

## Emotional labour in social workers' encounters with children and their families

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## **Emotional labour in social workers' encounters with children and their families**

### **Abstract**

The ways in which social workers experience a range of emotions that are evoked in their professional relationships with children and families is an area that is little focused upon and yet the processes involved in their expression and management can have profound implications for all involved. Theoretically informed by sociological concepts and combining data from a two year, UK four nation, ESRC-funded research project 'Talking and Listening to Children' (TLC), this paper explores the ways in which social work organisational contexts and dynamics give rise to 'feeling rules' in the workplace and the impact of these on social workers' relationships with children and families. Using Hochschild's (1983) emotional labour analytical framework, the paper highlights that the management and expression of social workers' feelings is filtered through personal, professional and organisational contexts. The implications of these pervasive and powerful processes are explored. The paper concludes by considering the significant, wide-reaching implications of this focus on the experience, expression and management of emotion for every day, social work practice in both children and families settings specifically, and other social work practice contexts more broadly.

### **Keywords**

Emotional labour, Hochschild, social work, encounters, children, families.

## **Introduction**

There is a growing body of research that focuses on social workers' communicative encounters with children and families. This research has sought to explore the content and quality of professional encounters, the complexity of the processes involved and the need for theoretical and analytical frameworks to elucidate, explore and explain some of these complexities (Ferguson, 2014, 2016; Ruch et al., 2017; Winter et al., 2016). Regarding the latter point, the recent contributions to our knowledge through the work of Ferguson (2014, 2016), Lefevre (2015) and Ruch et al. (2017) are a welcome addition in exploring the social interactional, relational processes of the communication between social worker, child and family by applying conceptual tools associated with social pedagogy and sociology (motilities) for example.

In our research that involved closely observing the communicative exchanges between social workers and children during their encounters, it was apparent that an important and yet neglected area for social workers was the expression and management of emotions and feelings. These encounters were often challenging, emotionally charged and unacknowledged by the wider social work organisations. Organisational norms also had a significant impact on the experiences of social workers, children and families. In this paper, we explore these themes through Hochschild's (1983) conceptual lens of emotional labour. We focus particularly on the relational processes that social workers engaged in, the feelings evoked and implications for professional practice more broadly.

## **Existing research knowledge**

The expression and management of feelings comprise an aspect of social work practice with children and families that is under-researched and under-theorised. Existing knowledge can be categorised under the following themes: first, there is a body of written work that is therapeutic in its positioning and that reflects on the challenges and opportunities that emerge within the context of managing professional relationships that have therapeutic aspects to them (Emond et al., 2016). Second, there is work that explores the theoretical underpinnings regarding the management of feelings within relationships including attachment theory (Howe, 1995); psychosocial approaches (Ruch et al., 2010) and trauma informed practice (Levenson, 2017). Third, there is some work that explores, through ethnography, the feelings and emotions evoked in social work practice with children and families (Ferguson, 2005; 2016). Fourth is work that explores the current support mechanisms available to social workers – including, for example, reflective spaces (Ruch, 2014) and the supervisory relationship (Ingram, 2013).

Building on Ferguson's work (2016) that combines a detailed account of social workers' emotions during home visits, the relationship between professionals' experiences and the organisational contexts within which they work, this paper explores these issues further by applying Hochschild's sociological conceptual framework on emotional labour (1983) to data collected as part of a wider ESRC project 'Talking and Listening to Children' (TLC project) that took place between 2013-2016. Reflecting the words of Hochschild (1983, p. 76) who said, 'we bow to each other not only from the waist but from the heart', the aim of this paper is to make visible the invisible and to contribute to new ways of thinking about

professional social work relationships in practice. The paper begins with an overview of the research methodology, before moving on to explore the insights afforded by Hochschild's ideas in relation to our data.

