The Supervision Process in Social Work: Emotional Dissonance and Acting

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Abstract: Being a social worker involves a heavy emotional burden, if we consider the implications of a social worker's relationship with their clients. In their profession, they have to face the aspects of human life which involve most suffering, such as sickness, poverty, death, violence and hardship. Contact with these areas of human experience can become extremely wearing, to the point where an imbalance arises between the emotions normally required by their professional role and those they actually feel. This is why social workers are at risk of experiencing what Hochschild (2006) calls emotional dissonance. Based on these assumptions, the aim of the study which forms the basis of this article was to draw attention to how social workers handle the emotions their job evokes in them. Furthermore, we intend to investigate whether and how social workers dedicate time and space to reflecting on their feelings and emotions. To achieve the aim of the study, our analysis focused on four fundamental aspects in particular:
- what emotions the social workers interviewed felt;
- whether these emotions were considered a hindrance to their work;
- what emotion management/regulation mechanism(s) the social workers interviewed deployed;
- whether there was a supervision procedure in place at the facilities where the interviewees worked, and if so, how they viewed it.

To answer these questions, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews with social workers who work for care providers in the Veneto region of Italy. The study was carried out between November and December 2021. Confirming the studies already carried out on the topic (Leung, Mok & Wong, 2006; Moesby-Jensen & Schjellerup Nielsen, 2015; Lavee & Strier, 2018; Reed & Ellis, 2020), social workers perform emotional labor using mainly surface-acting rather than deep-acting strategies. The data which emerged from the study show the need for coaching and training programmes designed to prepare social workers to understand the various nuances of emotions (Dore, 2019; Bini, Pieroni, Rollino, 2017). Gaining awareness of their own emotions are inherent abilities in every person, but little is done to cultivate and develop this ability in traditional training programmes (Sewell, 2020).

Keywords: social work, emotional labor, emotion regulation, emotional dissonance

1. Introduction

In the early days of sociological thought, emotions appeared only as an inadvertent side product or appendix to completely different core topics. For proof, we need look no further than Durkheim[1] (1912) and his reflections on the religious life, where shared symbolic and emotional processes allow for the positive integration of social, moral and individual order. Or, for a more individualistic point of view, we can look at Weber's affectional action[2], which is one of the four forms of action the German sociologist reflects on, to show how the process of rationalisation is always accompanied by an action that distorts our social understanding of reality, which is guided by the emotions (Cerulo, 2018; Holmes, 2010; Kiernan, 2020; Papakitson, 2020; Glazer, 2021).

In recent years, emotions have come to hold more and more importance in society. Excluded from sociological debate for a long time, with the emergence of consumer dynamics and the commodification of immaterial needs (Lacroix, 2001; Illouz, 2007; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Chaudhary & Dey, 2020; Veenhoven et al., 2021; Tsurumi et al., 2021), the rise of the services sector and the decline of the rational mindset behind the Fordist system, emotions have taken centre stage (Davies, 2016; Turnaturi, 2016; Cerulo, 2018; Han, 2021; Sandel, 2021).

An emotion is an impulse of the soul, something which rises up from within and manifests in our bodies. Emotions arise instantly, last only a short time and produce a physical effect beyond our control, unlike feelings, which are a longer-lasting stirring of the soul.

Emotions are complex experiences because they bring together biological, subjective, social and cultural factors through the medium of human experience.

Taken as core components of human life on a par with reason, with Arlie Russell Hochschild[3] emotions become an integral and foundational part of daily life, or in other words, the times people spend in the family or place of work.

Within this framework, AR Hochschild (1979; 1983) introduces the concept of emotional labour, i.e. a mechanism according to which workers should regulate their emotions during the interactions which take place in the workplace[4].

The concept can be divided into two activities:

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[1] *The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*, 1912.

[2] *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, published posthumously in 1922.

[3] For further reflections on the work of AR Hochschild, see Di Nicola (2022).

[4] For an empirical analysis of emotions in the field of care work, see Viviani, Bevilacqua and Brugnolli (2019) and Di Nicola and Viviani (2020). For an example of providing care to hikikomoris, see Funakoshe, Saito, Yong and Suzuki, 2022.

- emotion work: i.e. managing emotions in one's private life;
- emotional labour: in one's professional life.

