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Emotions in Social Work Education: Tools and Opportunities

Alessandro Sicora

Abstract: Social work students, especially because of their commitment to internships, are on average under greater emotional pressure than students on other degree courses, and they often believe that the emotions which they feel are 'wrong' in terms of intensity and/or quality. The support provided by supervisors, tutors, or practice teachers is central to learning how to reflect on emotions in classrooms and internship locations and share experiences and learning with one's study colleagues. Emotions are often blamed by students when they make mistakes during their field practice. A reflective approach considers experiences of shame, anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and happiness to be powerful opportunities for learning in a structured manner with the aid of reflective tools like reflective frameworks and writing. It is accordingly important to help social work students handle their emotions with acceptance by naming them before investigating the meaning of what is felt. The 'bonsai stories' (a form of very concise narrative) in this article exemplify some of the most common circumstances in which social work students feel strong emotions during their field practice.

Keywords: emotions, social work education, reflective practice, mindfulness

1. Introduction

Emotions are often deemed incompatible with effective and professional social work practice and education. A formal and detached attitude towards service users is too frequently considered to be a fundamental component of being a good practitioner in any helping profession. This belief simplifies a more complex reality in which empathy, intuition, tacit knowledge, and other 'non-rational' components are key ingredients of many successful helping interventions. The denial of the emotions themselves, considered wrong and unprofessional, can paradoxically generate dysfunctional attitudes towards the helping process. Nevertheless, many social workers and social work students still see their emotions as sources of shame and not as opportunities to understand the world more in depth and thus become more skilled and resilient professionals.

Reflective practitioners listen to their emotions in order to improve their ability to learn from their experience and create harmony between personal well-being and the quality of the helping relationships established with service users. Reflection on emotions, from a perspective of emotional intelligence (Howe, 2008) and emotional agility (David, 2016), contributes significantly to the well-being of social workers and the quality of their professional activities.

This article highlights the importance of a mindful and self-compassionate use of emotions in social work education. Using an adapted version of the Gibbs' reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988) and a form of synthetic reflexive writing ('bonsai' micro-stories; Sicora, 2018), social workers and social work students involved in a series of workshops in Italy and abroad (England, Israel, South Africa) reflected on some of their experiences when they had felt strong emotions during their field practice. Some of the stories written were discussed with the students to help them reflect on the emotions that they had experienced during their internship, especially when those emotions were the consequence of mistakes made by the students themselves.

Difficult emotions (like anger, disgust, fear, and sadness) and joy are like 'messengers' able to provide a deeper understanding of reality. Some of the aforementioned stories are presented here as examples of the positive outcomes from reflection. They also demonstrate the educational value of reflective learning applied to the sphere of emotions in social work field practice. Especially when difficult emotions are more frequent, this promotes the wellbeing not only of social workers but also of social work students involved in similar form of reflection applied to their field practice, and indirectly the wellbeing of social-service users as well.

Social work students, especially because of their involvement in internships and not only in theoretical lessons, are on average subject to an emo-

tional pressure greater than that of students on other degree courses and often believe that their emotions are 'wrong' in their intensity and/or quality (Sicora, 2019). The support provided by supervisors, tutors, and practice teachers is crucial, and so too is the possibility of reflectively addressing the issue of emotions in the classroom and in internship locations, also by comparing with the emotional experiences of their fellow students.

A conscious, mindful, and shared listening to emotions can enhance the quality of actions to support service users. At the same time, it can maintain and increase the personal motivation to be a social worker. Paying attention to work experiences of joy and satisfaction gives access to informative and motivational aspects of great interest. Moreover, in order to cope with emotions of any kind, especially the 'difficult' ones, it is useful to accept, identify, and name them before better understanding the significance of the experiences under investigation.

This is true at an individual level as well as within a team (also an inter-professional one) and even in the entire professional community. In fact, social work and social services are empowered when the professional and organizational cultures consider emotions as opportunities and are willing to listen to them. Building a common understanding on emotions may strengthen helping practitioners and their mutual understanding, as well as their work engagement and well-being at work.

