

DISCIPLINING OUR EMOTIONS IN A CARING DISCIPLINE

DISCIPLINING OUR EMOTIONS IN A CARING DISCIPLINE

BY

KATHRYN DIANNE MACRAE

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AUTHOR: Kathryn Dianne MacRae
B.S.W. (St. Thomas University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Roy Cain

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Abstract

As professionals in helping relationships, social workers must often balance themselves between the construction of caring relationships with the individuals with whom they work, the maintenance of boundaries which restrict their personal emotions in the relationship, and the prevailing agency and professional expectations of such interactions. This study aims to understand how social workers manage their emotions relating to their practice, given the many discourses that inform and guide them. I also examine some of the disparity between social worker training, socialization, and workplace realities.

The research involved qualitative interviews with four individuals in social work roles in Southern Ontario. Discussions with research participants encompassed an examination of how they saw their reactions to distressing events and how they perceived managing these responses in order to navigate their emotions in the context of their varying roles. Analysis of these narratives is interpreted through a framework of literature on emotion management and information relevant to social work practice today. A critical perspective is taken up as I explore how our emotions and intuition are being impacted through political, economic or organisational ideologies and ask whose interests are served by these prevailing discourses. How this translates towards individuals and families in need is of significance to the core social work values of social justice.

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I. Introduction

My interest in this area of research originates from an experience of loss. When contemplating a subject of interest for this portion of my education, I was inundated with prospective topics. Since graduating with an undergraduate social work degree, I have worked in child welfare services in two provinces and, more recently, with adults with acquired brain injuries at a small not-for-profit organization. Though this is not a long career list, my experiences were varied and provided a multitude of potential topics of interest for further study and I was overwhelmed. In a more quiet moment I reflected on memories of a woman I had worked with in my most recent place of employment. Through this reflection, I was reminded of outstanding questions regarding the situation that prompted me to wonder about others' experiences in similar positions. I share this and the story below to make explicit my research intentions.

As "Case Facilitator", it was my role to work with individuals who had encountered the effects of an acquired brain injury. This position began in 2006 and it was at this time that I met and began working with the woman from whom I learned a great deal. She had been the victim of a stroke in her mid-forties, and life with the effects of a resultant brain injury was new to her. At times she was confused and, overall, her thoughts and behaviour far more jumbled and chaotic than she remembered them to be only two or three years prior. She was filled with kindness, sincerity and humour and it hardly seemed like a job to work with her. Her brain injury was not the only health concern she

struggled with, and after some brief but severe ups and downs, she passed away. This occurred in May 2008, and I found myself experiencing a real loss. She was not a personal friend, but as her needs increased, so did my time with her. I spoke with her nearly every day in the final weeks before her passing, and visited her at her home the day prior to her unexpected death.

I was fortunate to experience support from my supervisor and colleagues, as they recognized the reality of my grief at the time of her death. I still had administrative responsibilities, the duty to inform collaterals of her death and the need to nurture others who also experienced this loss, such as family members and other participants of the agency's program whom she had befriended. What I now reflect on as intriguing was my relationship with her and the frustrations I experienced preceding her death. About two months prior she had confided in me her fear of death, and because of this I found myself working harder to support her with living. I feared that she was right, and while I comforted her and attempted to provide hope, I found discomfort in my emotional reaction. I wondered if my caring for her was inappropriate and was concerned that I would be seen as "overinvested". Appallingly, it was only when she passed away that I felt somewhat more justified in my level of caring. Through grief I felt comfort knowing that I had allowed myself to care for her as I did.

This internal discipline occupied a great portion of my relationship with this other human being: I suppressed my caring, managed my compassion, repressed fear and eventually "allowed" myself to grieve. Managing the many tasks of coordinating a healthy lifestyle for this individual was not the only laborious aspect of my work; another

exhausting facet was managing my feelings and coordinating their appropriate display. As professionals in helping relationships, social workers must often balance themselves between the construction of benevolent relationships with individuals with whom they work, the maintenance of boundaries which restrict their personal emotions in the relationship, and the prevailing agency and professional expectations of this interaction. There is an obvious need for boundaries for the protection of both social worker and client, but I could argue that my professional boundaries were intact: I did not burden her with my personal problems, she did not have my home phone number or address, and the relationship was indeed focused on meeting her needs. Despite this, I could not simply stop myself from caring, particularly seeing as it was my job to do so.

This study aims to understand how social workers manage their emotions relating to their practice. I also examine some of the disparity between social worker training, socialization, and workplace realities. I explore how our emotions and intuition are being impacted through discourses of professionalization or other political or organisational influences. Whose interests are served by these prevailing discourses?

This research examines how social workers saw their reactions to distressing events and how they perceived managing these responses in order to navigate their emotions in the context of their varying roles. I am also interested in reactions the workers received from others, particularly in the workplace, to provide additional context to workplace environments. The study entails qualitative interviews with four individuals in social work roles in Southern Ontario. I have recorded and analysed the narratives shared with me by these individuals and offer my interpretations in the pages that follow. A review of

the literature, methodology and methods used provide a framework for the study and prelude the Findings and Discussion portions of the paper which present the context of these social workers' accounts of emotional situations.

II. Literature Review

My interest in this research, as previously stated, is derived from a personal experience where emotions played an overt part in a professional circumstance. Following the death of this client, I found myself in the peculiar position of attending to a professional persona of what I *should* be feeling, in what ways, and for how long, versus how I privately felt. When sharing this story and my intrigue regarding this self-regulation as a potential topic of interest for further research, my fellow students and professors at McMaster University directed me towards an unexpected body of literature. While I framed my curiosity with this experience as professional “obstacles” to personal expressions, I had not considered this the “management” of my personal reactions. On this topic, I was subsequently guided to Arlie Russell Hochschild’s 1983 book, “The Managed Heart”. Examining this and ensuing literature on emotion management provided a great deal of sociological perspectives on the topic, but lacked information specific to application of the theory to social work practice. Thus, I also supplement this review with other influences to our profession’s collective understanding. This section commences with a review of literature on emotion management, followed by impacts of socialisation on social workers and ends with perceptions of professionalism and a brief overview of social constructionism as it relates to this topic.

a) Emotion Management

Hochschild's 1983 book is based upon her research conducted primarily with airline attendants and, to a lesser extent, bill collectors. Through the course of her research, Hochschild (1983) revealed that the flight attendants involved in the study were to regard their smiles and hospitality towards passengers as a main point of advertising for the company. Such displays of emotion were expected to be genuine and thus it was stated that the "emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 5). The request for this sincerity from workers meant that flight attendants were required to actually feel the emotion they were projecting to the customer. Through this research, Hochschild introduced the term "emotional labour", and defined it as:

(Requiring) 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" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7).

The demand for a genuine smile from a flight attendant, one that is truly sincere, necessitates an alteration of feelings to match the job requirements (Hochschild, 1983). The separation between the display of feeling and a worker's actual feeling is difficult to sustain and leads to what Hochschild refers to as "*emotive dissonance*." To counter the discomfort of this dissonance, individuals will attempt to close the gap between their actual feelings and their constructed actions. When the job requirements do not allow for the behaviour to alter, the feelings are often what must change. This requires crossing a boundary from private life to public life, which Hochschild (1983) refers to as

“transmutation”. She argues that the personal cost of this emotion work is that “it affects the degree to which we listen to feeling and sometimes our very capacity to feel” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 21).

Many others have studied emotional labour in the years that followed Hochschild’s introduction of this concept (Barron & West, 2007; Bolton, 2005; Fineman, 2003; Garot, 2004; Lopez, 2006; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001), several of whom have subsequently criticised Hochschild’s definition, arguing that her theory of emotional labour is narrow and presumes workers’ powerlessness in the workplace. While many have used Hochschild’s work as a catalyst for development on the topic, concerns are also raised that Hochschild’s analysis of the research focuses heavily on the “corporatization” of feeling and undermines possibilities for constructive views of emotion management.

In one such example, Steven Lopez (2006) studied the use of emotional labour in nursing homes, and argued that Hochschild’s conception of emotional labour requires expansion from its original confines. Lopez (2006) suggests that where Hochschild viewed emotional labour as corporate manipulation of personal feelings, some organizations simply foster this part of an individual’s character with much less devious intentions. While Lopez (2006) agrees that emotional labour, in its coercive form, is the current prevailing form of emotion management, there are others to be theorized about. Particularly in caring work, Lopez (2006) discusses worker autonomy as key to discerning between varying concepts of emotion management:

If workers are compelled to bring their feelings into line with managerial requirements, then their actions are not autonomous. On the other hand, if they are permitted to act autonomously, according to their own evaluations of what their work situations require, then they are not compelled to display particular emotional states, and whatever they are doing can no longer be called emotional labor in Hochschild's sense of the term. (p. 157)

As an alternative, Lopez (2006) proposes that organizations can be positioned on a continuum, with emotional labour on the coercive end and "organized emotional care", which he defines as "self-conscious organizational interventions that encourage relationship building and emotional honesty" (Lopez, 2006, p. 137), on the other.

Also spurred on by Hochschild's work, Stephen Fineman (2003) and Sharon Bolton (2005) each write extensively on emotions in the workplace, delving into the complexities of how deeply emotions are embedded in organizational cultures. In her book, "Emotion Management in the Workplace", Sharon Bolton critiques Hochschild's separation between private and public emotions, and states that Hochschild's interchangeable association between "public" and "commercial" creates "an oversimplified dichotomy" (Bolton, 2005, p. 60). In this respect, Bolton states that: "For Hochschild there is no distinction between emotion work as part of the capitalist labour process, emotion work due to professional norms of conduct, or emotion work during normal social interaction in the workplace" (Bolton, 2005, p. 60).

In contrast, Bolton (2005) introduces a new typology of workplace emotions: Pecuniary, prescriptive, presentational and philanthropic. Bolton (2005) defines pecuniary emotion management as commercial in nature and generally exists within very short term encounters between service workers and customers. Prescriptive emotion management tends to be more complex, and can encompass both organisational and professional emotional expectations “indicating the possibility of multiple, even contradictory, motivations” (Bolton, 2005, p. 95). The latter two, presentational and philanthropic, are complex social interactions which find their way into the workplace, suggesting that “it is not always the organization which defines the emotional agenda” (Bolton, 2005, p. 92). Bolton (2005) views the worker as a “skilled social actor”, and suggests that this actor moves with fluidity amongst the flexible categories set out in her typology.

Both Bolton (2005) and Hochschild (1983) speak at length regarding “feeling rules”. Feeling rules are a culture’s moral script for directing our emotions, expectations of what we should feel and how we should act (Hochschild, 1983). Bolton (2005) suggests that feeling rules may also be motivated by organisational, professional, commercial or social expectations. An individual’s conduct is greatly influenced not only by private cultural expectations, but by membership in an organisation, profession, or commercial enterprise. “Care-work”, Bolton (2005) states, stands out given that such workers often have membership in more than one typology or category; organisational *and* professional, for example. Thus, the label “...‘emotional labour’ tends to underestimate its complexity”

(Bolton, 2005, p. 159). In the following section, I will explore such complexities influencing emotion management as it pertains specifically to social workers.

b) The Socialisation of Social Workers

“Workers in these (caring) occupations are socialised to show genuine feelings of concern for the recipients of their service” (Barron & West, 2007, p. 2163).

