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Emotional Labour of the Polish Social Workers: The Study in Sociology of Emotions

Abstract: The article presents the results of a study conducted among a group of 55 highly experienced Polish social workers on the management of their emotions in contacts with clients. The research was inspired mainly by Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labour. Using a qualitative approach allowed us to incorporate a wider range of the spontaneity and reflexivity expressed by the subjects of the study. The paper helps illustrate that, similarly to other helping professions, social workers deploy significant emotional labour and use a range of emotional strategies to affect their clients' actions or behaviour. The effectiveness of such labour depends on experience, individual characteristics and the formal and informal support they have access to. We conclude that with experience such workers not only control their emotions better, but first and foremost become more effective in using their emotions in such a way as to encourage or discourage certain actions and behaviours among their clients. The findings indicate that more attention should be placed on the role of emotions and emotional labour used by social workers in their daily practice. Incorporation of elements of the sociology of emotions might be particularly useful in this regard.

Keywords: emotional labour, sociology of emotions, social work, supervision, social work practice

Introduction

This paper addresses the discussion into evidence-based (rational) vs gut feeling-based (emotional, intuitive) decision making in social work practice (see [Taylor & White 2001](#) for details) in so far as it illustrates how emotional labour is used (often very consciously) in dealing with clients. We look at emotions as essential to the processes of judgement and decision making. Steven Gordon (1990) points out that all emotional cultures rely on 'dictionaries of emotions' as well as on norms and beliefs related to emotions. Those working in service sectors draw from these dictionaries, which are useful in dealing with difficult and often irritating clients. There are two paradigms to the concept of emotional culture: institutional and impulsive ([Gordon 1989](#)). When emotional expression fits the normative patterns and is controlled internally, then we can speak about an institutional paradigm. When, however, emotions are uncontrolled, unconventional or intense, then we talk about an impulsive paradigm. According to the results of our research, both paradigms are present in the practice of social work, but only the first one tends to be officially addressed. The impulsive paradigm seems to be rather neglected, both in everyday social practice, research and in the specialist literature. In the popular handbooks ([Show & Lishman 1999](#); [Beckett](#)

2006; Garthwait 2012; Cournoyer 2014) attention is usually drawn to the clients and their well-being. Service workers' emotions are far less often the main focus.

DuBois and Miley (1999) in their classical reader *Social Work: an Empowering Profession* list the 10 principles of a social worker, one of which is controlled emotional involvement during practice. This is supposed to be a golden mean between indifference towards clients' problems and over-involvement. Such an attitude should ideally result in empathy and maintaining a balance between accepting and forgiving any inappropriate behaviours by clients. In the academic domain, however, researchers have recently noticed the need to study closer the role of emotional labour in social work practice (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen 2015).

In this article we will focus on the more neglected impulsive approach to emotions of social workers by identifying ways in which Polish practitioners manage emotions in contacts with clients. The research findings draw attention to the rigidity of professional role guidelines within generalist social work education, which in many ways is disconnected from the experiences of direct practitioners, and certainly also in relation to outcomes related to occupational health and emotional well-being (Łuczyńska 2012; Łuczyńska, Olech 2013). Our interest in the topic is expressed in two main research questions: why do Polish social workers manage emotions and how do they do so? Additionally, in the course of the analysis, questions related to the type and availability of support available for managing social workers' emotions turned out to be significant. This issue is therefore discussed in a separate section in the paper.

Emotional Labour

In her book *The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feelings*, Arlie Hochschild (1983) notices that apart from the classical distinction of two types of work—manual labour and mental, intellectual work—there is also another one, which has been hugely undervalued—emotional labour. This is performed on a daily basis, in many occupations, and involves subordinations of feelings in order to maintain a specific body language and facial expression attached to a particular social role. Emotional labour “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild 1983: 7). Hochschild distinguishes between ‘deep’ and ‘surface’ acting. The former refers to a situation when a worker evolves a specific emotion, while the latter is more about faking an emotion to meet work rules. Using this typology we claim that the more engaged workers tend more often to employ the ‘deep’ acting method. They try in effect to change the emotions they feel to match the situation. This may happen when a worker must suppress their fear or anger about a client's undesirable behaviour. This approach involves a high level of empathy towards clients and emotional commitment and, as a result, may become overwhelming for the worker. Those who are more distanced, or feel more burnt out, would rather stick to ‘surface acting’, that is using various masks to adjust to situations, for example when a worker changes his or her attitude and becomes indifferent to work. Such a strategy may be seen as a form of self-protection from bearing further emotional costs.