Emotion work is the act of trying to change the degree or quality of an emotion (Hochschild, 1979). It is an effort to align emotions with contexts and can be performed using three techniques: cognitive, bodily and expressive[5].

Managing one's emotions (Bolton & Boy, 2003) (especially negative ones) is one of the core aspects of working in a caring profession (Ashforth & Humphreym, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Grandey, 2000; Leung, Mok & Wong 2006; Ingram, 2012, 2015; Lovee & Strier, 2018; Viviani, Bevilacqua & Brugnolli 2019; Di Nicola & Viviani, 2020; Reed & Ellis, 2020; Sicora, 2021, 2022; Funakoshe et al., 2022) and therefore also a significant source of stress, which could lead to somatic symptoms (Gross, 2002; Dore, 2019).

In caring professions, the individuals providing the care are called on to feel and display emotions which are appropriate in type and degree to the situation. As Hochschild shows us, this involves two different types of work:

evocation work: when the individual displays the emotions required by the context, even if they do not feel them;

suppression work: when emotions considered inappropriate to the situation are suppressed to the point of being eliminated.

2. The Sentient Self and Emotional Labour

Sociology research has traditionally been based on two images of the self: the conscious/cognitive self and the subconscious/emotional self (Hochschild, 2006).

In the image of the conscious/cognitive self, the social actor acts because they are busy seeking advantages and disadvantages, which they can obtain by deploying the means at their disposal to achieve a pre-established goal. The subject acts wearing a mask (Goffman, 1959; 1967) which displays a self that must first and foremost appear appropriate to the situation. Thanks to this mask, they can manage and manipulate the emotions they feel[6].

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[5] The cognitive technique is based on the attempt to modify the ideas or images associated with the emotions being felt, thereby modifying the emotion itself. The bodily technique attempts to modify the bodily or physical symptoms which arise at the time of feeling the emotion. Lastly, the expressive technique attempts to change the gestures one makes so as to change the emotion being felt (for example, deliberately smiling in an attempt to feel happier).

[6] The ability to control emotions displayed by Goffmanian actors, however, is limited to their external manifestations, i.e. expressions and gestures. It is not known how these individuals try to control the deeper aspects of their emotions and conform to social rules on the inside.

The second image, the subconscious/emotional self, has been abundantly portrayed in Freudian thought. In this case, the social actor is led by instincts and impulses, the subconscious origins of which they are unaware of, as only experts have the necessary tools to interpret them.

In a kind of implosion of the images of social actors analysed above, Hochschild introduces a third image of social actors: the sentient self.

From Hochschild's point of view, the sentient self is a subject which is capable of feeling, within a framework of responsibility and awareness. This awareness is not only correlated to the understanding and correct interpretation of the emotion being felt, but also with the knowledge and application of the cultural code through which this emotion takes shape (Hochschild, 2006).

The sentient self is a subject which has the ability to feel emotions and adapt them to the social situation they form part of, and is fully aware of both what they are feeling and the cultural codes they are aligning with. When the sentient self acts, emotions and reason are in correlation to each other. This is how the self creates a critical space within which to analyse the meanings behind their feelings.

2.1 Emotional Dissonance and Emotional Labour

According to Hochschild (2006), everyone works to bring situations and emotions into alignment in both their private and professional lives, following the rules laid down by a certain emotional culture. The emotional culture comprises feeling rules and display rules, or, in other words, socially and historically defined directions which clarify the standards to which emotions and their display should conform. Both are learned through socialisation processes in which the actor apprises a series of expectations regarding which emotions it is or is not appropriate to feel in certain situations and in what way or ways they can be expressed. For example, one learns that at funerals it is normal to feel sad, grief-stricken or sorry and that these emotions are expressed through crying or bowed heads. Moreover, one learns to hide any positive emotions one may feel at such a time, such as happiness at the thought of receiving an inheritance.

When a subject follows these rules, they avoid the risk of social disgrace.

More specifically, feeling rules establish the emotional reactions considered appropriate in a particular situation (Hochschild, 2006). They make it clear to us when, how and for how long we may feel angry, sad, happy or jealous.

Display rules, on the other hand, establish whether and how to display our emotions and whether to substitute them with more socially acceptable ones (Hochschild, 2006).