The pitfalls of commercializing feelings appear obvious in Hochschild’s report, but the role that emotions play in caring professions, such as social work, is a far more complicated matter, a matter Hochschild herself wished not to pursue, given that she rejected the notion that social workers were in fact, emotional labourers. Hochschild stated that, unlike flight attendants, social workers do not have an “emotion supervisor immediately on hand” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 153), which, she claimed, is one criterion for defining an emotional labourer. Despite this, Hochschild noted that such helping professionals “...are expected to feel concern, to empathize, and yet to avoid ‘too much’ liking or disliking” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 150). Such an example appears in contradiction to her own argument against social workers’ emotion labourer designation, in that it is but one of many examples of how social workers find themselves emotionally “supervised” by overarching professional rules, whether this supervision embodies another individual or not.

Social workers’ education, training and socialization irrefutably call for internal impositions of emotion management. In a contemporary workbook designed for use by undergraduate social work students, Cournoyer (2008) advises students that

“authenticity” is an “essential facilitative quality” of an effective social worker and it is defined as:

Authenticity refers to the genuineness and sincerity of a person’s manner of relating. Reflecting fundamental honesty, an authentic social worker is natural, real, and personable. The presentation is congruent, so that verbal, nonverbal, and behavioural expressions reflect synchronicity. (p. 10)

Cournoyer (2008) goes on to explain that this authenticity can exist in the social work profession solely for the intent and interest of serving client needs, warning students not to bring personal feelings to the relationship for any other purpose but to enhance the client’s well-being. This not only appears to be telling students that authenticity can be taught, something Hochschild (1983) reminds us is paradoxical, but that students should not be *too* authentic in their relationships with clients. The request for authenticity coupled with vague descriptions of suitability and more stringent guidelines on boundaries creates a rather subjective push and pull on the students. One could assume that such a dual and contradictory request can leave a social worker perplexed about their use of self in the profession.

Furthermore, social work theories implemented at the undergraduate level can command integration of very personal values. Structural Social Work, as an example from my undergraduate experience, is a theory that compels the learner to participate in the transformation to a more just society by espousing deeply held values of social justice in our daily lives, both within and outside of a paid occupation (Mullaly, 1997). It can

thus be understood that such an ideology is not merely a job, but a way of life. This is just one example of how, both in practice and theory, social work students are not only instructed to adjust their authenticity to adopt social justice ideals, they must also maintain acute awareness of the need to maintain boundaries that create a divide between worker and client. Such a balance required of the soon-to-be-professional transcends conventional vocational training and requires a great deal of emotion work.

Such discrepancies do not end at the academic level. The disparity between social work education and social workers' workplace conditions creates further tension on the emotion work required from these caring professionals. In the 1994 article, "‘Problematics of Government’, (Post) Modernity and Social Work", Nigel Parton discusses the crisis in welfarism that commenced in the mid-1960's and eventually gave way to a neo-liberal era. Neo-liberalism is described as an era which sees social work practice as increasingly individualistic, more managerial, and less state-involved, with responsibility being placed more heavily on the individual or the family (McDonald, 2006; Parton, 1994). In light of these changes, Parton (1994) states that social work has experienced a move towards management, assessments, monitoring and evaluations as a discourse for practice.

In Canada, this neo-liberal paradigm "emphasizes the primacy of the capitalist market as the steering force in society, deregulation of the economy and the displacement of public goods onto the market" (Brodie, 1999, p. 38). Such trends in market-driven social services and diminishing resources have produced adverse consequences on caring professionals (Brodie, 1999; Freud, 1999; McDonald, 2006; Parton, 1994; Postle, 2002).

More explicitly, social workers are asked to do more with less, and are experiencing the tribulations of compromised services to the people with whom they work. Many social workers find themselves experiencing tension or disillusionment when their social work values do not match these reductionist workplace conditions (Postle, 2002).

When ambiguity in workplace circumstances is evident, this is cause for further self-governing. Karen Postle (2002) argues that social work has long been experiencing “difficulties inherent in exercising both compassion and control, and mediating between the state and the individual” (Postle, 2002, p. 335). The flight attendants in Hochschild’s (1983) study experienced a strain between their feelings and workplace conditions, not unlike those in Postle’s (2002) study. As previously stated, this strain, or emotive dissonance, is a discomfort that, given the constraints of the workplace conditions, are often only relieved by transmutation, with the worker adjusting their feelings to match employment conditions (Hochschild, 1983). As opposed to the flight attendants’ requirement to garner compassion for the angry passenger, the social worker is now finding they require quite the opposite. In social welfare settings, transmutation may entail creating a moral barrier between the social worker and the client, to justify the agency’s inflexible rules, lack of resources or unfair bureaucratic requirements (Garot, 2004). Robert Garot’s 2004 study, “You’re not a stone” examines emotional reactions between housing workers and applicants when applicants do not meet program eligibility. The experienced worker who was the least affected by the tears of the housing applicants in this study had learned to adjust her feelings towards the clients and simply qualify individuals as “deserving” or “undeserving” (Garot, 2004).

With discrepancies between social work values and managerial workplace structures, such workers sometimes choose to sacrifice one in favour of the other, or attempt to balance both with some tension arising from these ethical incongruities. The proposed solutions to such ambiguity in the workplace often rest not with improved work conditions, but with the recommendation of stress management for the professional (Postle, 2002).

c) Professional Personas

“Professional autonomy is not respected in the age of managerialism” (Tsui & Cheung, 2004, p. 440). Instead, standardization, efficiency and bureaucratic expertise replace social work knowledge as assets in the workplace. Given the past two decades of market reform and overarching “managerialist rationality”, caring professionals have experienced a departure from their vision of quality care in the place of satisfying customer demands at the lowest cost (Bolton, 2005). This has altered emotion work: “What caring professionals now offer are empty performances. The measured facework of *pecuniary emotion* management is no substitute for authentic *philanthropic* emotion management given as a gift” (Bolton, 2005, p. 160).

There are many influences to social workers’ perceptions of self as professional. Political, financial, and ideological discrepancies can further obscure workers’ realities and the consequential emergence of seeing the self as “stressed” is a contemporary and seemingly widespread phenomenon in this profession (Barron & West, 2007). Peter Kelly and Derek Colquhoun take up concepts of professionalism in their 2005 article

regarding the professionalization of stress management. In this article, Kelly and Colquhoun (2005) explore the processes that prompt stress management to be seen as a professional problem and ask how stress has emerged in post-industrial society as a costly economic issue. The authors explore how identifying stress as a professional concern is a form of self-problematization, situating it as an individual's responsibility. Kelly and Colquhoun (2005) ask:

What processes are at work that make it possible to imagine that it is a professional duty of care to manage one's life in such a way as to be healthy, balanced and effective so that the organizations we work for can enhance and/or maintain their performance and effectiveness? (p. 136)

Using Michel Foucault's genealogies of the self, Kelly & Colquhoun (2005) suggest that professional identity is internally imposed by our awareness of the expectations that comprise that particular discourse. Personal lives are penetrated by concepts of ascetic professionalism as well, which is both rewarding and limiting. A professional can enjoy the status associated with the title of professional, but is limited to this 'way of being' to avoid being perceived as "unprofessional" (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005). By and large, "a professional identity is profoundly marked by a capacity to maintain balance in the midst of change, uncertainty and risk" (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005, p. 144).

Seeing stress management as an individual's problem ultimately holds institutional benefits. Healthy, balanced professionals pose little threat to order in the workplace, and by using the title of professional to substantiate requirements that a worker "govern

oneself”, the workplace is relieved of responsibility to improve workplace conditions (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005). By seeing stress management as a professional task, accountability is shifted to the worker, overlooking increased demands or excessive workloads as causal factors for such adverse reactions.

d) Perceptions of Normality

Social constructionism is a valuable and warranted, albeit complex, notion to take up within the topic of emotion management. Postmodernist in theory, social constructionism regards “truth” and “norms” as creations formed by interactions within a specific culture and time in history and dependent on social and economic arrangements (Burr, 1995; Freud, 1999). In “The Social Construction of Normality”, Sophie Freud posits that “normality is a mere context-dependent social construct” (Freud, 1999, p. 333). Freud (1999) examines changing standards of normality that social workers are asked to enforce and urges us to be alert to the “uncertain shifting boundary” that exists between constructions of normality and abnormality. Our perceptions of normality are guided by varying discourses, which Burr defines as “a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events” (Burr, 1995, p. 32). As explained in prior components of this section, social workers can find themselves guided by competing discourses. This can create complex or confusing reactions: “different discourses construct social phenomena in different ways, and entail different possibilities for human action” (Burr, 1995, p.15).

How does this fit in with discussions of emotion management? The concept of feeling rules described by Hochschild, Bolton and many others interested in the field of emotion management can very much be taken up by those with social construction theories. What are feeling rules but the construction and expectation of accepted emotions in a particular setting? The construction of what is normal or abnormal in a particular context shapes our perceptions of responses to others within that context. Freud (1999) speaks briefly on topic of emotions as “appropriate” or not and states: “The absence of certain emotions or the expression of wrong emotions are bound to create social havoc” (Freud, 1999, p. 338). For social workers, our management of emotions can be judged, both by ourselves and others, as normal or abnormal and is dependent on our perceptions of acceptable feelings and expressions for a particular time and place.

Contained within capitalist societies, social welfare agencies are increasingly “embedded in the profit motive with people as commodities” (Freud, 1999, p. 339). Notions of social construction in this research, then, are intended to shed light on the arrangements that influence social workers to manage their emotions in such contexts. They are accompanied by critical assertions aimed to analyse such layers for underlying intentions.

Given the many levels of both incentives and difficulties within a profession such as social work, emotional implications and experiences are multifaceted. This research explores how some social workers navigate through an event they describe as emotional, given the many influences to and complexities of their role.

III. Research Questions

In both academia and practice realities, social workers often find themselves teetering between the desire to construct authentic connections while helping others, and professional boundaries and limitations to their personal contributions in such relationships. We can assume that many social workers enter the profession with the intent to help others. While this initial intent, or caring, may be elicited from altruism or a yearning for social justice, it is later shaped and socialized to fit standards driven by professional rules, agency conditions, and social discourse. Like the flight attendants in Hochschild's study, are social workers confined to a very limiting and restricting manner of relating to people or do social workers experience the freedom of autonomous acts of caring that Bolton and Lopez suggest are possible? How have managerial influences affected the emotion work of social workers? When an emotionally distressing event occurs, how are social workers to manage their emotions, given the many discourses that guide them?

With such concepts in mind, I examine the following research questions:

- How do the social workers understand their emotional reactions in such situations?
- How do they make decisions about how to react to such occurrences?
- How do they perceive themselves as a professional through the course of such events?

- How do they understand reactions from and interactions with their colleagues or supervisors at the time of their distress?

Participants of this study have shared stories of emotion management and provided context to some situations that social workers experience on the topic. In the pages that follow, I describe how I went about this research and what I discovered through the stories shared with me.

IV. Methodology

a) A Critical Stance

The questions that guide this research pertain to the context of social workers' experiences with emotions. While I am aware of the potential for the topic of emotions to become entwined with more traditional scientific or psychological interpretations of the data, my intent is to examine what influenced social workers to respond and react as they did. I am enquiring about interviewees' responses to such feelings, the responses they received from others and their perceptions of why this occurred. This will be explored within the context of their role as helping professionals and wider cultural, and perhaps even political, considerations. Understanding participants' emotions from their perspective is foremost in beginning to discern patterns or common issues.