### **Research methodology**

The ESRC-funded TLC project was conducted between 2013 and 2016 and involved fieldwork conducted in local authority children's services teams across the United Kingdom. The project explored what happens in everyday, ordinary communicative encounters between social workers, children and parents. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the principal investigator's institution and the participating jurisdictions. During phase one of the project, from which the data informing this paper was drawn, 82 encounters (which were digitally recorded afterwards) were observed between social workers, children and their families. This element of the dataset comprises social workers' contacts with 82 families and 126 children from babies to young people aged 17 years old. While there were 82 unique visits, some of these involved the same social worker. Individual social worker characteristics were not distinguished in the database but it is possible to say that approximately 60 social workers were involved. Just over half the encounters took place at home, a quarter at schools and the remainder in public places (supermarket cafes and a park) (Winter et al., 2016). Access to the families was gained via the social worker who informed the families of the project and gained their consent. Consent was then confirmed by the researcher as part of the fieldwork with the family. In addition, pre- and post-encounter interviews with the social workers were audio recorded.

The encounters drawn on for the purposes of this paper are from different regions. Although different, common organisational issues were observed including pressures on: space (agile working for example); time (high caseloads); and on role and function (the dual expectation to meet bureaucratic imperatives to work effectively, quickly and objectively with families and their case records combined with the requirement to engage with feelings and take time to form meaningful relationships). The encounters selected are indicative and draw out the depth, nuance, subjectivity and diversity of practice and offer new theoretical insight and ways of thinking, rather than generalisation more widely. We acknowledge limitations in that: the presence of the researcher inevitably had an impact on the social work practice that we observed; the data gathered was from a very small number of social workers relative to the total workforce; and our observations represented only a snapshot of practice occurring with its contextual and temporal contingent aspects (Bryman, 2004). That said, most practitioners expressed their appreciation at having someone interested in their work and the opportunities afforded by the pre- and post-interviews to reflect on it. Moreover, the diversity of the practice observed suggests that the encounters, and the social workers' responses to them, were a genuine reflection of 'real-life' situations.

### **Hochschild and emotional labour**

Hochschild's (1983) seminal publication on emotional labour emerged from a sociological study regarding flight attendants and bill collectors and their work, in contact with the public and on behalf of a company, in managing their own emotions and the emotions of others – a broad term she referred to as emotional labour. The conceptual framework has since been applied to several settings including hospitals, private companies and educational establishments (Rainer and Espinoza, 2016; Riley and Weiss, 2016). Except for

work by Leeson (2010), there is very little work that seeks to apply this conceptual framework to social work practice. This is surprising given the fact that the emotional dimension to social work practice has increasingly come to the fore (Ruch, 2010, 2014). In defining the parameters of the broad concept Hochschild (1983, p. 147) states that:

[There are] many jobs that call for emotional labor. Jobs of this type have three characteristics in common. First, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person - gratitude or fear, for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees.

The job of a social worker encapsulates these three components. As argued above, there is a distinction between the emotions and feelings that a worker can give effect to in others and the role of their employer in governing the parameters of that work. With regards to social work specifically, it is the case that with professional status comes power and that through the provision of guidance, support and the threat of more serious intervention where there is 'non-compliance', social workers have the power to evoke certain feelings responses from those they work with including gratitude, fear and deference for example. There is an additional issue here. The practice of social workers, unlike that of flight attendants and bill collectors, is regulated by governmental bodies, not just by employers. Social workers must sign up to Codes of Practice that give guidance on 'feelings rules' and emotion management, just as social work employers must agree to put certain safeguards and advice in place for their employees.

It has also been argued that a focus on the emotional dimensions of the work has lost out to the pre-occupation with bureaucratic requirements and that this has governed the parameters of practice so that it has become predominantly procedurally-driven (Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016; Ingram, 2013, Munro 2011). At grassroots level, the implication of this is that the ownership and expression of emotion by social workers has been stripped out of their encounters with children and families and that the rules of engagement for both the worker and the child/parent have become primarily focused on task completion. The definition of emotional labour can be found in Hochschild's own research questions that underpinned her study with flight attendants and bill collectors where she asked participants to answer the following questions (Hochschild, 1983, p. 13):

'Describe a real situation that was important to you in which you experienced a deep emotion' and 'Describe as fully and concretely as possible a real situation that was important to you in which you either changed the situation to fit your feelings or changed your feelings to fit the situation'.