Feeling and display rules, like all rules, can be either followed or broken. In the latter case, the subject experiences a gap between what society tells them they *should* feel in terms of emotions and what they *actually* feel[7].

Therefore, the term 'emotional dissonance' refers to displaying or feeling emotions which, whether qualitatively or quantitively, create discord with what one would expect to observe or feel in certain situations. The appropriateness of a feeling is defined in terms of the intensity, direction and duration of an emotion (Hochschild, 2006). The level of dissonance, therefore, can be measured based on these three factors.

As far as intensity is concerned, this manifests when one is unable to dampen the strength of the emotion being felt or displayed. Even if the emotion itself is in line with social rules, it is considered inappropriate because of how it is expressed or the behaviours it leads to (Cerulo, 2018).

In situations in which one experiences emotions differing from what is expected, or one fails to display the emotions required in that particular social context, then the emotional dissonance is caused by misdirection.

The third factor concerns the duration of the emotion: the act of feeling or displaying an emotion can deviate from social norms in terms of how long it lasts. In these cases, the subject is incapable of regulating the period for which the emotion is felt or expressed, therefore they hold onto the emotion until the reasons for it have finally been understood.

Breaching feeling and/or display rules can lead to feelings of guilt, unease or shame, and can therefore become the trigger for excessive control of one's emotions in an attempt to bring them into line with social expectations.

As mentioned above, Hochschild (1979) divides emotion management into emotion work (carried out in one's private life) and emotional labour (carried out in one's professional life).

In general, for Hochschild, emotion work is the attempt to either induce or suppress a feeling. It does not mean simply modifying the display of an emotion and the behaviour associated with it, but also dominating the emotion, deciding deliberately whether to feel it or not, so as to align the emotion felt with the context the individual acts in and the social characteristics of the person with whom the individual is interacting. It is an action designed to transform either the degree of feeling or the emotion itself. The outcome of emotion work can be either positive or negative; what really matters is the intentional effort the individual makes to attempt to change whichever part of their emotions is deemed inappropriate by society.

Emotion work is contained within two cognitive processes: the evocation and the suppression of an emotion (Hochschild, 2006).

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[7] To go back to our example of the funeral, emotional dissonance arises when an individual has the sensation they are not feeling suitably sad for such an occasion, perhaps to the extent where they can hardly contain their joy at the inheritance they are soon to receive.

The aim of evocation is to call up an initially absent feeling the subject wishes to feel. For example, one performs this feat when one makes an effort to show joy in front of the bride and groom at a wedding, smiling throughout the ceremony or making merry at the party afterwards, despite having recently received some bad news.

Suppression, on the other hand, consists of working on an emotion which is being felt, but is not desired. To cite an example, suppression occurs when, at the beginning of a new relationship, a woman feels very strongly for her new partner from their first few dates, but hides her feelings for fear of being considered a woman who gets involved too easily.

As far as the modalities used to manage emotions are concerned, we can divide them into two types (Hochschild, 2006):

- Surface acting. Here, the emotion management work concentrates on transforming the how emotions are displayed. The subject makes an effort to smile or cry or even adapt their posture, for example to appear in a good mood, perhaps hoping that this will help them actually feel the desired emotion. However, whatever feeling the subject is trying to simulate does not ring true; all they are doing is playing a part. This action is similar to what Goffman theorized (1959; 1967), an action which is unable to modify the inner emotion. Therefore, surface acting is performed through the deployment of expressive techniques which tend to correct gestures, expressions and postures.

- Deep acting. In these cases, the deviation from the rules originates on the inside, from feelings and memories, and travels outwards, leading to corresponding expressions. There is a physical kind of deep acting that acts on somatic symptoms, for example relaxing one's muscles to stop trembling or deliberately breathing more slowly, while the cognitive kind of deep processing consists of focusing on an image, a memory or an interpretation of a situation, with the aim of modifying the emotion aroused by it. A common example of this type of work is focusing on a thought that generates positive feelings. These processing techniques are rather different from each other in terms of theory, but coexist in practice.

- Hochschild (1979, 1983, 2006) holds that emotion management is performed both in the private and the professional sphere, stressing that some types of jobs involve more emotion management than others[8].