After Hochschild developed the concept of emotion management a swathe of new interdisciplinary international literature started to appear (Grandey, Diefendorff & Rupp 2013; Lively & Weed 2014; Hoffman 2016), developing the idea further. Inspired by Hochschild's work, we have decided to look at the ways in which social workers manage their emotions in their contacts with clients. Hochschild (1983) argues that professions such waitress, flight attendant, sales representatives and debt collector all involve emotional labour. The aim of the first three is to make clients feel happy and looked after in order to increase the chances they will come back for more services or products. The role of the debt collector, on the other hand, is to use controlled aggression to make the client pay the money he or she owes. Despite their different goals, both the waitress and the debt collector use and manage their emotions to enhance the effectiveness of their performance.

All occupations which involve some kind of emotional labour can be classified into two groups: emotional proletariat (telework, cashier, waiter) and expert social services (doctor, lawyer, researcher) (MacDonald & Sirianni 1996). Social workers would reside in the latter category, as so-called 'privileged emotional managers' (Orzechowicz 2008) in their contacts with clients. Not only do social workers deal with their own emotions induced at—and by—work, but they are also expected to adjust to the norms governing the emotional culture (Gordon 1990) of their occupation, which is created by different institutions: social assistance legislation, codes of ethics, church organisations and non-governmental educational institutions. Emotional culture includes emotional ideologies about appropriate attitudes, feelings and emotional reactions of an employee engaged in the profession. When the components of an emotional system—joy, anger, fear—enter the labour market they are sold as a type of human work (Hochschild 1983).

Methods

The type of study conducted here is a pragmatic qualitative study that utilises written response data. The research was influenced by a grounded theory framework as in Kathy Charmaz (2006) constructionist paradigm, which offers the possibility of adopting a bottom-up approach, allowing for the discovery of unforeseen issues and processes. Contrary to Glaser and Strauss (1967), Charmaz highlights the role of a researcher in influencing the scope of the data as well as its coding and interpretation (Konecki 2009).

We decided to ask the social workers participating in our study to provide short written descriptions (we call them "mini-essays") of some work-related situations. This technique was inspired mainly by Hochschild (1983) and Brady et al. (2002), who both used it to allow their participants not only to tell the story, but also to reflect on it—an aspect of research easily lost even in IDIs and in standard questionnaires. It was also our intention to observe how the social workers perceive and rationalize their use of emotions in certain situations, after the passing of some time. The mini-essay technique is not used very often in the social sciences. There were two reasons for employing this approach: the nature of the topic and the limited availability of research subjects.

Emotions are a very intimate subject. By using the mini-essay technique, the participants were able to take more time, without feeling rushed to answer questions immediately,

as may happen in the more common in-depth-interviews (IDIs) often used in qualitative studies. It was also up to them to decide which question (out of three) they wanted to address first. This created an atmosphere which allowed them to open up and share their—sometimes very difficult—experiences. As a result, there was often a surprising level of spontaneity and genuine honesty in the writings, as we will see in the excerpts presented later in this paper. Additionally, an IDI technique carries the risk that the interviewees will feel somehow pressured to share information, and as a result might withdraw or give only superficial answers. Writing essays avoids this kind of problem and allows the participants to decide how much they want to reveal and in what order. Also, the very action of writing requires concentration on the subject and makes the sharing of information a more reflexive process (Brady, Corbie-Smith and Branch 2002). Because the pace of revealing information is much slower in written than in oral performance, essay-writing may become a self-reflexive activity.