Emotional labour is therefore a dynamic, social, relational process that requires (Hochschild 1983, p. 7):

one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others [...] This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling, and it sometimes draws on a source of self that we honor as deep and integral to our individuality. Hence emotional labor involves the

management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display and it is instrumental in that it involves the management of feeling [...] for the benefit of another person.

Of course, the management of emotions occurs within, and is governed by, the wider institutional and organisational contexts that give rise to professional roles. Organisational, socially constructed 'feeling rules' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 57) establish the norms, the expectations regarding the ways of 'handling of other people's feelings and our own'. Dependent on the feelings rules, professionals may engage in 'surface acting' or 'deep acting' in the management of their own and the emotions of others. The difference is explained by Hochschild (1983, p. 33) who states that 'In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves'. However, in deep acting, Hochschild (1983, p. 33) argues that a fundamental change takes place in that 'by pretending deeply, [we can] alter [our]self. This process describes an individual's response to emotional dissonance in that in response to managing the difference between how they feel and what they are feigning we pull 'the two closer together either by changing what we feel (deep acting) or by changing what we feign (surface acting)' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 90 – brackets added).

From this perspective, there is a difference between seeming to 'become more patient and caring' to 'becoming more patient and caring'. Interestingly, one critique of Hochschild's framework is that even more attention should be paid to the internal unconscious emotion processes as much as to aspects of their external management (Theodosius, 2006) and that Hochschild's distinction between the 'real self' and the 'false self' is unhelpful (Bolton, 2004)

because it underplays the agentic capacity of individuals. The work of Addison (2017) takes this a stage further by arguing that there is a need for a 'conceptual bridge between the mind and the body [...] to better explain how emotion management occurs. To this end, Addison (2017) argues that the work of Bourdieu and the concept of habitus is useful. Notwithstanding this critique (the development of which is beyond this paper), and the limitations to our dataset (as outlined earlier) what is focused on here, is the usefulness of Hochschild's conceptual framework in exploring four interrelated issues: What emotion work is expected of social workers by prevailing organisational norms? What are the 'feeling rules'? What emotions do social workers manage in themselves and others and how do they do this? Finally, what is the impact on social workers? The paper ends by offering some concluding thoughts and implications for practice.

### **Emotional labour and the Talking and Listening to Children project**

#### ***What emotion work and feelings rules are expected and evident in social work practice?***

Reflecting on earlier commentary regarding the organisational imperative to focus on bureaucratic procedures over engagement with feelings, the example below highlights the impact on relational processes. Dana, a 16-year-old girl who is being looked after faces several concurrent transitions: from one placement to another; from her family GP to a new GP; from secondary school education to further study and the ending of her relationship with her current social worker as she transitions to the 16 plus team. The researcher's field notes include the following observations:

The social worker confirms the name of the new social worker to Debbie (carer) and Dana (young person), saying that there will be a review soon and that there is paperwork to sign (a kinship care contract). During this conversation, Dana has stood up, straightened her jeans and brushed her hair back from her face. She seems keen to get going.

The social worker adds, 'Yeah you need to get your doctor changed, you can always go down to... sure you never liked that other doctor anyway. They'll just do a general check up on you and then actually – because your doctor changes all your – they will send all your notes down to... I've written it on your Review report, Dana'.

Dana's concern is whether the social worker will be at the review meeting. The social worker confirms that she will be away on holiday but that she has written the report as the new social worker has only met Dana once before.

The social worker tries to be reassuring and says to Dana that the new social worker could help her with her Access course – she would contact the tech [college] and support her application.