2. Unprofessional emotions vs. informative 'messengers' to enhance reflective practice?

Emotion in social work is often a taboo subject that generates embarrassment, and sometimes even shame. The ambivalence of social workers in defining who they are as persons and practitioners gives rise to a paradox: emotions are part of professional practice (because they are an essential component of any human relationship), but they are often not perceived as 'professional'. The emphasis on maintaining satisfactory working standards accompanied by a negative view of the emotional sphere has a strong impact on these practitioners also because professional and personal identities are closely interconnected and significantly influenced by social and gender constructions (Virkki, 2008; Leeson, 2010; Stanford, 2010; Gunaratnam, 2011; Ruch & Murray, 2011; Wendt et al., 2011; Carey, 2014).

A second paradox arises from a sort of 'schizophrenic' view of the centrality of the person. Social work promotes this principle during its everyday activities with service users; but when the social workers themselves are concerned, emotions are lost, together with the need for appropriate self-care in regard to difficult emotions. The latter are more often experienced as possible interferences in the correct development of the helping process

than as opportunities to conduct effective evaluation, decision, and intervention processes.

In the most recent and relevant literature review on this topic, O'Connor (2020) highlights two main emerging and contradictory themes: 1) emotions are recognised as a dynamic resource for practice, with functions of interaction and creation of meaning; 2) social workers and social work organizations are ambivalent in judging the role of emotions in professional practice.

The denial of emotions, considered wrong and unprofessional, can paradoxically generate dysfunctional attitudes to the help process since it can produce rigidity and distance from the service users. Mature practitioners reflect on and learn from emotionally rich experiences because emotions are informative on many aspects of professional practice and reveal the personal and professional value systems of the social workers. The latter should examine their emotions in everyday practice and reflect on how they influence their moral judgements, decisions, and actions. It is important that emotions are not ignored or neutralised. Instead, professionals should examine their signalling function and importance for moral decision-making. Social work ethics training and education should pay attention to emotions (Keinemans, 2015). Some difficult and engaging emotions can reveal inner conflicts related to ethical dilemmas: that is, those situations in which the worker is confronted with conflicting values and must choose among options that are all unsatisfactory (Bertotti, 2016).

Social workers experience emotional responses not only because of the complex and fluid nature of the lives of service users but also because of their previous emotional experiences, which inevitably affect their assessment of situations encountered in the exercise of their profession. Reflective practice and critical reflection are essential in order to recognize, understand, and effectively use any emotional reaction. Without the development of such reflective and emotionally intelligent skills and abilities, the influence of emotions may remain hidden and not put to valuable use. Ignoring and marginalizing emotions does not reduce their presence and influence. On the contrary, this attitude decreases the opportunity for social workers to shed light on their own and others' emotional worlds and to make sense of the unclear and complex situations encountered in their professional practice. Furthermore, without awareness of their emotions, social workers cannot meaningfully engage in empathic relationships with the people that they work with and for (Ingram, 2015).

Fortunately, a growing number of social workers value reflection on emotions, since the latter are decisive for giving meaning to their actions (Folgheraiter, 2004) and may enhance the quality of decision-making processes in social work.

3. Reflection on emotions and constructing 'bonsai stories'

Galimberi (2018) maintained that emotions are intense affective reactions with acute onset and of short duration determined by an environmental stimulus. Ekman (2016) proposed a classification based on research conducted on a large group of experts and which identified some basic emotions, the first five of which were (in brackets the percentage of scientists who chose that emotion as a basic one): anger (91%), fear (90%), disgust (86%), sadness (80%), and happiness (76%). Immediately after, 40% to 50% of the experts chose shame, surprise, and embarrassment.

Using this classification, which has become popular thanks to the successful animation movie *Inside Out* (Docter, 2015), between 2019 and 2020 workshops were conducted in Italy and abroad (England, Israel, South Africa) with the participation, in presence and online, of social workers who were asked to describe some of the most emotionally intense professional experiences from which they had learned something important. Working in pairs (one person was telling the story, the other was listening and asking some partly predefined questions) the participants (all social workers, mostly female, aged from 25 to the retirement age in their countries) then summarized these narratives with a very limited number of characters (about 160) in order to share them in the final discussion with the entire group. When experiences dominated by strong emotions were examined, two key questions were: what is the purpose of this emotion? What is it telling me?

