

# **EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES**

ON EMOTIONAL LABOR AMONG SWEDISH SOCIAL WORKERS

**FANNY HOLT**



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL WORK**

EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

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## **ABSTRACT**

Title: Emotional Navigation in Social Services: on Emotional Labor among Swedish Social Workers

Author: Fanny Holt

Key words: social services, social work, feeling rules, emotional regime, emotional labor, frames of reference, interaction rituals, professional identity, street-level bureaucracies

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This thesis explores emotional labor among social workers in Swedish Social Services. The primary aim is to enhance understanding of how social workers discuss and utilize emotions in their practice, as well as how they manage their own and others' emotions. Additionally, the thesis aims to shed light on how social workers identify and navigate feeling rules and role expectations within their professional practice. The study is based on empirical material gathered from social workers employed in the individual and family care sector, including interviews, observations of professional meetings, supervision sessions, and informal interactions. Informed by institutional ethnography, the analysis also incorporates various texts and documents.

The theoretical framework of the study draws from the sociology of emotions, which views emotions not merely as individual experiences but as social phenomena that both shape and are shaped by interactions. This perspective highlights how feeling rules and norms at different levels govern the experience, display, and management of emotions.

The analysis reveals that social work practice is embedded within often-contradictory sets of feeling rules, reflecting larger inherent conflicts and tensions regarding the mission, role, and direction of social work. These ambiguities manifest as conflicts and disagreements in organizational meetings, where professional ethics and bureaucratic standards—conceptualized as dual emotive-cognitive frames of reference—collide in terms of ideas about case interpretation and how to relate to emotions in practice. Additionally, these ambiguities lead to feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty, frustration, self-doubt, and guilt among social workers, as there is no clear standard for evaluating their practice and behavior, making it difficult to delineate boundaries for what can and should be done.

Furthermore, the analysis shows that social workers engage in ongoing emotional navigation within the complex emotional regime of social services. This process involves claiming and moving between role positions defined by the dual frames. Role positions are based on beliefs about one's role responsibilities, the scope of one's duties, the degree of closeness to clients, and the boundaries between private and professional spheres. Claiming these role positions allows social workers to maintain coherence in their core values and sense of self. Emotional navigation and the sense of professional identity are greatly influenced by repeated interaction rituals with colleagues, which produce group solidarity and emotionally charged collective symbols, such as moral standards. Finally, the analysis demonstrates that emotions are a fundamental part of social work practice, strategically used to influence others, motivate and guide actions, inform decision-making, and underpin moral reflection. However, the organization, through implicit norms and explicit instructions regarding how, when, and where emotions should be displayed, managed, and used, aims to shape social workers' emotions into organizational resources.

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## FÖRORD

I november 2014 stod jag bland doftljus och krukväxter på IKEA:s avdelning – missvisande kallad ”oasen” – iklädd en pikétröja i en nyans av gul som det mänskliga ögat borde förskonas från. Under denna tid höll jag på att skriva en masteruppsats i sociologi om försvarsadvokaters emotionella arbete. Efter att jag kommit i kontakt med begreppet hade jag börjat reflektera över det emotionella arbete jag själv utförde som anställd i den kommersiella serviceindustrin. Denna typ var av relativt okomplicerad art. Oftast innebar det att dölja känslor av irritation och förorättning när en kund, djupt förkrossad av nyheten att en högt önskad dekorationsvas var utsåld, skällde ut mig. Dessa oförrätter var dock lätta att skaka av sig, av den enkla anledningen att jag inte brydde mig speciellt mycket. Jag kände varken skuld eller sorg över att jag inte kunde hjälpa kunden, dels för att jag saknade det *äkt* *engagemang!* för kundservice som jobbannonsen efterfrågade, men framför allt för att jag inte upplevde någon form av moraliskt övertramp från min - eller företagets - sida.

I kontrast till den kommersiella sektorns kundorientering kommer jag att tänka på mina alldeles för många och alltid lika oangenäma möten med den tyska byråkratin när jag under några år bodde i Berlin. Jag minns särskilt en gång när jag och en vän skulle registrera adressändring, vilket inte gjordes via nätet (vilket jag betvivlar att det görs nu heller), utan krävde ett fysiskt besök till *Bürgeramts* imponerande intetsägande lokal. Efter att tillsammans ha tagit en nummerlapp – då vi skulle skriva oss på samma adress – satte vi oss och väntade. Blotta tre timmar senare var det vår tur, varvid en människa med en nästan beundransvärd brist på engagemang meddelade att vi måste ha varsin lapp. Protester var verkningslösa, det stod snabbt klart. En av oss (jag har förträngt vem) fick helt enkelt snällt ta en ny lapp och vänta. Nu i efterhand så förstår jag att personen bakom disken betedde sig som en idealisk byråkrat. Samma regler gäller för alla, inga undantag. Försök att väcka empati är därför meningslöst. En byråkrat är i sin renaste form en funktionär, satt att utföra vissa uppgifter och säkerställa att dessa verkställs enligt principer om rättvisa, vilket innebär att inte ta hänsyn personliga skäl eller låta sig påverkas av pockande känslor

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av medlidande (eller en vilja att bli av med en sur civilist). Ingen mannamån, lika för alla.

Hur som haver, den där dagen i november stod jag i vanlig ordning och smyglyssnade på radio medan jag försökte gömma mig för kunder bakom en hylla hyacinter. Programmet, producerat av *Kaliber i P1*, granskade ”krisen i socialtjänsten”. Där och då föddes idén till denna avhandling. För socialtjänstens anställda är målsättningarna och principerna, och därför emotionsarbetet, mer komplexa än inom serviceindustrin eller inom den rena byråkratin, vilket jag hoppas framkommer i den här texten.

Att avhandlingen nu faktiskt existerar har möjliggjorts av en massa andra personer som jag vill tacka. Först om främst vill jag tacka alla deltagare som stod ut med mina dumma frågor och närvaro i en redan stressig arbetsvardag. Det empiriska materialet är i min mening utan tvekan avhandlingens mest fascinerande del. Stort tack till er alla!

Sedan vill jag tacka mina handledare, Therése Wissö och Torbjörn Forkby, för era hundratals läsningar, guidning, och inte minst tålmod under dessa år. Tack för att ni har mäktat med mina alldeles för långa utkast och utsvävningar under åren. Ett särskilt tack vill jag även rikta till Staffan Höjer för din läsning inför mitt mellanseminarium, och min läsgrupp, Marcus Herz och Katarina Hollertz. Tack också till Peter Dellgran för ditt stöd och hjälp i olika faser av doktorandutbildningen. Åsa Wettergren, du har betytt otroligt mycket för mig! En gång i tiden handledde du min masteruppsats och uppmuntrade mig att söka forskartjänst, och dina kommentarer i egenskap av opponent på mitt slutseminarium har varit ovärderliga.

Doktorandtiden har varit präglad av känslor av självtvivel och en rädsla att avslöjas som en imposter. Dessa vedermödor har dock varit hanterbara tack vare den fristad som har skapats i doktorandkollektivet. Framför allt så har mina doktorandsyskon i 2017-kullen varit outhärliga; Lowe Bergström, Tobias Jansson, Kristin Blom, och Elias Ternström. Även dig, Magnus Weber, räknar jag till denna skara. Lowe och Kristin, vi har alla parallellt med slutfasen av våra avhandlingar under vårterminen 2025 utkämpat – och ofta förlorat – maktkamper med våra tvååringar hemma.

Kristin, vi har delat kontor sedan begynnelsen, och jag hoppas att vi fortsätter att göra det fram till pensionen. Vårt kontorshem har fungerat ömsom som arbetsplats, ömsom som terapirum.

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Fanny Holt

Göteborg, maj 2025

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## **TRANSLATIONS OF TERMS, ABBREVIATIONS, AND ACRONYMS**

Administrative Court - Förvaltningsrätten

Adult Unit – Vuxenenhet (AU)

Assessment/Investigation – Utredning

Care of Substance Abusers (Special Provisions) Act - Lag om vård av missbrukare i vissa fall (LVM)

Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act - Lag med särskilda bestämmelser om vård av unga (LVU)

Case - Klientärende

Children and Youth Unit – Enheten för barn och unga (CYU)

Exercise of Public Authority - Myndighetsutövning

Financial Assistance – Försörjningsstöd/Ekonomiskt bistånd

First Response Team – Mottagsenhet (FRT)

Foster Home Unit – Familjehemsenhet (FHU)

Health and Social Care Committee – Inspektionen för vård och omsorg (IVO)

Home and Care Residence – Hem för vård eller boende (HVB)

Municipality 1 / 2 (social services office) – Socialtjänstkontor i respektive medverkande kommuner

Individual and Family Care – Individ och familjeomsorg (IFO)

Intervention - Insats

Social Services Act – Socialtjänstlagen (SoL)

Social Welfare Committee - Socialnämnden

Social Worker (in social services) – Socialarbetare/Socialsekreterare

Treatment Facility – Behandlingshem

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

### A PERPETUAL CRISIS IN SOCIAL SERVICES?

The Swedish social services are frequently described as being in a state of crisis. This narrative is far from new. In December 1970, a journalistic article titled “Crisis in Social Services!”<sup>1</sup> was published. Forty-four years later, in late 2014, the investigative journalism show *Kaliber* published a three-part series on “the crisis in social services”<sup>2</sup>. The similarities are striking. Social workers describe feelings of inadequacy, stress, and worry, of sleepless nights and gnawing guilt over not being able to adequately help their clients. They speak of inadequate resources, overwhelming caseloads, excessive administration, insufficient knowledge, and staff turnover and recruitment problems.

In 1970, interviewees describe clients dying because social workers lack the time to help them. The administrative workload is identified as a central problem, “We should do the job we are trained for, relationships with people, not administration and paperwork. One interviewee cites insufficient training and knowledge: “We can fill out the forms, refer people with minor problems to the appropriate authority, but when it comes to treatment, we know nothing. We need psychological expertise, but what we have learned is simple pseudo-psychology.” Another interviewee asks, “we work as hard as we can, but it’s not enough. I’m starting to lose my confidence, am I the problem?” In 2014, the reports are eerily similar: clients dying because

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<sup>1</sup> Swedish: *Kris i socialvården!* Bildmagasinet *Se*, December 16, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Swedish: *Kaliber granskar krisen i socialtjänsten*. Sveriges radio P1, November 23, November 30, December 7, 2014.

social workers lack the time and ability to help them: “How do you respond to a child that wants to commit suicide or has been sexually abused? I have no training for dealing with that.”

These anecdotal reports are echoed in research and official reports on the working conditions and consequences in Swedish social services<sup>3</sup> over the past decade. A review by the Swedish Work Enforcement Authority in 2018 confirmed the significant work environment problems across the country (Arbetsmiljöverket, 2018). In addition to these sources, research has demonstrated deteriorating working conditions, such as overwhelming caseloads, insufficient resources, extensive staff turnover, and recruitment problems. Studies indicate that statutory social workers<sup>4</sup> experience higher rates of long-term sick leave due to burnout and stress-related illnesses compared to other public sector employees (Andrén, 2021; Astvik et al., 2021; Tham, 2018; Tham & Meagher, 2009; Welander et al., 2017), particularly among newly qualified social workers (Bruhn et al., 2020; Tham & Lynch, 2019, 2021). These tendencies are not limited to a Swedish context, but similar research findings have been reported internationally, for example in other Nordic countries (Blomberg et al., 2015; Mänttari-van Der Kuip, 2014), Great Britain (Curtis et al., 2010; Hussein, 2018), and the USA (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Travis et al., 2016).