As I interviewed each participant, I reflected on the literature and interpreted the conversations from a viewpoint of a social worker who has experienced variations of emotion work. If I were to reflect on Lopez's (2006) spectrum of emotion management, I could point to an array of influences to my emotional display in my past practice experiences ranging from coercive to autonomous. Given such experiences, my interest lies in examining what knowledge was taken for granted in these situations. So, while I am certainly respectfully accepting the participants' experiences as they perceived them, my intent in organizing such findings examines the "why" of such reactions. I primarily use a critical social science perspective to take a closer examination of the social context

of the interviewees' experiences with this topic. Using a critical social sciences methodology provides a more in-depth understanding of the research as it aims to dismantle mainstream discourses, and explore "why things are as they are" (Neysmith, 1995, p.103).

Approaching the study in this manner, I have used critical inquiry to go "beyond surface illusions" (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). This approach to the topic of social workers' disciplined feelings allows me to investigate some of the broader structural underlay that compels professionals to conduct themselves in a certain way:

The critical social work approach argues that social reality has multiple layers. Behind the immediately observable surface reality lie deep structures or unobservable mechanisms. The events and relations of superficial social reality are based on deep structures beneath the surface of casual observation. (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 85)

My analysis of this research has not only examined the participants' outward narratives, but the nuances of emotion management within the varying, and often contradictory, discourses of these social workers' realities.

Stephen Fineman (2008) describes emotions as "interpersonal work" that is shaped and governed by cultural and social expectations:

Emotions, therefore, are remarkable social products that 'make' all forms of human communication. However, of particular interest to critical scholars are the

social contours or biases that act like invisible hands on emotion – to privilege some forms of expressiveness over others; to silence or oppress some voices but not others. (p. 1)

By using a critical approach, then, I am inquiring about the purpose and intent of what shapes social workers' responses to emotional events.

b) Guiding Assumptions & Epistemological Thoughts

Critical theory is one of many forms of emancipatory methodologies. While it is clear that external factors affect the internal responses of these workers, another, less obvious, impact is significant here. In one way or another, the participants of this research each work with individuals or families who have been deemed in need of assistance. By and large, many such individuals or families are at a social disadvantage just by their need to access services. It is for this reason I wish to make explicit the assumptions that guide this research. Of emancipatory methodologies, Margaret Kovach states, "The epistemological assumptions of these varied methodologies contend that those who live their lives in marginal places of society experience silencing and injustice" (Kovach, 2005, p. 21). So while this study encompasses a generally privileged population – given the interviewees' educational and employment status alone – their conduct and approach to emotion management are of consequence to the marginalized populations with whom they interact. If displays of anger and frustration are customary in the workplace, for example, how do we suspect this translates towards permissible interactions with clients? Does talk about fiscal restraints in the workplace create

different reactions toward people in need of assistance? For such reasons, I believe it is crucial to reflect on underlying motives for these interactions.

Of ultimate concern in this research are the core values of social justice. My understanding of social justice is derived from my Structural Social Work background, the primary objective being the elimination of oppression. Bob Mullaly defines oppression as consisting of “institutional conditions that inhibit or prevent one from becoming a full participant in society” (Mullaly, 1997, p. 142). The “institutional conditions” I have discussed in the Literature Review portion of this study guide social workers’ interactions with those experiencing oppression. Bureaucratic reforms generated by cost containment have “pervaded all aspects of the conduct of community care practitioners” (Martin, Phelps & Katbamma, 2004, p. 484). How we as social workers interpret and manage ourselves in light of these conditions is reflected in our acceptance or resistance to oppression and, likewise, is of utmost concern to the values of social justice.

Neysmith (1995) asserts that few researchers could or would identify themselves squarely within one form of research methodology and, while I agree that there are certainly varied influences to my perspectives, it is clear that I draw a great deal of my approach to research from a structural viewpoint. Regarding research contained in structuralist epistemological claims, Moosa-Mitha states: “Researchers engage in the research process so as to deconstruct dominant or mainstream ‘constructions’ of reality and expose the interest that these constructions serve both historically and contemporaneously within specific socio-cultural contexts” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 50).

Given that these structural forces shape our behaviour as social workers towards marginalized populations, I hope to investigate the purpose and intent behind our expressions: are these expressions fostered in the best interest of the people we work with, or are there other intentions at play?

Similar to Absolon and Willett, I am of the opinion that “neutrality and objectivity do not exist in research, since all research is conducted and observed through human epistemological lenses” (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 97). Hence, it is not my intention to make “truth” claims, but to explore and question the findings from this research as it pertains to my subjective world view. In the section that follows, I will elaborate on this subject position.

c) Subject Position/Use of Self in Interviews

In sharing this research, it is important that I make my biases transparent to the reader. There exists a dominant perception that research should be free of bias. Sheila Neysmith posits not only that the idea that a researcher could control her bias is an “illusion” but that the researcher can and should be “seen as an active presence in the research process and the construction of findings” (Neysmith, 1995, p. 106). My presence in this process is clear: I am a social worker who has experienced events in the workplace that I would describe as “emotional”, and have experienced governing my emotions in various circumstances to fit workplace expectations and ideals of professionalism.

I have made explicit my story of loss to illuminate moments when I became aware of my need to utilize emotion management in a distressing professional situation, despite my complete unawareness of emotion management concepts at the time. I have shared this account to provide context to my motivations as a social worker which are derived from an understanding of my personal values and identity and relational to workplace perspectives (Hoggett, Mayo & Miller, 2006). My perceptions of social justice and the significance I place on interpersonal relationships are a part of my intrinsic identity as social worker. My inclination to honour my relationship with this individual about whom I have spoken, entailed expressions of sadness and reflection at her passing. This subject position was shaped by and confronted with competing claims in the workplace (Hoggett et al., 2006).

Indeed, I am invested in the topic, and have organized the findings in a fashion that brings out what I feel is significant in the data. Given my experiences with the subject, I am inclined to critique structural and managerial influences that stifle individuals' abilities to process emotional circumstances in a manner that suits them, particularly when such restraint appears to be for no other reason than toting bureaucratic restructuring or maintaining professional or workplace facades.

My use of self within the interviews was a bit complicated given the interview situations. The topic of emotion management can and did include a number of intimate details being shared among relative strangers for the sake of the study. Regarding such situations, de Montigny (2007) states:

The meeting of strangers creates not only anxieties but significant practical difficulties. Just as I enter the office with my agenda, so too does the interviewee. Just as I wonder who this person is and how he or she will affect me, so too do they wonder about me. (p. 191)

This initial hesitation was confronted with the need to collect data for this project, but expecting participants to be comfortable sharing quite intimate details with me within the first moments of our meeting was a tall order.

I reflect here on the role of intuition in research. Kreuger & Neuman (2006) state the following on this topic:

The philosophical issues that underlie intuitive social work knowledge and the question of what constitutes reliable and valid knowledge in social work research are both closely related to the advocacy of differing research methods. They also have something to do with questions that have been raised about the adequacy of knowledge based solely on “Euro-male” paradigms that have guided the development of traditional quantitative (nonintuitive) research perspectives. (p. 421)

Those of a qualitative methodological standpoint argue that “some degree of involvement of the researcher in the ‘life world’ of those being studied is essential to the gathering and interpreting of data” (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 423). Indeed, as the first interview neared the end, I perceived the need to share the story that I have included in the Introduction section of this document in order to clarify my position and research

intentions to the participant. After sharing my narrative, the participant appeared to glean a better understanding of the goals of the research and shared a bit more information with increased focus and depth regarding her experiences with emotion management.

One of the points of advice Kreuger & Neuman (2006) provide on the matter of intuitive-based research is for the researcher to record thoughts and reflections throughout the research to aid in the researcher's reflexivity. After each interview, I tape recorded my own impressions, and from these drew an important conclusion when reviewing the first post-interview reflections. As mentioned earlier, I perceived the need to share my account of emotion management with the participant to illuminate my research objectives. When reviewing the interview and my corresponding recorded reflections, I considered solidifying this approach with the following interviews. With the second interview, I intentionally shared a personal story of emotion management in the workplace with the interviewee closer to the beginning of the interview. Not only did this provide focus for both my own inquiries and the interviewee's participation in the research, it also appeared that we were both more at ease with the interview process. My reflection on this experience prompts me to believe that the inclusion of my own story of emotional management fostered the participants' willingness to share, providing interviews of greater depth and meaning central to qualitative research intentions.

V. Methods

a) Qualitative Approach

This research is qualitative in nature. The purpose of this form of research is to *understand* the topic of social workers' emotion management rather than attempt to *explain* its occurrence (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). In-depth, face-to-face conversations with participants took place in hopes of gaining insight into their experiences with emotional management in a professional context. It was not my intention to produce concrete answers to the question within this topic through the course of this study, nor would I believe this to be an easy feat, given the complexities of emotion management. It was my intention, however, to attain useful information on the topic of emotion management as understood by the social workers interviewed. "Qualitative methods aim to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997, p. 740).

Semi-structured questions allowed for depth and flexibility with each participant's story in order to bring forth vivid understandings of their realities through the narratives of their experiences. Each interview was audio taped, and following each interview, I audio taped my reactions to the interviews to retain any impressions relevant to the subsequent analysis. This practice of recording my observations in addition to the style of data collection in this research was aimed at producing "thick descriptions" within the data. "Thick descriptions" are significant in qualitative research and allow for "a rich, detailed description of specifics (and)...places events into a context" (Kreuger & Neuman,

2006, p. 360). The style of interviewing was used in hopes of gaining detailed, contextual stories of each participating individual. My intention, through the use of such qualitative methods, was to provide a “candid portrayal of social life that is true to the experiences of people being studied” (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 184).

b) Recruitment and Data Collection

The data for this study was drawn from face-to-face conversations with four individuals practicing social services in Southern Ontario. Due to the small scale nature of this project, I had initially intended on recruiting solely from two child welfare agencies in Southern Ontario. However, after receiving feedback from the McMaster Research Ethics Board inquiring on my intentions to recruit only child protection workers, I decided to expand my search outside of child welfare agencies. Still, given the size, I began recruitment at one child welfare agency before seeking respondents from a large health service corporation. Beginning with the child welfare agency, I asked the Director of Human Resources to send my letter of invitation to social workers employed there. This request was not approved and processed until more than a month later. During that time, I asked a manager at a health services corporation to distribute the research information to social workers employed there. The contacts at each site were given a suggested format for e-mail recruitment (see appendix 1) in addition to the letter of information/consent (see appendix 2) to be attached to the e-mail. Participants contacted me via e-mail to request interviews.

Of the four participants, one had a bachelor's degree in social work, two had graduate degrees in social work, and the other had alternate social service education accompanied with experience and is in the midst of obtaining her undergraduate social work degree. All participants were female and all had less than ten years of practice experience in their current fields. Questions of ethnic backgrounds were not addressed, though some volunteered this information. However, in the interest of confidentiality, I have chosen not to specify these traits. Readers may note in the latter parts of this study that cultural impacts are seen as major contributions to the alteration of "feeling rules" in a workplace. Even so, culture specifications are somewhat veiled in light of protecting a participant's concerns with anonymity.

One participant was recruited from a hospital site and the other three from the child welfare agency. Audio-taped, in-depth conversations with participants pertained to a past workplace event that they described as emotionally distressing. I drew questions from an interview guide (see appendix 3) in addition to individualized questions and prodding, allowing for conversational flow. Generally, I asked each participant a series of open-ended questions with regards to this event, their reactions to the event and perceptions about other's responses to them at this time. The interview format accommodated personal intricacies of each interviewee, in addition to my own participation in the interviews, which I have explained in the Methodology section. Three interviews were approximately one hour and ten minutes in length and the fourth interview was over 90 minutes.

