, p. 38). In some situations, parents may behave in ways that are evasive, dishonest, aggressive, intimidating and angry – experiences
that can be frightening and emotionally draining for social workers (Ferguson, 2014). These situations call for good supervision and peer support and organisational backing to ensure that they do not lead to practitioners losing their focus or becoming burnt out:

Being exposed to the powerful, and often negative, emotions found in child protection work comes at a personal cost. If the work environment does not help support workers and debrief them after particularly traumatic experiences, then it increases the risk of burnout which, in the human services, has been defined by [Maslach et al., 2001] in terms of three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation (or cynicism), and reduced personal accomplishment. (Munro, 2011b, p. 91)

This reduced personal accomplishment can also lead to the practitioners becoming deskilled through a lack of opportunity to use the knowledge, skills and experience they have acquired. Here it is important to remember the ‘use it or lose it’ principle (LeDoux, 2002, p. 79) in neuroscience which states that brain cells that are not used, and do not ‘fire’, can fall away and wither. Munro notes that the many difficulties experienced by social workers could be turned around if we could move away from culture of compliance based on ‘perverse incentives’ and ‘too much focus on achieving targets’ (Munro, 2012, p. 43) and instead create a learning culture that supports ongoing feedback, learning and change in social work and toward a culture where practitioners feel in touch and able to communicate their emotions in ways that are caring and supportive.

Organisational defences

In relation to organisations, one ‘emotional dimension’ that has already been mentioned is the way that service users’ and social workers’ emotions and feelings are avoided and denied. This is a defensive stance. Another manifestation is the extent to which fear and anxiety are driving an organisation’s structure and decision-making processes – a defensive strategy that may have conscious and unconscious features. Some of this fear is likely to be rational and a result of the criticism that central government and the public direct at local government, including social work agencies. Also, the ongoing demands placed on local authorities, often without additional funding, can lead to rigid responses that make organisations less amenable to change. For Munro (2012), the organisational picture in social work is of ‘a defensive culture that focuses on compliance with targets and rules instead of whether services are providing effective help’ (p. 3) – a system which perpetuates a mistaken confidence in the view that compliance with policies and procedures can protect children. Munro conceptualises the defensive culture that has emerged in terms of single and double loop learning, where double loop learning allows for errors to be detected and corrected in ways that lead to changes in the organisational structure, policies, objectives and assumptions: ‘via this loop the system is able to learn’ (Munro, 2010, p. 50) and the opportunity to operate as a learning organisation.

In contrast, single loop learning creates ‘a self-defence mechanism which “hides” the perceived errors’ (Munro, 2010, p. 20) in order to fend off criticism. Instead, there can be a ‘tendency to consider the error was avoidable and to blame the individual’
The development of a ‘blame culture’ (Munro, 2010, p. 38) is one that places unrealistic expectations on social workers and service users (MacDonald, 1990; Lees et al., 2013), and one where ‘blame’ can be placed or projected on to service users if they fail to engage in ways deemed appropriate or fail to meet certain targets or responsibilities (Bower, 2005, p. 163). It is a culture that can lead practitioners to seek other self-protection strategies – a situation where ‘the more punitive and defensive the culture, the harder it is for anyone to accept flaws in their reasoning’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 91). No practitioner can be working from their best self (Trevithick, 2012, p. 227) in such a climate but one of the most disturbing features of a more ruthless and defensive managerialist approach is that it can lead to a culture of bullying, harassment and intimidation (van Heugten, 2010). Here I am reminded of a social work agency that has a ‘shame board’ which lists the names of social workers who have failed to meet assessment targets. I am also reminded of a comment by an experienced social worker who was told by a newly appointed, non-social work manager to ‘dump’ the toys she used in her work with children, adding the comment ‘my way or the highway’.

This section has looked at the impact of managerialism and argued that by ignoring the ‘emotional dimensions’ that practitioners and service users bring to an encounter means that this system has consistently failed to understand key areas of human experience and to build this understanding into its organisational culture, policies and procedures. An example of this failure is the extent to which conscious and unconscious defences dominate social work and are a serious obstacle to effective practice (Trevithick, 2011) – defences that are evident in the fear and anxiety that lead to compliance rather than courageous decision-making among practitioners, defences that lead to a bullying culture where differences are attacked and independent thinking prevented (Munro, 2010, p. 31), and defences that lead to service users feeling reluctant to be open and honest for fear that the services they need may be denied. The skewed system this has produced means that the opportunity for service users and practitioners to learn and change – and to work together in ways that can achieve lasting and meaningful change – remains seriously hampered.