There are, of course, some drawbacks of using essays as a research technique. The main one is that it requires more physical effort from the informants than just participating in a conversation, as offered by the IDI technique. The participants may get tired or simply bored and, as a result, there might be tendency to shorten the narration (although other techniques in fact face a similar risk). This is why the researcher has to be realistic when planning the topic for an essay. Another potential problem is the limitation of time: in our case the participant were given 90 minutes to complete the task. Finally, the researcher has little control over the input of the writing. Although there is always a subject/questions to address, there is little guarantee that the informants will not diverge from it, in a direction which might not be necessary interesting for the research. Fortunately, we did not face such a situation in our study. The mini-essay technique allowed the workers to describe the range of emotions that accompany their work, although there was little information on the particular ways of coping with the more difficult ones. Still, the great majority of the essays were elaborated at length and rich in content. On average each participant of the study wrote 2–3 pages, which altogether made up approximately 110 pages.

The informants shared with us examples of the various emotions (both negative and positive, arousing shame or pride) they experienced in their work with clients, usually starting from contextualisation of a case, developing it, and ending with description of a decision-making process regarding a presented case.

There were three topics included in the essays. (1) We asked the participants to describe important situation(s) (in their own opinions) in their workplace, which were meaningful for them and which entailed strong emotions, both positive or negative. We assumed that the difficult/emotional experiences of social work practitioners oblige them to use emotional work/manage emotions. (2) The informants were asked to give examples of how they use their emotions to obtain the results they expected in their contacts with clients. (3) Finally, we asked them to describe the most satisfying aspects of their work with clients. The first two topics correspond to the research questions we address in the paper. The findings from the third topic was presented elsewhere (Kanasz 2014b). The written data was coded by the two authors independently of each other, but using analytic induction and constant comparison strategies to code the data. There were 38 codes created altogether for the whole

data (topics 1–3). During systematic reading and re-reading of the material we looked for main themes and patterns in relation to the research questions. The analysis was aided by qualitative data software Atlas.ti.

Characteristics of the Research Group

The participants were all part-time students of the undergraduate three-year programme organised by the Department of Applied Social Sciences, Academy of Special Education in Warsaw, aimed at those who has already been working in the job but lacked a university degree.¹ The studies were structured in a part-time system, every other weekend, so that they did not interfere with the students' work. This way we had gained direct (though limited) access to 55 highly experienced social workers representing all of the 16 regions of Poland. Although the participants came from various parts of the country, they hardly composed a representative sample of Polish social workers. However, the variety of the sample does allow, we believe, for extrapolation of the results to some extent. 49 of the participants of the study were females (90.8%), five men (9.2%) (in one case there was no data regarding gender). Such distribution is only slightly different from the general proportion of male and female social workers in Poland.² The students were all lower rank (non-managerial staff), frontline social workers, representing various social welfare institutions, such as the Social Assistance Centre, the Municipal Social Assistance Centre, Family Welfare Centre, Nursing Homes, and in one case a children's home. The youngest participant was 25 year old and the oldest 55. The majority of the informants were in the 41–50 age category (33 people) and 21 of them had over 20 years of experience in social work. The second biggest group consisted of those who had less than 5 year experience (14 informants).

The study was carried out in May 2012 in Warsaw. We kindly asked one of our colleagues to allow us to carry out the research during her class. All 55 students were informed about the aim and subject of the study, the anonymity of information they would offer and voluntary participation. The project complies with EU and Polish laws and regulations with regard to privacy and is in line with the codes of ethics applicable to the social science.³ Each participant received a form which included three open questions and basic socio-demographic variables (gender, years of experience, region). We are aware that such an approach may risk response bias that occurs when using students as subjects, especially students enrolled in a programme that has rigid requirements around what is considered appropriate professional behaviour in relation to one's own emotions. However, the collected information indicates low presence of such influence.

¹ Since the introduction of the new regulations in 2007 and 2008, in order to keep their jobs (relatively) safe, social workers need to have adequate qualification to carry on in the profession. The Maria Grzegorzewska University offers a part-time graduate programme in social work, financed to a large extent by the European Commission (European Social Fund), aimed at social workers with hands-on experience who still lack formal qualifications.