Summarising the dynamics of this interaction, and notwithstanding the potential influence of the researcher's presence on the nature and content of the encounter, it could be suggested that what took place was task-centred, professional, detached and devoid of any obvious emotion. The checklist of what needed to be done as part of transitions (in this example, case transfer) was worked through and completed. There was no

acknowledgement or discussion between Dana and her social worker about their feelings, although their relationship had extended over a two-year period and involved both being involved in several of Dana's very challenging life events.

In ascertaining why this might be the case, Solomon (2010, p. 166) argues that in a context where a bureaucratic and procedural approach prevails, social workers can lose sight of their significance to families and children and perceive themselves to be nothing more than an 'interchangeable faceless administrator'. Solomon (2010) also postulates that a bureaucratic approach to transitions might be useful in that it acts as a defence mechanism for social workers helping to ensure that they do not have to engage in the emotional aspects to their work. As Solomon argues 'some social workers have come to defend themselves against the powerful feelings stirred up in their work by acting as if there was no relationship between themselves and service users' (Solomon, 2010, p. 166). Rather than critiquing, one could argue that such an approach is necessary for professional survival in a context where the system is overladen with cases and in which social workers are expected to process vast volumes of work as illustrated in the quote below from a social worker involved in the TLC project:

[...] if you think of [...] those old-fashioned meat grinders? That's how I see it, I feel like so you put in a few assessments and you can work and you turn the handle and everything comes out and you start completing and they put a few more in and its starts to sort of clog up a bit and then they chuck a few more in and then you get to the point where you can't move it because there are so many calls coming in, there's

so much, just so juggling so many cases that you just stop, you just become ineffective'.

A key question, arising from the case of Dana, and regarding Hochschild's (1983) conceptual framework, is whether the process depicted above, was an example of surface or deep acting. In the interview with the researcher that took place in the car after the observation of the encounter, the social worker says:

Okay, I do feel for her in that she doesn't really have anybody there supporting her. We are there, but that's not the same as your mum and dad, but she's never said that to me, like. She told me all the things she is supposedly doing with her mum. She told me she was doing all these things, but for her mum to make no contact whatsoever, like.

Here we can see, on the one hand, a visible enactment of an ending that has taken place imbued with implicit messages such as 'moving on is matter of fact, there is no meaning to our relationship beyond its professionally defined task orientated approach'. This is compared with the social worker's invisible (because they are not expressed to Dana) feelings where she admits having feelings for Dana, where she connects with the fact that Dana does not have a mum and where the social worker admits indirectly that she has stepped into that gap. To understand this more explicitly, if the words 'we are there' are replaced with 'I am there', it is possible to gain a deeper appreciation of the depth and significance of the relationship. This, as an example of surface acting, has positive elements. It keeps clear for the social worker, the distinction between 'what the organisation expects

of me' and 'what I really feel'. Both Dana and the social worker keep themselves intact emotionally in the encounter as they end their relationship. Furthermore, the social worker by engaging in surface acting (managing her own emotions) achieves the desired effect in Dana - Dana accepts the process of the transitions without protest and, from the researcher's observations at that point in time, without emotion. Hence, for that moment (because we do not know whether emotion/feeling came later), the organisational requirement for a clean, quick, smooth transfer of the case before the social worker departs on holiday, is achieved. However, it could also be argued that 'surface acting' may have potentially negative impacts too, particularly if there had never an opportunity at any point to explore the significance each may have held for the other.

### ***What are the feeling rules?***

Taking this analysis further, we now turn to a very different scenario. The next example reflects emotional labour demands in a context (as described earlier) where there is an increasing emphasis on a relational approach and where the emotional significance for social workers, children and families is acknowledged and engaged with (Ruch et al., 2010; Solomon, 2010). In this case, the social worker is applying for a legal order in respect of Reece (a 10-year-old) who lives with his mother. The social worker is engaged in weekly meetings:

The social worker looks at Ruth (mother) in the corridor and picks up from her body language that she needs to go and do the shopping. The social worker says, 'look Reece, we have to go now'. Reece does not look at the social worker when he hears this but carries on playing on the computer.

