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Gendered organisational and professional discourses of emotions in 'macho' social work: ethnographic insights

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on empirical research this paper explores how gendered discourses position emotions and emotion practices in social work environments characterised as 'macho'. It highlights the intersection of traditional emotion-reason dualism and gendered constructions of emotions with dominant hegemonic organisational and professional norms. This ethnographic study in an English Children's Service explored how emotions were understood and used in practice. It identified essentialist negative beliefs and a paradoxical positioning of practitioners' emotions alongside their constructive use. Problematic perceptions of professionalism fed into notions of conformity, heroism and transgression, devaluing engagement in agile emotion practices which underpin relationship-based systemic practice. Institutionalised dynamics created scope for differential impacts given practitioners' status and social locations such as, gender, race, age, sexuality or status. These findings contribute new knowledge, relevant to humane social work, professionalism and workforce retention.

Introduction

Emotions are complex yet everyday phenomena in social work. This paper draws on an ethnographic study of social work practice in Children and Families. This identified the centrality of emotions to relationship-based practice, sense making and assessment, whilst at the same time emotions were perceived as problematic and potentially harmful. One finding was the functional use of 'agile emotion practices', defined as the interconnected, agile, physical, cognitive and emotional doing of intersubjective emotions in social work, including individual/internal and interactional/external activities, both conscious and less conscious (O'Connor, 2022, p. 4155). Some practices occurred spontaneously as part of the professional role, many involved practitioners actively leaning in to and holding their own emotions and those of others. Agilely switching between different forms of skilful emotion practices was a significant feature, not only in relational systemic practice but also in reflection, reflexive analysis and decision-making. A key finding was the importance of organisational and professional factors which shaped how practitioners individually and collectively perceived and used their emotions.

The objective of this paper is to illuminate how traditional emotion-reason dualism and gendered constructions of emotions intersect with dominant organisational, hegemonic and cultural norms to position social workers' experience and use of emotions in problematic ways. It will illustrate that the intersection of institutionalised norms in organisations, by nature gendered and risk-averse (Lewis & Simpson, 2007), reinforces paradoxical double binds. These create problematic discourses about emotions in professionalism and can contribute to conformity, heroism and transgression. These themes further intersect with the structuring impact of power dynamics, which are differentially experienced dependent on practitioners' gendered, racialised and status positions.

Emotions are theorised from a range of disciplinary perspectives. In the context of social work, sociological literature provides useful conceptualisations of emotions as interactional and relational phenomena (Spencer et al., 2012). They are experienced in response to and within relational interactions between people, and between people and social organisations or systems. Feelings such as happiness, sadness, anxiety, fear or anger usually emerge in response to our perceptions of and interactions with other people, events or social circumstances, consciously and unconsciously. Emotions are multi-layered, comprising embodied, sensory and cognitive experiences and/or physical sensations. Embodied experiences include the cognitive and sensory. We *warm to* people, feel empathic or experience unsettled, disturbing feelings. Ruch (2012) and Ferguson (2018) emphasise that emotions emerge as part of unconscious responses individually and organisationally, underlining the importance of psychosocial understanding of emotions.

Situated and contextual, emotions are shaped by socio-cultural institutions, from norms and rituals of social interactions to social divisions which structure social experiences, for example race, gender, class, power and status. Hochschild's (2012) concept of emotional labour comprises management of feelings and emotional dissonance to create desired responses or emotional states, emphasising the managed performance of emotions to meet socially prescribed feeling or display rules. This includes organisational expectations in social work, such as regulation of emotions to comply with expectations of professionalism (Gibson, 2019).

The paper begins with a discussion of dualist and gendered influences on how emotions are perceived. It explores social work and social work organisations as gendered phenomena, prior to outlining the research study. Findings are thematically presented, with a discussion of the possible implications.