The purpose of workshop was to assess the potential of reflecting on one's emotions and promoting its practice in everyday work practice. At the same time, the participants produced more than 150 micro-narratives and sent them to the facilitator teacher to be shared and discussed during the workshops. These are also called 'bonsai stories' because, although they are very short, they contain all the essential elements of more complex narratives, like a bonsai, which has leaves and branches like other trees but on a much smaller scale (Sicora, 2018). Reflective writing and qualitative research are closely connected in the literature (Engel & Schutt, 2016) and every 'bonsai story' may be considered as a 'local knowledge case' with which to go deeper into personal reflection (Thomas, 2011). Furthermore, professional narratives are research materials also appreciated in social work (Gilgun, 2014). They are useful not only to explore the relationship between social work and emotions, but also to create more meaningful opportunities for social work training and education. The authors of these anonymised stories authorised their use for publications and training or education events. Moreover, a micro-narrative of just 160 characters takes very little time and allows effective reflection not only on individual events but also, through the

accumulation of these stories, on what has taken place overall over longer periods of time (Sicora, 2021).

Analysis of these stories shows that the main triggers for each of the five emotions mentioned above are:

- Anger: frustrating relationships with managers, colleagues, organizations, and users; lack of resources, inadequate guidance and support, disavowal of the role, mistrust expressed by managers or colleagues, inter-professional conflicts.
- Disgust: social policies and services unable to help people; disturbing events of, for example, child abuse and child pornography, with characteristics that strongly conflict with the core values of social work.
- Fear: making mistakes or carrying out ineffective interventions, receiving a negative judgment from the users; service users' violence, especially in the field of child protection.
- Sadness: the death of a user, the conditions (or worsening of the same) of those who are more fragile (for example, children, homeless and terminally ill persons); the failure of an intervention and the consequent feeling of helplessness; the sense of loneliness and disqualification experienced at work.
- Happiness: the success of a professional intervention, especially in a particularly difficult situation; expressions of appreciation and gratitude from the service users; sharing of happy emotions of the latter; confirmation of professional skills in the successful conclusion of professional interventions.

The following stories are examples of the many 'bonsai stories' collected during the workshops:

Anger. "Young boy from Afghanistan, limited foster placement. Hoped for longer but carer decided to end holiday. Boy moved to another city. – Anger at lack of resources. Sadness at move. – Good experience, boy had nurture and stability for a month. Bad experience, disruption of relationships. – Anger gave drive to look at all options, sadness aided empathy + understanding. – Lack of options, no better outcome. – All have different perspectives". (A-EN-10)

Disgust. "Discovery of historical child abuse by a service user I like. Disgust at service user's actions. Learning that people do bad things but deserve empathy and care". (D-EN-07)

Fear. "Child removal. Physical and verbal aggression. Fear for my life. Ashamed at being recognised as a child thief. Growth path. Return to work with more awareness". (F-IT-09)

Sadness. "First sexual abuse investigation in statutory work. Feeling of sadness + inadequacy when I could not control all aspects of the process. Learned that every decision has significant implications. However, role in similarity process was clarified. Led me to be more trusting of own judgement". (S-SA-02)

Happiness. "Service user grateful after difficult intervention. After feeling many emotions, relieved to feel joy. Learned to have faith in the decisions made and to expect many emotions in practice". (J-EN-03)

4. Social work education and emotions

4.1. Learning from mistakes in social work student placement

Field practice or internship is an essential educational component of social work (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). The importance of field education is unquestionable, but the management of its application has assumed diverse forms in different countries and universities. In any case, internships provide students with opportunities to develop, enrich, and integrate theoretical and practical knowledge while in the 'doing' process. This important training moment is often the only one in which students can connect and verify theory with the reality of practice while they are supported by qualified social workers supervising the 'what, why and how' of the practical interventions made by the students. Thus, the latter find themselves having one foot in the academic world and the other in the reality of practice (Noble, 2001).

As Dellavalle (2011) suggests, an internship is an experience of learning from practice during which the learners are directly confronted with the multiple dimensions of operational reality. In protected contexts like those of learning, trainees experience professional action with all the cognitive and emotional implications that this entails.

What attention should be paid to the relationship between emotions and social work education, especially in field practice? What skills and attitudes should be developed in social work students?