We [researcher and social worker] walk backwards out of the room and begin to walk down the corridor to the top stair of the stairwell that leads to the door. At this point, Reece comes out of his room really quickly and says, 'don't go, don't' go'. The social worker says, 'oh Reece we have to go'. Reece says, 'no but I've still got loads to show you'. The social worker says, 'Reece you know I'll be coming back – it won't be long'.

At this Reece throws his arms around the social worker giving her a big hug and a squeeze. 'I don't want you to go'. The social worker reciprocates with a hug (not of the same size and strength of Reece's) and then says 'Ok, look your mummy needs to do the shopping Reece. I'll see you next week yeah?' We then walk down the stairwell back to the car.

In this case, there is an obvious and affectionate connection between the social worker and Reece. In the interview between the social worker and the researcher on the way back to the office the following is said:

SW: Oh, I struggle with that [referring to the meeting just observed].

Int: Do you?

SW: Because, with the threat of something severe happening, they're pulling the stops out.

Int: And Reece just gave you a big hug.

SW: He did, he's lovely. We have a great relationship, you know. She [mum] would text me at any time or ring me nearly at any time. [...]. The issue for me is how long I can keep that up for you know. And how much of my input he needs. He needs support. She needs people telling her, "This is what you do. This is how you do it, and this is who you talk to when it's going wrong."

Int: So, she is vulnerable?

SW: [...] I don't know if she or he values what I'm doing. It won't matter when the case is transferred. But it does. So, I take a few photographs on my phone and make sure we've got those. Because this is a good period. Mum and him are good together, so I get a few of them.

Int: Get them on her phone or your phone? [...]

SW: Yeah, that's right, that's right. So, you have to capture the good bits while they're there because it won't last. The good bits will end. Even a photograph of me and him together –

Int: Yeah

SW: I adore him. I love him [laughs].

Int: It sounds like a photograph of you and him together is pretty essential in all of that?

SW: You don't see this in the textbooks, you know.

Here the social worker is engaged in emotional labour of a different sort. Rather than stripping out and avoiding the emotional aspects of her relationship with Reece, she leans into them, acknowledges them and tries to work with them. The social worker is not having to feign or work on feeling connected and being sincere – she has become them. Two

elements from the social worker's comments are noteworthy. First, the social worker indicates strong feelings through the words 'love' and 'adore. These may not sit easily with normative assumptions regarding the exercise of professional boundaries (O'Leary et al. 2012; Turney, 2010) where there is a separation between the 'doing' – that is the expectation that close, meaningful relationships will be formed and the 'feeling' – the expectation that social workers will manage their feelings in such a way to maintain neutrality and rational objectivity (O' Leary et al., 2012, p. 4).

Second, strong feelings emerge within the context of professional relationships and, in this example, are filtered through other considerations such as the social worker's age, status and gender (middle aged female mother of grown up children) and the gendered nature of emotional labour (Pilcher, 2007). Building on Hochschild's hypothesis that male/female workers are called upon to do different types of emotional labour –it could be argued that women (who mainly occupy the lowest paid social worker jobs - the support worker or fieldworker roles) are assigned what Hochschild refers to as the 'flight attendant' elements of emotional labour (in this case the direct interface with children and families and managing their feelings of love, aggression, hate and so forth). By comparison, males who are more likely to occupy the middle and upper social work management roles, are assigned the 'bill collector' elements – this includes dealing with 'aggressors' (for example 'non-compliant' parents) once the rules have been broken and organisational expectations have not been met (Hochschild, 1983, p. 163). A consequence is that it is more permissible for the female social worker to say she adores, loves Reece than for a middle aged male social worker to say this. Third, the social worker highlights that even in an organisational context that purports to lean, in its outlook, to valuing a relational approach with its associated

'rituals' (such as taking photographs and making a scrapbook as an enduring artefact celebrating the child/social worker relationship), this is still not the prevailing organisational norm. Although our sample comprised mainly female social workers and female fieldworkers, broader issues regarding gender and communicative encounters were noteworthy and are explored further in a related forthcoming paper (Cree et al.).