Gendering of emotions

The gendering of emotions is rooted in traditional Cartesian dualism in which reason and emotion were seen as opposites. This dualist construction remains highly influential in positioning emotions as the opposite of logic, dangerous distractions or compulsions, not to be trusted. As Williams (2001, p. 2) argued, emotions were associated with primal, often female passions which needed taming 'by the steady hand of (male) reason'. Despite feminist and neuroscientific researchers challenging these ideas (Ahmed, 2004; Barrett, 2017) such dualism contributes to entrenched binary thinking about emotions. Consequently, the feminisation of emotions whilst outdated is frequently reinforced in stereotypes from *boys don't cry* to media representations associating emotions with irrational, reactive responses, the opposite to stereotypically masculinised rational logic

(De Boise & Hearn, 2017). The point here is not to reinforce these stereotypes, rather it is to set out some of the important influences shaping how emotions are constructed to fully consider practitioners' experiences and use of emotions in contemporary social work organisations.

Social work requires substantial emotional labour, which is highly gendered (Cottingham, 2017), reflecting traditional beliefs about femininity and masculinity. Gendered feeling rules underpin compliance with cultural and organisational norms. Pease (2012, p. 127) notes that emotions are 'reflections of macro-societal processes as well as individual psychology'. He challenges essentialist approaches which reinforce gendered constructions of men as unemotional, inexpressive and disconnected from their feelings, and the implication that women are naturally empathic and understand emotions. De Boise and Hearn (2017) underscore the importance of such critical perspectives in understanding the complexities of power relations which construct ideas of innate or gendered capacities for emotion experience or expression.

Nonetheless, gendered constructions of emotions continue to be supported and reinforced by hegemonic masculinities, practices which support patriarchal and unequal gender relations (Connell, 2005). In other words, beliefs about gender frame and institutionalise sociocultural behaviours, contributing to gendered expression and management of feelings stemming from interpretations of masculinity and femininity. For example, men repressing emotions to avoid presenting as vulnerable and to meet gendered constructs of manliness/masculinity (Pease, 2012).

But what does this all mean in the context of social work practice and organisations? How do these themes relate to practitioners' experience and use of emotions? To appreciate the influence of institutionalised gendered constructions of emotions, it is important to recognise the extent social work and organisations are themselves gendered phenomena.

Gendered intersectional profession, organisations & discourses

Social work is gendered in several ways. As a caring profession it continues to be perceived as a non-traditional career for men (Pease, 2011). Entry to social work is disproportionately female (NASW, 2020; Social Work England, 2023). Gendered hierarchies and perceptions of emotional capacities remain influential in social work discourse (Hicks, 2015).

Social work clients and practice are often gendered, particularly but not exclusively in child welfare. There is a predominance of work with women as carers, or women and children as survivors of often male violence. Intersectional analysis (Bernard, 2022) highlights that entrenched negative constructions of men as problematic contributes to failures to engage with the complexities of both gender and race.

A considerable proportion of social work occurs in bureaucratic organisations which are highly gendered and raced, based on institutionalised hegemonic masculinities and power relations (Pease, 2011; Ray, 2019). Such institutions embed so-called 'masculine norms (hierarchy, rationality, accountability)' (Lewis & Simpson, 2007, p. 11) which valorise 'emotional distance' and compliance with rational-technical approaches (Pease, 2011, p. 407). These themes combine to create gendered discourses, specifically 'a discourse of gender [which] relates to

people's actions within localised settings and the organisation of their ways of thinking and talking' (Hicks, 2015, p. 482). Through such organisational discourses, the research findings discussed below suggest that beliefs and expectations about the experience and practices of emotions confer a particular status on practitioners.

An intersectional lens enables consideration of how practitioners' lived experience and socially located identities such as race, age, sexual identity or status frame their experiences as organisational professionals. Gunaratnam and Lewis (2001) spotlighted the significance of race and gender in researching emotions in social care organisations. Virkki (2008, p. 83) found that gendered identities influenced perceptions of emotional skills, resulting in a 'devaluation' and feminisation of emotions, creating coded messages about their acknowledgement or expression for all genders.

Thus, emotions in social work are not apolitical or solely subjective phenomena. They must be understood in the intersection of practitioners' lived experiences, contextual and organisational discourses.