So, labeling the testimonies above as an indication of a crisis in social services seems not be without merit. Yet, the term “crisis” can be interpreted in various ways. Is it a temporary condition to be managed, repaired, and resolved, or does it signify a more perennial state, deeply embedded in the assignment and operation of statutory social work? This thesis takes its starting point in the latter understanding.

Social work is characterized by inherent contradictions and dilemmas, conceptualized in various ways such as care versus control, street-level bureaucracy, and conflicting logics. These aspects highlight the dual role of social workers as both professionals and bureaucrats (Evetts, 2009; Farrell & Morris, 2003; Lipsky, 2010). This dual role means that social workers operate in a field of tension between conflicting and often contradictory goals, values, and expectations. As argued in this thesis, a central element of these tensions involves navigating conflicting ideas on the role of emotions. Using theories and concepts from the sociology of emotion, I

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<sup>3</sup> Specifically the individual and family care sector of social services.

<sup>4</sup> Swedish: *Socialsekreterare*. I will use the term “social worker” throughout the thesis.

conceptualize these issues as tensions between professional values and bureaucratic principles regarding how to use, regulate, and interpret emotions.

Before articulating my research problem and aim, I outline the significant transformations that have taken place in legislation, the social work profession, and organization and governance during the last decades. Despite these changes, as I will show, fundamental conflicts and contradictions remain.

## SOCIAL SERVICES: A CONTENTIOUS AGENCY

The 1970s were characterized by lively discussions and debates about the purpose, aims, and methods of social services, which resulted in an extensive government investigation that led to the Social Services Act of 1980 (1980:620). This legislation aimed to modernize and coordinate various aspects of social services, replacing previous laws such as the Child Care Act, the Sobriety Care Act, and the Poor Relief Act.<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, reviews were conducted that formed the basis for the current legislation (SFS 2001:453). In 2017, the government decided on a new review of the Social Services Act, which will come into force in July 2025 (Swedish Government, 2024/25:89). While there have been changes throughout the reforms, the core values have remained steadfast, including democracy, solidarity, economic and social security, and equality in living conditions. The societal mission and *raison d'être* of the social work profession can therefore be summarized as helping vulnerable individuals and, by extension, improving society as a whole (Swedner, 1983).

However, the societal mission of social services extends beyond assisting vulnerable individuals in need of support and care. It also involves disciplining people who create problems for themselves and others, which in turn involves determining what are appropriate ways of behaving in society. Hasenfeld (2019) refers to this as *moral work*, where social workers process people into bureaucratically manageable ‘cases’ according to formalized classification systems based morally infused notions of ideal citizens and behaviors, delineating who is deserving or undeserving, normal or deviant (Brante 2014, p. 69).

Therefore, the function of social services is, and always has been, conflict-ridden and socially and politically charged and involve fundamental questions, including:

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<sup>5</sup> Swedish: *Barnvårdslagen, Nykterhetsvårdslagen, Fattigvårdslagen*.

should social services discipline individuals through interventions so that they become functional parts of the larger social order, thereby maintaining order and protecting the public? Or should they contribute to an egalitarian social order that facilitate individuals' potential to be a part of this order? (Börjeson, 2021; Marston & McDonald, 2012). These questions also relate to conflicting viewpoints about the *causes* of social problems. While some emphasize individual responsibility, others stress structural factors creating unfair opportunities for individuals in society (Billquist, 1999; Börjeson, 2021). These diverging emphases are reflected in media and public debates, where social workers are sometimes portrayed as intrusive and authoritarian bureaucrats, and at other times as naive do-gooders contaminated by ideological convictions. Criticisms involve accusations of inadequate judicial knowledge and psychological methods, unsystematic and arbitrary decision-making, and a lack of impartiality and objectivity<sup>6</sup> (Nilsson, 2025).

Thus, determining the “appropriate” mission and objectives for social services is difficult to articulate in a consensus notion. Instead of a unified idea, there are tensions and potentially conflicting standpoints and views about the causes of social problems, who is responsible for changing the conditions that sustain these problems, and the role and methods of social work.

An additional significant tension for social work relates to the one found between the organizational, bureaucratic order and the professional actor, which I will explicate next.

### SOCIAL WORK: A PROFESSION IN A BUREAUCRATIC SETTING

With the expansion of the Swedish welfare system in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the human service professions emerged. In the late 1970s, social work was established as an academic field aimed at developing a specific knowledge base. This can be understood as part of a professionalization project of social work, aiming to gain jurisdiction and autonomy (Brante, 2015, p. 68; Dellgran, 2015). However, to

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, in 2020 an antagonistic media debate erupted following the death of a three-year-old girl known as “lilla hjärtat” (sweetheart). In the editorial pages of one of Sweden’s largest newspapers, “*Dagens Nyheter*”, it was claimed that “social workers’ assessments are a danger for the rule of law”, and that “decisions are made based on personal opinion, faulty logic, claims about what children and others have said that cannot be verified” (Björklund, 2020-05-14; Lagercrantz, 2020-04-21).

be recognized as a profession and gain jurisdiction over certain social problems, professions must gain public trust. This trust relies on the formulation of a professional code of ethics, stating a commitment to the public and promises to adhere to certain standards of conduct (Evetts, 2009; Freidson, 2001).

Social work ethics emphasize individualized responses and client advocacy, defining social workers' primary responsibility as promoting the well-being and interests of their clients by building trusting and helpful relationships (Bruhn & Källström 2018; Sjögren, 2018). Ideal ethical characteristics for individual practitioners include, according to the leading trade union for social workers, commitment, empathy, taking responsibility, and independence of mind, and using the “self as tool,” aiming to develop authentic and personalized relationship with clients (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016). In addition, they include societally oriented values, such as human rights, social justice, and solidarity (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016; IFSW, 2018).

The social work education program<sup>7</sup> is assumed to play an important role in shaping values, ethics, as well as providing a foundation for professional conduct. Together with professional ethics, which aspires to provide practitioners with a specific worldview and certain dispositions to act<sup>8</sup> and evaluate clients' lives and the structural conditions that embed them (cf. Brante, 2015; Bruhn et al., 2020; Fagerberg, 2024). Through educational socialization, individuals (ideally) internalize the values and norms of the profession, aspiring to shape morally responsible workers. Subsequently, they strive to live up to the idealized image of the profession by incorporating and behaving in accordance with these values (Abbott, 1988; Bolton, 2005; Wiles, 2017). Swedish research has shown that social work students often cite idealistic motives for choosing the profession, such as social justice and altruism (Bruhn et al, 2020; Kullberg, 2011; Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015; Tham and Lynch 2014).

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, the recent proposal of a new Social Services Act (Swedish Government, 2020:47) stresses “selecting individuals with suitable backgrounds and personalities for professions within social services” (p. 487).

<sup>8</sup> Brante (2022) suggests that theories of profession can be categorized as “naïve” or “cynical”, where naïve perspectives view professions as inherently beneficial to society, while cynical perspectives suggest that professions are self-serving and primarily concerned with maintaining their own power and status. The ideal-type profession I refer to here represents a *naïve* perspective.

However, social workers in social services are dependent on, and practice within, politically governed public bureaucracies, and the *Realpolitik* of government often creates a significant gap between the ambitions of legislation and practice reality. In other words, as several profession and organizational scholars have argued, public bureaucracies are governed by often-conflicting logics. The tensions that social workers experience in their daily practice can, in part, be attributed to discords between these logics. In particular, tensions arise between the professional practice ideals and the bureaucratic principles governing their employing organization (cf. Brante, 2015; Evetts, 2009; Lipsky, 2010). This conflict has become evident in the neo-bureaucratization of the public sector following new public management (NPM) reforms (cf. Farrell & Morris, 2003).

#### *NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND THE BUREAUCRATIZATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES*

Over the past decades, the Swedish public sector has undergone significant transformations due to the introduction of NPM reforms. Although these reforms were intended to reduce excessive bureaucracy, many argue that they have paradoxically led to *increased* bureaucratization (Brante et al., 2015; Hall, 2012; Tham, 2018). Reduced budget allocations and recurring financial challenges have led to austerity measures, cost-saving requirements, and performance evaluations for many public sector agencies<sup>9</sup> (cf. Andersson et al, 2017). To ensure these requirements are met, there has been a growing emphasis on professional accountability (governed by management and external government agencies), increased documentation requirements, and demands for (measurable) standardized evidence-based practices (Brante, 2015; Evetts, 2009; Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Hall (2012) describes the transformation as a shift from a large central bureaucracy to a “dispersed” bureaucracy, characterized by decentralized responsibility, with unit managers responsible for performance measures and budget (cf. Tham & Strömberg, 2021). While these functions aim to ensure transparency and the rule of law, they have diminished professional autonomy and the capacity to implement flexible solutions,

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<sup>9</sup> A recent example is the proposal for a new Social Services Act (SOU 2020:47). Its stated intention is to improve quality of social services interventions, emphasizing preventive work and accessibility for service users. However, while government-initiated directives for the municipal sector are normally under the *financing principle*, ensuring necessary funding for such reforms, this directive specified: “the proposals submitted by the investigator should contribute to increased quality *without* leading to increased costs for the state or municipality.” (Swedish Government, 2017, p. 1, my translation)

as the “audit culture” fosters rigidity and fear of failure (Power, 1997). Consequently, public sector professionals’ discretionary space has decreased, and the *content* of work has been altered, as paperwork demands reduce time for meeting clients (Hall, 2012; Tham & Strömberg, 2021).

Researchers argue that NPM reforms have widened the gap between the client-centered professional ethos and bureaucratic efficiency principles, cause temporal conflicts, when a “culture of measurement” has generated a shift from the traditional client-centered and relationship-based work towards paperwork, cost-efficiency, and time management (Bornemark, 2018; Hjärpe, 2020; Mänttari- van Der Kuip, 2016; Shanks, 2016, 2018; Tham & Lynch, 2021; Tham & Strömberg, 2021; Yuill & Mueller-Hirth, 2019). The increasing bureaucratization has been argued to cause a gap between professional ideals and practice (Carey, 2014 Tham & Strömberg, 2020). Other have argued that NPM reforms has caused growing dissatisfaction and a loss of meaning amongst social workers (e.g. Dellgran, 2016; Lauri, 2016; Tham, 2018; Tham & Kåreholt, 2023).

The question remains over what “the gap” between the professional logic and bureaucratic logic consists of. To disentangle this question, I briefly describe the ideal type<sup>10</sup> bureaucracy as formulated by Weber (1946). Accordingly, the purpose of the bureaucratic organization is to efficiently operationalize the objectives of the state apparatus. Individual workers are neutral *functionaries*, loyal to and guided by the states’ “objective criteria”, regardless of its political ideology (Weber, 1946, p. 220). Neutrality is achieved through a functional division of labor into specialized tasks, and technical correctness and efficiency and adherence to procedures and technical efficiency rather than moral evaluations of the results (Bauman, 1989). In a bureaucratic system, individuals follow orders and adhere to rules without questioning the ethical implications of their actions. The purpose of separating “reasons of state” from other ethical considerations is to ensure they are judged solely by the standard of rationality, meaning whether they represent the best technical knowhow and cost-efficiency (Weber, 1946, p. 220).

If social workers were governed by either a professional logic or a bureaucratic logic, their job would conceivably be relatively unambiguous. However, in practice,

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<sup>10</sup> Ideal types are *theoretical* standards for comparison, never existing in pure form (Weber, 2019, p. 97).

they are “hybrid professionals” who must navigate both logics<sup>11</sup> (Evetts, 2009; Farrell & Morris, 2003). These dual logics involve competing values and aims that give rise to tensions in practice relating to what it means to be “professional” in practice, both in terms of conduct, duties, and methods.