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[8] Hochschild arrived at this concept thanks to a study carried out involving the cabin crew on commercial airlines (Hochschild, 2006). From the study, it emerged that certain major airlines hire and establish the respective salaries of their employees in accordance with their ability to manage and regulate the expression of their emotions in emotionally complex situations that can become sources of frustration, stress and anxiety. The training provided to cabin crew members was based on learning emotion management techniques – mostly cognitive – which involved, for example, in the event of having to deal with difficult (drunk, racist or aggressive) passengers, trying to think of them as scared children, or concentrating

3. Research Methodology and Questions Posed

Being a social worker involves a heavy emotional burden, if we consider the implications of a social worker's relationship with their clients. In their profession, they have to face the aspects of human life which involve most suffering, such as sickness, poverty, death, violence and hardship. Contact with these areas of human experience can become extremely wearing, to the point where an imbalance arises between the emotions normally required by their professional role and those they actually feel. This is why social workers are at risk of experiencing what Hochschild (2006) calls emotional dissonance.

The disparity between the emotions felt and the need to respect the emotional rules laid down by social work keeps social workers continually involved in emotional labour (Hochschild, 2006), which is performed using two strategies: surface acting and deep acting.

Based on these assumptions, the aim of the study which forms the basis of this article was to draw attention to how social workers handle the emotions their job evokes in them. Furthermore, we intend to investigate whether and how social workers dedicate time and space to reflecting on their feelings and emotions.

To achieve the aim of the study, a number of questions were posed, the most significant of which were:

- Are the emotions felt by the social worker perceived as a hindrance to their work?
- How are emotions handled by individuals and by the team as a whole?

The most important question, however, is what technique the social worker uses to put their emotion management into practice. Is it an emotion management process which makes use of surface acting or deep acting?

To answer these questions, we conducted thirty semi-structured interviews[9] with social workers who work for care providers in the Veneto region of Italy[10].

The study was carried out between November and December 2021.

The interviewees were aged between 26 and 60[11], with different degrees of experience in line with their ages[12].

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on a characteristic they had in common with a loved one, in order to be more understanding. Another technique was thinking of all the passengers as being on their first flight ever and needing special attention.

[9] Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it was not always possible to meet the interviewees in person. Some of the interviews were carried out using the Zoom platform.

[10] In this article, we decided not to name the precise geographical areas or the facilities where the interviewees were employed, in order to ensure anonymity.

[11] There are no gender differences; the participants were all women.

[12] The study arose from the thesis written by Marta Ceccato for her Master's Degree in

The study only involved female social workers. The survey took place in facilities where there were no male social workers.

The types of social welfare organizations they worked for break down as follows:
- 5 interviewees worked at a Mental Health Centre,
- 6 interviewees worked at a Family Planning Clinic,
- 4 at a care home,
- 7 for the municipal social services;
- 8 for a child protection service.

4. Results of the Study

The interviews have been transcribed. A reading grid was developed which made it possible to analyze the transcribed interviews. Through a hermeneutic approach, useful for collecting the information contained in the texts, the analysis highlighted thematic nuclei and recurring terms.

The transcripts of the semi-structured interviews were analysed in order to answer the research questions posed. Our analysis of the data focused on five fundamental aspects in particular:
- what emotions the social workers interviewed felt;
- whether these emotions were considered a hindrance to their work;
- what emotion management/regulation mechanism(s) the social workers interviewed deployed;
- whether there was a supervision procedure in place at the facilities where the interviewees worked, and if so, how they viewed it.

4.1 The Most Commonly Felt Emotions

Anger and irritation were the emotions that the interviewees stated they felt most often. These emotions were perceived as inconsistent with or inappropriate to their role as care providers.

The next emotions on the list were: powerlessness, frustration, pity and sadness.

The emotions reported as being felt least often were fear and disgust.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, anger is the emotion felt most often by the interviewees. According to their statements, this emotion arises above all in situations where minors have been the victims of mistreatment and/or negligence from their parents. One of the social workers interviewed declared:

Social Work in Complex Contexts at the University of Verona. The interviewees were all recruited through snowball sampling in facilities where Ms Ceccato had worked or undergone training.