Materials and methods

The research question asked: What sense children and family social workers made of the emotions they experienced in practice and what they thought informed this? Sub-questions explored what influenced or regulated experience or expression of emotions, including organisational context. An ethnographic approach enabled naturalistic observation of emotions in everyday interactions, proximity to practitioners' lived experiences, sensory data and the contextual environment (Atkinson, 2015). Smith's (2005, p. 41) idea of the 'ethnographic problematic' supported exploration beyond individual subjectivities to locate these in the institutionalised social relations of child protection practice.

Ethical approval was obtained from University X and phased consent used throughout 11 months of data collection. The research site was a Referral and Assessment Service (The Service) in an English Local Authority Children's Service serving an ethnically diverse, inner-city community with significant inequalities, constrained by financial austerity. Practice focused on initial assessment of child welfare including statutory safeguarding and child protection. Participants included social workers, clinical consultants, senior practitioners and senior managers, with diverse experience, age, gender and sexual identities. Almost 50% of participants were from global majority[1] backgrounds. High referral rates were processed in limited timeframes. Practitioners did regular 'Duty' work responding to initial referrals, holding individual caseloads for 9 weeks. The setting typified a new public management organisation, with heightened scrutiny, a culture of blame avoidance, risk reduction and high staff turnover.

Data were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006), drawing on psychosocial and social constructionist theory. An ethnographic approach over an extended timeframe led to rich, complex data and generation of distinct patterns and themes in data analysis. O'Connor (2022) provides more methodological detail.

Limitations include findings being specific to the research setting and context during data collection (2016–2017). As The Service prepared for an OFSTED[2] inspection practice was intensely scrutinised. Practitioners' gatekeeping, perceptions of emotions, high staff turnover and the part-time nature of data collection were ongoing features.

Selected findings relevant to this paper are now discussed. Abbreviations indicate sources of data extracts.[3]

Results

Analysis of over 300 hours of observations involving 27 practitioners, field interviews and participants' diaries, demonstrated that agile emotion practices were used to engage relationally with clients, peers and professionals, in individual and group processing, sense-making, analysis and decision-making. This paper focuses on a significant contrasting finding, that emotions were viewed paradoxically, representing both a positive resource and a problematic danger. In the former, they were observably drawn on as an integral practice resource. One participant described emotions as the keystone holding everything together. Emotions were fundamental to the heart of practice, whilst at the same time occupying an ambivalent position:

> They are absolutely vital to social work, absolutely crucial. It's the basic radar that we all work with, and it's not given enough credit. We're not made to feel confident about those emotions, we're not allowed to feel that they are useful. I think it is the keystone from where we start. (I:CC2:7)

The suggested importance of emotions as a form of information, *'the radar'* of feelings, sensory information, cognition and reflection which practitioners used in multiple ways was reinforced across the data. And yet, an evident tension was the importance of emotions and the apparent fears they represented. A senior manager illustrated the potential dangers of the absence of emotions, of practitioners becoming *'emotionless'* through perhaps conscious or unconscious detachment or dissonance. The extract underlines an equally powerful theme that emotions are potentially dangerous:

> Worst nightmare is when emotions are not there, when the social worker is just so emotionless. But [we] don't want emotions to take over. We have to be able to hold it in and manage that. (I:SM2:4)

Four predominant themes illuminate the paradoxical constructions of emotions, embedded organisationally and professionally. They provide valuable insights into the intersection of essentialist, dualist beliefs about emotions with gendered organisational discourses.

- Emotion management and labour
- Maintaining the 'tough veneer' in a macho culture
- Heroism, conformity, transgression
- Intersecting social locations, unequal agency

Emotion management and labour: 'the cloak of professionalism'

The fast-paced environment of Referral and Assessment was characterised by emotional intensity, juggling significant uncertainties, risks and incomplete information. Everyday practice included face-to-face engagement with vulnerability, distress and child abuse including physical abuse and rape. Work with children

and adults experiencing violence, trauma, struggling, defensive and sometimes harmful parents/carers occurred in a context of structural inequalities, poverty, racism and limited resources. One participant's diary represented everyday emotions, including:

> Hope, pride, joy, frustration, sorrow and feeling sick with apprehension. (D1:7)