### ORGANIZATIONAL TENSIONS

To highlight the organizational tensions that social workers face in practice, I will briefly outline some key conflicts in bureaucratic and professional logics.

In bureaucracies, the worker’s primary responsibility and loyalty is the organization, and work should be carried out efficiently and according to standards of fairness and equal treatment.<sup>12</sup> However, professional ethics assigns the workers’ primary responsibility and loyalty to the client, and work should be relationship-based, considering the unique circumstances of each individual.

The essence of these tensions relates to the view of the individual. In bureaucracies, both workers and clients are segmented into components. The private sphere of the worker should be separated from their occupational role, and work should be carried out impersonally and objectively, based on standardized knowledge produced by experts. Clients’ problems and needs must be converted into pre-determined classifications, allocated into specialized functions, and managed through available interventions provided and restricted by the organization. According to the professional logic, conversely, workers should use “the self as tool” and rely, in part, on “tacit knowledge” gained from practice experience (Bruhn & Källström 2018; Sjögren, 2018). Professional ethics emphasize a holistic view of clients, considering their unique circumstances and needs (Lipsky, 2010).

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<sup>11</sup> Others argue that public bureaucracies are also governed by a third logic – the market (Freidson, 2001). For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to focus on the logics of professionalism and bureaucracy, although I recognize the influence of market logics in the public sector (e.g., the increasing “customer-orientation”).

<sup>12</sup> For instance, in 2017, the Swedish government initiated a directive to review the Social Services Act. The aim was to, among other things, ensure that “social services are equivalent regardless of where in the country one lives. The individual should be able to foresee when they can expect to receive support and help from society. That social services should be legally secure, equal, and equitable is necessary for its legitimacy” (2017:39, p. 7, my translation).

In essence, the dual logic poses some key questions: Should the social worker be a fellow human being who uses their personality traits to create authentic relationships with their clients, or should they adopt a professional role that is clearly separated from the private sphere? And should the client be assessed in consideration of their unique circumstances and needs, or should the focus be on isolated components of their life that can be translated into the organization's problem classifications?

Arguably, these tensions are amplified by professional discourses articulating a moral imperative to struggle against social injustice and go *beyond* the bounds of their official duties (cf. Olson, 2007; Specht & Courtney, 1995; Williams & Briskman, 2015). This often involves compensating for organizational shortcomings as well as challenging the rules and norms of the organizations (Marston & McDonald, 2012; Weinberg, 2014).

## INTEGRATING AN EMOTIONS LENS

We have seen that social work practice is situated in a zone of tension between the wants and needs of their clients, public expectations, professional values, and bureaucratic demands. Therefore, the “perpetual crisis” of social services can be understood in light of inherent goal conflicts and unclear role expectations of the professional groups assigned to translate and implement them into practice. Within this practice, social workers must balance between several and sometimes conflicting ideals and imperatives for how to construct their professional identity. This involves ideas of how to understand their grander mission, which values should guide their practice, and what it means to “be professional.”

In this thesis, I explore these questions through theories and concepts from the sociology of emotions. In Chapter 3, I will outline the theoretical framework in detail, but in order to pinpoint my research problem, I will briefly describe some key concepts relating to social norms and expectations (emotional regimes and feeling rules), and the efforts by individuals to meet these expectations (emotion work/emotional labor).

Accordingly, emotions are understood not only as biological and psychological factors, but as “patterns of relationships between self and others, and between self and world” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 2). They are framed and circulated through language

and social practices, providing individuals and groups with acceptable ways to account for themselves and to interpret assessments from others, and therefore in constant need of management (Barbalet, 2002; Fineman, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Emotional performances are vital for the formation of (professional) identities, which are in turn guided (although not determined) by overarching norms and rules (cf. Sieben & Wettergren, 2010).

If we briefly revisit the 1970 article, social workers describe feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and powerlessness. These are what Turner & Stets (2006) refer to as *moral emotions*. Thus, they can be understood as moral evaluation of one's own actions compared to an external yardstick of moral standards. As such, these emotions can be understood not only as individual experiences, but as an expression of moral expectations unfulfilled: something that should have been done but that was not. The moral referent here, of course, being professional values. We have seen that social work ethics are grounded in humanistic values, including democracy, social justice, solidarity, and economic and social equality. The professional identity is defined in relation to desired personality traits, such as commitment, care, empathy and responsibility and the ability perform these qualities by using the "self as tool", aiming to develop authentic and personalized relationship with clients (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016). At the same time, bureaucratic work demands an affective neutrality, both in terms of expression, and in terms of an ability to distance oneself from personal motives and convictions in order to align with standards of impartiality, fairness, and equal treatment. Thus, emotions are portrayed as a liability if not controlled, managed, and instrumentalized.

I will theorize these ambiguities as conflicting *feeling rules*, defined by Hochschild (1983) as an ensemble of formal instructions and rules, informal norms, practices, and institutionalized behavior. As such, the internalization of professional values in part involves learning how to feel and display emotions. In other words, constructing a professional identity guided by the larger values of the profession involves emotionally committing to these values, while acting as a "committed" and "empathetic" social workers means emotionally performing these traits (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Bolton, 2005, Burkitt, 1999). However, when entering a bureaucratic role position, practitioners are met with a different set of expectations on how to act, think, and feel. This involves an emotional commitment to, for

example, principles of objectivity and efficiency (Albrow, 1992) and an impersonal (polite, yet detached) and rational self-presentation.

The dual logics of bureaucracy and professionalism plausible complicates efforts to construct a professional identity. In other words, what it *means* to be “professional” in social services is contested and is therefore subject to ongoing negotiations. While clearer professional identities may be restrictive, they are a medium through which professional practice is guided, and actors relate to each other. The sociology of emotions can illuminate what *motivates* people to embrace a specific identity. In essence, individuals seek to confirm the image that they have of themselves in any specific social interaction. When these identities are confirmed, individuals experience positive emotions. When not, they experience negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, or shame (Burke & Stets 2009; Turner & Stets 2006). Second, individuals *perform* their identities across interactions, and these performances involve emotional displays that correspond to the image they seek to confirm. Therefore, people engage in *emotional labor* aiming to “fit” their feelings and displays to the normative expectations (Hochschild, 1983). In other words, the “threat” of unpleasant emotions motivates people to conform to feeling rules.

All organization-dependent professions, such as employees within healthcare, migration agencies, and debt enforcement authorities, face dilemmas and contradictions. All of these must relate to competing organizational logics and various groups' expectations and beliefs regarding the profession's purpose, direction, and methods (cf. Selberg, 2013; Wettergren, 2010; Larsson, 2014). These expectations and logics encompass feeling rules that define core values and goals orienting professional identity construction and performances, regulate the use and expression of emotions in practice (Bolton, 2005; Lok et al., 2017). In other words, all organization-dependent professions juggle between different *motivations* for emotional labor, such as value commitment as a motivating force (e.g. inducing hope despite hopeless expectations to maintain determination) versus organizational efficiency (e.g. suppressing compassion and refocusing efforts for the sake of performance measures).

The specific characteristics of Swedish social services, as outlined in the introduction, make it a particularly compelling case study. The inherent contradictions and dilemmas present in all organization-dependent professions are especially pronounced in social services due to the historical connection between

the ethics of the social work profession and the values of the Swedish welfare state. Additionally, the agency's sensitivity to shifts in political ideology further complicates this dynamic. Consequently, this case study highlights how changes in broader societal values manifest as goal conflicts and role tensions within public sector organizations, requiring emotional labor and navigation among professionals.

In sum, social service practice is characterized by a range of contradictory values and goals that social workers must navigate. These contradictions create unclear role expectations and challenges in constructing a coherent professional identity. Emotions play a central role in how social workers experience, relate to, and negotiate these values and goals. On a daily basis, social workers perform emotional labor and therein manage, suppress, modify and neutralize their own and others' emotions. Despite this, the significance and management of emotions in social work practice is an underexplored area. In this thesis, emotions are used as a lens to explore how larger values and expectations are – mediated via feeling rules – experienced and managed in situated interactions by individuals and groups, illuminating what happens in the double mission of social workers as impartial bureaucrats and caring professionals.

## AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to conduct a comprehensive analysis of how emotions are expressed, managed, and utilized within social work practice. It seeks to describe how role expectations and associated feeling rules manifest in practice, and how these expectations and rules influence the construction and performance of professional identity. Additionally, the thesis aims to illuminate the role of emotions in social workers' navigation of the broader normative values and ideologies inherent in social work. The following central research questions will be addressed:

1. How do social workers identify and discuss the expectations and rules for managing and using emotions in their practice?
2. In what contexts and through what processes are rules for emotional experiences and displays mediated and negotiated? What factors contribute to the acceptance, compliance, rejection, or contestation of specific feeling rules?

3. How do social workers understand and articulate their professional identity in relation to their emotional experiences and expressions?
4. For what reasons, in what ways, and to what ends are emotions managed in social work practice? How do organizational factors influence social workers' experiences and displays of emotions?

Questions one and two are mainly addressed in chapters 5 and 6, question three is addressed in chapters 7 and 8, and question four in Chapter 9. In the final chapter, I summarize the main findings and their overarching themes.

### *THESIS DISPOSITION*

In Chapter 2, I review previous research related to my research problem and questions. In Chapter 3, I introduce my theoretical framework and the central theories and concepts. In Chapter 4 I outline the methodological approach, in terms of how I carried out the interviews, observations, and analysis, and my epistemological reasoning. First, I will briefly describe the organization and legal framework of social services.

## **ORGANIZATION OF SWEDISH SOCIAL SERVICES**

Social services in Sweden are formally governed by the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453), which is characterized as a “goal-oriented framework legislation” (SOU 2020:47, p. 38). This means that the law does not specify the nature, range, or eligibility criteria for services. Instead, the overarching goals and fundamental values of social services are outlined in the introductory paragraph of the Social Services Act, which plays a crucial role in guiding and shaping practical activities.

The values articulated in the social services legislation, along with their preparatory work, primarily provide a framework and certain conditions for professionals. It is the responsibility of municipal organizations to translate and incorporate these values into practice. The first paragraph of the Act states that social services:

For the sake of democracy and solidarity, shall promote the economic and social security of citizens, equality in living conditions and active participation in society.

In addition, social services "shall consider the person's responsibility for their own and others' social situation, strive towards the liberation and development of the resources of individuals and groups," and their activities shall be based on "respect for people's right to self-determination and integrity" (my translations).<sup>13</sup>

Each of the 290 municipalities in Sweden is responsible for providing social services to their inhabitants (1974:152; 2017:725), and the organization of social services varies between municipalities and city districts. The municipal boards decide on the local organizations' objectives, budgetary matters, and how the activities are to be organized. Financial resources are allocated to different units within the municipal social services office, and each unit manager is responsible for the budget (Tham & Strömberg, 2020). The formal authority to make legal decisions on applications and interventions lies with the municipal social welfare board, often delegated to a committee consisting of politically appointed laypersons. Although the committees can delegate discretionary power to caseworkers or managers, these laypersons retain the right to review and change caseworker proposals (Forkby et al., 2023).

The official duties of social workers include investigating social and economic problems or relationship issues of individuals, families, and groups; assessing needs and interventions; providing advice and support; and exercising supervision<sup>14</sup> (SCB, 2023a). As the Social Services Act is a framework law, social workers have discretionary space when interpreting law, what information should be gathered, and designing inquiries and interventions.