The recruitment strategy resulted in a purposive sample, meaning that participant selection was based on my request for social workers who have experienced an event at work that they define as “emotional” (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). I noted in my letter of invitation that such events may include, but were not limited to, a social worker’s experience with the death of a service user. Indeed, two stories shared with me pertained to the death of individuals with whom the participants worked, and the other stories included a medical emergency, a worker’s first experience with a child apprehension, working with an adolescent following his involvement in a serious criminal offence and working with a family with ongoing neglect issues. Given the modest dimensions and time constraints of this study, I accepted a convenient sample in that the first eligible participants to contact me requesting an interview were involved in this study (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006).

The notice and information letter provided to the participants asked them to contact me directly so that their employer would not be aware of their participation in the project. Participants were informed both verbally and in writing that their involvement in this research would remain confidential. The participants reviewed the information letter and consent form prior to each interview. I reviewed the consent form with participants prior to the commencement of the interview, and answered any questions before they signed the form. The form is a statement of informed consent, outlining basic details of the research and is a formal agreement to participate (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). A copy of the consent form was provided to them as well.

c) Ethical Considerations

This project was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board at McMaster University. Risk to participants of this research was minimal but given that participants were discussing events that were emotionally distressing to them, the possibility existed that they might experience feelings of sadness, discomfort and/or anxiety. In preparation for such reactions, I provided each participant with contact information for their workplaces' Employee Assistance Programs (EAP), and explained the process of obtaining assistance through such programs. The initial letter of information which was provided to each participant at the recruitment stage outlined the potential for such risks and explained that their participation would be voluntary and they may opt out at any time. This initial letter of information was identical to the consent form that each participant signed prior to the interviews. Prior to beginning the interviews and when touching on sensitive topics, I also verbally reminded them that they were required to share only to the extent that they were comfortable. All participants signed the consent form and all consented to the use of the tape recorder to record the conversations, in addition to me taking hand-written field notes.

All interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon location. Two interviews took place in a private room at McMaster University's School of Social Work building and one interview took place in the participant's home. The other interview took place in a private meeting room at the participant's workplace. I cautioned this participant on the possibility that her comfort and confidentiality may be breeched at such a location, but she stated that she was okay with such risks.

Electronic communications and transcriptions of each interview completed have been password protected, and only my thesis supervisor and I have access to material confidential information. Audio tapes were destroyed following transcription. While all identifying information has been removed from the transcripts, participants were warned, both verbally and in the consent form, that some stories they shared may identify them. I advised participants that, while I intended to avoid such identifying information in the written portion of my research, some information about their stories may need to be retained to allow for clarity and comprehension of the information. Therefore, despite my intention to extract confidential information, participants were warned of the potential risk to their employment status should such stories identify them. Again, the participants' agencies were not informed of the participants' involvement in this research.

Debriefing with participants occurred after the interviews, and I was available to participants via e-mail to respond to any questions or concerns through the course of the study.

In addition to approval from the McMaster Research Ethics Board, an underlying set of "guiding assumptions" also influence the ethical framework to this research (Peled & Leichtentrit, 2002). Consideration to the core values of social work; working for the best interest and autonomy of the client with social justice as the foundation (Peled & Leichtentrit, 2002), is of concern to me within this research undertaking. Of importance to this topic of professional emotion management is the relational impact on the individuals with whom we work, and the greater concerns of social justice. As stated in previous sections, political, fiscal and other workplace constraints have impacted and

continue to impact the work that we do. My question regarding the degree to which we are narrowing our definition of professionalism, tapering our feelings and potentially “stunting” our relationship with ourselves and others, impinges on our utility in striving for social justice. The interplay of boundary issues, authenticity and a genuine concern for the people we aim to assist is a complex undertaking not likely to output simple, uncomplicated answers. The aim of this research, however, is to provide some context to the topic, and ethically speaking, it is important that social justice remains central to this research endeavour.

d) Coding

Following each interview, I personally transcribed the interviews before proceeding with the next. This process allowed me to familiarize myself with each interview prior to the commencement of the one that followed. Initial coding began after the first interview, and occurred again after the second. This was done using coloured pens and highlighters and making notations in the margins of paper copies of the transcriptions. Codes were derived from key words or phrases in the transcriptions that I interpreted as noteworthy. Unfortunately, given the length and complexity of the initial coding I used, I later revamped this coding, abandoning quantity in favour of using basic codes for organization. After the completion of my final interview, the new, simplified version of coding worked well in organizing the basic categories found in the Findings section of this document. Through the process of writing the Findings section, I read and re-read each interview several times and sub-categories began to emerge. I have presented the data in the Findings section in such a way that basic categories and subcategories within

are shared with the reader in a comprehensible thematic fashion. Readers may note, however, that excerpts from the interviews are interchangeable with more than one theme in the Findings section. This is merely one illustration of the complexities inherent in the topic of social workers' experiences with emotion management.

Stories shared by participants of the study provided detailed accounts of scenarios they described as emotional for them. Given that such details could place their anonymity in jeopardy, a concern about which I cautioned each participant prior to the interviews' commencement, I have taken extra measures to protect confidentiality by describing each account in the Findings section without the use of assigned numbers. Although many researchers use such assignment for sake of ease for the reader, I felt that connecting each account in such a way may further threaten the participants' anonymity. Some interviewees shared more than one emotional situation in the interview and to protect their privacy, situations are shared thematically in the Findings section rather than by separate interviewee accounts.

VI. Findings

Through the course of the interviews, research participants shared events that they described as emotional and recounted their own and others' reactions to these occurrences. Despite the differences in their stories, themes emerged as participants of this study described experiences with emotional events in the workplace. This section explores the participants' stories and themes and begins by describing to the reader the details of events the participants describe as emotional for them. Following this, I have highlighted the ways the participants believe the events impacted them, followed by their reactions given their roles and responsibilities and perceived expectations around their expression of feelings. I then discuss how others reacted to them through the events described, both helpfully and otherwise, and conclude with a breakdown of the nature of the participants' work as it relates to emotion culture.

a) Emotional Experiences

Interviews began with some brief background information of each participant regarding their experiences in social work, education, and employment. In three of the four interviews I shared a personal account of an emotional situation towards the beginning of the interview as a means of having the interviewees better understand my motivations for the research and to allow a bit of familiarity with me as they divulged personal information. Following this and some background information, I asked participants to share with me a work experience wherein they felt emotional. Some

interviewees shared more than one experience with me. Variance was evident in what participants considered emotional from event to event. Seven scenarios were discussed, two of which related to deaths of individuals with whom the interviewees worked, one was an interviewee's experience with parents of a child in the midst of a medical emergency, one detailed the events around a worker's first apprehension of a child, and three pertained to ongoing or traumatic events within open child protection cases.

An emergency room social worker who contends with death on a rather regular basis described a situation that did not result in death as a source of significant emotion for her. At a hospital not specializing in paediatric concerns, parents brought a very ill infant to the emergency room where the interviewee works. The child was unable to breathe without medical intervention and his heart rate became a concern. As medical staff worked quickly to stabilize him and determine the source of this sudden event, this social worker stayed behind with the panic-stricken parents. Her unfamiliarity with the type of occurrence was unsettling for her:

“we don't get a whole lot of paediatrics so I'm not really, you know, I don't deal a whole lot with children and any sort of traumas in that regard and family, you know, what do you say when their child has come in and he's not doing well, it doesn't look good...”

Consoling parents of a child and having to uphold the rules of the hospital by not allowing the parents in the room with the child created difficulty for this worker:

“..[it's] hard to console someone like that, and to have to be the person to say 'you can't go in yet, you can't go in yet' when you just want to say 'just go in and be with your kid' and you just can't do that.”

Two participants became tearful when recalling the events of child deaths that had occurred years prior. Both expressed surprise with themselves as they expressed this sadness, noting that the events had occurred some time ago, and it appeared that they did not expect to be tearful when discussing them in the interviews. After working very closely with a medically fragile infant, a sleep deprived social worker was present to witness the baby's passing:

"We were all in the room, [choking up] so long ago eh? So, they unhooked the monitor, so we didn't really know when she passed, but we sensed that she was gone. But I had to put all my stuff aside, 'cause I had to call the coroner and do all that stuff, right? And report back to work as to what was going on."

When working at a youth drop-in centre, a different worker had attained a good relationship with a 20-year-old individual who accessed services there due to various problems she faced including being afflicted with bi-polar disorder:

"...you could tell things were ...in terms of the illness that she was dealing with that presented difficulties every now and then but she was connected with [a youth worker] that she was assigned to work with and she I guess was fine, had come in the one day and then the next day we found out that she went home and hung herself that night...that just came out of the blue"

Other stories from participants involved aspects of their work in the child welfare field as cause for frustration, confusion, anger and sadness among other feelings. One worker described confusion around her first apprehension as a child protection worker:

"...mom was freaking out and here I am holding the baby and I have no idea what I'm doing...so, we headed back to the office, the worker and I with the baby, and then I had a baby in my office, so what am I supposed to do now?"

This worker describes this experience as not only challenging due to her inexperience, but even more difficult given that her typically supportive supervisor was on holidays. She was consequently assigned by an off-site manager to apprehend with the assistance of a colleague with whom she had a very strained relationship.

Another interviewee gave a number of scenarios in her line of work in child protection where she experiences distress. Of one situation she stated:

“The one that I find I lose the most sleep over that bothers me the most, is a family that has chronic neglect, attachment issues...you feel terrible about every day going out there and you’re just sick to your stomach thinking maybe this is so close to the brink mom is just going to pitch herself over the edge.”

The worker discusses multiple services going into the home but states:

“I know it’s not enough, but I’m really fearful of removing the children, of what impact that’s going to have, because I know it’s going to be really bad.”

This interviewee also briefly described distress in another scenario months after removing children from a home. When one of the children’s counsellors informed her that the child had intended on killing her with a knife, she told me: “That was months after the fact, but it’s always haunted me that that happened”.

In another situation, this social worker oversaw the care of a child who committed a very serious offence. At the time the offence occurred, the worker described her feelings as such:

“I was devastated. For the community. The whole community was absolutely beside themselves that there was this young person that could do this to another human being.”

In all accounts, this worker reports working diligently to find solutions for the families with whom she worked or continues to work. She notes:

“I think the ones that come out as most distressing are the ones that are ongoing risks with no quick solutions. That is what’s most distressing.”

Such stories, while ranging vastly in their characteristics, all caused emotional upset for these workers. In the following section, I will discuss how these situations affected those interviewed.

b) Impact on Workers

Grief and frustration were among many emotions expressed by the workers in this study. After witnessing an infant pass away, one worker was grateful to have a week off following this event:

“For me, dealing with stuff like that, I just keep busy gardening and do whatever, spend time with family and friends and unwind. And then you come back to work and everyone’s ‘so how are you?’ and then you cry in front of people...that was horrible. I felt like I needed to run away.”

This interviewee noted that she valued privacy in dealing with emotional matters, and when at work, if she became upset, she would “sneak off to her cubicle” and work until the feeling of distress would pass.

After becoming tearful in her explanation of a youth’s suicide, the former youth outreach worker stated “I thought I’d be okay about it, but I haven’t thought about it for awhile.” She went on to explain:

“..that was really hard...that was the first time I’ve ever had a youth pass away that we all worked with and I mean she wasn’t specifically on my caseload but I worked with her quite a bit ... I had known her for a few years already at that point.”

In a different context, an interviewee discussed the emotional impact on her after her first apprehension in a child welfare agency. Her inexperience in the situation, supplemented by a directive to pair up with another worker who had previously made clear her dislike for the interviewee complicated the situation. This participant explained having to work for approximately 12 consecutive hours in attempts to sort out the aftermath of a perplexing child apprehension before finally going home and releasing what she felt:

“I just went went went went until it was all done and then went home and that’s when I bawled my eyes out. I just laid flat on the couch, face down and was bawling ‘cause I said, ‘I took a baby and I know it was all wrong the way it all happened.’”