Investigating and managing risk triggered diverse emotions, from excitement and a rush of adrenaline to anxiety. The latter was ubiquitous '*always bubbling there a little bit under the surface*'(I:SW8:7). Anxiety was expressed interchangeably with various emotional experiences including, fear, uncertainty, apprehension, worry and guilt. Management of emotions was viewed as an important aspect of professionalism. A constant and frequently hidden process, described by one manager as putting on:

> The cloak of professionalism. (I:SM1:9)

This involved significant emotion work to manage emotional dissonance between workers' actual feelings of anxiety, empathy, anger or distress and implicit feeling and display rules used in the performance of professional practice (Hochschild, 2012). For example, engaging with assessments of a 13-year-old who had been raped, or parents and children traumatised by physical violence and homelessness required sensitive relational practice <u>and</u> hidden emotion work. Emotions were fundamental to these relational interactions, created in the engagement and emotion work these required. Additionally, such multi-layered emotions interconnected with the worker's emotional state at the time. Thus, putting on and managing '*the cloak of professionalism*' masked several interconnecting emotional practices.

Emotion management ranged from self-protective mechanisms of limiting emotional engagement or distancing from emotions, to managers containing emotions in group supervision or duty. Self-protective strategies included avoidance of getting '*too caught up in their story*', recounted by one participant with forceful expressions of frustration and anger suggesting that avoiding emotions was less achievable than implied.

Organisationally reinforced cautions about the acknowledgement or expression of emotions permeated the data, sometimes subtly observed through occasional gestures, tone and body language when duty seniors sought to manage the emotional climate in situations of increasing tension or heightened banter. These threatened the normative culture of steady focused working at computer screens. A wry statement appeared to communicate empathy to duty workers vociferously expressing frustration with other agencies:

> 'There's not a lot of love in this room. (Obs.5)

Such interjections operated as subtle reminders of what was deemed appropriate, evident in responses of brief laughter and quiet refocusing on tasks. Organisational norms about the expression and place of emotions were similarly observed in practitioners' narratives, recounting instances in which the expression of emotions was deemed potentially harmful or breaching professional norms. Notably, the extracts below come from practitioners with experience of intersecting minoritised identities, based on their race, sexual or gender identities.

> [It] gets picked up quite a lot. I show my frustration in my body language a bit too much and I become a bit too vocal. My manager says I have to be very careful [. . .]There are rules and you have to conform to them. (I:SW11:6)

Self-censoring avoided potentially negative judgements and identity maintenance as competent professionals. Hearing another practitioner described as highly anxious, one experienced participant illustrated how organisational and professional discourses about emotions can be internalised:

> Wow. I wouldn't want to be seen as that. It was said almost like a criticism. If you are seen to be like that, what's your judgement and decision making like? So people are less likely to trust your judgement. That's the thing that would stop people openly expressing certain emotions. (I.2:SP1:5)

Group supervision data demonstrated that practitioners who felt safe in their teams were more confident in using emotions overtly to probe and analyse case discussions. Some perceptions of emotions changed with experience:

> I kind of shifted more now to think that's not a weakness, whereas I think before it was difficult to talk about emotions and feelings without looking vulnerable or weak in some way. (I:SW10:5)

Several senior practitioners reflected on the commonality of associating emotions with weakness and lack of competence despite challenging embedded negative perceptions:

> [It] can be uncomfortable, generally saying that you're frightened is a sign of weakness isn't it? People want to be seen as competent. (I:SP4:11)

Whilst managing emotions and emotion work as part of the *'cloak of professionalism'*, these data show the significant ambivalence in how emotions were perceived. Despite being a constant in everyday practice, and a form of practice in themselves, perceptions of emotions reflected normative dualist discourses. The implications become more apparent when viewed through practitioners' perceptions of organisational and professional culture.