The critical reflective paradigm, largely developed from the concept of the reflective practitioner described by Schön (1983; 1987), has become the most important way to explore the knowledge/practice relationship in social work. Reflexive processes are explored in field teaching in order to consolidate and make explicit the link between theory and practice by emphasizing interaction, reflection, and dialogue with service users as a basis for enriching practical skills (Fook, 1999; White et al., 2006).

Reflective writings are powerful tools with which to help students reflect in depth on experiences during their field practice. At the same time, this

form of writing is a rich source of information with which to explore the impact of emotions in social work education. This was the focus of an analysis of 87 reflective writings on mistakes made by students during their internship (Sicora, 2019). Blaming emotions for these mistakes is very frequent. Emotions were even considered wrong in themselves by almost half of the authors of the above-cited studies because they would interfere in the relationships with the service users and the students' cognitive process of assessment. Emotions are often also considered responsible for 'bad' decisions on how to react in unexpected and difficult circumstances, as declared in the following extracts from reflective reports written by three Italian social work students (Sicora, 2019, p. 70).

"Anguish makes it difficult to manage previous information concerning the son of a couple of users". (IT-M-01)

"In an interview with a girl in SPDC [Psychiatric Service of Diagnosis and Care] I was too emotionally involved. My failure to collect information compromised the work done by the social and medical team". (IT-M-02)

"As a trainee, I witnessed the scene of a multi-problematic user who was aggressive towards others due to an emotional breakdown. I fled and hid myself in the office". (IT-M-03)

The writer of the last sentence also added a rhetorical question as a title for the episode: "Strong emotions: running away is simple but is it also the right choice?". Other students underlined that "too much" empathy could make lose control and produce mistakes in the relationship with users, especially during interviews, as in this example (Sicora, 2019, p. 70):

"As an overly empathic trainee, I witnessed an interview with a woman abused by her drug-addict son and I burst into tears, causing her to have a panic attack". (IT-M-04)

The strength of the emotional impact of the mistakes made by social work students emerges very clearly; and so too does the difficulty that such students find in critically recognizing the chains of events leading to their mistakes and failures. These latter result from complex processes and involve not only the responsibilities of social work students and their limitations as trainees but also the impact of many other systems, such as, for example, social policies, social work organisations, the academic world, and the cultural and social contexts to which they belong. Students are often so focused on considering their responsibilities that they do not recognise the systems and interactions that contribute significantly to the negative results of their actions.

4.2. The importance of emotion in social work education

Failures and ‘difficult’ emotions, as well as moments of joy and success, should be the subject of constant attention and reflection in social work education. It is important to emphasize the importance of structured reflective habits and to promote the culture of responsibility instead of the ‘culture of guilt’, which is probably the strongest obstacle to learning from mistakes and preventing their repetition in the future (Sicora, 2019).

According to many authors (i.e., Stanford, 2010; Keinemans, 2015; Dore, 2016, 2019) university social work programmes should consider the importance of emotions in social work. At present, this happens rarely and in ways that are not always adequate (Ikebuchi, Rasmussen, 2014), as confirmed, for example, by research highlighting that qualified social workers in child protection still express educational needs also in the areas of emotion management and work in stressful conditions (Cabiati, 2017).

Moreover, because of the inclusion of internships within their degree programmes, social work students are subject to stronger emotional pressure than are their fellow students engaged in other university programmes (Dore, 2019). Social work students often encounter anger, sadness, and other difficult emotions. Regarding the challenging reaction of fear, Stanford (2010, p. 1077) suggests reinforcement of risk-taking “as an integral dimension of social work practice throughout qualifying degree programmes”.

The quality of the relationship between students and their supervisors, tutors and practice teachers is essential. Considering the emotional sphere of the students does not mean simply asking questions such as ‘how did you feel?’; rather, it means walking together on a path of exploration, acceptance and recognition of emotions and the complex intertwining of situations and variables that arouse them (Dore, 2016). In this regard, when analysing the results of qualitative research on how the topic of emotions enters the supervision interviews of social work students, Dore (2019) stressed the great importance of careful and unobtrusive reflective support. A context of non-judgmental but welcoming and validating curiosity makes the exploration of emotions particularly fruitful. Those who help students need a solid value base and a deep understanding of their role also in terms of respect for the uniqueness of every person.