Furthermore, social services are a politically governed authority, meaning that their operations and priorities are influenced by current politics and decisions made by political bodies at the municipal, regional, and national levels. This can result in changes to the resources, guidelines, and focus areas of social services, depending on which political parties are in power and which social issues they prioritize. Consequently, municipal organizations are subject to frequent changes based on

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<sup>13</sup> In the recent proposition for a new Social Services Act, the overall goals remain unchanged, but adds "gender equality" (Swedish Government, 2024/25:89, p. 197).

<sup>14</sup> Swedish: *Utöva tillsyn*.

societal needs and political directives<sup>15</sup> (Blom, 2004). For instance, while working on this thesis, a proposal for a new Social Services Act has been presented (SOU, 2020:47) was presented and is expected to come into effect in July 2025.

While there is limited research on specific variations in organizational structures, most municipal social services are, since early 2000s, organized into specialized units. These focus on specific issues or target groups, rather than adopting more integrated (“holistic”) approaches that address a broader range of needs within a single organizational structure (Lundgren et al., 2009; Perlinski et al., 2011). In individual and family care, these include a divisions into adult units (mainly focusing on substance abuse issues), child and youth units, and financial aid. Additionally, there is typically a division between units exercising authority<sup>16</sup> /investigations and treatment units (Dahlström & Thyrberg, 2016). The treatment units comprise both municipal entities and external providers, which can be non-profit organizations, public sector organizations, or private companies (Bergmark & Lundström, 2005).

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<sup>15</sup> For example, a reform in 2006 municipalities extended and clarified responsibility for unaccompanied minors. In 2015, more than 35,000 unaccompanied minors migrated to Sweden, prompting the establishment of specific units in many municipalities. In 2023, the number was down to 339, leading to these specialized units being dismantled (SCB, 2023b).

<sup>16</sup> Swedish: *Myndighetsutövning*.



## CHAPTER 2: EXAMINING THE RESEARCH FIELD

In this chapter, I begin with a short summary of how emotions are typically positioned and theorized in social work research, under the headline *The ambivalent place of emotions in social work practice and research*. Thereafter, I describe my literature review process, which includes empirically based research adapting a sociological approach to emotions. These incorporate a view of emotions in relation to social structures, cultural norms, collective emotions, and interactional perspectives on emotions. These are presented in a thematically structured summary under three broader headlines: *Feeling rules in social work: Ideals and conflicts*; *Emotions and professional identity*; *Emotional labor in client interactions*; *Social work knowledge: Emotions and knowledge in social work: an area of conflict*. Lastly, I summarize the previous research and the contributions of this thesis.

### **THE AMBIVALENT PLACE OF EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The place of emotions in statutory social work practice has been described as ambivalent (O'Connor, 2020, p. 47), as they are simultaneously perceived as harmful *and* central to practice (Dingwall et al., 1995; Butler, 2010). On the one hand, emotions are recognized as crucial in relational activities (Bruhn & Källström, 2018; 2019; Ruch & Murray, 2011; Smith et al., 2012; Trevithick, 2003; Winter et al., 2019), involving close interpersonal engagement with clients in varying degrees of distress, many of whom are involuntary (Smith et al., 2012; O'Connor, 2020). On the other hand, as the centrality of relationship-based practice is decreasing, emotions are often overlooked and rendered invisible (Clayton et al., 2015; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016). Furthermore, practitioners frequently associate the experience, management,

and expression of emotions with evaluations of professional competence or incompetence, where emotions are often linked to weakness, inadequacy, or a perceived lack of objectivity (Gibson, 2016; O'Connor, 2020; Smith et al., 2003).

Moreover, emotions are often highlighted in terms of the emotional *impact* of practice. These include psychological strains such as sleeping disorders, anxiety, stress, and compassion fatigue (Karsten, 2018; Kinman & Grant, 2020; Pithouse, 1998; Ruch & Murray, 2011; Zeidner et al., 2013), as well as emotions emerging from threats, violence, and aggression (Keesman & Weenink, 2020; Tham & Lynch, 2020).

In response to reports of increased “negative” work-related emotions, research has concentrated on coping strategies. Studies have explored methods to mitigate adverse health effects by fostering “positive” emotions and developing skills such as resilience, self-care, emotional intelligence, and social competence, thereby emphasizing individual experiences and emotional regulation (cf. S. Collins, 2008; Frost et al., 2018; Grant & Kinman, 2014; Howe, 2008; Kinman & Grant, 2011; Lewis & King, 2019; Morrison, 2007). Notably, two British reviews, Social Work Task Force (2009) and the Munro Review of Child Protection (2011), emphasize the importance of resilience and emotional intelligence for social work professionals. Lewis and King (2019) argue that “self-care techniques and strategies are essential skills that should be woven into daily practice to mitigate the risks of developing secondary traumatic stress and burnout” (p. 96; cf. Zeidner et al., 2013). However, others (Rose et al., 2015; Weinberg, 2014) caution that while self-care strategies are crucial for worker well-being, work conditions often hinder their implementation, and the imperative to practice self-care can paradoxically cause additional strains.

Following Lipsky’s seminal book on street-level bureaucrats (1980), many scholars have invoked the concept of “coping” to understand how frontline workers deal with stress. In a systematic review of coping strategies in frontline public service delivery, Tummers et al. (2015) distinguish three types of coping: “moving towards clients,” “moving away from clients,” and “moving against clients.” Moving toward clients involves rule bending, rule breaking, or working beyond one’s role expectations. In contrast, moving against clients consists of rigid rule following with no discretionary exception. Moving away from clients involves withdrawing from clients by routinizing interactions or rationing services.

While these studies offer an insight into the emotional *impact* of practice on individuals, they do not account for sociocultural or professional/organizational feeling rules and norms in social work practice. However, there are a number of studies that have examined these topics, which I will present below. First, however, I will detail the literature review and search strategies for identifying relevant studies.

### LITERATURE REVIEW AND SEARCH STRATEGIES

Key concepts in this thesis are *emotional regime* (Reddy 2001), and *feeling rules and emotional labor* (Hochschild, 1983). These concepts refer to how normative emotions and feeling rules guide, restrain, or encourage certain ways emotions are experienced and displayed in the workplace. In turn, these emotional norms intersect with perceptions of professionalism and shape how professional identity is constructed.

In the literature reviews, conducted in 2018, 2022, and 2024, I included research that considers the *social* aspects of emotions in social work, including group and collective emotions, interactional emotions, and emotion norms and rules. To identify relevant empirical studies, I conducted a combination of keywords and phrases related to the topic. Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) were used to refine the search results, and filters were applied to limit the scope to recent publications and peer-reviewed sources. These included “social services” OR “social work” OR “social worker” AND emot\* OR feelings in title, abstract, and keywords. I also searched for titles or abstracts including “emotional labor” (/labour), AND/OR “emotion work” AND/OR “emotion management,” AND/OR “emotional regime” (/ “emotion/al culture/emotion/al communities”), AND/OR “feeling rules/norms/ideologies.” Search terms were combined with discreet emotion terms: AND/NEAR/OR anxiety, ambivalence, shame, embarrassment, guilt, pride, fear, anger, distress, disgust, sadness, shame, empathy, sympathy, compassion.

Databases included Google Scholar, Scopus, Social Care Online, Web of Science, JSTOR, Supersök. I also used “reference harvesting” in the articles found to identify further relevant studies. The criteria for inclusions were empirically based studies using qualitative and mixed methods of the above themes. Exclusion criteria were quantitative studies, theoretical/conceptual articles. Several of the mentioned studies did not match the inclusion criteria but served to provide contextualization for the themes.

## FEELING RULES IN SOCIAL WORK: IDEALS AND CONFLICTS

As argued in the Chapter 1, a fundamental dilemma for statutory social workers is that they are simultaneously bureaucrats and a part of a caring profession (Lipsky, 2010). This means that they are guided by an ethos of care and commitment, and bureaucratic ideals and rules (Clayton et al., 2015; Whitaker, 2019). Research has demonstrated that the gap between professional ideals and practice has widened under new public management governance, leading to a devaluation of relationship-based and client-centered practice (cf., Evetts 2009; 2011). New Public Management (NPM) reforms promote market-based ideals such as productivity, accountability, and efficiency. Austerity and efficiency demands have required care workers to do more with fewer resources, intensified by individual performance evaluations (Selberg, 2013). Women have been argued to be more affected by NPM reforms, as they “face contradictory expectations of being intensely involved in emotion work on the one hand and in the efficient performance of tasks on the other” (Husso & Hirvonen, 2012, p. 29).

In social services, this is evident in how agencies’ finances and financial targets have become an integral part of their operational work, which both managers and social workers need to relate to (Bornemark, 2018; Ponnert & Svensson, 2019). Studies on speed-up processed in public bureaucracies illuminate how a “culture of measurement” or “obsession with outputs” cause temporal conflicts and have generated a shift from relational work to paperwork and time management (Evetts, 2009, 2013; Karlsson, 2017; Miller et al., 2006). In the social services, this may involve measuring the *number* of case investigations carried out over a certain period of time (e.g., Yuill & Mueller-Hirth, 2019; Hjärpe, 2020). In turn, complicated cases are often deprioritized when activities are directed toward improving performance scores<sup>17</sup> (Brante, 2014; Hjärpe, 2020, cf. Lipsky, 2010). These directives to evaluate, measure, and audit have been said to increase management control and reduce professional autonomy. Increased documentation requirements have been argued to function as a disciplinary technology that structures the social worker's time (Yuill

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<sup>17</sup> For example, there has been a broad implementation of LEAN in the social services. Lean, originally developed by Toyota, purposed to increase productivity by identifying "time thieves" and improving cost-efficiently. Standardization, e.g., fixed time slots and quotas, is a strategy to speed up “the flow,” i.e., the fast and smooth running of cases through the different fractions of the organization (Forssell & Ivarsson Westerberg 2014; Hedlund 2018).

and Mueller-Hirth, 2018), while performance measurements aim not only to evaluate but also to *shape* the activity itself (Dardot & Laval, 2013, p. 250). Thus, the *content* of work has changed toward goals and results, rather than the traditional core activity of relational work (Blom, 1998; Bruhn, 2018; Forsberg, 2019).

Simultaneously, there is a growing emphasis on the importance of relational work in social work education and in professional ethics (cf. Gibson, 2019; Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Morley 2022a). During social work education, students are socialized into values of solidarity, social justice, and an “altruistic commitment to service” (cf. Brodie et al, 2008; Bruhn et al., 2020; Fagerberg, 2024; Yam, 2004, p. 929). The gap between professional ideals and practice has been argued to cause *moral distress* or *ethical stress*. This occurs when workers are unable to carry out actions they believe are morally appropriate (Bornemark, 2018; Hjärpe, 2020; Mänttari- van Der Kuip, 2016; Miller et al., 2006). Ethical stress thus reflects opposing moral rationalities in social work, which has also been theorized in terms of conflicting *feeling rules* and, consequently, emotional labor requirements (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018). Resource limitations, as well as increased accountability and risk management – leading to meticulous documentation requirements – may have detrimental impacts on the ability to build trusting relationships with clients, and to engage in “successful” performance of emotional labor (Drury, 2019; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016; Kanasz & Zielinska, 2017). This may cause *emotional dissonance* (Hochschild, 1983), arising from the need to balance the emotional demands of the morally infused caring ethos of the profession with the requirements for organizational loyalty and adherence to bureaucratic rules and procedures (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Miller et al., 2006; Whitaker, 2019).