She went on to state:

“I felt really stupid and really like I wasn’t doing my job at all correctly and now I know afterwards that I wasn’t. There’s a way to do an apprehension.”

This interviewee explained that she tends to be particular about doing her job the “right way”, and feels that this is very important in the field of child welfare. Her inexperience and lack of support in this situation created an array of what she now knows to be significant mistakes in the apprehension process. Such errors weighed heavily on this worker as she describes feeling “stupid” at the time.

Similarly, a hospital emergency worker was troubled by her unfamiliarity of assisting parents through their infant's medical emergency. This worker had also made a personal connection with the situation given that her close family member was due to have their first child. Drawing the similarities in these situations caused additional strife for the worker. She explained how the situation made her emotional:

"It's always kind of hard to see that intense emotion from other people that it's so raw and just so sad and they're at the very bottom and that's all they can focus on and concentrate on and it's just so hard to see that and to have people go through that and I can't make any of that go away... I can't change their emotions or what they're going through at that time, so that's really hard to see and it weighs heavy on you."

The weight of comparing this situation to one that her loved one could face with their baby compounded with her inability to relieve the pain for the parents of the child in need of urgent care made this worker feel "helpless...and very tired afterward."

The perceived inability to change undesirable circumstances is cause for distress among other workers as well. One child welfare worker explains what makes her upset:

"The sense of feeling completely powerless to make the changes that I think are necessary...That is the most upsetting to me. It leaves me sleepless, sick to my stomach."

Disappointment and fear are real emotions for this worker:

"Frustration is always bound in some sort of struggle professionally for me in that environment.... Again, the emotion is about disappointment that I can't move them forward and fear that they might back peddle and that I would be a cog in that machine that ended up crumbling and the child got hurt. So, it's bound in all of that."

This sense of worry is embedded in the feeling of responsibility for the situation. This interviewee states that she worries about what will happen with the people with whom she works when she cannot determine viable and safe solutions. Such worry weighs heavily because of her level of responsibility in the situation, that ultimately she is “driving the car.”

c) Managing Identities: Worker Reactions to Impact

The range of feelings experienced by these workers is undoubtedly beyond job descriptions and expectations of professional encounters. Emotions were the workers’ private responses to the events described. In these situations, however, such responses have entered a more public forum. For an array of reasons, some workers chose to conceal, mute or modify their display of feelings with others. In this section I will explore how a sense of professionalism and the workers’ responsibilities influenced their perception of the situation and their display of emotions. I will also share narratives that explain how those interviewed understood what were deemed “appropriate” feelings within the context of their circumstances.

i. Professional Identity/Responsibilities

After being present when an infant died, one interviewee not only felt the need to “run and hide” when she began to cry, she also found herself in the midst of tasks she described as “bizarre” given the nature of what was occurring:

“So, it was interesting because reporting back to work I’d have to detach myself and say ‘okay they say she’s going to maybe have a few hours left to live’ and I’d

have to report to my supervisor. Then I'd call and then 'okay I've talked to the coroner, okay I've done this...' like just all the little...I'm still a case manager, right?"

The worker's role as "case manager" was grounds for detaching herself from the situation:

"It was really weird, 'cause you have to pull yourself in and out of the situation, like be strong for the foster parent and her daughter. Yeah, do all the planning and make sure you write all your case notes, and it's just so silly."

The interviewee also notes that she was responsible for working with the estranged parents of the infant who passed:

"The parents were my clients as well...so we had to try to locate them. So trying to help them through it, when really in the back of my mind I'm like, 'you did this to her', with her drug use and everything. So putting that aside so that I could support them through their grief and their loss."

This social worker's responsibilities to complete necessary paperwork in addition to providing strength and support to those involved in the child's life, despite how she felt about their involvement was something that required some modification to her own feelings:

"I felt like I needed to be strong, like I had to be detached in order to do my work, 'cause you're supposed to care about the kids on your caseload, but you're not supposed to get overly involved, right? But I think it's a different situation, when they're that needy, and it's that serious of a case."

For a social worker in a hospital's emergency department, attachments to individuals coming in are less about time spent with patients than it is personal triggers. This social worker explained that because of the brevity of the relationship, it is quite rare that she will experience "triggers", or reminders of personal relationships or situations:

“Once it triggers you personally then that’s when I think it affects you more. As sad as that is, if I don’t have a whole lot of personal connections with the situation, I’m able to separate myself even more because there is no personal connection and I’m there for support. That sounds really cold.”

This interviewee seemed concerned that she would appear distant from those she was supporting. She went on to clarify:

“I’m not saying I’m cold to family or anything like that, but you know certain situations don’t bother me as much. I always hate when people die, but that’s part of the job, so you know, you learn to deal with that.”

Learning to deal with matters of life or death is part of this social worker’s role, however undesirable. After an intense morning alongside parents of a very ill infant, the social worker had to move on after the child was transferred to another hospital:

“I guess you just eventually ... go through it in your head and you [say] ‘At this point the child is living and I have other things I need to do’ and you just kind of move on.”

The necessity to manage other tasks takes the social worker out of the intensity of the situation, ready or not.

After her first apprehension, one interviewee stated that she rushed around trying to determine which tasks needed to be done. The worker received some assistance from different departments within her workplace, but her support was minimal. Despite feeling ill-prepared, this interviewee shared the image she was supposed to portray in the workplace as she understood it:

“Just don’t say anything, just keep doing what you’re supposed to do and pretend you know what you’re doing.”

She described this as “being functional in a dysfunctional place”.

ii. “Appropriate” Expressions

Only one participant reported that she had no hesitation in expressing how she felt at the time of the emotional event. This individual, who shared two very different stories with me, shared that she felt very comfortable expressing grief in one of the workplaces where she was employed, because “Although it was sad, it was a learning thing for me too, right?” In this situation, the participant of the study shared that the team in her workplace had an approach to grief that was specific to the spiritual beliefs of that culture. In her experience, she expressed gratitude that such beliefs provided her freedom of expression as she grieved the loss of a youth with whom she worked. Togetherness and community were paramount to this process:

“I know they say in the social work field you shouldn’t be crying with your clients ... I’ve never agreed with that, I mean of course there’s an appropriate time and place for everything but there it was okay. It didn’t matter if we were crying too because everyone was crying and that’s just an open expression of feeling in that community, it’s okay to cry.”

Crying as an expression of emotion was not perceived as acceptable for another worker in a child protection agency. When discussing this in the interview with me, she stated directly, “I don’t feel comfortable crying at work. I feel...that you would be considered unstable.” Instead, when discussing her upset over a child’s safety after he had committed a serious offence, this worker chose to express her emotions in other ways:

“I tended to focus on how fearful I was for his safety and for the safety of the community and that was legit...it was seen as legit...I was able to show panic in the form of ADHD ‘ah where do I start?!’ I was allowed to panic but definitely not tearful, that wouldn’t have been okay [in the workplace].”

When discussing the impact of an emotional situation at work, this employee also stated:

“you can always couch it in terms of your concern for the family, you can always couch it in terms of that. So, ‘I’m worried about the family, I’m worried, I’m concerned. I’m not convinced that the plan is working.’ ‘I’m panicked and losing sleep over this and I can’t not think about this’ is your back story, that might be your unstated, but you can always couch it in those... [your feelings] they’re sanitized, they’re sanitized. Yeah, for sure. I can say I’m frustrated, I’m angry.”

Anger and frustration, then, are more acceptable expressions of feeling in the workplace for this worker.

After the death of an infant, one social worker said that others in the workplace would inquire about her well-being. Aside from expressing herself to some close friends at work, she stated that she would reply only briefly to everyone else:

“So, there was concern brought on by other people as well, but for them I was more detached and “yeah, I’m okay” and your typical “I’m fine”...I probably only showed stuff for maybe three weeks or so after it happened. I probably just kind of put it on the back burner, because life goes on and everyone is busy and I don’t know if I was over it or not – it’s hard to remember now.”

The same worker stated that she felt the need to “run away” when unable to hold back tears in front of people at work: “Yeah, because you’re not supposed to show that stuff at work.” This worker recognized that this type of emotional expression would have been deemed inappropriate in her workplace.

d) Reactions from Others

In this section, I will explore some of the reactions interviewees received from others following an emotional event. Such reactions shaped workers' perception of how their expressions were experienced.

i. Helpful Reactions

Interview participants shared various supportive responses from others in their time of distress. Following a youth suicide in a community outreach organization, one interviewee cited the workplace as a major source of emotional support:

“To have the elder there on the team, that just made everything a lot better that he was around and able to answer any questions and talk to you if you needed to because he did that with the youth, but he also did it with us. So, that was what made it tolerable.”

Although the incident was clearly distressing, this worker also stated that, due to the community context of the event:

“You didn't feel like this happened, and then there was nothing, no support, no assistance from anyone. You didn't feel that that experience happened and then you were just left alone to deal with it. There were teammates, there was even youth that were helping, everyone was helping everyone out – everyone pulled together. You didn't feel like you were in it alone.”

Co-workers were often cited as sources of support for those interviewed. For a hospital social worker, debriefing with colleagues was a primary resource for expression following an emotionally intense event:

“I think there’s that underlying understanding that I don’t need to explain things so that other people understand that, they already understand the role and already understand the emotional aspect of that.”

Given that only one social worker works in this department at any given time, debriefing may occur solely through e-mail or at a shift change. Still, the support between these social workers was something this interviewee described as more in-depth in terms of detail than with her family members given the constraints of confidentiality. The level of understanding also tended to be even greater than other staff at the hospital:

“The manager’s never fully involved in stuff like that, she’s not there with the family, it’s basically me that’s there with the family, no one else, right? Other than the doctor or the nurse comes in to tell them what’s going on. I’m with the family...no one else is seeing that or having to go through that so...not everyone on the team understands that role and understand the emotional effect that it does have on you. So, I think that’s why it’s so much easier to talk to the colleagues, because they’ve been in situations similar like that, that they understand the emotional support piece more so than anyone else.”

At times, supervisors have been sources of support. In the instance where a publication ban was placed on a sensitive issue in a child welfare agency, one interviewee stated that her supervisor was the only person she could talk to about the issue.

Another worker in the same agency stated that she chose to talk with colleagues whom she considered close friends when discussing her distress over a child death. She did note that supervisors were available to talk about the situation if she wished, but she chose not to. She did, however, take comfort in the similarity in reactions from a covering supervisor:

“That’s why my supervisor covering took time off too. She was just, emotionally she was exhausted. So, it was good to have her be off as well, so the other people knew this isn’t just something that’s going to be dealt with in a day.”

With regards to support outside of the workplace, confidentiality was, at times, a hurdle to these workers’ communication in times of need:

“Well, everything is really so confidential that you can’t discuss it with your family...they knew what was going on with the situation but I couldn’t give them specifics or anything.”

Despite the barrier of confidentiality in sharing details of events with people outside of the workplace, interviewees still sourced family and friends as necessary supports.

Interestingly, three of four workers interviewed stated that their mothers were significant sources of support for them.

ii. Unhelpful Reactions

While co-workers and supervisors are described as supportive in some situations, many workers, while accepting of this support, also proceed with caution when approaching others in the workplace for emotional support. An emergency room hospital social worker describes the need to keep herself in check in the event that she would be seen as too “sympathetic”:

“For the most part I can keep my emotions and everything in check but there’s that odd time where it’s not and you really have to almost hide that from other people because they might be saying you’re too sympathetic, or you’re not really thinking of this objectively type of thing, right?...So, it’s kind of hard to be like, ‘well, no I’m just sympathetic towards them and I can’t explain why.’ And they question that.”