Maintaining the *'tough veneer'* in a macho culture

Participants frequently used the term '*macho culture*' to characterise the organisational culture and more generally frontline child welfare. Notably, the term was used by people employed in The Service for many years as well as those who had recently joined, suggesting this characterisation extended to Children and Families practice more widely. Informal asides and responses revealed unspoken messages and uncertainties about where emotions fitted, as illustrated in surprisingly similar data extracts, one practitioner was only 18 months qualified and the other had over 15 years' experience:

> Well you know, it's quite a macho culture in social work, so emotions . . . . [voice trails off with questioning tone]. (SW5:Obs.1)

> It is quite a macho culture social work, and you're not allowed to show your emotions and you can't show your emotions, it's very much get on with it. (I:SW6:9)

Significantly, observation records suggested this was not a '*macho culture*' of stereotypical gendered roles and overt machismo. The surface environment usually was:

> Busy, focused, collegial atmosphere, occasional banter, laughter, supportive conversations about cases. (Obs:4)

Rather, the findings suggested a more ambiguous collective culture. This was represented by a type of performance, a facade articulated with some frustration: '*This sort of tough veneer*' (Obs:9). This was reinforced by organisational and wider cultural perceptions of child welfare/protection characterised as:

> The frontline of the frontline, an ethos that we can handle anything. (I:CC 2:9).

Analysis suggested that this '*tough veneer*' reinforced expectations that practitioners present as resilient, brave, and fearless in their capacity to assertively manage risk and emotions. There was a reality to this. Practitioners combined investigative skills with authority and empathy, working with complex trauma, uncertainty, conflict, stigma and at times resistance. A common refrain reiterated the binary positioning of toughness versus expression of emotions which might be perceived as weak:

> You can't be falling apart in tears all the time. (Obs:3)

However, the combination of a so-called '*macho culture*' and the '*tough veneer*' underlined negative perceptions of emotions and their association with weakness and/or incompetence. Interestingly, participants with extensive experience in The Service described long-standing organisational ambivalence about the place of emotions, despite moves to embrace them in a systemic relationship-based practice model. Arguably, some emotion management strategies such as the masking of emotions, hidden emotion work and unconscious defence mechanisms against the intensity and anxieties of practice strengthened embedded organisational discourses:

> Traditionally (LA) had quite a macho culture. I think that's been moderated a bit in recent years, it's still pretty much there, there's still a sort of cultural tradition of macho [...] management. Expressions of emotion are not easily accepted by the organisation. (I:SM3:9)

Indeed, analysis showed that despite many participants emphasising commitment to the use of emotions in relational systemic practice, they also acknowledged concerns that showing emotions could lead to judgements of incompetence and unprofessional practice. Some questioned the viability of using emotions in an output driven, highly proceduralised organisation. Their sense of exhaustion and struggle in promoting the use of emotions in systemic practice was apparent:

> It's about helping [practitioners] to understand that vocalising and articulating feelings is not a weakness, but that's a constant struggle. (I:SP2:3)

The paradoxical positioning of practitioners' emotions and emotion practices intensified prior to an OFSTED inspection. Increased scrutiny and a more procedural managerial culture were described as '*devastating*' (Obs:10). Defensive strategies were apparent in conformity to more '*robotic*' practices and minimising emotional engagement. Some managers evoked an observable sense of tension and unease. This atmosphere intensified the suppression of emotions and a macho culture in which emotions were riskier to acknowledge. For those supporting systemic practice through group supervision, and thus agile emotion practices, the changes made this '*a relentless fight*' (Obs:7). The sense of unease and increased compliance impacted on the espoused aims of embedding

systemic practice, underpinned by understanding and using emotions. This more tense and fearful culture was captured in an extract commenting on changed managerial styles:

> 'Quite authoritarian. SM4 coming in as the polar opposite to SM1' had created 'real worries for the agenda of fostering risk [taking]' in the emotional engagement of systemic practice. (Obs:7)

These workers were caught in paradoxical double binds, in which the intersection of institutionalised organisational norms reinforced problematic discourses about emotions. These double binds contributed to different forms of conformity, heroism and transgression and are now discussed.

Heroism, conformity, transgression: *'taking away from me being human'*

Double binds are experienced as two irreconcilable demands, difficult to recognise and if recognised they appear dangerous, destabilising and hard to challenge (Luscher et al., 2006). So far, the data illuminate an implicit paradoxical double bind for practitioners, that the use of emotions is the keystone to relational, systemic practice, but organisational and professional discourses strongly associated emotions with a lack of professionalism and judgements of incompetence or weakness.