In an analysis of a Finnish social work trade paper from 1975 to 2009 (Turtiainen et al., 2022), the authors examine how emotional labor has evolved in response to changes in the welfare state. Three eras are defined: the welfare state era in the mid-1970s, the economic recession of the 1990s, and the neoliberal reforms of the 2000s. The authors conclude that external pressures and efficiency demands associated with political reforms have altered the nature of social work and have negatively influenced social workers’ abilities to manage emotions. Particularly, they argue that, in the NPM era, social workers struggle with the tensions between professional feeling rules backed by ethical standards and emphasizing philanthropic emotion management (cf. Bolton, 2005) in an era of retrenchment (p. 79).

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in Swedish social services, Hjärpe (2023) examines how social workers navigate organizational and professional feeling rules during child protection investigations. The study highlights the tension between organizational demands for documentation and the emotional realities of social work. It also discusses how digital documentation practices can lead to emotional dilemmas, technostress, and emotional fatigue. Falkenström & Hjärpe (2018) highlight how documentation can both aid in emotional management and contribute to stress and professional dilemmas for social workers.

Gibson (2019) explores how practitioners' subjective experiences of pride and shame are strategically used by policymakers and managers to reinforce compliance with new public management decrees. Political discourses provide a range of boundaries for praiseworthy and shameful behavior for practitioners. While historical professional discourses represent social work as activism and care, neoliberal discourses define social administration and social policing as good practice, instilling a culture of control and disciplining of clients. These discourses contradict the historical ideals, values, and objectives of the profession (p. 197). Gibson shows that ideals of administration and policing are instilled through episodic shaming and criticizing non-compliance with organizational rules and norms, while pride is evoked for compliance. Ultimately, these ideals were enforced by systemic shaming, which served to redefine the meanings and expectation for the professional identity of social workers (see O'Connor, 2020 for similar findings).

Furthermore, austerity measures in the public sector – resulting in increased workloads, reduced resources, and pressures to meet target measures – were legitimized through political anti-welfare rhetoric (Grootegoed, 2013; Jensen & Tyler, 2015). In an interview-based study with public service workers in the UK (including social workers), Clayton et al. (2015) showed that while workers maintained an emphasis on the importance of care and commitment, the context of austerity caused feelings of role ambiguity, frustration, demoralization, and incompetence. To counter such feelings, workers frequently tried to compensate for lacking resources, for example, by working overtime and bending the rules (cf. Astvik & Melin, 2013), or engaging in more emotional labor, which ultimately led to additional work strains (Lauri, 2016; Quick & Scott, 2019, cf. Selberg, 2013).

Similarly, in an ethnographic study, Jupp (2022) explores the emotional dimensions of social policy in the context of austerity measures in a children's center

in the UK. Jupp argues that while emotions are “swept aside” during austerity cuts, they still remain the most important aspect of the relational work, rendering the dynamics of emotional labor in public sector work even more complex. Furthermore, Jupp argues that austerity tends to individualize and privatize emotional responses, with workers and service users attempting to absorb negative emotions and experiences, quenching their potential for collective resistance.

Several researchers argue that austerity in public sectors fosters worker cynicism and a detached approach to clients that suppresses identification and loyalty and produces distance between social worker and client (Carey, 2014; Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Hardesty, 2015; Lauri, 2016; Nissen, 2024). However, collective emotions, such as hope, solidarity, cynicism, and anger can also create possibilities to mobilize resistance to such feeling rules (Carey, 2014; Jupp, 2022; Whitaker, 2022). Whitaker (2022) identified two strategies for workers to resist feeling rules: “getting by”: resisting organizational procedures and emphasizing the relational work, enabled through their discretionary space (cf. Ponnert & Svensson, 2019); and “getting back” through quiet resignation and resistance (pp. 333–334).

## EMOTIONS AND PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

Scholars have argued that standardized approaches conflict with the caring ethos of client-centered and relationship-based social work, in turn leading to ambiguities in professional identity (Gibson, 2016, 2019; Healy, 2009; Jönsson, 2019; Miller et al., 2006), and even an “identity crisis” (Donovan et al., 2017).

Barlow & Hall (2007) demonstrate that social work students in Canada experienced unclear norms for emotional displays during their practice training, producing identity confusion and stress. Similarly, in an interview-based study on English social work students, Rajan-Rankin (2014) shows a tensions between expressing emotions and maintaining professionalism. In a study with final-year social work students and practice educators, Dore (2019) showed that there is a stigma associated with emotional displays in professional settings.

Studies have shown that emotions are often perceived as opposite to professionalism, mirroring gendered discourses of masculine rationality and female emotionality (O’Connor, 2020; Lauri, 2016). In a 2020 dissertation, O’Connor ethnographically examines how social workers understand and use emotions in

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practice. The study reveals that emotions are viewed as both essential to practice and crucial for a relationship-based approach, yet they are not considered “professional.” This perception leads individuals and organizations to develop strategies to shield against “harmful” emotions. O’Connor highlights the ambivalence professionals feel about the role of emotions in practice, which creates a profound tension in their professional identity and negative judgments about their professional competence. O’Connor (2020) notes that without clear professional guidelines on the role of emotions, traditional binary views of subjectivity (emotional/problematic) and objectivity (rational/professional) are reinforced (pp. 234–235; cf. Munro & Hardie, 2019).

In an ethnographic study of an English social work agency, Whitaker (2019) demonstrate a paradoxical managerial demand for personalization and authenticity in client meetings, epitomized by the phrase “bring yourself to work” (p. 325). Thus, the organization promoted morally imbued professional values, while practice was nonetheless regulated by bureaucratic rules. Therefore, social workers experienced contradictions and struggles over what it meant to “do” social work (p. 334) (cf. Grimwood, 2022; Hanlon, 2021). This is in line with a sociological perspective of neoliberalism, according to which, workers are encouraged to develop and refine their “affective capital” (cf., Illouz, 2008; Penz & Sauer, 2019). This may be a double-sided sword; on the one hand, using one’s affective capital can be rewarding and may strengthen professional identity. On the other hand, the boundaries between *private* leisure time) and *professional* emotion (work time) may be blurred, leading to a “commercialization” of feelings (Boltanski, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Illouz 2008).

## COLLECTIVE EMOTIONS, POLITICAL REFORM, AND RISK MANAGEMENT

While feeling rules and emotional regimes may be locally constructed, political emotions denote how emotions work on a societal level. Warner (2015) explores the interplay between politics and emotions in the context of social work and child protection. Warner argues that social work policy and practice are deeply influenced by collectively generated emotions, such as anger, shame, fear, and disgust, activated through political rhetoric, media stories, and official documents such as inquiry reports and case reviews. These collective emotions are embedded in the larger child

protection system— including policy, government institutions, social work agencies, and social work education – and constitute an emotional regime (p. 7).

Warner argues that media reporting and political discourse following the serious harm or death of a child cause a crisis for social work and child protection, followed by a phase of reform characterized by political commitment to ensure such an event will not happen again, driving a “relentless cycle of crisis and reform” (2015, p. 17). Therefore, risk and reform are mutually constitutive; the emotional regime of social work has driven the implementation of instrumental approaches to risk management and audit procedures, which are at odds with the complex and fundamentally relationship-based social work practice (cf. Broadhurst et al., 2010). Others have argued that risk management is not only unable to capture the complexities of human beings, but has become the main *raison d’être* of social work, devaluing relationship-based practice (Healy, 2009; Kemshall et al., 1997).

Social workers must translate individual troubles into bureaucratically manageable “cases” according to formalized classification systems, finding “common denominators” for human suffering. These classifications are based on morally infused notions of ideal citizens and behaviors, delineating between deserving and undeserving, normal and deviant (Brante, 2014, p. 69). Social workers are therefore positioned between the “normal” mainstream citizens and those who are excluded from it and tasked with regulating and managing risks that such groups are deemed to represent. As such, they are responsible for the “moral regulation of the dangerous Other,” for whom the public hold collective emotions of contempt and disgust (Warner 2015, p. 45; cf. Brante, 2014; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003). Moral judgments are experienced emotionally (such as disgust and outrage), and in effect generate political action and policy reforms. Therefore, emotions connect private worries to public concerns (cf. Mills, 2000). Warner exemplifies how these emotions are collectively mobilized by analyzing emotional media and political responses to the death of children which “also strengthen the narratives about specific social groups and the emotions related to these groups” (Warner, 2015, p. 158).

Furthermore, Warner highlights social work’s central role in “governing the family,” due to its powerful position of mediating between the privacy of the family and protecting children on behalf of the state (p. 10, cf. Parton, 2012). In this capacity, social workers often face media criticism for being overly intrusive and not

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respecting family privacy (Dingwall & Eekelaar, 1988) (cf. Coccozza & Hort, 2011 for similar observations in a Swedish context). Hostile media coverage on the actions (or inaction) of the social services has been dubbed an “occupational hazard” (Greenland, 1986). Social workers are often portrayed as “cold-hearted, bureaucratic folk devils,” who are either conceived of as unable to see abuse where it does exist, or as a potential threat to *any* (respectable) parent, seeing abuse where none exists” (Warner 2015, p. 93).

The balance between overinvolvement and failure to intervene is further complicated by a growing emphasis on risk management in political discourse and practice, carrying an “allure of certainty” (Helm, 2011, p. 902) and a “false hope of eliminating risk” (Munro, 2011, p. 134). Paradoxically, continuous reform has heightened anxiety among social workers, as practitioners are aware that risk can never be eliminated. This fosters defensive social work practice, leading agencies to lower thresholds for intervention (Munro, 2011, pp. 134–135).

## EMOTION MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL WORK

### *EMOTIONAL LABOR IN CLIENT INTERACTIONS*

Feeling rules govern how emotional labor is performed. Several studies examine how social workers navigate the complexities and contradictions of their roles, including managing emotional dissonance stemming from ideals of professional detachment and genuine care and empathy, maintaining professional boundaries, and addressing systemic challenges (Leeson, 2010; Morley, 2022a; Winter et al., 2019). Despite the centrality of relational approaches in social work discourse (Sjögren 2018), it has been argued that social work is currently in a context of “relational austerity,” where the use and management of emotions in social work practice are not sufficiently addressed in research (Clayton et al., 2015; Hingley-Jones and Ruch, 2016). However, a few studies address emotional labor and emotion management strategies in social work.

In an ethnographic study, Nissen (2024) examines how emotional practices of sympathy and care in Danish child protection are influenced by governmental and managerial expectations of cost-effectiveness. Nissen identifies three emotional practices affected by these expectations. First, the ambition to create close and

authentic relationships with children and families, which exposed them to managerial critique for exceeding the budget. Such critique resulted in limited margins for sympathy, care, and the possibility to create close relationships. Second, the practice of maintaining professional authority by focusing on the child while demanding parental responsibility aligned more with managerial expectations but restricted the potential for a relationship-based approach. Third, emotional endurance by relying on knowledge solidarity and sympathy with families, allowed for an emotional investment in the family. This practice could, if successful, meet management cost-efficiency expectations by avoiding expensive placements while sustaining a good relationship with clients (Nissen, 2024).

In a Danish ethnographic study, Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen (2015) identified three types of emotional labor: (1) *Shutting off* emotions, both during and after client meetings; (2) *Deferring emotions*, where social workers delay their emotional reactions; (3) *Dominating* emotions, where a case gets “under the skin” of the social worker and influences how they manage the case both during and after meetings. Similarly, Lavee & Strier (2018) examine Israeli social workers’ emotional labor with families, identifying three interrelated aspects of emotional labor: emotional flooding, emotional attrition, and personal precariousness. These aspects impel the development of protective mechanisms such as emotional *numbness* (shutting off emotions), emotional othering (viewing clients as socially different from themselves, leading to unfair treatment compared to more similar clients), and emotional splitting (withdrawing care and empathy from uncooperative clients).