Entering the sphere of emotions makes it possible to evaluate the pedagogical needs of the student in order to identify the most appropriate teaching approach with which to promote learning (Tsang, 2006). The supervisors, tutors and practice teachers or internship coordinators are not parents, assistants, or therapists for their students. Moreover, as important actors in the educational process, they do not just transmit information but also play a role with a significant impact on the emotional lives of students. Social work

training concerns people within their living environments, and it should pay especial attention to build professionals that must be prepared to do emotionally demanding work. Knowledge of the use of emotions in this context is an important factor in the development of reflective and competent professionals (Ikebuchi, Rasmussen, 2014).

For this purpose, it is possible to use didactic strategies that have already been successfully tested especially with reference to the making of ethically sensitive decisions, such as problem-solving models, Socratic dialogue, and 'moral case deliberation'. These tools improve the understanding of situations by strengthening motivation, and help future social workers pay more attention to emotions in everyday practice (Keinemans, 2015). The promotion of creative opportunities for experiential learning for social work students can also be successfully focused on taking charge of changes within themselves so that they are prepared to support life improvements of service users (Cabiati & Folgheraiter, 2019).

However, as Ikebuchi and Rasmussen (2014) note, the role of emotions in social work education and the translation of this understanding into solid pedagogical practices are still important areas for further research. There is still a lot to do to build "emotionally intelligent social workers" (Howe, 2008).

4.3. Micro narratives of emotions in field practice

To further stress the importance of considering emotions and reflective learning from them in university curricula, and to provide some examples of emotionally-charged situations in social work placements, there follow some 'bonsai stories' written by Italian students who had participated in specific seminars on the relationship among shame, emotions, and social work like those addressed to social workers described above. Therefore, first presented are the micro narratives on the experience of shame (an important emotion that may be a meta-emotion when it arises as a reaction to other emotions; Jäger & Bänninger-Huber, 2015); and then, in the conclusion of this section, the synthesis of the results of a second seminar that considered anger, disgust, fear, sadness and joy (Sicora, 2021).

The micro stories below were originally written in Italian during workshops held in the period 2016 – 2020 by students in response to the following task: "Think about your experience of shame during the internship, describe it using Gibbs' cycle of reflexivity and summarize it in 160 characters". Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle is probably one of the most successful reflective tools because its cyclical structure, made of six stages including around 40 questions, is easy to understand. These stages are: 1) description, 2) feelings and thoughts, 3) evaluation, 4) analysis, 5) conclusion and 6) action plan. Those who want to consider in depth their experience should recall details on what happened outside (1) and inside (2) the one who reflects before eval-

uating the positive and negative aspects of the episode under scrutiny (3). The learning – that is, the discovery of a deeper sense of the experience (4) – should lead to better awareness about what could have been done differently (5) and to an action plan if similar situations are encountered in the future (6). The learning produced by the Gibbs' cycle of reflexivity is not abstract, nor is it learning for learning; rather, it is aimed at finding new and hopefully better ways to deal with challenges arising from social work practice.

The main issues are clustered into three groups: the first relates to the emotional impact of feelings considered inadequate during the field practice; the second to the encounter with social exclusion; and the third to the lack of recognition of one's role as a trainee.

The first and largest group concerns the sense of inadequacy felt because of the gap between reality and the expectations about what students can do in their field practice. These unrealistic expectations are likely to be nourished by universities when these are not well connected with the world of professional practice, the social image of the social worker, and other life experiences that have led students to choose a degree course in social work.

“At the CSM [mental health centre] during an interview: shame stemming from a sense of experiential inferiority”. (IT-S-01)

“I found myself in a situation of shame when during an interview that involved the removal of mother and daughter from possible domestic violence, I - as a trainee - did not have the necessary tools in that situation”. (IT-S-02)

“Sense of inadequacy caused by the awareness of not possessing certain skills required by the tutor”. (IT-S-03)

In the next three sentences the students used the words ‘shame’ and ‘inadequacy’ as a sign of full recognition of the difficult emotions that they felt. Naming emotions is the first step towards dealing with them with a positive attitude.