In this example, objectivity appears to be favoured over a worker feeling “sympathetic” towards people using the hospital’s social work services.

In the weeks leading up to an infant’s death, one worker noted that she dealt with several different supervisors. After working overtime through the event of the death itself, this interviewee approached a covering supervisor to request time off and was faced with the need to justify this request. The worker expressed frustration at the need to specify her emotional turmoil after the event in order to obtain approval for time off.

In the same agency, a different worker describes difficulty with a situation that she was not able to discuss with others due to its very sensitive nature:

“So, I was bereft at times because in the office there is definitely a sense of you deal with it and you move on, because several folks have been given the statement ‘you should be over this by now. It was last week.’ ...Tends to come from certain supervisors, but they’re often very strong supervisors ... they can shift the mood areas of the agency pretty easily because they are very well respected professionally. Emotionally they may be completely retarded.”

Here, this worker described professional respect as attached to supervisors who restrict expression of emotions in the workplace. The interviewee indicated that such supervisors appear to greatly influence the atmosphere of the agency.

In the aftermath of an apprehension gone awry, an interviewee discussed with her supervisor some trepidation with meeting with the father of the case in question, given his violent history and the worker’s presumption of his displeasure with her. When expressing this fear to her typically supportive supervisor, she received this remark:

“Then my supervisor said ‘well I think you really need to think about is this the field for you?’ So there’s another blow, okay so I can’t do this job.”

Indeed, showing emotion with supervisors may lead to assumptions regarding the worker’s ability to fulfill their role. One child welfare worker states that a common assumption from some agency supervisors is “If you’re crying you must need EAP.” The Employee Assistance Program, or EAP, is a confidential service that offers therapeutic counselling to employees in a workplace. This interviewee described some supervisors’ apparent assumption that workers require counselling should they become tearful.

e) Nature of Work

The following section is a closer examination of the atmosphere of the interviewees’ workplaces as it pertains to emotional expression. The essence of what these participants do and how the work is perceived in the workplace greatly impacts how they interpret their ability or inability to express how they feel about work situations.

i. Emotions in the Workplace

Through the interviews, participants discussed what they perceived as acceptable emotional expression for the environments in which they were employed. Some ideas appeared to be impressions about potential reactions:

“I would rarely go to a supervisor and talk about my emotions. Usually here that gets you into trouble, if they know too much about you personally...it’s that whole union versus supervisor thing. Don’t divulge too much information about yourself because a lot of people here take sick leave, and if you need time off and they know too much about you then things get tricky and it’s just better to keep your distance I find, from the supervisors. Talk about work stuff, your cases if you

need direction on something, but I don't get into the process side of things very often at all."

The same interviewee shared that at one point a supervisor who worked at her agency was very good at checking in with workers regarding how they were doing. He did not stay with the agency, because as this worker describes, he was "more focused on that than on tasks which, you know, in child welfare, you should be focused on tasks."

Many interviewees talked about using caution with expression of emotions that they recall experiencing at the time. Reservations around this expression occurred for various reasons. One worker noted that she has had seven supervisors in the six years of her employment at that agency. Interestingly, another interviewee in the same agency described a very good relationship with her supervisor, but stated that she would remain cautious about expressing herself openly:

"At the end of the day, I don't trust that it wouldn't be used against you at another level...you don't have the same supervisor forever either...So, although it may be safe right now, it may not be safe in the future."

Unfortunately, despite this worker stating that she had an excellent relationship with colleagues, supervisors and upper management, there were still misgivings about workers freely expressing themselves. In this workplace, some supervisors had made it known that workers must not hang on to emotional situations for any length of time:

"To be affected like that, it's seen as co-dependence, yeah. That's what it is. Not that it would be just emotional for you and difficult for you...child welfare is such a conundrum and there's a dichotomy there because you are doing so called emotional work with people and clinical, therapeutic, counselling, touchy-feely things ...that emotional end of things and then also there is a very institutional power policing type of work that happens that is viewed as unemotional. So, you

get the emotional supervisor, you get the cop supervisors and you get the balanced supervisors, but really, no one has it cornered and they'll choose a side...so, if it's considered a really complicated moment you need to set your emotions aside for this one 'cause we need all hands on deck."

In this case emotions seem to be viewed as something that would deter the helping process rather than contribute to it.

More favourably, the interviewee who felt able to express her emotions said the following of her workplace at that time: "We had our own bubble, we were a little team, very holistic, very cultural." After experiencing the loss of a youth to suicide, the members of this agency came together:

"I think what made it okay and positive was that we all just pulled together, we had a really strong team at that time, right? So, just being all there to support each other and we didn't have to work, obviously we closed the place down and went and participated in ... her funeral."

For this interviewee, it was a given that work would cease in order to honour the deceased youth. The spiritual context of the agency compelled the workers to support one another as they mourned this loss.

In a child welfare context, one worker compared the change of roles she has experienced. In her new role working solely with foster families, she stated the following when asked about how she would express herself on a more regular basis, with the example of hearing something sad:

"I allow myself to tear up...I never feel like that this is inappropriate. And I think dealing with foster parents more so, it feels like it's more okay to do that than say, with family service clients."

When comparing work with different populations in this example, this worker stated that her team, which works strictly with foster parents, all appear able to react in this manner:

“I think it’s probably more okay in our department than it is in frontline departments...to be that way...it’s a nicer area where I work because you can be yourself, you can divulge personal information if it serves a purpose in the foster home meeting.”

This social worker stated that divulging personal information within a frontline role would be less acceptable. In working directly with individuals accessing child welfare services, she stated “You’re supposed to be that much more detached, I think.” Threats of harm to personal safety was one rationale discussed for altering a worker’s more personal engagement with clients. Expression of emotion, however, can alter not only in conversations with clientele, but within teams when discussing work situations.

Another child welfare worker currently working directly with families accessing agency services stated that the culture of expression within her team does not generally involve tearfulness, but a different form of expression:

“It would definitely be just in venting. Yeah, venting, swearing, jokes – lots of humour, tons and tons and tons of humour. Lots of trench humour, toilet humour.”

Swearing and the use of humour within her team is the demonstrative norm as she perceives it.

ii. Workplace Culture

To obtain a sense of each organization as a whole, this section reveals participants' interpretations of the organizational or structural images of their workplaces. This provides a wider context to the discussion of emotional expression for these workers.

Two interviewees provided personal accounts of emotional events which occurred in the same agency. When asked to describe relationships within the agency, one worker stated:

“I find that just the spirit in the agency, the relationship between upper management and frontline tends to be pretty good, really good as a matter of fact.”

This research participant described having a very good relationship with colleagues, supervisors and upper management. As an active member of the union, she finds herself interacting with all levels of the agency on a frequent basis. Regarding expression, this worker states that not all managers or supervisors are agreeable to processing emotional expression with workers, but given her familiarity with the agency, she has an awareness as to who is open to this and who is not.

Regarding the nature of child welfare from this agency's perspective, when referencing frustration over collaterals' image of her work, she stated:

“So, again it comes back, there's this view of Children's Aid, that we have this power. Because we threaten, then people will make the changes and the children will be safe. Whew. No.”

As this child welfare worker appeals for collaborative compassion for her clients, she strived to relinquish the image of child welfare workers as all powerful. Still, she describes child welfare in the following way: “It has its history in mother and nurturing

but it has been blended with policing.” Regardless, with respect to the organization in which she works, she argues:

“The agency in and of itself is a great agency. The work is still the work and we’re still caught up in the dichotomy of this work.”

The dichotomy, she states, is where “masculine policing” meets “feminine clinical therapy”, and the resultant work can be a “conundrum”.

In a similar theme, another worker at the same agency discussed differing roles within child welfare. After stating that she felt comfortable expressing emotions in her current role working with foster parents, she stated:

“But with family service, you’re kind of telling them what to do. It’s more policing, and I know it’s supposed to have changed, I still think it’s more policing than it is working with...yeah.”

In this worker’s experience, the work done within the agency that directly interacts with families accessing child welfare services remains “policing” type work despite recent restructuring.

Aside from child welfare examples, one interviewee talked about the strength of her team in a youth outreach agency. The cultural organization of the work allowed for freedom of emotional expression when experiencing loss. Unfortunately, this interviewee describes the team crumbling after new management processes were introduced:

“They wanted a lot of stats and were really coming down hard on us. A lot of the work that we did couldn’t really be put into numbers, you could always take numbers of how many youth come in and out of your door, but in terms of the one on one work that we were doing, no recognition for that. Even moving people forward that way... they really wanted a way to number that and you can’t.”

This worker stated that the restructuring involved a great deal of micromanaging that did not account for an understanding of the customs of the community. She stated that this was the ultimate cause of the team's demise.

All participants in this study discussed stress as a component of their work. For many, feeling stress within their work role was a typical experience. The pace of work for a social worker in the emergency department tends to be fast. Dealing with life or death situations is not an infrequent occurrence:

"I think it's a little bit high stress anyways in the emergency department because everything does move quickly and we're trying to figure out what's wrong as opposed to we know what's wrong and we're just trying to see how this will go and so everything is fast paced."

In this situation, the interviewee shared that there was only one social worker working within her department at any given time.

For those employed within a child welfare agency, stress is a common theme:

"you're expected to be frenzied. There's always more work to be done, you should never be on top of things."

This social worker described the workplace culture as perpetually hectic by nature. In the same agency, another worker echoed this theme and with regards to her current position working with foster homes, she stated "It's still stressful, but it's a lot less stressful than frontline." In this instance, frontline, or working directly with families, is considered more stressful than this worker's current position.

When it comes to expressing oneself within this child welfare agency, one worker states:

“So, yeah, giving it a clinical context is fine. We can talk about being overworked, we can talk about being overwhelmed, we can talk about the work-life balance, we can talk about being exhausted – those are all okay emotions, because it’s okay to work too hard.”

Here, using “stress” as a backdrop for workers’ experiences provides justification for expression of emotions. From such examples, it appears that workers are expected to experience stress as part of the cultural understanding of the workplace.

VII. Discussion

The participants described a variety of intriguing details in the stories they shared. While each story is unique, as is each participant, these workers share commonalities within the discourses that guide them in the work that they do with people. Questions around what behaviour and emotions are normal, and the cultural and professional influences to their expressions revealed that these experiences were very complex. There were common themes regarding what the participants saw as acceptable expressions within these discourses.

In the section that follows, I will explore concepts of normality as it relates to the stories shared, and examine the discourses and feeling rules within the context of these findings, noting what was deemed as acceptable expressions for most participants. I have taken a closer look at detachment as a theme that the interviewees noted on more than one occasion. I will also touch on some cultural implications and then share some of my reactions to the findings. I draw from the literature to illuminate these themes and explore them from a critical perspective. What follows are just some of many possible developments within the numerous intricacies of this data.

a) Pursuing Normality

In this section, I draw from notions of social constructionism that I have discussed in the Literature Review portion of this study. To reiterate such concepts, social constructionism asserts that “we construct our own versions of reality...[and] all

knowledge is derived from looking at the world from some perspective or other, and is in the service of some interests rather than others” (Burr, 1995, p. 6).