"there's anger, because when you hear certain things said about what's been done to children you get really irritated; so you feel angry when you read about it, when you meet people who you've been told have done certain undesirable things to children" (no. 21, 28 years old).

Together with irritation, anger is also felt when clients show arrogance or untrusting attitudes. This happens when citizens turn to social workers with persistent requests, or when they 'think they know better' than the professionals.

"those types of clients show no acknowledgement of what you do, […] they just say 'you're not doing anything', 'you took my daughter away' […], so, yeah, I got angry that time, she'd overstepped the mark" (no. 2, 52 years old).

Irritation is also felt at times when citizens turn to their social worker simply to get whatever benefits are available, whether in terms of cash or domestic assistance.

"… expects me to just arrange everything she could be eligible for: home help service, regional government benefits, meals on wheels […]. People come with a 'shopping list', especially elderly ladies … It's all 'it's the first time I've come here, I've never asked for anything', and that irritates me because it places me in a difficult position […]" (no. 12, 55 yrs old).

This emotion is also felt in cases where clients risk losing their home, or when the conditions in their place of dwelling make it difficult – or even impossible – to continue living there, for example because of an extreme lack of hygiene.

The feeling of powerlessness, like anger, is the result of situations where the social worker is impeded by the restrictions imposed by the organisation they work for. These are episodes where organisational difficulties, such as the unavailability of funds, have made it impossible for the professionals to provide the most suitable care to their clients.

"When you've got an order to place a client in a facility and can't enact it because there aren't enough funds, it's hard to take, on an emotional level, too … you feel powerless and often you also get angry" (no. 9, 52 yrs old).

This description evokes how social workers can feel worn out, which also happens in cases where the outcome of an intervention fails to live up to expectations. The effort made to achieve an end for a client can turn out to be in vain, leading only to repeated failures and uncomfortable reflections on oneself and one's work.

According to the interviewees, frustration is felt at excessive workloads, which become highly oppressive for the professional care provider as they find themselves unable to meet either their organisation's requirements in terms of efficiency and efficacy or their client's expectations.

The interviewees reported that fear was only felt in extreme cases where the professionals were unprepared for the potentially dangerous behaviour of their clients. Fear was associated with episodes of both violence and verbal aggression, such as threats.

"I'd never been scared at work before – in my book, being scared wasn't an option in our job. But a few years ago I found out what it meant to be scared, when I removed a child from his parents and the father came to 'get me' at work more than once" (no. 9, 52 yrs old).

4.2 The Emotional Sphere in Social Work: Hindrance or Resource?

From our analysis of the interviews, it emerged that social workers agree that emotions are a constant presence in their work, because "emotions are there, you can't help it" (no. 1, 42 yrs old).

Most of the interviewees saw their emotions as a resource, another tool in their professional toolbox. These emotions send signals to the social workers concerning different aspects of their work and on different levels:

"(Having emotions) is a kind of antenna that allows you to tune into the emotions of the person in front of you. [...] It's a bit like an alarm bell that helps you understand both where the other person's coming from and what you're picking up from what that person's saying [...]. Usually, they give me information on several different levels: about myself, about the person in front of me and also about the kind of exchange that's taking place" (no. 3, 45 yrs old).

According to this statement, the emotions felt by the social worker are a prerequisite for an empathic attitude. Knowing how to listen to one's own emotional vibrations allows one to bring one's ability to empathise to the table, and to recognize and enter into the other person's emotional state. Thanks to this ability, the professional can then 'tune in' to the other.

Through this mechanism of emotional mirroring, encounters with suffering and hardship can evoke memories of their own past experiences in social workers and destabilise them.

"It becomes an obstacle when, for example, coming into contact with the other's hardship and suffering undermines the professional's emotional balance to the extent where they lose their objectivity during their attempts to help. When there's too big an emotional charge, you risk losing sight of what's really going on [...] I watched one of my colleagues getting too involved in a situation ... you think you can just wade in and save everyone, but then reality hits home" (no. 7, 27 yrs old).

When this kind of situation arises, the social worker is no longer able to use their ability to empathise as a tool helping them in their work – their empathy becomes a trap.

It often happens that emotions become a mirror of the cognitive maps and social imaginaries held by a social worker. For this reason, the behaviours displayed by the 'other' could be in complete discord with the social worker's personal vision.