² There were 17,882 social workers in Poland in 2010, 94.2 percent females to 5.8 males (Łuczyńska 2012).

³ We referred to the Sociologist's Code of Ethics, set forth by the Polish Sociological Society in 2012.

Findings

Every participant provided at least one example of emotional labour, but for the sake of the integrity of the paper we have chosen only a few of the most illustrative quotes. The presentation of the results of the research is divided into three subsections which clearly correspond to the research questions.

The Need for Managing Emotions

As Willem Mastebroek (2000) notes, the history of organisational behaviour has been changing in two directions: increasing discipline and acknowledgment of emotions. Welfare organisations today are also characterised by both tendencies—disciplining while encouraging more natural, relaxed behaviour, based on informal relationships, provided—paradoxically—that they remain under control. Social workers are usually aware of such limitation of expression. One of them says:

The approach [towards a client] is neutral and relies on factual examination of the case, and my emotions that arise during contact with the clients are not affected. However, after the client's gone, emotions are analysed, but only in my head. (F/55/13).⁴

Two issues arise here: the inability to show real emotions in front of the client and lack of support in dealing with own emotions after leaving the client. Such control of emotions within a work context serves as a base for professional duty fulfilment and job performance in many professions, including social assistance (Boyd, Hayward, Tuckey, Dollard, and Dormann 2015). It assumes a pragmatic approach without the involvement of intense emotions. This is how one informant expressed the policy of boundary:

As a social worker I'm not supposed to show my emotions, especially when dealing with clients, because our clients can take advantage of it. A factual and objective attitude allows me to work, and protects me from burnout. (F/55/13)

The professional role of a social worker requires expressing appropriate emotions in dealing with clients. Social work is a socially created reality, part of a broader socio-cultural system, which defines the profession of social worker, client and the functioning of social welfare institutions (Payne 1997). The sociologist and social worker Emilia Lichnerowicz notes that "...this is one of the professions in which the performance of duties is often accompanied by emotional tension, caused to a great extent by the discrepancy between the expectations of the beneficiaries and the real possibility of meeting them" (Lichnerowicz 2012/2013: 87). In addition, social work requires a certain loyalty to the system of social assistance institutions (Davies 1991), which often results in further frustrations. According to one of the participants of our study:

the difficulty of social work practice lies in the fact that this is not a job that I do from 8 to 16, then close my desk and start the next day at 8 again. It's hard not to take the problems from work back home. I'm a clerk, I'm

⁴ The symbols used after a given fragment from a mini-essay stand for the following: F—Female, M—Male/essay's number/years of experience in social assistance.

obliged by law and rules, but I don't agree with all of them. Personally I often sympathise with the clients, but as an official I cannot recognise their rights, because the rules say otherwise. The social worker is also torn between the client and the line manager, who often makes us responsible for what the client does or what he or she fails to do. (F/39/17)

This fragment illustrates the two separate areas social workers operate in. One is official and accepted, defined by formal rules and procedures but hardly able to encompass the workers own emotions. The other is unofficial, informal, where behaviours may contradict formalities. The boundaries of the latter are not so clearly defined; it can be said that it starts where the official area ends. Because the official system often fails to address the emotional side of the workers' activity (we discuss the issue further in this text), the assistants are forced to take things into their own hands, using their own resources, knowledge and experience.

How Social Workers Manage their Emotions?

Social work takes time and skills and, as the section above illustrates, leads to various dilemmas regarding obeying procedures, showing sympathy towards clients and managing emotional struggle. It can be a heavy burden to carry. Emotional labour requires commitment, which results in bearing costs but also often gaining emotional benefits, such as pride when the undertaken activities prove to be successful, or gratitude from clients. This side of emotional labour was also noted by Danish researchers in their ethnographic study of social practice (Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen 2015).