Throughout one interview, my curiosity was peaked when this participant discussed her behaviour and feelings after the death of a child and continued saying phrases such as “which is normal, right?” It appeared to me that this participant was looking for affirmations that her emotive processes were “intact” according to normal standards. Sophie Freud (1999) would suggest that normality is based in the values of a particular context, so I wondered about what formed ideas of “normal” and “abnormal” feelings and behaviour for this interviewee in that place and time. Furthermore, the same participant reported being soothed by a supervisor’s similar emotional reaction of needing time off due to the overwhelming events that followed this child’s death. Why did this worker take comfort in another person’s distress? Social constructionists may say that her behaviour was normalized through the parallel response offered by another individual. I would agree, but my curiosity rests with how this norm came about and what prevailing assumptions created such a scenario to occur. What was “abnormal” about her reaction in the first place?

This participant indicated toward the end of the interview that the reactions she received from colleagues and others in the workplace were, for the most part, adequate. She stated that given her distress at the time, she could not think of any other manner in which she would have liked others to respond to her. Still, she reported cloaking her tears, and running to her cubicle to prevent workmates from seeing this emotional expression. Displays of sadness or grief at someone’s death are generally accepted

emotional displays in most cultures, but this interviewee acknowledged that as a worker she was *supposed* to care for the children she worked with but was not *supposed* to become too involved. Workplace expectations on her level of involvement or attachment, then, seem as though they may have been under scrutiny. What was the purpose of such scrutiny? Why did this worker have to manage her expressions of grief? Given her description of caution around being under or over involved with clients, perhaps this worker was checking the ever-shifting boundary of normality familiar to social workers (Freud, 1999). Having a supervisor also express distress over the same situation eased some of this scrutiny, possibly more so due to the supervisor's higher level of authority in the agency.

This participant's management of emotions appeared to require a balance of conflicting interests: managing reactions, abiding by feeling rules for grieving and navigating the appearance of attachment or distance from the individual about whom she was grieving. I would suggest that this must have been a complex balancing act, and her questions around normality were intended to reconcile the competing demands she experienced. Foote and Frank (1999) describe grieving as hardly a straightforward experience:

Complicated mourning either lasts too long (prolonged or chronic) or not long enough (abbreviated). It is either expressed too demonstrably (exaggerated, distorted, conflicted) or not demonstrably enough (absent, inhibited, delayed).

What is left over – as normal or “uncomplicated” mourning – becomes difficult to imagine. (p. 164)

That this worker had the added complication of professional discourses around attachment or disengagement created further ambiguity.

b) Detached Relationships

Through reflecting on the interviews and examining the transcripts, I found the reports of varied workplace discourses for these social workers intriguing. As detailed in the Findings section, one interviewee, a hospital social worker, seemed concerned that she would appear “cold” in the interview with me, as she described supporting clients without having personal connections with the situations. I got the impression that being disengaged from the families with whom she worked appeared an undesirable image to assume in this interview. The ability to connect with families despite the typically short-term nature of contact seemed to be a valued quality for this worker. However, later in the interview, the same worker briefly shared that other hospital personnel would question her for being “too sympathetic” with patients with whom she may find a more personal connection.

These reports give insight into the possible variations of feeling rules within this worker’s reality. Reflecting on Bolton’s (2005) feeling rules as framed within commercial, professional, organisational or social interests, and categorized within pecuniary, presentational, prescriptive and philanthropic emotion management, I suggest this interviewee contended with more than one of these aspects. Certainly dual and contradictory as Bolton (2005) would suggest is a frequent experience for caring professionals, I wonder if this participant’s fear of sounding “cold” to me pertained to our

shared reality as social workers, where the idea of managing sympathetic responses was derived from organisational expectations. The philanthropic underpinnings of social work values may very well have influenced her need to clarify with me, a fellow social worker, that she was abiding by the feeling rules established by social work values. Her mention of others' expectations embracing objectivity over sympathy, I would suggest, is sourced from a more organisational, prescriptive request for emotion management.

Accordingly, in this conversation it appeared that at least two incongruent motivations laid claim to stipulations of this worker's feeling and behaviour. Whether her "true" feelings have been "transmuted" as Hochschild (1983) would suggest or she is skilled in mixing and managing different emotion management capacities as Bolton (2005) would assert, is ultimately for this worker to decide.

On the other hand, child protection workers made comments throughout their interviews about their need to remain detached and not become too connected with clients. While this situation appears to have possible similarities in that the organisational agenda seems to request distance from clients (or patients), the child welfare workers articulated with greater clarity the emotional expectations of a frontline worker – detachment is venerated. As with Garot's 2004 study, I wondered if these workers find themselves creating 'moral barriers' with clients, or at least recognizing that this is expected of them. Direct comments from participants such as "you're supposed to be that much more detached [in frontline services]", or stories of muted or altered displays of emotion – concealing tears, carefully rephrasing conversations – or describing feelings being "sanitized" provides clues as to the feeling rules within that culture. "The emotion-

rules are implicit to the professionals' disciplines and training that, typically, emphasize rationality, objectivity and detachment" (Fineman, 2003, p. 36). The discussion with me in this regard, however, appeared to be a sardonic acknowledgement of such rules, which indicated to me a form of disapproving tolerance. At first glance this may seem like a surrendering to agency rules, but the nuances of their disapproval speaks volumes. This disapproval was articulated in the interviews through acknowledgement of inefficient or even harmful structures that the workers would knowingly circumvent, subtle conversations they would have with allied colleagues or avoidance of particular unsupportive supervisors. Could this be a quiet protest? A resistant subculture spurred from objectionable expectations that deviate from kinder, more agreeable competing claims?

More importantly, why are workers from both environments experiencing this necessity to disengage from those with whom they work? Is it the original social work lesson on maintenance of boundaries? I am inclined to presume it is something more, given the interviewees' intimations at such requirements being beyond the characteristic social work profession's feeling rules. I am suggesting that these workers may be experiencing the emotional fallout from the institutional transformations I have discussed in the Literature Review portion of this study: "Neo-liberal economic ideologies and their spawn, managerialism, have demanded that practice and policy be assessed in terms of fiscal accountability and little else" (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 5). The value of relationships with recipients of services is undermined in favour of these measurements.

In a study by Jane Aronson and Sheila Sammon (2000) on front-line social service workers' practice realities following such cuts and restructuring, it was said that:

The day-to-day realities of their jobs were at odds with their sense of good practice: that is, reflective practice built on informed relationships and playful engagement that addressed both people's immediate problems and their links with the broader conditions of their lives. (p. 175)

Instead, workers in this study encountered increasingly onerous caseloads alongside a much faster pace (Aronson & Sammon, 2000).

Financial constraints brought about by political transformations are cause for a significant lack of resources – time and otherwise – for social workers to connect and emotive in a compassionate manner familiar to social work values. In a study of caring work in three provinces over a number of years, Donna Baines (2004) addressed the loss of discretionary power among paid social service workers: “Lean staffing meant that the volume and pace of the work increased to the point where workers did not have time to get to know or relate to clients beyond standardized formats” (Baines, 2004, p. 21). In more than one interview, workers described enduring emotionally distressing events followed by the need to “move on” given that there were other responsibilities awaiting them. In such cases, detaching oneself is a matter of surviving the acceleration of tasks and loss of autonomy resulting from downsizing and standardization.

c) Accepted Expressions

Most of the interviewees noted that they would choose to maintain distance from supervisors when discussing their feelings about workplace events. Many feelings, it was stated, were not “safe” to express in the workplace, noting on more than one occasion that emotional displays of sadness or tearfulness could result in such displays being used against them at another time. I reflect here on the use of language in this discourse, remembering Beckett’s (2003) argument that language can be seen as “a reflection of reality” (Beckett, 2003, p. 625). If such expressions are not *safe*, one could suggest emotional expressions are seen as *dangerous* in these contexts. Emotions, perhaps, are risky to manoeuvre, and if displayed incorrectly could place the worker in peril.

With grief, sadness, tearfulness and sleeplessness not legitimated, what emotional expressions are safe? Humour, frustration and expressions of anger were described as more accepted in frontline child welfare contexts. Being stressed and overwhelmed is also accepted. Why? Because, as one participant puts it, “those are all okay emotions because it’s okay to work too hard”. The same worker stated “you’re expected to be frenzied. There’s always more work to be done, you should never be on top of things”. Such components of stress, it seems, are not only expected, but respected.

Kelly and Colquhoun (2005) state of this phenomenon: “We are encouraged to think and act on ourselves as individuals who are stressed” (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005, p. 143). The emergence of an idealized, standardized concept of professional is “framed by a duty of care to manage one’s health and well-being to maximize organizational performance

and effectiveness” (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005, p. 135). The management of stress is a responsibility imparted upon the professional, thereby diminishing bureaucratic acknowledgment of causal conditions to stress. Improvements to workplace conditions, such as excessive workloads, are overlooked. Stress management, then, is taken up as ethical self-problematization, which ultimately places the responsibility for such a state squarely on the individual experiencing it (Kelly & Colquhoun, 2005). Workers are obliged to adjust themselves in the name of efficiency as organizational causes for stress evade the spotlight.

d) Professional Predicaments

All of the participants interviewed expressed concerns about job responsibilities: Did they have enough knowledge to assist someone in a difficult situation? Did they follow procedures correctly? What could be done about a child under their care who needed protection? How do they complete the tasks required despite personal conflicts with a situation? The magnitude of responsibility experienced by these workers was tremendous. Yet, as I have examined earlier, it often occurred in a context where they were expected to detach from the individuals they were attempting to assist. These paradoxical experiences are bound to create confusion.

In a subjective sense, “workers bring their values and identities to this environment to engage in complex negotiations about commitment and motivation” (Hoggett et al., 2006, p. 770). Among others, I have argued that many such values may arise from social justice or altruistic values. But the negotiations are indeed complex and political climates and

the ensuing standardization of practice “has removed the worker’s capacity to make judgements concerning the types of tasks to be completed, the order and pace of task completion and the use of alternative or politicized services and intervention plans” (Baines, 2004, p. 21). In addition to the responsibilities of their work, the interviewees are further burdened with restrictions to the manner in which they go about the work and the resources available to assist them in the process.

The manner in which professional discourses are constructed generally involves a disengagement of sorts. By claiming neutrality, Sellick, Delaney and Brownlee (2002) suggest that our knowledge is constructed as ‘official’ through case notes, conferences and stories we share about practice:

This privileging of our own actions in our official accounts of our work may serve to give meaning and coherence to our activities, and a sense of professional competence, but it is a narrative that casts our clients as the passive beneficiaries of our knowledge and expertise. We can’t have a truly emancipatory social work practice this way. (p. 494)

Furthermore, the standardized practices we experience more and more in professional discourses may actually “suppress rather than facilitate transgressive acts of inquiry” (Sellick et al., 2002, p. 495).

With such practices so divergent to the education that many have experienced – education that emphasized social justice values and the eradication of oppression – it is

increasingly problematic for workers to practice creatively given these workplace contradictions and restrictions to their autonomy.

e) Cultural Impacts

There was some discussion with two different participants regarding cultural influences towards emotional expression. While this was not an original question in this research, the conversations were thought-provoking, and provided context to the discussion of emotional expectations. How we perceive our emotion and ability or inability to express feeling varies greatly on the cultural milieu: “Culture can impinge on emotion in ways that affect what we point to when we say emotion” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 28).

It is clear from the Findings section that one interviewee felt very well supported in her grief over the death of a young client using outreach services at the participant’s former workplace. On several occasions through the interview, the participant cited cultural and spiritual beliefs and rituals that broke down barriers to the grieving process for all involved, clients and workers alike. It was a given that the workplace close for a day and everyone “pull together” as they celebrated her life and mourned her death through ceremony. For this participant, though somewhat unfamiliar with some of the spiritual rituals, the community setting aided her in finding solace in the midst of tragedy. While this certainly may not be everyone’s preferred process of expression, she reported feeling supported, and I would speculate that such an environment may have allowed for a wider range of emotional expressions.