In an interview study on Norwegian social workers, Haugstvedt and Gunnarsdottir (2023) apply a combination of surface and deep acting techniques to manage the emotional and role-related challenges in their work with extremist and radicalized clients. They show how working with the target group caused suspicion and cynicism toward clients, which conflicted with their internalized professional values. These emotions were expected to be managed and hidden in accordance with professional, organizational, and personal feeling rules, resulting in emotional dissonance. The authors identified three strategies to deal with this dissonance: “Keeping face,” which involved hiding their emotions through surface acting techniques like slow breathing and remaining calm, thereby influencing their “actual emotional state” (p. 75). “Character acting” was a “proactive” surface acting strategy where social workers went “into character” to establish a professional shield and

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conceal emotional responses. “Adopting the client’s perspective” was a deep acting strategy aiming to understand the client, making surface acting unnecessary and thereby lessening emotional dissonance.

Furthermore, emotional labor is affected by moral discourses of certain groups of service users (cf., Warner, 2015). For instance, Lavee and Strier (2018) argue that institutional policies negatively influence social workers’ ability to meet client needs, fostering an “ideological environment” that blames clients who are seen as system dependent (cf. Jensen & Tyler). In contrast, emotions of compassion extended to clients perceived as independent and self-sufficient.

Several studies focus on emotion management requirements placed on clients. For example, Quick and Scott (2019) argue that parents are expected to “play the game” to reunite their family by suppressing emotions. Similarly, Thrana and Fauske (2014) argue that child welfare agencies operate within an emotional regime in which parents are required to be passive and to be cooperative. Correspondingly, in a Swedish study on hospital-employed social workers, Svärd (2014) argues that social workers’ risk assessments of parents are heavily influenced by emotions linked to normativity. For instance, Svärd demonstrates that feelings of affection, shame and cruelty were involved in assessing parents with medical diagnoses, while blame and worry are associated with gender stereotypes, potentially leading to discriminatory practices.

## BACKSTAGE EMOTION MANAGEMENT

“Backstage” emotion management involves both individual and collective processing of difficult work-related emotions, constructing collective identities and group solidarity, and negotiating or resisting feeling rules.

Backstage spaces include both informal (Forsberg & Vagli, 2006; Ingram, 2017; O’Connor, 2020; Moesby-Jensen & Nielsen, 2015) and formal (Dugmore et al., 2018; Ingram, 2015; Wilkins et al., 2017) forums. Ingram (2015) demonstrates the importance of physical and temporal spaces within which emotions can be acknowledged and articulated. Social workers identified informal interactions with colleagues as the most important forum for emotional expression. Ingram also emphasized the importance of formal interactions, such as supervision, as a space for expressing and collectively managing emotions, while other studies show that

formal supervision did not provide adequate space for workers' emotions (Dugmore et al., 2018; Wilkins et al., 2017).

Others have shown that backstage emotion management can reduce emotional detachment toward clients as well as relieve emotional dissonance among workers (Biggart et al., 2017). Furthermore, backstage spaces allow for developing a shared identity, and for mobilizing resistance through collective emotions such as hope, cynicism, and anger (Carey, 2014; Jupp, 2022; Whitaker, 2022). Others have highlighted the significance of humor for relieving tensions, gaining emotional energy, establishing relationships with colleagues, constructing collective identities, and building solidarity (Jordan, 2017; Morriss, 2015; O'Connor, 2020).

Backstage emotion management has also been demonstrated to shape and direct "frontstage" social work practice. For example, Gibson (2018, 2019) shows how backstage emotion management constructs local group culture and group-specific feeling rules. Similarly, Whitaker (2019) demonstrates how backstage emotion management allowed social workers to collectively resist managerial feeling rules and construct and maintain morally imbued professional identity.

## EMOTIONS AND KNOWLEDGE IN SOCIAL WORK: AN AREA OF CONFLICT

In Sweden, as well as internationally, the growing emphasis on risk management, auditing, and accountability has been accompanied by demands for standardization and evidence-based practice (cf. Svanevie, 2011). This is evident, for example, in the recent Swedish government proposal for a new "knowledge-based" social services act (SOU, 2020:47). The demands for Evidence-Based Practice EBP have led to heightened expectation that social workers' decision-making and risk assessment should be based on objective and neutral information and cause-and-effect reasoning grounded in research, preferably random control trials (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016; Lundström & Shanks, 2013; Hjärpe, 2020). However, critiques have been raised, arguing that the complex and multifaceted problems encountered in social work cannot be adequately addressed by universal approaches (Trevithick, 2009; Webb, 2001, p. 72).

Furthermore, EBP and NPM principles have increased standardization and specialization in social work. In turn, professional discretion is reduced, ultimately leading to a de-professionalization of social workers (Ahlbäck et al., 2015; Ponnert

& Svensson, 2016), and social workers tend to underestimate themselves in terms of their own knowledge and competence (Enell & Denvall, 2013; Levin, 2017). Several studies have shown that the high regard for research-based “objective” knowledge has indirectly led to the perception of embodied skills such as intuition based on practical experience, as inferior (Bengtsson, 2021; Jacobsson & Barfoed, 2012; Hjärpe, 2023; Munro & Gish, 2018; Munro & Hardie, 2019).

Forsberg and Vagli's (2006) study highlights the significant role emotions play in child protection social work. They compare approaches in Norway and Finland, revealing distinctions in how social workers integrate emotions in case assessment, interpretation, decision making and intervention design. Finnish social workers utilize “holistic welfare knowledge, emphasizing empathy and moral reflection. In contrast, Norwegian social workers rely on “evidence-based legalese”, promoting emotional distance. The authors argue that comparing the two cases illustrate “power struggles of legitimate knowledge in child protection” (p. 26-27).

Hardesty (2015, 2017) similarly demonstrates the tension between embodied knowledge and objectivity in child protection, based on an ethnographic study in a US state department of child welfare. Hardesty highlights how emotions are seen as both obstructive of “objective” reality and as vital sources for information that aids them in understanding their clients. Therefore, practitioners are expected to use emotions but simultaneously bracket emotions to maintain objectivity by using “techniques of objectification” by framing perspectival information as objective knowledge (Hardesty, 2015; cf. Jørgensen, 2019). Such techniques serve to distance workers from emotional and relational aspects of practice, while there is a simultaneous expectation that workers draw on their emotions in practice as a form of situated knowledge (cf. Webb, 2001).

Hardesty (2015) argues that the push for a disembodied, objective scientific approach conflicts with the professional logic that values nuanced, contextually rich, and embodied knowledge about clients, referring to this clash as conflicting epistemological imperatives. Hardesty identifies four techniques to make practice “objective”: 1. Documentation, which should be written up for outsiders (such as a judge) in a way that removes the worker's subjective (emotional) elements. 2. Collectivization: sharing information with a recognized expert that could provide an “objective” opinion on an opinion that the worker had already formed. 3. Institutionalization: concealing personal opinions by attaching them to professional

or agency opinion to gain legitimacy. 4. Audit: using risk assessment protocols and tools to produce “unbiased” grounds for decision-making, replacing “intuitive judgment.”

Nonetheless, emotions – often expressed as gut feeling or intuition - have been shown to be central for professional judgment and sense-making in terms of emotional experience which practitioners can utilize or interrogate as sources of information in their practice (Cook, 2017; Heggdalsvik et al., 2018; Nissen & Engen, 2021). O'Connor (2020, p. 127) demonstrates that both individual reflection on, and collective naming and processing of, emotions aid sense-making, analyzing, assessing, and decision-making in casework (cf. Cook, 2017).

## SUMMARY AND THESIS CONTRIBUTION

This chapter has reviewed research that informs and frames the focus of this thesis, highlighting the ambivalent place and valuation of emotions in social work practice. Emotions are recognized as central for relationship-based social work yet are simultaneously posed as harmful to social workers' health, with policy makers urging workers and organizations to develop strategies to suppress or deny emotions. While emotions have been shown to be essential for sense-making and decision-making, evidence-based approaches promote ideals of objectivity and impartiality, framing emotions as unprofessional and problematic.

This ambivalent stance toward emotions manifests as conflicting feeling rules and tensions in professional identity for statutory social work practice. On the one hand, social workers are guided by professional values, ideals, and objectives, internalized via professional training and occupational socialization. These emphasize client advocacy, commitment, and responding to individual needs, as well as larger values such as social justice and solidarity. On the other hand, social workers are supposed to be loyal to the organization and adhere to bureaucratic rules and procedures, based on ideals of objectivity, impartiality, and efficiency.

New public management reforms and their emphasis on meticulous documentation, time, and cost efficiency, and performance scores, have further increased the gap between professional and organizational feeling rules. Furthermore, efficiency demands and austerity measures in the public sector foster emotional detachment and distance toward clients, stifling client identification and

loyalty. On a grander level, neoliberal discourses underline individual responsibility, policing, and controlling clients, and ultimately affect social workers' sympathy and care for clients.

This thesis contributes to the research base by illuminating how social workers relate to feeling rules in Sweden, considering the specific historical and sociocultural context within which the profession is embedded. By focusing on the conditions, struggles, and motivations for practitioners' management and performances of emotional labor within the context of the ideals, objectives, and organization of the Swedish social services, larger contradictions and paradoxes are illuminated. Furthermore, I examine and illuminate emotions not only as outcomes of social processes, but also their role in *causing* these processes. In other words, emotions *motivate* individuals and groups to act, and orient them toward certain ways of thinking and acting. For instance, I show how social workers individually, as well as collectively through interaction rituals, construct certain ways of thinking and feeling about their clients, which influence their behavior and decision-making.

## CHAPTER 3: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter I introduce the central theories and concepts used in my analysis. First, I account for how I define emotion, and how the theories and concepts applied in this study relate to different areas of study, including interactional, cultural, and structural theories of emotions. This is followed by a brief introduction to emotions in the workplace in the era of “late modernity.”

In the main section of this chapter, I outline the fundamental theories and concepts: feeling rules and emotional labor, emotional regimes, emotions and (professional) identity, emotive-cognitive frames, interactional rituals, power and status emotions, the socioemotional economy, and lastly, emotions in cognition and action.

### DEFINING EMOTIONS

#### *EMOTIONS: INTERSECTING MIND/BODY AND SOCIOCULTURAL SPHERES*

Sociology of emotions is a broad field that lacks a unified definition of emotions. The sociological tradition was initially defined by what it was *not*: a focus on the individual/bodily experience of emotions, which served as a demarcation against other traditions dealing with emotions, particularly psychology (Olson, McKenzie, and Patulny, 2017). Now, the broad consensus is that emotions are *both* bodily/psychological *and* sociocultural phenomena, and conceptualized as the link between individuals and social structure:

In short, the emphasis here is on the active, emotionally expressive body, as the basis of self, sociality, meaning and order located within the broader sociocultural realms of everyday life and the ritualized forms of interaction and exchange they involve. Seen in these terms, emotions provide the ‘missing link’ between ‘personal troubles’ and broader ‘public issues’ of social structure. (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, pp. xiii–xiv)

Accordingly, emotions are not something that merely exists ‘within’ individuals, but emerge in and modify interactions and are deeply embedded in sociocultural

structures that define norms for emotional experiences and expression. Thus, emotions are understood as “*patterns of relationships* between self and others, and between self and world” (Burkitt, 2014, p. 2 emphasis in original). To understand the correlation between the individual and social structure/culture, Thoits (1989) conceptualizes emotion as comprising four components:

a) appraisals of a situational stimulus or context, b) changes in physiological or bodily sensations, c) the free or inhibited display of expressive gestures, and d) a cultural label applied to specific constellations of one or more of the first three elements. (Thoits, 1989, p. 318)<sup>18</sup>.