The type and amount of emotional labour used depends on each particular case. Working with children will not be the same as working with adults. A different approach is required when assisting a person with disability in their daily activities, and totally different in the case of a victim of violence. Here is an example of the latter:

I work with the victims of violence, so 99% of them are women. They expect from me full commitment and support, so they can trust me. So I have to immerse myself in what I'm doing, I cannot help them with a half-hearted attitude. Sometimes they have nobody but me. (F/41/21)

In the course of analysis we recognised several areas in which workers perform emotion labour: liaisons with clients, contacts with supervisors and other employees, relations with other institutions providing assistance (such as the police, clinics, hospitals, other organisations) and the social workers' private life (family, partners, children). The situations most emotionally challenging, as pointed to in the mini-essays, included separating children from their parents and placing them in an institution (often causing grief and guilt), contacts with victims of domestic violence (giving way to compassion for the victim and anger towards the bully), contacts with individuals suffering from mental disorders (causing fear), contacts with addicts and with aggressive clients (leading to fear and anger). However, the information garnered in our study suggests that emotional management is used mostly in situations which require self-control of anger and negative feelings towards the clients. The intensity of the emotions depends additionally on whether or not the social worker is a parent themselves, how close is their relationships with the client and the amount of work experience they have (those working longer clearly cope better with emotionally stressful situations).

Similar to Hochschild, we have identified two methods of emotional labour used by the participants of our research: ‘the carrot’ method and ‘the stick’ method. Taking into account the specific features of our research, including the adopted theory and methods, we found four emotion management strategies used by social workers in Poland. These are: (1) using controlled anger, (2) refraining from expressing negative emotions, (3) keeping (apparent) calm, and (4) a rationalising strategy. We develop these six codes/thematic categories below and a more elaborate discussion on the strategies is presented in the next section.

Strategies of Emotional Management

Emotional labour methods are used to achieve the desired effect at work (Hochschild 1983). In the case of a social worker this refers to assisting those who are socially underprivileged, excluded or suffer from some form of abuse. Such methods include encouraging the beneficiaries into undertaking various actions and activities, showing sympathy and a readiness to help. This is ‘the carrot’ method. Another methods used involves using threats, adopting a more distanced, cold attitude or *controlled anger*, as in the following example:

I went for a visit to a mentally ill person. I tried to be calm, and I was. I explained the purpose [of my visit], and what information I needed. When I repeated this 4–5 times again and again, I could not help thinking that the person was making fun of me. I stood up and said in a loud voice that there were a lot of people waiting for my visit and that either she gave me the information I expected, or... And it worked. (F/52/27)

Sometimes, after such situations, the workers in our research regretted their heated reactions, but in most cases they said they were: “maybe not very proud with the means used but satisfied it worked” (F/52/27). Such justifications were recognised first in social psychology by Festinger (1957) in his classic concept of cognitive dissonance, which describes a state of mental discomfort born as a result of a situation when two pieces of information, beliefs or values are in conflict (e.g. *social workers should be able to maintain their composure and I was aggressive towards a client*). At the same time in sociology Erving Goffman (1956, 1959) showed that shame and embarrassment appear when an individual projects “incompatible definitions of himself before those present” (Goffman 1956: 264). Later, in sociology of emotions Susan Shott’s theory (1979) explains such reflexive role-taking as a way of self-control to maintain social order.

All the social workers who participated in our study were aware to some extent of the emotional strategies used in difficult situations. Moreover, they were able to reflect on these strategies and assess critically their behaviour if it was inappropriate, that is not in line with the official rules or the training they had received. One worker, after asking a family in care several times to clean up a terribly messy home for the sake of a new born baby, confessed:

I raised my voice and told the family what to do and I threatened them that if they didn’t I’d take the child away from them and put it in an institution. When I calmed down I felt horrible and stupid, that I reacted in this way. I think this is due to my burnout, fatigue or maybe just a bad day. As a professional I shouldn’t have behaved like that. (F/15/24)

Another strategy we recognised relies on *refraining from expressing negative emotions*. In cases when a client gets angry, uses abusive or offensive language, the social worker tries

to control the situation by maintaining composure, as in the following fragment: “I let [the client] spit out his anger, and when he had let off steam I asked him calmly what the problem was. It worked” (F/24/46). Another social worker, after a visit paid by a mentally ill client who “stormed into the office, shouting insults, cursing and was dangerous,” said: “I found that the client could do or say anything to the social worker [but] the social worker must be wary of the words she uses to clients” (F/7/17). In many difficult situations calm conversation might be helpful, but it is not always easy to reach such a strategy. “I know that my anger was a bad counsellor,” says one of the assistants. “I know that quiet conversation with a client brings greater results, but in some situations I cannot control the ball” (F/23/16). Refraining from exercising their own opinions and negative feelings may be the hardest of emotional labour, at least in our informants’ opinion.