"It's inevitable that you end up managing information, attitudes, life stories, experiences and the consequences of experiences that can clash with your view of the situation. [...] When a person arrives, you can't get a read on them from a neutral position, because what they bring to you resonates and destabilises you." (no. 11, 50 yrs old)

These inconsistencies arouse emotions which inevitably influence the professional's modus operandi, often leading to a relational distance between them and the client.

As for the matter of which kinds of episodes arouse the strongest emotions, the circumstances cited most often involved minors who had been victims of maltreatment and/or negligence on the part of their parents:

"it's hard to stay neutral, and to make impartial judgements when there are minors who've been abused; obviously that can at times stop you from maintaining emotional neutrality towards the person [...]" (no. 7, 27 yrs old).

Cases where their clients, and even clients' family members, show arrogance or lack of trust are just as common in the anecdotes of the interviewees. At other times, big emotional issues can arise which the professional has to handle, such as when their clients have serious illnesses or die.

"what springs to mind is a young woman who lost her little girl at only two and a half years old. I'd followed her throughout the child's life, because she was born with a heart malformation and so the family needed a whole load of financial support [...]. Then when the little girl was two and a half, she died [...]. Of course, that set off a whole chain of emotions in me" (no. 13, 60 yrs old).

4.3 Emotion Management

When aimed at rebalancing the dissonance between the emotions one feels and those required by one's role or the situation one finds oneself in, emotional labour is mostly carried out using strategies which attempt to hide what one is really feeling. Through these strategies, social workers act on their surface displays, i.e. on their gestures, expressions and body language. These techniques can be seen clearly from the interviewees' words: *"I tried not to let her see this [...] I tried not to show it"* (no. 4, 34 yrs old), as well as *"[...] sometimes this stops you feeling neutral towards the person, but you have to do it because it's your job [...]"* (no. 7, 27 yrs old).

One social worker gave a very good description of how she controls her body language:

"I try to maintain a posture that's steady and respectful, sitting up straight, but not completely rigid … then I keep a close eye on my hands, because if I start getting angry they shake a bit, so I always keep a pen in my hand to stop me from shaking … and then there's eye contact – sometimes I want to look away but I try to keep my eyes facing the person, to show that I'm calm […]" (no. 19, 44 yrs old).

This particular interviewee works on her eye contact and posture, and tries to stop the somatic expressions of an emotion.

The same social worker stated that her 'act' is so convincing that people often ask her how she manages to stay so calm the whole time, even though on the inside she does not feel that way: *"I'm not calm at all … obviously I convey that sensation, but inside I feel quite differently"* (no. 19, 44 yrs old).

It emerged from the interviews that, when it comes to emotion management, social workers focus most strongly on how their emotions are displayed. The interviewees reported that they work to create alignment between the situation, the framework of social conventions and their emotions, using strategies that work on an external level.

Only a few of those interviewed reported that they handled their emotions in a different manner, going deeper and trying to change their emotional response and therefore modify the actual emotions they felt.

"When someone is being verbally aggressive, you can feel less scared if you try to convince yourself that they're just clients, just people who are scared themselves … we can't expect them to behave how we want. For me it's the only way, I mean, to use a metaphor, I become the adult dealing with a child who's not behaving, and doesn't understand what he's doing" (no. 19, 44 yrs old).

To reduce the emotional charge, this interviewee imagines that she has a naïve, awkward child in front of her, one who needs the help of an adult to learn how to behave more appropriately.

Another interviewee also leverages her thoughts and the ideas associated with the person in front of her to change her feelings.

"The thing I've learned to repeat to myself when I've got clients in front of me, which I got off my colleagues but have refined, a bit thanks to my own character and a bit from experience with others, is that people do bad things, but they aren't bad themselves. […] I think it's a matter of luck that I'm on my side of the desk and not theirs … although at times I have been on the other side; all of us potentially can find ourselves vulnerable" (no. 14, 55 yrs old).

This interviewee reports that she modifies her own feelings by thinking of her clients not as bad people, but as people who are having bad things happen to them, to the point where they end up engaging in behaviours that put their own and others' safety at risk.