Humanising managerialism

Like Munro, most practitioners know that for behaviour change to be fundamental, enduring and meaningful takes time. It requires focused work, quality relationships and good support, sometimes by professionals but, importantly, by building support from other individuals within a person’s wider community and social world. It calls for an understanding of the complexity of behaviour change and for a whole systems approach in order for ‘change to have a chance of being most successful’ (Munro, 2011b, p. 106). Once upon a time a professional stance involved adapting our approach and resources to meet a service users’ need but increasingly service users are being expected to adapt their needs to suit the resources and services available. These are worrying developments that too often lead to people to being processed through a range of administrative procedures with tight time frames toward a preordained goal – a court hearing, a referral onward or case closure. It is at this point that managerialism fails service users and fails social workers who are trapped within a heavily
proceduralised, emotion-stripped and unworkable system. However, in relation to social work managerialism could be said to fail to meet the principles that underpinned its introduction—economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Audit Commission, 1983, p. 8)—on the grounds of its failure to provide an opportunity to fundamentally address problems in ways that achieve lasting and meaningful change. The following is an account of the kind of details that managerialism would have to embrace if it were to humanise its policies and procedures in ways that included an emotional dimension at its heart. The two examples chosen are learning and self-regulation.

Learning

The research findings of neuroscience indicate that it is through our emotions—or our ‘emotional brain’ (LeDoux, 2002)—that we become linked to other human beings, and begin to make sense of who we are and the world around us. Central to this understanding is the capacity to learn and the fact that when we ‘learn something new associated structures in our brain change and grow’ (Gilgun, 2005, p. 856). These changes to the ‘emotional self’ or ‘synaptic self’ (LeDoux, 2002) involve alterations in synaptic connections that underlie learning and a process where memory stabilises and maintains the changes over time (LeDoux, 2002, p. 134). It is also essential to note that the greater the emotional arousal, the greater the learning that is achieved and remembered:

Emotionally meaningful events can enable continued learning from experience throughout the lifespan. Such learning may be seen as, in effect, the ongoing development of the brain. Experience plays a primary role in stimulating new neuronal connections in both memory and developmental processes. Findings from neurobiology suggest that such development continues throughout the lifespan. (Siegel, 2012, p. 345)

The realisation that it is the quality of the relationship and the emotions this engenders that leads to greater learning has profound implications for social work. It suggests that the opportunity for learning, for both service users and practitioners, is inhibited when standardised, tick-box forms of information-gathering and other prescribed tasks and targets take precedence over an emotionally meaningful encounter. That is not to deny the importance of meeting specific tasks because all professions have important administrative requirements to perform but as Munro and other commentators have noted, it is the emotional content of the encounter this is as important in information-gathering—and only a small percentage of this information is evident in terms of fact or answers that can be ‘ticked off’ and considered relevant in the wider picture:

Emotions allow us to see suffering as something negative that matters, just as they allow us to see happiness as something positive that should garner our allegiance. Without emotional insight, ethico-political judgment proves to be impossible. (Thiele, 2006, p. 183)

The capacity to learn is as important for social workers as it is for services users because it is in this area that we grow and change as human beings and as practitioners. In a
learning culture, it is possible for every experience to be a teacher (Thiele, 2006, p. 29) – an opportunity that is denied in a defensive culture (Trevithick, 2011).

The importance of self-regulation

One of the findings of neuroscience is the importance of self-regulation, sometimes referred to as emotion regulation or affect regulation, which describes the capacity of individuals to understand and control their emotions and behaviour and to do so in ways that are flexible and adaptable to the situations encountered. It states that ‘how we experience the world, relate to others, and find meaning in life are dependent on how we come to regulate our emotions’ (Siegel, 2012, p. 273). As human beings, we are not born with the ability to regulate our emotions. This begins in the early attachment relationships between a child and his or her parents/carers and in the way that different emotional experiences are organised and integrated – an integration where the more expansive the experience, the greater sense of self that the infant develops: ‘because emotional systems coordinate learning, the broader the range of emotions that a child experience, the broader will be the emotional range of the self that develops. This is why childhood abuse is so devastating’ (LeDoux, 1998, p. 322).