In contacts with angry and violent clients the most typical strategy used by workers is *keeping (apparent) calm* by taking control of body language, so that they seem calm from the outside, but in fact inside the person may be shaking with fear. One of the workers reports that once during a typical visit:

a client suddenly got up from his chair, closed the window, covered the blinds and shut the door. I was paralysed. I felt panic (...), especially when he said he'd kill me now and throw me out of the window. (...) I sat motionless in his chair, I did not say anything and that probably saved me. (F/24/46)

In such life-threatening situations, social assistants try to hold back any words or gestures they believe might provoke the client. It is a ‘wait out’ strategy. Clients with a behavioural disorder or suffering from mental illnesses also belong to the more challenging category, where active management of emotions from workers is necessary. Their behaviour is often annoying, provoking or aggressive. Here is an example:

I recently went to see a mentally disordered client to fill in some forms. The person was aggressive, he accused us of making his life's misfortunes, his conflict with an ex-girlfriend; he complained loudly about his low allowance. I had to try to calm him down, listen to his complaints and convince him I was on his side. (...) I had to control my negative feelings not to fuel a bigger conflict. (F/7/38)

In this situation the social worker had to carry out double emotional labour: keeping her own composure while taking care of the client’s emotions.

A *rationalising strategy* might also be considered one of the types of management of emotions on the cognitive level. It is used to justify one’s own actions (or lack of them) by using (and referring to) knowledge about the client’s condition or his/her attitude. Below is a longer fragment of an essay illustrating such a strategy in the case of a suicide committed by a client who used to severely abuse his wife and family.

When I found out about [my client's suicide] I felt a bit guilty—maybe I had not been supportive enough, maybe he had felt rejected, maybe he felt his life had no meaning? On the other hand, I know that suicide attempts are actually a part of alcoholism. I couldn't support the victim of domestic violence and the perpetrator at the same time. It was probably the only time I felt so torn between two people. It was terrible. I cried, I didn't know whether the costs borne by the family (loss of a father) was bigger than the gain (end of abuse, violence, aggression). Now I know it is impossible to compare these things, but at that time I had such dilemmas. The family is not using our help any more but I keep thinking about them. Once, I met the wife on the street and she said her life was better since her husband had gone. I think I needed to know that my actions had not resulted in worsening her situation, that she was happy and safe. (F/17/39)

Sometimes the rationalising strategy is used in situations when the social workers are not sure how, and if, they can help. In such cases they call on the laws and regulations they are obliged to obey to convince potential clients that their hands are tied. For example workers may refer to binding rules when helping would require extreme efforts (and they are not very willing to make them), or when they are not sympathetic towards an aggressive or demanding client, as in this case:

There is this guy, he's been coming to the office for a long time. Never tried to find any job. Alcoholic, living alone. His whole life he has been treating social welfare as an institution giving away free money to people like him (...). We can't give him money because he'll spend it all on booze right away. Once we provided wood and coal so he could heat up the house in winter, but he sold it all to buy alcohol. Working with the client is really discouraging and makes me angry. (M/12/3)

When, on the other hand, the worker is determined to help, they might get irritated with the rules and regulations that prevent them from acting. Sometimes, they might even try to bend the laws so a client gets help anyway, as in the case of one of the informants.

Support in the Workers' Practice

Although the issue of support was not the central focus of the research, many of the social workers raised the subject spontaneously in their mini-essays. Those to whom support was available highlighted the role of it in their practice, those who lacked it said they would benefit from it. For this reason we have decided to include the topic of support in the article.