***What emotions do social workers manage and how do they do this?***

The examples above have outlined what emotion work is expected of social workers, some of the 'feelings rules' and some of the emotions experienced. Some of the 'rules' are explicit in that they are captured in a UK context in overarching 'Codes of Practice' for example, whereas other rules are established within this overarching context and are the preserve of unwritten, unstated organisational norms – implicit ways of being, doing and thinking. While Codes of Practice establish expectations, practice on the ground is also affected prevailing practice norms including (as highlighted earlier) the tension between relational and the bureaucratic approaches to practice – a theme expressed in related work (Ruch, 2010, 2014). In this next section, consideration is given as to how social workers manage their emotions, those in others and the impact on them.

In the following scenario, which involves a social worker confirming to a father that his child will have to be received into care because the family can no longer cope, the emotional labour deployed by the social worker involves an example of 'deep acting'. The social worker manages her emotions (fear) and those of the father (guilt at the imminent loss, anger, sense of failure) by carefully terminating the ending of a visit early to avoid further deterioration to an already difficult situation. This is illustrated in the notes below:

I walk down the stairs and stand in the doorway to the living room by the front door [...] David (pseudonym) shouts through from the kitchen if the social worker has ever read *1984* [George Orwell's classic novel about a totalitarian state], and tells her she is like the police. He shouts that he is fed up with being told what to do. He tells us to get out. The social worker says nothing and looks at me and moves to get her bag which she has left in the living room. David shouts again that he wants us to get out, and the social worker is putting her coat on and we are making moves out of the door as David shouts through to us to 'fuck off out of my house!'

In the context of the encounter above, the Hochschild's reflections on the cost of emotional labour to the professionals involved are pertinent:

In private life, we are free to question the going rate of exchange and free to negotiate a new one [...] But in the public world of work, it is often part of an individual's job to accept uneven exchanges, to be treated with disrespect or anger by a client, all the while closeting into fantasy the anger one would like to respond with' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 85 - 86).

In this case, in the post-visit interview the researcher notes that the social worker says that she thought it would be a good idea to leave when we did, and then laughs and says that we didn't really have much choice. She says that he was 'going to blow'. Issues of power and feelings of fear are central to her reaction. The father's feelings, articulated in his own ultimatum to the social worker to leave the house and his anger, are experienced by the social worker as threatening – a fear that he might 'blow' (lose control of himself). For the

social worker, deploying emotional labour in this situation requires a considered response – knowing when to push the discussion further or back away, knowing what feelings to suppress to avoid igniting the situation and knowing when and where to leave to maintain personal safety.

### ***What is the impact of emotional labour on social workers?***

Although keen to highlight that this is not always the case, Hochschild (1983, p. 187) identifies emotional dissonance where there is 'estrangement between what a person senses as [their] "true self" and [their] inner and outer acting' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 90). In the TLC research study, some social workers appeared to use a range of techniques to manage their feelings and to mitigate against such dissonance including the use of humour; self-care through a focus on bringing in and sharing food together; and distraction (focus on social lives and social activities). A finding in this study that echoed in other social work research studies was that humour performed many functions including the release of tension, the creation of group cohesion and the venting of feelings such as anger, frustration and anxiety (Gilgun and Sharma, 2011; Jordan, 2016). In the example from TLC data below, it is notable the social worker uses humour to manage her emotional responses to the bleak reality of children's lives (explained below). The children, mother and the social worker are engaged in a mutual exchange of humour as they say goodbye to each other at the end of a visit:

The social worker then says 'Do you remember my joke I told you? It's the only one I can ever remember! Why did the dog sit beside the fire? He wanted to be a hot dog! There is more laughter. Sorcha (7-year-old child) then says 'Why did the

rubber chicken cross the road? Because he wanted to sttttrrrretch his legs!

(Laughter)

The social worker says 'Oh I like that one. Brilliant!' [ ... ]

The social worker again reiterates that the family should phone through to the office if there are any problems. She gets up off the settee to leave the house.