In general, all the social workers interviewed acknowledged the importance of emotional awareness as a resource to avoid emotions becoming a hindrance to their work. Recognising emotions, giving them a name and reflecting about them are all actions that help support professionals in the process of legitimising them. According to the interviewees, being clear about their own feelings and emotions allows them to overcome situations where emotions transform from being resources to obstacles, making it more difficult for them to do what they need to.

This awareness allows them to identify emotional interference. A social worker who is too involved emotionally in a client's case risks losing their objectivity and their ability to tell which actions are justified, and therefore will help the person in need, and which, on the other hand, are guided by personal feelings (Cellini e Dellavalle, 2015).

"You have to understand your own emotions, your own feelings, especially in caring professions, otherwise you risk doing things more for yourself than for the person sitting in front of you ... so sometimes you have to just have a talk with yourself and ask 'am I doing this for me, because I feel I need to, or because my client needs these things?' ... I mean, it's not always easy to get clear about that" (no. 2, 52 yrs old).

According to the interviewees, emotional awareness could, moreover, make it possible to recognise how an emotion changes in relation to the moment and the personal experiences of the client.

4.4. A Time for Understanding Emotions

The interviewees acknowledged the importance of reflection as a tool for arriving at emotional awareness. In particular, they stressed the importance of looking at themselves from the outside, or, in other words, adopting a third-party point of view in order to gain greater objectivity as regards their own behaviour.

"I try to see myself from the outside, to watch myself as if I was watching a film, not inside myself and part of the narration, but detached [...] Doing this pulls us out a bit, detaches us from the context, but at the same time leaves us in it, watching ourselves from the outside, seeing how we act and what we're actually doing [...]" (no. 3, 45 yrs old).

The interviewees also noted that they dedicated little time to reflection; this was especially true for the social workers who work in non-specialist services.

Taking what the interviewees reported, we deduced that the lack of planned moments for reflection within care facilities can be traced to a number of different causes:
- the lack of a multidisciplinary team;

- the difficulty in talking about personal matters such as emotions with co-workers with whom one has little in common;
- excessive workloads.

As regards the first cause, the social workers who work in non-specialist services reported that they had no team to turn to on a daily or periodical basis, unlike their counterparts in specialist services. This deficiency makes it very difficult to dedicate time to emotional reflection in the course of the working day. One interviewee stated that she overcame this problem thanks to discussions with co-workers employed to perform clerical duties.

"Not having any other social workers with me, I have to take advantage of the goodwill of the clerical staff. […] It's a stratagem I use because I don't have anything better; they're not part of the world of social work, so I can't really ask them to do anything more than they do, which is listen" (no. 8, 56 yrs old).

Concerning the lack of time dedicated to dealing with the emotions evoked by their work, the social workers ascribed the problem in large part to their huge workloads. With hectic working days, reflection on feelings and emotions ends up being sacrificed.

Especially in the non-specialist social services, there is a dearth of multi-disciplinary teams, and also a lack of structured spaces dedicated not only to the emotional sphere but also to the process of carrying out and then assessing interventions. Those who work in non-specialist services complain that the organisation considers their work to be focused principally on clerical and bureaucratic matters. This is why contact with strong emotions and how they are handled is ignored.

"We don't have a time for reflection and discussion like in other services, which are appointed to manage other aspects of human beings, perhaps more important ones. We're defined in clerical/bureaucratic terms, which is of course a part of it, and has to be, but we could do with some time to talk about things, too" (no. 11, 58 yrs old).

When this kind of space is provided, the process to understand the emotions being felt mainly takes place through informal discussions with colleagues. More often than not, these occur not at planned times, but spontaneously, during coffee breaks or over lunch.

The interviewees reported that they preferred these discussions with their colleagues for a number of reasons. First of all, because it is a more spontaneous, immediate means of communication, but also because the exchange takes place with people they feel they have a lot in common with.

When these discussions take place as part of formal supervision, the interviewees stated that they did not feel free to express such personal things as their emotions, since there is usually a wide array of people involved in

these processes, not only their colleagues. Their greatest fear is being judged by the others and the others using this to their advantage.

In a number of interviews, the subjects reported that it was highly important for the supervision process to be flanked by the opportunity to talk about their emotions with their colleagues.

These interviewees held that the two tools should be integrated, as they each provide different benefits.