We distinguish between institutionalised support (supervision) and informal support, such as peer support and the supporting role played by colleagues (Shier & Graham 2011). According to the emotional standards required from social workers (DuBois & Miley 1999), practice can—and should—be assisted institutionally through an empathetic, motivating manager, regular supervisions and counselling, as well as informally (support provided by family, friends, colleagues). Before we move on to presenting the results of the study in this regard, some background on the past and current situation on supervision among Polish social workers is needed.

For many years Polish social workers had little formal support regarding their emotional wellbeing and coping with stress (Łuczyńska, Olech 2013). They tended to be left to their own resources. In recent years the situation has gradually started to change. On 31 December 2013 a new bill was introduced guaranteeing all social workers access to regular supervision. By 'supervision' we mean reflective, process-oriented counselling that focuses on work-related feelings and which leads to greater self-awareness (Bashirinia 2013). As Łuczyńska and Olech (2013: 5) note: "Supervision means the opportunity for professional development, (...) it means a way—not always easy—to expand self-awareness and a better understanding of self." In practice, in Poland the amount and quality of the support is left to a Social Assistance Centre. It is up to each institution to work out its own support policy for employees. The information included in the mini-essays suggests that the situation is generally better in bigger cities in this respect. One of our informants pointed to the role of counselling in her practice in the following way:

For the last two years I've been dealing with victims of violence (...). Having contact with a psychologist is very helpful. Whenever my emotions—both positive and negative—become overwhelming and influence my be-

haviour—not only at work but also at home and with my family—Ms X is around to help me structure and arrange some order. (F/19/51)

As the research findings suggest, the particular institutions designed to support social workers are often insufficient and ineffective. The practitioners who took part in the study pointed to problems such as: “the slowness of the courts (...), sometimes powerlessness against the work of other institutions” (F/25/31), a situation when “a police patrol was called twice at night to intervene but did not react accordingly” (F/4/40). Another fragment illustrates the ineffectiveness of the actions taken:

Sometimes we are helpless, because alcohol rehab committees, therapies, the police, do not bring any results. [After rehab] our clients return to their old environment, their mates, anyway. We worry about other people, as if they were our relatives. We worry about ourselves. (F/1/36)

Apart from the feeling of helplessness, in the case of the inefficiency of the institutions on which the client’s situation depends, grief and rage are also sometimes experienced by the social workers.

When I hear from one of my female clients that she had been calling the police again and again when her husband starts a fight, and the police—instead of doing their duty and taking the husband into custody—had threatened my client that they’d charge her for calling the police out without due reason...! then I feel furious and resentful that the police officers are neglecting their work. And they could do so much good! (F/21/41)

Some workers also said that instead of a more individualised approach to a particular client needing help, there is far too much paperwork and bureaucracy, which in turn does not allow them to be engaged in a case in the way they would wish. Some mentioned in their mini-essays difficulties in getting along with managerial staff and continuous rush, which creates a dilemma: completing office work or listening to the client and guiding them? Moreover, the current evaluation system seems to emphasise the importance of paperwork, which in return demotivates social workers to get involved in clients’ problems. This is exemplified by the following fragment:

We are treated as ‘drones’ who have to be familiar with every piece of legislation, and who know how to fix everything. (...) This often results in rather negative emotions. This is due to the fact that our work is difficult to assess; sometimes it’s only paperwork all day long, and sometimes clients are constantly coming in with some problems and I have no time to fill in forms. And then the management says: today you’ve done nothing because you haven’t complete the papers. And where is the time spent with the client, I ask? Nobody cares, only completing documents matters. (F/52/49)

It appears from the study that there are a lot of unmet expectations regarding the need for institutionalised support for social work practitioners from their organisations. Some of these needs are partly addressed by informal actors, mainly family members and colleagues. This phenomenon is illustrated in the passage below:

I deal with human tragedies on a daily basis, there are often ex-mates from the past involved, which brings a lot of emotions. I’m not able to go back home and not think about it, leave all of that behind. My family often senses my emotions, and although I never share any details from my work, I know I can count on them. (F/34/30)

Emotional support is often obtained through informal contacts with other workers. Although this usually takes place within the institution it is not formally structured and regulated. It should be looked at as rather peer type of support (Shier & Graham 2011). It is

a spontaneous activity, which carries some of the characteristics typical for any self-help group: regular contacts between people in stressful situations who try to help each other by sharing experiences.⁵ The impact of such peer support should not be underestimated. A Canadian study on social workers' well-being shows how informal contacts between colleagues provide them with a feeling of a safe place where they can get things of their chest (Shier & Graham 2011). Satisfying communication with other team members would appear to be essential to fulfilment and helps workers cope with difficult emotions. It plays—as the workers indicate in their mini-essays—a very important psychological role: “I work in a great team, I get wound up in a positive sense, and gain the desire to help others” (F/41/21).