In this context, where agile emotion practices were demonstrably used, emotion management required an almost heroic capacity not to acknowledge or express emotions, often achieved through hidden emotion work, *'the cloak of professionalism'*. In reality, emotions were a central element of practice and neither emotion management nor professionalism equated to their total absence. Ambivalence about where emotions were permitted, alongside an expectation that emotions were an element in relational systemic practice led to some practitioners feeling dehumanised and '*robotic*' (Obs:9). Many participants expressed frustration and anger resulting from this tension:

> It feels almost like it's taking away from me being human. (I:SW11:6)

Acknowledging implicit negative messages about emotions, one experienced practitioner highlighted the ambivalence created:

> You've got to be professional, sometimes I do feel a little bit like a robot. There is an expectation that you should be holding it together at all times, accept anything that's thrown at you and not get upset about it, just deal with it and move on. (I:SW12:7)

It was evident that many practitioners regardless of experience, age, race, gender or sexual identities had unconsciously internalised beliefs about the place of emotions as problematic. Concerns not only about other people's perceptions of one's professionalism, but also one's own sense of identity as a competent professional were common:

> Maybe it's not even so much about how someone else interprets it, but maybe how <u>you</u> feel you're coming across. Maybe you don't want to come across as someone who's overly emotional. (I:SW1:3)

Conforming to such expectations required a type of heroism. Reified organisationally but experienced as dehumanising, this resonates with the heroic professional who Christie (2001) argued is essentially masculine. Notions of heroism are however double-edged.

A further double bind becomes apparent here. On the one hand, heroically conforming to implicit requirements to suppress or deny emotions might support positive professional identities, linked to organisationally reinforced ideas about professionalism, resilience and commitment. On the other hand, such heroic conformity masks the reality of practitioners' experiences of emotions, and more significantly, their active leaning into, containment and processing of emotions via diverse emotion practices.

The consequent tensions are likely to be untenable in the long-term, potentially contributing to burnout and/or withdrawal to more detached, '*robotic*' practices. Such tensions I suggest also create feelings of transgression. Transgressions might be in the form of openly using and expressing emotions with the risk of being judged '*too vocal*' or '*overly emotional*'. Additionally, a more internalised sense of professional transgression was identified by several participants. Conforming to proceduralised, hegemonic organisational norms reduced their humanity and capacity for humane practice:

> We are all just so focused on churning [out assessments], we're actually forgetting that it's human people that we are dealing with, humane issues, we've just got process and precision. (I:SW12:7)

Intersecting social locations: unequal agency

An important consideration is how practitioners' social locations intersected with these findings. Identity characteristics have not been ascribed to data extracts to preserve anonymity. Participants with diverse identities expressed similar concerns about being overly emotional, negative judgements about expressing emotions, and perceptions not just of the organisation but also of child welfare practice as '*macho*'. This suggests Ahmed's (2004, p. 119) 'affective economy' whereby emotions bind workers together in processes which can result in feelings of transgression if they fail to conform to embedded expectations. If perceived as too expressive of emotions, men felt judged as not meeting heteronormative perceptions of masculinity, or conversely conforming to gendered/heteronormative stereotypes of the '*gentle man*' (I:CC2:6). Women similarly were required to be transgressive, as to be seen as 'too' emotional or feminised might be equated with weakness, lacking resilience or stamina. For some female participants it was therefore arguably more important to conform to normative influences in order to maintain the '*tough veneer*' of practice. Thus, all practitioners regardless of genders, sexual identity or race were positioned as gendered actors, required to personify detached, emotionally distant and competent practice, features identified by Ainsworth and Flanagan (2019) in similarly gendered hierarchal cultures in the health sector.