In social work, we can encounter service users whose early emotional experience has led to a fractured sense of who they are – a situation that is sometimes indicated in term of emotional dysregulation:

Emotion ‘dysregulation’ can be seen as impairments in this capacity to allow flexible and organised responses that are adaptive to the internal and external environment. When integration is impaired, coordination and balance cannot be achieved, and the system moves toward chaos, rigidity, or both ... repeated patterns of such dysregulation can have their origins in constitutional elements, interactional experience, and the transaction between these two fundamental components of the mind. (Siegel, 2012, p. 269)

The extent to which an individual demonstrates a sense of ‘chaos, rigidity, or both’ can be observed in practical ways, appointments that are not kept, or tasks not achieved, but also through our capacity to feel the emotions being conveyed (Stern, 1985). The example given above in relation to learning and self-regulation could be applied to our understanding of other areas of emotional distress that we regularly encounter in social work – such as the impact of trauma, abuse, stress, depression, bereavement and loss and also the emotional impact of poverty, social inequalities and discrimination. How we work in practice with this ‘reading’ of our own and others’ emotions and feelings will involve drawing on different areas of knowledge, our capacity to relate to others and our capacity for logical, rational, intuitive, analytic, critical and reflective thinking in ways that enable us to work alongside service users to initiate change. As a final point on this subject, the concepts of ‘chaos, rigidity, or both’ could also be applied to social work where we struggle, amid competing pressures placed on us by government, to be a self-regulating profession.

In this paper I have argued managerialism has hijacked the importance of professional judgements and intuitive reasoning by promoting a skewed interpretation of logical thinking. In this task, I have focused on more extreme and rigid forms of
managerialism because these pose the most serious threat to the future of social work and how we are seen by others, including the general public. Managerialism compromises everyone within its reach which means we must avoid splitting people into ‘goodies’ or ‘baddies’ – although there are good and bad decisions and decision-making processes. As Munro notes, there are excellent examples of good practice taking place in England due largely to a more relaxed and innovative interpretation of managerialism and the courageous stance adopted by some managers and senior staff. Examples of good practice are also evident in the courage and integrity demonstrated by social workers who have found ways to remain relationship-based and to work between the cracks of managerialism.

To humanise managerialism would change the future of social work and radically change how we work with people. It would involve working with an understanding of the emotional nature of the difficulties people experience, and adopting an approach that builds on the research findings of attachment theory and neuroscience – and the practice wisdom and professional expertise of social workers. It would involve practitioners having more direct contact with service users and more time to assess what is happening and why, and how best to positively engage and collaborate with others to progress the work to be undertaken. This would call for a significant increase in the number of social workers employed and more a thoughtful approach to retention – together with changes to the administrative burden that practitioners are expected to meet. It would involve placing the relationships we build at the heart of social work practice and introduce a more emotional and collaborative language to replace the more sterile, mechanistic and proceduralised terminology that is sometimes adopted. This focus on relationships and relatedness would allow us to understand and change the extent to which defences are operating in social work, particularly organisational defences (Trevithick, 2011) and encourage us to articulate and resist its worst features. Managerialism’s greatest weakness is its failure to recognise the importance of emotions and it is this weakness, or Achilles Heel, that can offer the chance to collaborate with service users and other professionals to bring about change. It is only by placing an emotionally responsive relationship-based practice at the centre of social work that managerialism can be humanised.

If we were to introduce these four basic changes – an emotional and knowledge-based dimension, higher staff levels, administrative changes and relationship-based practice – other positives would occur. But to achieve this vision also means challenging the myth that we cannot afford quality services and to care for people in ways that are appropriate to their needs. The UK is reputed to be the seventh richest country in the world but one of the most unequal in terms of the distribution of wealth (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). For example, if we add together tax evasion, tax avoidance and late tax payments, more than £120 billion is owed to the state, which would be ‘enough, at least in principle, to close the whole current government deficit’ (Murphy, 2010). Similarly, it is reported that UK banks benefited from a £36 billion subsidy from government in 2012 and an estimate from the London School of Economics put the cost of financial scandals among 10 banks in the UK at £100 billion in the five-year period from 2007 to 2012 (Treanor, 2013). Or again, in 2006 the government estimated the cost of replacing the Trident nuclear missile system to be between £15 to 20 billion which Greenpeace state could rise to £97 billion over the system’s 30-year life (Norton-Taylor, 2009). We need to draw on these and other
examples to argue the case that there is money and that we can afford to provide good social work and services of high quality – if there is a commitment to do so.

I believe that as human beings we are capable of anything. Time and again throughout history people have shown the ability to change the given order, despite the obstacles and barriers erected to hinder progress. If the efforts of human beings can bring down the Berlin wall, it has to be possible to humanise managerialism – a task we need to begin now.

Notes
1. In an amusing quote cited by Damasio (2012, p. 319), love was described by Stuart Sutherland (1996) in the *The Macmillan Dictionary of Psychology* as ’A form of mental illness not yet recognised by any of the standard diagnostic manuals’.
2. The term ‘evidence based practice’ was first developed by the Evidence-Based Medicine Working Group at McMaster’s University in Canada. This working group included David Sackett who has written extensively on this subject.
3. Ofsted stands for The Office for Standards in Education, which inspects and regulates services working with children in the statutory, voluntary and community sectors.

References


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