Sorcha, as the social worker is getting up to go, says 'What's big and helps you to get well? The social worker says, 'A big doctor'. Sorcha says 'A "Wellaphant". Everyone laughs again. The social worker says bye to everyone 'See you soon Sinead. See you soon Miss Sorcha. Thank you for your time'. As she is leaving the social worker says, 'take care Sheelagh'. Sheelagh says, 'thank you and bye'.

The strength of this display of mutual humour could be performing a multiplicity of possible functions. Sheelagh (mother) had significant mental health issues due to drug misuse and the social worker was visiting to begin the process of enabling Sinead (oldest daughter) to secure legal parental responsibility for her siblings if Sheelagh (mother) became unwell again. The only other alternative was the children's admission to care which they were all aware of. The visit was therefore taking place in a context of high anxiety and humour appeared to defuse (or avoid confronting) the worst of this. Everyone was instead unified through the expression of humour. Furthermore, humour provided the platform for a dignified and respectful social work ending to the meeting. By way of postscript, the researcher was informed by the social worker the following day that Sheelagh had taken

drugs that night and experienced a drug induced psychosis, so that Sinead was, in effect, the parent for her younger siblings.

### **Implications for social work practice and concluding thoughts**

As noted at the start of this article, Hochschild (1983, p. 76) says that 'taken together, emotion work, feeling rules, and interpersonal exchange make up our private emotional system. We bow to each other not only from the waist but from the heart'. Strengthening the focus on social workers' relationships with children and families and improving their quality, means putting emotional dimensions' centre stage. We cannot avoid this, or sanitise it; emotions and feelings are an integral part of who we are, what we do and how we engage. It also means paying attention to the factors that shape and influence emotions and that include gender, age, status and organisational context. It is imperative then, that we give space to understanding emotional labour on a theoretical level and it is equally as imperative that we give attention to supporting this dimension of daily social work practice.

At the level of practice, the work of Bolton (2000) who develops a typology to identify four types of emotion organisation and emotion management could be a useful start point for further exploration at an organisational level although it would be important to avoid the temptation to reduce complicated ideas to typologies as that is counter intuitive to the points being argued in this paper. Within teams, interesting ideas are emerging such as reflective spaces highlighted in the work of Ruch (2009; 2014). Essentially, spaces in which social workers can share with peers' aspects of emotional labour and its impact, Ruch (2014, p. 2158), argues that these spaces encourage the development of a greater self-awareness

as social workers learn from each other. Ruch (2014, p. 2159) argues, that alongside the process of sharing should be a process of ‘confrontational empathy’, which involves:

[being] attentive to the emotionally distressing nature of the family situations they encounter, whilst ensuring their professional purpose—to focus on the well-being of the child—and the authority that is imbued within it, are not compromised.

Applied to social workers, the approach could possibly allow for an articulation of the experience of dissonance (it becomes owned rather than hidden) but also a reaffirmation that this is the reality of the context in which they work and that there will be situations that are challenging, frustrating as well as positive. Having said this, in the TLC project, we have struggled to avoid the overwhelming temptation to produce a reductionist, sanitised and simplified view of what are undoubtedly complex communicative encounters that social workers, children and families engage in or to offer a checklist of solutions or simplistic ‘to dos’. In attempting to stay true to the findings, we cannot easily produce a checklist addressing ‘how to *do* a good relationship’ because that belies the need to engage with communicative processes as social, relational, fluid and dynamic –encounters that change in form, nature, substance, experience and expression through the course of their duration. This naturally has implications for the training of social workers where, reflecting the work and ideas of Lefevre (2015), there is a need to take forward a framework in training in this area that strengthens the reflective capacity and self-efficacy of social workers to identify, own, express and work through the emotional aspects of their job. It is our intention, and hope, that the distinctive ideas explored in this paper will be taken forward in ambitious but

nuanced ways, that are reflective and respectful of their complexity and the complexity inherent in social work practice across its diverse domains.

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