However, an intersectional lens enables consideration of how interlocking dynamics of oppression might impact some practitioners' experiences. Subtle but significant differences were observed in the data. Global majority practitioners and managers (almost 50% of participants) regardless of identities or seniority expressed particular caution about negative judgements or censure if they transgressed organisational or professional norms about emotions. Expressed warily, they placed a distinct emphasis on how they might be perceived by others, and how their judgement and professional capacity might be judged negatively. This suggests that the heroic performance of maintaining the '*tough veneer*' had additional layers of risk for workers whose racialised

and gendered identities shaped their experiences in the organisational culture and the potential for inequalities.

In contrast, white male practitioners, recently qualified through to senior managers, were more openly vocal about the '*macho*' culture and their compliance or resistance to it. This possibly reflected a level of confidence arising from their social locations as white men, despite variations in age, seniority and sexual identity amongst these participants. Significantly, they too expressed dissatisfaction with this culture and concerns about the risk of negative judgements or censure.

Nevertheless, if we accept that structural inequalities are institutionalised within bureaucratic organisations, it is essential to consider that for some workers their experience is underpinned by intersecting layers of subtle marginalisation and oppression based on race, sexuality, age, disability or gender. As Boyd (2010, p. 203) notes, drawing on the idea of 'voice entitlement', membership of cultural or gender groups impacts how practitioners are positioned and have a voice in organisational contexts. The wider impact of interlocking oppressions created differential experiences for workers, even with a majority female workforce with 50% global majority workers, many LGBTQ+ workers confidently open about their identities and a diverse senior management. The expression or acknowledgement of emotions was linked to perceptions of vulnerability. However, data analysis revealed that greater pressures to maintain 'a mask of toughness' (Hooks, 2015, p. 69) were experienced by workers whose intersecting identities increased their vulnerability to potential negative judgements.

Discussion

These findings shed light on important under-researched aspects of social work. Three key areas are illuminated: the outdated but influential gendering of emotions, the paradoxical double binds challenging practitioners in organisational systems, and how these double binds can impact differentially on practitioners dependent on their social locations. Social workers and managers experience and skilfully use a range of emotions and emotion practices in their everyday work. Yet paradoxically there is widespread ambivalence about whether emotions are part of professional practice. There is a deep paradox in engaging in emotion practices as part of relationship-based systemic practice, in an organisational culture where emotions are perceived as potentially indicative of weakness, incompetence or lack of professionalism. Further, such ideas are reinforced in a macho organisational culture, which my analysis suggests is not limited purely to this setting. Significantly, participants with different levels of experience, trained in diverse universities and transferring from other organisations showed similar patterns of thinking about the association between emotions and negative judgements, and beliefs that child welfare practice is '*macho*'.

Combined, these perceptions serve to reinforce formidable tensions, namely, how to sustain emotionally engaged relational and skilful use of emotion practices within organisational and professional discourses which reinforce outmoded dualist beliefs about emotions. Indeed, such tensions are not limited to this research site or English settings. They resonate with Hardesty's (2015, p. 476) research, which showed the privileging of procedures and 'techniques of objectification' distancing US practitioners from relational and emotional practice. Yet, as in this study, practitioners were expected

to actively draw on emotions whilst simultaneously emotions were constructed as obscuring reality and 'pose a threat to competent service delivery' (Hardesty, 2015, p. 473). The sustained impact of heroically engaging in emotion practices whilst maintaining a pretence that emotions are <u>not</u> part of professional practice is destabilising, untenable and arguably manipulative. To be blunt, it presents a form of dishonesty within the profession if, as I suggest, these findings resonate more widely within social work.

A structural intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991) grounded in black feminist theory spotlights how the discourses and double binds outlined can impact differentially on practitioners because of their social locations. Despite Local Authorities being perceived as equitable employers, workers from minoritised groups are likely to be more sensitised to how their performance and compliance with organisational and professional expectations are judged. Research in other professional fields reveals pressures to comply with organisational norms, both to conform to expectations and to avoid colluding with institutionalised negative stereotypes which impact for example, female and/or global majority workers (Arifeen & Syed, 2020; Doharty & Esoe, 2023). Although employees have agency, their voice is vulnerable to forms of conscious and unconscious 'self-silencing' (Dutta, 2010, p. 111) in hierarchical organisational cultures.