A regular, complex system of support for social workers is still underdeveloped in Poland. A special publication was prepared only in 2013 (Łuczyńska & Olech 2013) advising in a systematic way what were the different forms of supervision and pointing to its role in social worker practice. One of the main goals of supervision is to learn appropriate expression of feelings and how to cope with difficult emotions (Powell & Brodsky 2004; Ingram 2013). Therefore, by acknowledging the need for expert emotional support in the helping professions, emotional labour can be formally integrated into social work practice.

Conclusions

The undertaken research allowed insights into important spheres of emotional labour performed by Polish social workers in relation to their practice. However, the results, it seems, can be also applied to other professions such as sales representatives, nurses, teachers, flight assistants. For this reasons the findings presented in the paper make an input not only on the sociology of emotions but also sociology of work.

The forms of emotional labour distinguished in the paper are rather generic and go beyond the social work sector. Only *controlled anger* seem to be more context-dependent than the other forms, as it would be used mainly in those professions in which the element of socialising is present, such as teachers and social workers. Moreover, the Polish context of social assistance differs from the American or western-European. For one, the profession had to be built from the ground after transformation in 1989 and the process is still in progress, which can result in the insufficient institutional support as mentioned in the text. This situation may also influence the forms and intensity of emotional management. For example, in the light of the research questions we posed, the findings show that social work practitioners often undertake emotional labour partly because the system rarely addresses the emotional side of the workers' activity. They might use several emotional management strategies, such as controlled anger, refraining from expressing negative emotions, keeping calm and rationalising, to deal with challenging clients and problems.

Our research shed some light on the sources of the problems practitioners come across in their work. The results from the study suggest that the social workers' skills used to

⁵ See for example: What is a self-help group? Retrieved from: http://www.mededfund.org/NJgroups/What_Is_a_Self-Help.htm

cope with emotions seem to depend on three factors: individual character, the availability of institutionalised and informal support and experience.

It is often suggested that learning to control (constrain) emotional reactions comes with the acquisition of practical experience (DuBois & Miley 1999; Łuczyńska & Olech 2013). Our study, however, does not necessarily confirm this. It seems that with time and experience the Polish workers we studied have become better rather at *managing* (using) their emotions effectively, or deep acting in Hochschild sense (1983), which is not the same as *controlling* (constraining) the emotions in the textbook sense. In other words, more experienced workers would know better how to use their emotions (both positive and negative) deliberately to provoke the actions they expect to be done in order to improve the situation (cleaning a house, registering in a job centre, joining an AA group and so on). This may not be quite in line with the all-too-rigid job principles, and the workers are aware of that, but they often have to compromise, so it seems, between effectiveness and working by the book. Therefore we believe that the sociological theories, as represented in the paper by Goffman, Hochschild and Shott enriches the perspective provided by social work theory.

The results presented in this paper support the arguments expressed also by other authors (Shier & Graham 2011; Ingram 2013) that workers' social well-being is significantly influenced by supervision and peer support. This indicates that more attention should be placed on the role of emotions and emotional labour used by social helpers in their assessments and interventions. Further research could broaden the analysis of emotions among social work practitioners and other helping professions by incorporating knowledge and methods from the sociology of emotions. In addition to mini-essays as used by our informants, emotion diaries completed after each work day would provide a much richer data. Using more participatory research methods, on the other hand, such as ethnographic research and shadowing would allow observations into how social workers use their emotions in day-to-day practice. It could be also interesting to focus on international experiences to enable comparative analysis.

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