Thus, individual factors include bodily feelings, physiological changes, and expressions. Sociocultural factors include interactional clues, cultural labels (“emotion words,” e.g., angry, envious, or lonely), norms and rules about how to feel and display emotions, and the efforts required to align with these norms and rules (cf. Patulny and Olson, 2019, p. 8).

While all these components are relevant for this thesis, the main focus is on the sociality of emotions.<sup>19</sup> I examine emotions in relation to interactions, social structure, and culture. Next, I briefly outline key theories and concepts used in my analysis, and how I define them.

*Interactions* refer to situated encounters between two or more individuals (Goffman, 1982). In these (micro-level) interactions, individuals strive to conform to the image they have of themselves (self-identity), and to the role identities through which they act in specific social interactions. When they fail to do so, they experience negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, shame, or guilt (Turner & Stets, 2006). Interactions can also be understood as *rituals*. I will particularly use Randall Collins’ (2004) theory *interaction ritual chains* which shows how rituals generate *collective* emotions that are linked to group symbols and form the bases for beliefs, morality, thinking, and culture, and ultimately collective solidarity. Rituals foster social cohesion, collective effervescence, and group consciousness, and reward individuals with emotional energy that motivates them to seek out further interaction rituals.

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<sup>18</sup> These components are relatively consented on in emotionsociological literature. However, which of the components have the most impact is a point of debate, specifically the influence of culture versus individual agency.

<sup>19</sup> However, I consider the role of emotions in rationality and action, which focus on individual factors.

In turn, interactions are embedded in social structure and culture. Situational cues (component 5) indicate that individuals engaged in interactions are sensitive to emotional signals, from self or others, informing them whether they act in a way that is normatively acceptable. Individuals relate to feeling rules and emotional norms that vary temporarily, spatially, and socially between societies, historical contexts, and social classes or groups (Hochschild, 1983; Reddy, 2001).

*(Social) structure* here refers to how power and status structures, such as gender and class, influence individuals' emotions, as well as the norms for how emotions should be experienced and expressed. For instance, actors with high and unchallenged power in an interaction experience satisfaction, confidence, and security, while those with relatively low power experience fear and anxiety. Actors with high status (and to which others show deference) experience pride, while those lacking or losing status experience shame (Kemper, 1978; Barbalet, 1998).

*Culture* involves structural dimensions, but also symbolic systems to which individuals relate and use to interpret meaning and guide their behavior. Culture refers to norms, institutions, practices, rituals, symbols (including language), and meanings that guide and influence cognition, emotion, and action (Illouz et al., 2006). Culture contains normative prescriptions about how identities should be crafted, and the values and beliefs a person should uphold. Emotions are conditioned – but not determined<sup>20</sup> – by the cultural norms, values, ideals, and beliefs in a society, which define what (and how much) should be felt and expressed. The role of language is highlighted in component 6. This indicates how culture forms and regulates emotional experience and displays, and provides a framework for how we classify and define emotions. A feeling is not simply expressed, but *completed*, in the word as an emotion; through conscious articulation of a feeling, it is restructured as an emotion (Burkitt, 2008, p. 156). As Gould (2009, p. 21) carefully puts it:

Language and conventionalized bodily gestures thus in a sense 'capture' affect, or attempt to. And that attempt gives specific form to an inchoate but pressing bodily sensation, shaping it, delimiting it, fixing it into the emotion or emotions that have been named or expressed. An emotion, in other words, brings a vague bodily intensity or sensation into the realm of cultural meanings and normativity, systems of signification that structure our very feelings.

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<sup>20</sup> Individuals can *strategically manipulate* their emotions and displays (Hochschild, 1983; Illouz 2008).

In other words, when we label a feeling, it transforms from having initial broad potential into a specific (or a combination of several) emotion(s). This, in turn, *alters* the experienced feeling (cf. Barrett, 2017; Reddy, 2001).

*EMOTIONS AT WORK: FROM IRRATIONAL TROUBLES TO ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES*

The social and cultural aspects of emotions bring into focus how historical changes, cultural differences, and structural factors impact how we feel, display, and value<sup>21</sup> emotions in our private lives and, crucially for this thesis, at work.

As argued by Patulny and Olson (2019), different historical eras and their unique social economic and cultural conditions also have different codes for emotional conduct and expectations (p. 9). In other words, they have different *emotional regimes* (Reddy, 2001). The “classical” and the early “modern” era of industrial capitalism were characterized by, as Williams (1998, p. 747) describes it, “an irrational passion for dispassionate rationality.” The fixation on rationality was, as Barbalet (1998) argues, founded on a persistent Western narrative that positioned rationality (or reason) as *opposite* to emotions. This dichotomy was portrayed as an ongoing battle for control of our behavior between an “inner beast of emotion” and a rational self (Williams & Bendelow, 1998, p. 132; Barrett, 2017).

This rationalist ethos is epitomized by Weber’s (2019) ideal bureaucrat. Weber (2019, p. 101) argued that society had<sup>22</sup> undergone a fundamental shift from a *value rationality* (e.g., ethical or religious values) – which has an *intrinsic* worth (unrelated to outcome) – to an increasingly dominant *goal*<sup>23</sup> *rationality*. Goal rationality (bureaucracy) denotes intentionally orienting actions to the purpose, means, and related consequences. Tasks should be carried out “objectively,” *sine ira et studio*,<sup>24</sup> a formalistic impersonality where the “private” self is clearly distinct from the professional self, guided by legal formalism, rules and procedures, and rational

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<sup>21</sup> For instance, Swedish historian Karin Johannisson (2010) explores how melancholy has been experienced and expressed historically and given different meanings by both individuals and society. While melancholy was a status symbol in the 1800s, associated with male intellectuals, it was later decoupled from this group and instead linked to women, whereby melancholy lost its high status.

<sup>22</sup> Written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>23</sup> Or “purposive” rationality (Weber, 2019, p. 101), which is a more accurate translation of the German word *Zweck*.

<sup>24</sup> “Without hatred or passion, and so without ‘love’ and ‘enthusiasm’, the ideal official fulfills his office ‘without regard to person’: ‘everyone’ is treated with formal equality” (Weber, 2019, p. 353).

calculation, to enhance efficiency and productivity. Thus, actions guided by goal rationality do not have an intrinsic value, but are means to ends (e.g., productivity). The bureaucratic principles extend beyond a specific organizational order, but encompass a particular ethos internalized by individuals' – *Lebensführung* – styles of conducting themselves in various spheres of life (e.g., work, family, community) (Tribe, 2019).

While the ideal bureaucracy should function like a machine, effectively harnessing human resources and eliminating the unpredictability of human beings (Giddens, 1972, p. 47), in the present area of late modernity (Giddens, 1991), personal qualities are instead formed into organizationally profitable resources. More than 70 years ago, Mills (1951, p. 183) pointed out that personality and personal traits played an ever-increasing part in the labor market. Mills argued that we sell our personality in a “personality market,” where workers are expected to sell “their smiles and their kindly gestures” and “practice the prompt repression of resentment and aggression” (Mills, 1951, xvii). However, Hochschild argues that individuals do not inherently *have* a “sellable personality” but must engage in active *emotion management* to produce it, which requires developing proper emotional skills, such as emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010) and emotional intelligence (Fineman, 2000; Illouz, 2007).

Eva Illouz describes this phenomenon as a “fusion of the market repertoires and languages of the self,” where “emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified and commodified” (2008, p. 109). Emotions are thus valorized as either “negative/destructive” or “positive/constructive.” Negative emotions (anger, envy, resentment, sadness, etc.) are to be managed, while positive emotions (enthusiasm, happiness, self-love, etc.) should be summoned and displayed (Sieben & Wettergren, 2010). This valorization is central to the growing “happiness industry,” which promises happiness and prosperity through positive thinking, self-care, perseverance, and, above all, individual effort<sup>25</sup> (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019; Honneth, 2004; Illouz, 2007; Sennett, 1998). Analogous to the bureaucratic *Lebensführung*, these qualities should inform not only the work self, but also the individual's conduct in other spheres of life:

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<sup>25</sup> Epitomized in the 2006 American true-story movie *The Pursuit of Happyness*, in which a homeless man, through perseverance and determination, manages to secure a job as a stockbroker.

“never has the private self been so publicly performed and harnessed to the discourses and values of the economic and political spheres” (Illouz, 2007, p. 4). Thus, the nature of labor has shifted from Weber’s “iron cage of rationality” – ruled by ideals of formalistic impersonality – toward a commodification of private experiences and emotions, muddling the boundaries between private and public spheres. However, as I will argue throughout my analysis, the work in social services requires *both* adherence to bureaucratic principles *and* using personal experiences and emotions, a constant movement between formalistic impersonality and personal affection.

In sum, norms and rules for emotional experiences and displays are deeply engrained in sociocultural ideals, providing instructions for how we should craft our private and work identities. Next, I will expand on Hochschild’s emotion systems theory and key concepts, which illuminate how sociocultural norms and organizational feeling rules govern how individuals’ experience, display, and manage emotions.

## FEELING RULES AND EMOTIONAL LABOR

Hochschild introduced the concepts of feeling and display rules – culturally rooted norms that determine what to feel, where to feel, when to feel, who to feel for, how much, and for how long to feel (Hochschild, 1979). Feeling rules are recognized by individuals in “the pinch between ‘what I do feel’ and ‘what I should feel’” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 57). Overstepping or breaking feeling rules elicits painful emotions such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment (cf. Scheff, 2000). Violations of feeling rules are mediated through *rule reminders*, either through “a private mumbling to ourselves,” or by others asking us to *account* for our feelings, implying that the emotional conventions have been broken and need to be repaired (Hochschild, 1983, p. 58). To align with these rules, people engage in *emotion management*,<sup>26</sup> defined as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily

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<sup>26</sup> Hochschild uses *emotion work* and *emotion management* synonymously, referring to the management of feelings in a private context (2003, p. 7). However, in recent literature, emotion management is often used as an umbrella term for emotion work and emotional labor, indicating people’s ability to manage their emotions according to rules both in private and work settings (Callahan & McCollum, 2002, p. 222).

display” requiring individuals to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Emotion management refers to what people do in their private lives, and is crucial for maintaining the flow of social interactions (cf. Goffman, 1959). In other words, feeling and display rules are culturally imposed norms, while emotion management involves the private efforts to conform to these rules.

In a work context, Hochschild (1983) argues that workers’ emotions are “bought” and used for a profit motive by organizations (or companies). Here, people’s “private emotion systems” are commodified through organizationally imposed feeling and display rules. Hochschild refers to this type of emotion work as *emotional labor*. To meet these ideals, workers manage their emotions through various techniques, broadly categorized into surface and deep acting. *Surface acting* involves managing *outward* facades, pretending “to feel what we do not, [...] we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33). *Deep acting* involves eliciting feelings *as if* the individual were in a different situation, using trained imagination and private memories to display “genuine” feelings. The aim of deep acting is “deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others [...] we make feigning easy by making it unnecessary” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33).

Hochschild (1983) introduced both “positive” or empathetic (flight attendants) and “negative” or antipathetic (debt collectors) emotional labor, which she refers to as “the toe” and “the heel” of capitalism (p. 137ff). Empathetic emotional labor aims to enhance the customer’s status, by displaying empathy and *genuine* warmth, epitomized by the airline’s catch phrase “Our smiles are not just painted on” (1983, p. 4). The antipathetic counterpart, in contrast, involves deflating the status of the customer by performances of intimidation, fear, and aggression (Hochschild, 1983, p. 139; Ward & McMurray, 2016).