Safety is central to working relationships and supervision. The impact of intersecting social locations was an added feature influencing the extent participants conformed or transgressed organisationally instituted norms about emotions. If as identified in this study, practitioners from minoritised backgrounds are more acutely aware of how they might be perceived if transgressing organisational or professional norms, they are likely to experience greater emotional dissonance. This emotional burden in already challenging work environments has implications for staff retention and wellbeing. These are significant findings which draw out practitioners' different experiences, alongside the evidence that overarching organisational and professional discourses about emotions impact all practitioners.

The data show that all participants learned as Hicks (2015, p. 480) argues, that *doing gender* is not simply about normative perceptions of femininities or masculinities, rather it is an activity which risks 'gender assessment'. Applied to emotions and emotion practices, gendered assessment stems from dualist hegemonic and negative perceptions of emotions and their experience or expression. In other words, emotions are persistently linked to deeply embedded beliefs, associated with weakness, irrationality and stereotypical femininity.

Cottingham (2017) aptly observed that emotion practices are rooted in 'a mix of conscious and unconscious ways of being and doing that become habitual and natural to the well-socialised individual' (p. 273). The socialised norms of The Service shaped professional expectations, devaluing emotion practices and reinforcing entrenched beliefs.

And yet, practitioners and managers showed agency and capacity to transgress these influences, as demonstrated in their everyday participation in emotion practices which named, evoked and used emotions. Dependent on context and timing, engagement in these practices was both transgressive and heroic. Transgression usually refers to actions or behaviours which infringe protocols, codes of conduct or professional boundaries. Here the term underscores how practitioners used their moral and professional agency to

engage in emotion practices, sometimes as a form of resistance to organisational discourses. To feel transgressive can be liberating and reinforce a sense of agency. It can also be isolating, exacerbating existing concerns about negative judgements and questionable professionalism.

For practitioners not conforming and instead engaging in practices which openly used their emotions, this effort was substantial. Deliberately leaning in and holding back emotionally, using voice and self in naming and mobilising emotions are demanding. Containment individually and in interactional processes was essential in maintaining purposeful emotion practices. Team alliances and supervisory relationships were central to this. When supervision was lacking, or staff turnover and managerial changes disrupted previously safe working relationships, it was apparent that practitioners withdrew to more defensive, procedural and in their own words *'robotic'* practices.

Conclusions

This paper illustrates the powerful intersection of dualist, gendered constructions of emotions and hegemonic organisational discourses which create paradoxical double binds for practitioners using emotions in relationship-based systemic social work. The themes presented raise concerns which are of crucial importance at a time of widespread challenges in staff retention and workforce stability (SWE, 2023). Whilst data is drawn from one research setting, these findings warrant further exploration to consider whether they are representative of practitioners' experiences in other services, local authorities or internationally. A distinct pattern and consistency in the ambiguity about the place of emotions in professionalism was revealed, alongside their skilful use in practice. This suggests these themes were not unique to this setting. Similarly, whilst more subtle, the differential impact of such paradoxical experiences and organisational discourses on minoritised practitioners merits further attention.

Participants frequently conflated emotions and the stressful impact of the work. This is part of the lived experience of social workers. Emotions are complicated, both invaluable resource and prompting defensive responses organisationally and individually in situations that feel unsafe, uncontained and, when emotions themselves are constructed as problematic and unprofessional.

As Andrew Cooper (2005, p. 3) argued, social work is intensely emotional, it requires thinking about and feeling painful things, alongside measured contextual analysis. People receiving social work services need humane emotionally engaged practitioners and organisations that support caring, contained emotion practices. By focusing not simply on the impact of emotions but on how they are used and constructed it has been possible to explicate and spotlight influential organisational and professional discourses and practices. These findings suggest we need to radically rethink contemporary discourses about emotions in social work organisations and in the social work profession.

Notes

1. Global majority: collective term for people of colour racialised as 'ethnic minorities'.
2. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) Regulatory inspection body in England (www.gov.uk).

3. Prefixes indicate participant, role, data source i.e. SW: social worker; CC: clinical consultant; SP: Senior practitioner; SM: senior manager. Obs.:observations; I: field interview, D: diary. Number: month of study.

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