On the other hand, a discussion regarding culture with another participant ensued wherein I commented on crying as problematic in Western cultures, and the participant responded with agreement: “we’re expected to be pretty flat folks...we’re supposed to suffocate and bury our feelings. Except anger.” She went on to say that such expectations matched the workplace environment as well. As mentioned, anger, frustration, and venting through “trench” humour are accepted practice in her workplace.

Indeed, for those interviewed, most expressed that stifled emotions would be preferable in times of crisis. The expectation that emotions would be set aside because “we need all hands on deck” seems to suggest emotions are a luxury at best and a liability at worst. Emotional expression in this case would be viewed as a deterrent to the helping process. This makes me wonder about intuitive aspects of social work being silenced in favour of logic, the assumption being that it would be impossible to experience both features in a hand in hand process. One worker discussed child welfare’s roots as being derived from matriarchal nurturing then being coupled with masculine policing aspects. It seems the masculine characteristic wins out when the two come head to head: “Cultural value is placed on manly emotion through its connection to the expression of rationality and self-control” (Shields & Warner, 2008, p.178). In the same agency, a worker reported that she believes supervisors who were known to be less “emotional” are more respected professionally. Supervisors prone to making their emotions known were viewed as less authoritative and were given less esteem than their less “emotional” counterparts.

f) Researcher's Reflections & Implications for Practice & Education

The crux of my arguments leading up to interviews for this research has entailed a great deal of critique of concepts of professionalism: what is considered professional behaviour, professional expectations around emoting and so on. With passion, I would argue against the seemingly restrictive confines of professional norms on social workers' abilities to let loose their emotional reactions to difficult situations. Ironically, my need to preface my personal interest in this topic was consistently self-monitored for professional impressions I was leaving on the participants of this study. As I revamped my interviews to include my story of emotion management after the first interview, I was cautious about ensuring each participant understood my level of professionalism. An explanation of my "intact" boundaries seemed a requirement in the explanation. This may very well have been influenced by my need to gain the respect of the subjects of the study, but regardless it is clearly a component of my personal and cultural impressions of professionalism, and such impacts to our professional personas, for better or worse, appear to me to be simply inescapable.

I reflect here on the subtlety of varying discourses that face the social work profession. Through the Discussion, I have analysed some themes that were apparent to me through conversations with interviewees, but I recognize that there are a multitude of other influences that prompt social workers to manage their emotions through the complex work that they do. I assert that we would be wise to examine the motivations that shape such management, as the demands upon such personal aspects of practice correlate to conscientious social work practice and our collective ability to strive for

social justice. Indeed, “personal and social change comes about by unravelling the discursive power of dominant discourses and re-creating ourselves as the basis for a collective politics of the future” (Pease & Fook, 1999, p. 15).

This research has provided an illustration of such unravelling as it examines the vast range of motivations that guide us in our work, wittingly or unwittingly. While schools of social work often educate students about social justice and discuss self-awareness, the deeper levels of use of self in practice may necessitate more involved conversations. Detachment, for example, could be caused by a social worker’s inexperience with a particular issue, or by contrast, their proximity to it. Such motives are not necessarily harmful to a helping relationship, whereas detachment due to alienating budgetary or political objectives, as discussed through this research, has little to do with the helping relationship or goals of social justice. Thus, it can be seen that just one aspect of emoting or interacting with others as a social worker can have multiple motivations. Recommendations arising from this research, then, are hardly straightforward. Emotion management within caring disciplines is incredibly complex. Having tools for critical analysis and reflectivity are invaluable to gaining insight on the experience and use of emotions in the workplace. Social work education and training that include open dialogue regarding the connections between the personal and professional aspects of emotion management in social work would better prepare social workers for this important use of self in practice. Caring disciplines ought to understand what underlying motivations cause them to discipline their emotions. This research suggests that this initial critical examination is significant to the ultimate social work goal of social justice.

VIII. Conclusion

“Indeed, if not for the poignant resonance of emotions in social life, emotions would hardly be worth ‘managing’” (Garot, 2004, p.736).

Through the course of this research I have engaged in conversations on emotion management and analysed the many varied influences that shape how we manage our feelings as professionals. The research participants’ emotional reactions were varied: Some stifled sadness, some experienced fear, and others felt exhaustion, frustration, desperation or strain from the weight of the responsibility of their roles. The challenges presented in their experiences were evident. But as the interviewees shared their stories, I could see that they also experienced empathy, understanding, compassion, caring, shared humour and a longing to do what they felt was right for the people with whom they worked. Caring work involves complex interpersonal interactions. The emotions and corresponding, varied expressions are what make these interactions rich and meaningful.

Emotion management is a perpetual process of feeling and expressing according to the many discourses that guide us both personally and otherwise. When I reflect on the story of loss I described in the Introduction of this paper, I remain appreciative that I connected with this individual in a way that I felt was genuine. It seems unfortunate to me that competing political and economic conditions can and do lay claim to our ability to care. As with Aronson and Neysmith’s study on home care workers, clients’ entitlement to receive personalized caring work is made “even more precarious by our

collective lack of language...for claiming the emotional and personalizing aspects of good caring as work” (Aronson & Neysmith, 1996, p. 74). Understanding compassionate emotions not as a hindrance, but as a meaningful and worthwhile connection is a far more valuable interpretation.

Through examining the constructs of what is deemed normal and by scrutinizing the source of reactions and manipulations that create our emotional realities as social workers, an understanding of guiding assumptions will gain increasing transparency. I suggest that social workers could benefit by practicing our critical awareness, and not accepting alienating discursive feeling rules at face value. Had I not experienced the level of autonomy that I had in supporting the woman about whom I have spoken, the outcome would have been far more distressing. Many discourses guided my emotion management and brought about some confusing and conflicting responses, but overall, I felt “allowed” to display my appreciation for her life alongside her family and friends. I believe she also valued our relationship, a helping connection based on respect and compassion. Because of the intrusion on her personal life, it is my opinion that she had a right to such a relationship. The women who have shared their stories with me for the purpose of this research have also revealed respect and compassion as integral values in the work that they do. For both themselves and their clients, I hope such motivations continue to prevail over competing claims.

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Appendix 1 – Recruitment E-mail

Recruitment e-mail

(Draft e-mail for distributions by agency managers)

I have been asked by McMaster University MSW candidate Katie MacRae to distribute this request for her research study. Please review the following and contact Katie if you are interested in participating. Please note that this agency is not involved in this research and will not receive any information on who chooses to participate or any confidential information that is shared between researcher and participant.

RE: Research Project for Social Workers – Requesting your help!

Social Workers deal with emotional situations often, but it can be a challenge to find the time or space to talk about our reactions to them. Given this, I am interested in hearing from Social Workers about what happens with them after an emotional event at work. The following attachment is an information letter regarding the research project I am completing for my Masters-level Social Work thesis. I will be conducting qualitative interviews with practicing Social Workers about managing emotional events in the workplace.

Unfortunately, many Social Workers have experienced distressing events, such as the death of a client in their practice. If you have experienced this or another event that you found emotionally upsetting at work, I would be interested in talking to you about how you experienced this.

Your participation in the project will only take approximately one hour, and will remain strictly confidential. This project has been approved through McMaster's Research Ethics Board. Please view the following attachment for more information about this study. If you have more questions, do not respond to this e-mail distribution as your privacy cannot be guaranteed. Please contact me directly at macraekd@mcmaster.ca. I would be happy to answer your questions. Thank you for considering participation in this project.

Sincerely,

Katie MacRae, M.S.W. Candidate

McMaster University

Appendix 2 – Letter of Information/Consent

<Date>

Letter of Information/Consent **A Study of Professional Emotions**

Investigators: Katie MacRae, B.S.W.

Principal Investigator: Katie MacRae, M.S.W. Candidate
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
macraekd@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

This is a research project required for the completion of my Masters level thesis. In this study, I wish to examine social workers' experiences of emotionally difficult situations and how they manage them. I am interested in how social workers deal with emotional events, such as the death of a client, or other workplace events that the social worker perceives as emotionally significant. I am hoping to learn about how social workers understand their emotional reactions in such situations, how they make decisions about how to react to such occurrences, and how they perceive themselves as a professional through such events. I also hope to gain insight on how social workers understand reactions from and interactions with their colleagues or supervisors at the time of their distress.

Procedures involved in the Research

If you agree to participate in the study, you and I will meet for a face to face interview that will last approximately one hour. We are going to talk about your experience with an emotionally difficult event in the workplace in the past. I will be asking you about the feelings you had at the time of this event and how you dealt with them. I will also ask you about the reactions of your supervisor, colleagues or others around you at the time of this experience and how you interacted with them. I will also ask for a bit of background information about your professional and workplace experiences. With your permission, I will audio tape the conversation. Together, we will agree upon a location for the interview that is comfortable for you.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that there will be any harm or discomforts associated with the interviews. You may feel uncomfortable with the questions about your experience of loss, but please remember that you do not need to answer questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Potential Benefits

I hope to understand more about social workers' feelings when in a professional relationship and how they are understood by themselves and by people in their workplaces. I hope to learn more about how professional social workers manage their emotions, and how they are or are not supported by their workplaces when they experience an emotional event.

The research will not benefit you directly.

Confidentiality:

Anything that you say or do in the study will not be told to anyone else. Any information about you that could identify you will not be published or told to anyone else, unless you provide your permission. Your privacy will be respected. Any personal information you share will be kept confidential.

Your workplace will not be informed of your participation in this study. The information obtained by me will be kept confidential, and will only be available to myself and my supervisor. The information will be locked in a cabinet, and the information will be destroyed following the study.

Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. It is your choice to be part of the study or not. If you decide to participate, you can decide to stop at any time, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

Information about the Study Results:

The study will be concluded by September 2009. You may obtain information about the results of the study by contacting me via e-mail.

Information about Participating as a Study Subject:

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact myself, Katie MacRae, at macraekd@mcmaster.ca or my supervisor, Roy Cain, at cainr@mcmaster.ca.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Katie MacRae, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my

involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, if I choose to do so, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

Name of Participant

Appendix 3 – Interview Guide

Interview Guide

- Information/Consent Form review, answer questions & sign (provide copy)
- Verbal reminder of right to withdraw/opt out of questions

Questions:

Background

- 1) Please describe your job title and brief description of your work. How long have you practiced as a Social Worker?
- 2) Can you tell me about your workplace: Do you receive supervision? How often? Do you consider it helpful? How would you describe your relationship with your colleagues? Supervisor? Management?
- 3) Generally speaking, how do you express your emotions at work?

Description

- 4) You have indicated that you have experienced an emotional event in the workplace. Can you describe the situation to me, (remembering that you only have to tell me what you are comfortable sharing)?
- 5) How would you describe the relationship you had with this individual(s)?

Experience of event

- 6) What was the experience like for you?
- 7) Did you talk to people at work about what it was like for you?
- 8) What did you say to colleagues/supervisor or family and friends? Was there a difference in the conversations you had with them about your experience?
- 9) What did you *do* after the event? Tasks?

Workplace Response

- 10) What do you recall about how your supervisor, colleagues, other individuals in the workplace reacted to you after this event? Do you remember having to think carefully about what to say about your feelings at work?
- 11) Is there anything else you want to share about this experience?

Note: These are general topics to be covered. Questions may not remain in chronological order, and may be altered to allow for conversational flow.