Despite the acknowledged benefits of supervision and the role of the supervisor, the interviewees stressed that it should only be carried out under certain conditions.

"supervision would be useful, but it would get too personal talking about emotions; you would need a small, close-knit group where people can open up about their personal feelings … so under conditions that allow you to feel comfortable and lay yourself bare a bit" (no. 20, 55 yrs old).

5. Conclusions

Confirming the studies already carried out on the topic (Leung, Mok & Wong, 2006; Ingram, 2012, 2015; Moesby-Jensen & Schjellerup Nielsen, 2015; Lavee & Strier, 2018; Reed & Ellis, 2020; Sicora, 2021, 2022), social workers perform emotional labour using mainly surface-acting rather than deep-acting strategies. The former are implemented through management methods that concentrate on the expression of emotions. The majority of social workers attempt to modify their posture, their gestures and their facial expressions with the sole purpose of displaying the most appropriate emotion to the context.

We can identify three main emotional labour strategies: emotional repression, postponement of affect and emotional hijack.

The first of these strategies sees the social workers attempting to hide their emotions. This allows them maintain a certain emotional distance from the person they are interacting with, and avoid becoming overly involved or unduly influenced by the situation. By denying their emotions, the social worker minimizes what they feel and avoids finding a time for reflection in which to meditate on their experiences and the feelings these have engendered.

By using this strategy, the social workers implement what Hochschild defined as a surface-acting strategy (2006), thanks to which a person tries to make others believe they feel differently from the way they do. In their interaction with the other, the individual does not reveal their real feelings and works to control and manipulate their external displays, from their facial expressions to their gestures. According to Hochschild, this strategy recalls the action theorised by Goffman (1959), in which a social actor acts wearing

a mask designed to show a self appropriate to the situation and receive benefits from this.

Shutting out their emotions does not mean that the professional does not care about the person or their needs; on the contrary, it allows them to focus more clearly on the present moment and the situation they find themselves in.

The second strategy involves work to handle emotions on a surface level when a client is in front of them, postponing their emotional reaction until a later time, when they can express and reflect upon the experience.

The strategy of postponing the freer and truer expression of emotions until a later stage is a strategy described by a number of the participants in the study. Many of them reported that, as well as postponing the emotional reaction – often described as 'venting' – they tended to reflect upon it during team meetings, or in more spontaneous settings, but always with fellow social workers.

Lastly, in some circumstances, hiding one's emotions becomes impossible. These are the moments that lead the professional to have a high level of emotional involvement in the situation and feel trapped inside the emotions they feel.

Maintaining emotional balance and suitability can prove difficult, and at times impossible, to achieve. In these cases, the social worker loses control of their emotions and realises it when they have already verbally expressed their disapproval of their client, their body language has confirmed it, and it is too late to change it (Turtiainen, 2022).

As mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph, our study has confirmed the literature and showed that social workers primarily implement superficial emotion-management strategies. However, in the long term, these strategies turn out to be disadvantageous for the intervention on the client's behalf and their work as a whole. Social workers' general wellbeing becomes affected and their mental resources can become depleted, in some extreme cases to the point of burnout. Loss of objectivity, moreover, reduces the efficacy of their intervention, to the detriment of their client's needs.

The lack of spaces and times for emotional reflection explains the prevalence of surface-acting strategies. Indeed, we have seen that neglecting emotions leads to processing them on a merely superficial level, harmful for the professional because they prejudice their ability to examine, assess and see what is real, fuelling superficial, stereotyped responses (Moesby-Jensen & Schjellerup Nielsen, 2015).

The data which emerged from the study show the need for coaching and training programmes designed to prepare social workers to understand the various nuances of emotions (Ingram, 2012, 2015; Bini, Pieroni & Rollino, 2017; Dore, 2019; Sicora, 2021, 2022). Gaining awareness of their own emo-

tions and giving them a name are inherent abilities in every person, but little is done to cultivate and develop this ability in traditional training programmes (Sewell, 2020; Cellini & Dellavalle, 2021).

Lastly, working hours need to be changed. Reflection on emotions is a quality practice because it contributes to self-care and care for one's professional wellbeing, and as such, adequate time must be found to allow this to be activated.

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