“Sense of shame during my first interview because I felt inexperienced and too young for the user”. (IT-S-04)

“Team meeting: they talked about ‘the DAP’ but shamefully I didn't understand what that acronym meant”. (IT-S-05)

“Misunderstanding with the supervisor: erroneous delivery of the task concerning the analysis of the need. Sense of inadequacy. Importance of communication”. (IT-S-06)

A student who realised that she needed to work on her ability to deal with emotions wrote:

“An interview with more people than expected. Feelings of inadequacy, desire to escape. Need to improve the management of emotions and unexpected events”. (IT-S-07)

The satisfaction of having been able to take the right action emerges in the following two episodes. The ‘difficult’ emotion guides the student in identifying the areas in which to strengthen her skills.

“Verbal aggression by users. Feeling shame and inadequate emotional control. Better management of the interview and emotions. Greater problem-solving skills”. (IT-S-08)

“Person shows up for a fixed appointment: I didn’t know about it. Social worker not there. Nervous person. I felt shame and sorrow and then I got activated”. (IT-S-09)

The direct encounter with social exclusion is an event that often has a strong emotional impact, but it helps to experience important aspects of social work. In some situations, being close to those who are excluded from society involves feeling the weight of the disapproval the latter suffer. The following sentences are good examples of this new and important discovery made by the students.

“Discomfort when accompanying a homeless person to the post office in the momentary absence of the supervisor. Feeling of shame in handling the task”. (IT-S-10)

“Accompanying a drug addicted young man: ashamed at noticing the disapproval of passers-by. If it happened again, I wouldn’t worry about other people’s gaze”. (IT-S-11)

“Interview with a mentally disabled person: shame about the fear felt in facing a new situation and a sense of inadequacy with respect to the profession”. (IT-S-12)

The social recognition of the trainees is the central theme in the following last two narratives of shame. Not only the attitude of a doctor perceived as disqualifying, but also young age, are elements that caused difficulties for the students engaged in their first experiences in the field.

“During an evaluation for admission to the RSA [nursing home for elderly people], the doctor did not take my presence as a trainee into consideration. I felt devalued and inadequate”. (IT-S-13)

“First team meeting. Sense of inadequacy, performance anxiety about my inexperience and age. I could have managed the anxiety better, and at future meetings I will try to be more confident”. (IT-S-14)

Students often do not know that their fellow students experience the same emotions of shame and that this emotion is common even among experienced social workers. The relief produced in the classroom by sharing such stories was tangible during the seminars held on shame (Sicora, 2021).

Also, when looking at the five basic emotions considered in this article, there are recurrent situations in which students experience the same 'difficult' or joyful emotions. Faced with the question "What did this emotion tell you that was useful for the moment you experienced it and for the future?", the picture summarized below emerged in relation to a seminar held in 2019 with a group of social work students. Of course, also in this case, it is a very partial and unrepresentative exploration of the diversified world of internship, but it can be useful for highlighting some interesting situations (Sicora, 2021).

Anger can arise from a difficult relationship with the supervisor or within an onerous organizational context that is instinctively rejected ("I don't want to get used to what's wrong with the organization"). The trainees may feel 'abandoned' (although realization that one has the strength to cope with it generates pride), limited by the supervisor, and prevented from performing more without understanding the reasons. Sometimes there is a perception of excessive emphasis on mistakes made, and doubts about one's abilities arise. Other situations of anger arose when the trainee witnessed an intervention by the practice teacher which s/he considered inadequate also ethically, with the consequent downsizing of expectations. Generally speaking, the chain of expectations-frustration-anger seems appropriate also to the context of the social work internship, and reflection on episodes characterized by this emotion could usefully start by asking: what were and are my expectations about this internship? What are the expectations about being a social worker and about the organization in which s/he works?

Disgust appears less often in the experiences of social work students. Two examples of situations of disgust concerned a father's sexual abuse of his daughter, and a home visit in an extremely dirty house, even with excrement on the floor, and a nauseating smell. In both cases, the students who experienced such situations felt that they had to contain their expression of disgust so as not to compromise the relationship with the user.

Fear is aroused by the unknown in relation to the student's inexperience (for example, in relation to the first interview or the first home visit at the beginning of the internship), or by risk situations involving potentially dangerous users. Two situations are thought-provoking: 1) a man with a knife, to whom the supervisor reacted by weakening the man's aggressiveness and thus giving a good example of how to react; 2) a young user of a psychiatric service made sexual advances to a student, who feared that such behaviour would degenerate into violence.

The last of the four ‘difficult’ emotions – sadness – arises empathetically in front of a person with a difficult story who cries during an interview and who, because of the emotion manifested, perceives the trainee’s authentic emotional participation. Discomfort can also arise from doubts about one’s ability to deal adequately with a complex communicative situation.

During the seminar that provided the material for the final part of this section, all students were asked to describe an experience in which they had felt joy. The situations that emerged concerned the satisfaction felt in consequence of the supervisor’s recognition of the work done and the skills manifested: in one episode, more cases were assigned than expected; in a second case, the supervisor’s confidence emerged when the student was allowed to carry out social secretarial activities independently; in a third case, the supervisor inserted the first interview recording into the user’s folder as it was considered professionally adequate. However, the expressions of satisfaction by the service users seem to be those most appreciated by the students.

In summary, some of the episodes that emerged are reported below:

- after an interview with the manager of an association that had made a contribution so that a boy could take part in a trip, the latter expressed his gratitude;
- at the end of the internship, celebrated with a final farewell dinner, a young user of the service cried as he was saying goodbye to the trainee at the end of her field practice;
- during the last internship meeting, the women of a self-help group were moved and acknowledged the work done by the trainee;
- a 15-year-old boy user defended the trainee when the supervisor scolded the latter for a mistake;
- a user told the supervisor that she had got on well with the trainee.

Reflecting on episodes of joy is important not only because of the consequent learning but also because it strengthens the motivation to work amid the complexities of social work. Furthermore, the sense of well-being and satisfaction generated by recognition and success is a positive factor in the psycho-physical health of any social worker (Sicora, 2021).

What has been argued in the previous pages shows that students reflect deeper on their field practice when they recount and then summarise in a few words their emotionally important experiences (including those of error and failure). At the same time, paying attention to emotions empowers individual and group learning. Finally, the ‘bonsai stories’ reported above are extremely useful for understanding the emotional and cognitive processes present in social work education.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Emotions are an important part of professional practice, and they may enhance the latter because of their informative and motivational nature. For this reason, they should be considered in social work education.

A reflective approach in dealing with the 'difficult' and joyful emotions felt by students during their field practice is helpful and may be concretised through the use of reflective frameworks, like the Gibbs' reflective cycle described above, and forms of reflective writings like the many examples of 'bonsai stories' provided in this article. Describing and sharing narratives of the most common situations of anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and happiness, as well as shame, may help students to consider their emotions positively. They should engage with, and be accompanied by, practice teachers and similar figures in constant reflection on questions like:

- Have you ever felt emotionally overwhelmed or in any case struck by particularly intense emotions during your internship? In what circumstances?
- What made you feel ashamed? What emotions and thoughts made you feel ashamed?
- What were the situations of anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and happiness that you experienced during your internship? What triggered these emotions? What was the message that a specific emotion conveyed? What did it tell you? What did it motivate you to do?
- What more could your university have done to understand not only the cognitive but also the emotional side of your internship experience?

A conscious, welcoming, and shared listening to social work students' emotions helps them learn how to act on future difficult occasions when the students are qualified professionals. This can significantly improve the quality of interventions in support of service users by preserving and increasing the passion of social workers for their jobs.

This different attitude toward emotions is one of recommendations arising from the research presented in this article; research which, even with the limitations common in any exploratory and qualitative inquiry (primarily, the non-generalizability of the results to all contexts), shows the positive outcomes of the use of the aforementioned tools of reflective framework and writing. Social work educators should talk and make students talk about emotions, promoting greater acceptance of an open and curious listening to emotions, especially those arising in difficult field practice experiences. At the same time, theoretical frameworks should be provided to help students to understand the role, risks, and potentialities of emotions.

Another important recommendation comes from Iacono (2017, p. 2) when he notes that "many social work students approach the end of their formal

training unprepared to utilize self-care approaches to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue. ... neither social work students nor experienced social workers are able to provide proper care and support to service users if they themselves are chronically stressed and overwhelmed”. Including self-compassion in social work education also in regard to ‘difficult’ emotions would be another important step towards improving social work practice.

This means approaching one’s emotions with acceptance first by giving them a name. Remembering that emotions come and go, reflecting on the meaning of what one feels, and giving up the need to keep everything under strict control seem to be further productive steps in generating resilience (Parker, 2016). This process is particularly fruitful in terms of learning and well-being for both students and experienced social workers.

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