#### **CLARIFYING TERMINOLOGY: MANAGEMENT, LABOR, OR WORK?**

Following the significant impact of Hochschild’s work (1983), scholars have noted a tendency to refer to all emotional activity within the workplace as emotional labor. Bolton (2005, p. 53) has labeled this phenomenon as the “emotional labor bandwagon”; indicating the perception that all emotions experienced at work are

organizational objects to be commodified. However, this might be a consequence of conceptual laxity. Hochschild (1983) presented a cohesive emotion systems theory which encompasses individual acts of “emotion work,” social “feeling rules,” and various exchanges between people in both private and public life (Hochschild, 1983, pp. ix–x), and the concepts must be understood as an interconnected framework. In other words, using “emotional management” as a standalone concept<sup>27</sup> overlooks the *normative* properties of the emotion system theory. Hochschild’s point is not to show *that* people manage their emotions, but rather *why* they do it and *who* formulates the feeling rules. When emotion management is an organizational demand, Hochschild speaks of emotional *labor*:

I use the term emotional labour to mean the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange-value*. I use the synonymous terms emotion work or emotion management to refer to these same acts done in a private context where they have *use-value*. (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7 emphases in original).

Emotion *work* is a necessary part of maintaining smooth interactions and is foundational for sustaining a “civilized” society (cf. Elias, 1978; Goffman, 1959). Emotional *labor*, building on Marx, emphasizes the systematic exploitation of workers for profit motives (1983, p. 89). Furthermore, emotion management is often reduced to an individual skill or effort, overlooking the collective and interactional dimensions emphasized by Hochschild, and illustrated by flight attendants’ collective efforts to maintain an appropriate “emotional tone”:

In fact, workers commonly say the work simply cannot be done well unless they work well together. The reason for this is that the job is partly an ‘emotional tone’ road show, and the and the proper tone is kept up in large part by friendly conversation, banter, and joking, as ice cubes, trays, and plastic cups are passed from aisle to aisle to the galley, down to the kitchen, and up again. (Hochschild 1983, p. 115)

McKenzie et al. (2019) argue that there are disciplinary differences in how Hochschild’s theory is used. In sociology, emotion management in the work sphere is typically understood as commercially driven, exploitative, and an alienating experience. In contrast, organizational psychology literature tends to equate emotion management with emotion regulation, framed as a useful individual skill that can be

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<sup>27</sup> Here, the concept *emotional regulation* might be more appropriate.

developed and used for organizational gain,<sup>28</sup> becoming depoliticized and losing its critical edge (cf. Ward & McMurray, 2016).

### CONSEQUENCES OF EMOTIONAL LABOR

Hochschild (1983) proposes that emotional laborers can take one of three “stances” towards work, each associated with specific “costs”:

1. The worker successfully – through deep acting - internalizes the feeling rules of the organization, which spares them from “feigning.” However, identifying too strongly with the organization means that the worker cannot separate work-related difficulties, such as failures or hostile clients from the self. Therefore, taking this stance increases the likelihood to suffer stress and burnout.
2. The worker distinguishes the “self” from the job, by only displaying the required feelings through surface acting techniques. While this decreases the likelihood of stress and burnout, the worker becomes detached from the people she engages with and begin to feel phony and insincere.
3. The worker may entirely stop performing emotional labor, become estranged from the job, and take on a cynical position.

While all stances bring their own troubles, the all-encompassing dilemma is as “how to adjust one's self to the role in a way that allows some flow of self into the role but minimizes the stress the role puts on [the worker]” (Hochschild 1983, pp. 187–188).

Surface acting, where displayed emotions do not match the experienced feelings, may ultimately lead to emotive dissonance. To avoid dissonance, workers may try to bring the feigning and the feeling closer together – displaying emotions in line with organizational demands and expectations – by deep acting. The aim is to manufacture the required feeling by imagining a previous emotional event. Continuous performances of such deep acting may cause a *transmutation of the private emotion system*, whereby the worker begins to feel that the normative requirements of the organization are their own. Building on Freud's idea that anxiety serves as a bodily *signal function*, Hochschild suggests that *all* feelings have a signal function, telling us where we “stand” in social settings (Hochschild, 2003, p. x). When the employing organization demands of workers to align their feelings with the

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Guy (in Hasenfeld, 2009) calls emotional labor “a necessary skill” in human service organizations (p. 434).

organization's goals, the *meaning* of these signals are lost: we are, in effect, estranged from our own emotions (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). This process, evoking or suppressing emotions through exhortation or trained imagination, distorts spontaneous emotions and may therefore cause alienation from one's sense of self. Ward (2009) suggests that both types of emotional labor – surface and deep acting – are ultimately performed to protect and maintain a consistent “narrative of self” (p. 259). In other words, when acting in a way that feels inconsistent with an overall self-image (brought to attention through the reaction of others or self-evaluation), individuals experience uncomfortable feelings such as embarrassment and guilt, prompting attempts to repair this deviant image through acts of emotional labor.

Some researchers have criticized the preoccupation with the negative effects of emotional labor, and it has been argued that emotional labor may sometimes facilitate job satisfaction, self-efficacy, and accomplishment. For example, Wouters (1989) argues that Hochschild's “preoccupation with the ‘costs’ of emotion management not only leads to a one-sided and moralistic interpretation of the working conditions of flight attendants, it also hampers understanding the joy the job may bring” (p. 116). Wouters also argues that the external level of constraints of feelings have actually declined over the last century, in that they have become more varied, and less rigid and coercive. In response to Wouters, Hochschild (1989) argued that her point was not to bring attention to the *quantity* of constraints on workers but, building on Marx, to bring attention to the changing *quality* of the constraints on workers. The social constraints are increasingly aimed at the *internal*, as “we are controlled to a greater extent through our feelings, and less through our externally observable behaviour” (Hochschild, 1989, p. 442). Thus, Hochschild puts the sociological lens on the changing nature of constraints on and exploitation of workers: how organizations interfere between *actual* feeling and what *ought to be* experienced and expressed. Nonetheless, it should be noted that research has shown that emotional labor *can* be rewarding and a source of pride (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Bolton, 2005; Erickson & Stacey, 2013; Pugliesi, 1999), including so-called antipathetic emotional labor (Ward & McMurray, 2016).

## EMOTIONAL LABOR IN PROFESSIONS AND CARE WORK

Feeling rules can be either explicitly prescribed or, as is often the case in professional work, often tacit and have various sources, such as interaction with colleagues, managerial supervision, education, and training, as well as from professional norms (e.g., codes of ethics) (Bolton, 2005; Dunkel, 1988).

Hochschild has been criticized for exaggerating the power of organizations to manipulate workers' feelings and workers' possibilities to display "genuine" feelings at work (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). This highlights what critics claim is a limitation in Hochschild's theory, namely that it mainly addresses *commercially* motivated emotional labor and is therefore inadequate for understanding the work of caring professions and human services (Bolton, 2005; Erickson & Stacey, 2013). This critique is founded on Hochschild's original conceptualization of emotional labor as jobs that have three common characteristics:

First, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. Second, they require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person - gratitude or fear, for example. Third, they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees. (Hochschild 1983, p. 147)

Hochschild did indeed argue that professionals fill only two of the three criteria, as they are not *monitored by an emotion supervisor*. However, I disagree with this critique, as Hochschild states that professionals<sup>29</sup> "supervise their own emotional labor by considering informal professional norms and client expectations" (1983, p. 153). Therefore, I argue that Hochschild does not in fact exclude professionals; rather, she hints at the different nature of, and importantly, the *motivations* for, adhering to feeling rules. In other words, while service workers aim to produce positive feelings in their customers to increase profit, monitored by a supervisor, professionals are motivated by commitment to internalized professional norms. In lieu of an external emotion supervisor, professions are characterized by a "mutual selection process" where candidates deemed to be the "right person for the job" are chosen, and individuals actively seek to fit the idealized image of their chosen profession (Bolton, 2005). This idealized image – represented in fiction as well as by famous representatives of the professional group – serves as a yardstick with its own set of

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<sup>29</sup> In an appendix, Hochschild (1983, p. 244ff) presents an extensive outline of occupational roles that entail emotional labor, including social workers and doctors.

feeling rules, and fellow professionals give constant interactional cues. Therefore, in contrast to the explicit rules found in commercial corporations, professional feeling rules function more as *cultural control*, which facilitates identification with the professional role and the internalization of values and norms (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). This identification process is cued and negotiated through situated interactions and collectively enacted sanctions (Collins, 2004; Kunda & Van Maanen, 1999).

Although Bolton (2005), in my opinion, misinterprets Hochschild's definition, she developed a helpful typology of workplace emotion that highlights the *motivations* for performing emotional labor in different types of occupations. These are: *pecuniary*, *philanthropic*, *presentational*, and *prescriptive* forms of emotion management. Pecuniary emotion management is equivalent to Hochschild's commercial service work, motivated by instrumental gain. Presentational and philanthropic emotion management are both governed by "social feeling rules," and not directly controlled by management. Presentational emotion management is motivated to maintain the interaction order (Goffman, 1982), meaning that it serves to uphold social stability within the organization (comparable to Hochschild's emotion work). Philanthropic manifests as emotional "gifts" and is motivated by moral commitment and the "general good." The latter two also create collegial solidarity and spaces for resistance in organizations, and largely emphasize the space for agency that Bolton claims Hochschild's theory lacks<sup>30</sup> (Bolton, 2005, p. 67).

Prescriptive emotion management is governed by organizational and/or professional feeling rules, mediated via "membership in a professional body," and motivated by status, instrumental gain, *and* altruism and "genuine motivation" to care for and help people. Each professional discipline has its own set of implicit feeling rules that align with their unique mission, serving to ensure that the individual professional meets the public expectations of how a professional should act (p. 122). Bolton argues that the fact street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 2010) are partly professionals and partly bureaucrats means that they are required to perform both

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<sup>30</sup> I disagree on this point. While Hochschild paints a picture of workers strictly governed by feeling rules, she also emphasizes their resistance: "Workers have also – in varying degrees – reclaimed control of their own smiles [...] they smile less broadly, with a quick release and no sparkle in the eyes, thus dimming the company's message to the people. It is a war of smiles." (1983, p. 127)

pecuniary<sup>31</sup> and prescriptive emotional labor, where workers may be “Genuinely motivated to care for or serve people in a public service profession thus indicating the possibility of multiple, even contradictory, motivations” (Bolton, 2005, p. 95).

A key difference between service occupations and professional roles is the nature of interactions with clients or customers, in terms of duration and frequency. Short interactions (as in service occupations) often involve highly scripted arrangements, which also call for less planning and effort. Conversely, long interactions demand more complex emotional labor and emotional stamina (Morris & Feldman, 1996, 2020; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989).

## EMOTIONAL REGIMES AND EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION

In addition to Hochschild’s emotions system theory, I draw on historian William Reddy’s (2001) theory of emotions, particularly the concepts of *emotional regime* and *emotional navigation*.

Reddy understands emotions as closely associated with *goals*. According to Reddy, a network of goals give a senses of coherence to the self, and emotions direct cognition, attention and motivation towards these goals, and degree of emotional intensity reflect the relevance of certain goals (2001, p. 14). When significant shifts in highly relevant goals happen, people experience emotional suffering, such as guilt or shame (p. 124).

However, neither goals and values nor emotional expression are freely chosen by individuals, but governed by political regimes, or *emotional regimes*. Emotional regimes refers to a set of norms and practices established by a political order coordinate goals and separate valued emotions from unwanted ones (2001, p. 125). According to Reddy, every political order creates a normative emotional regime to regulate emotional behavior and experience. This regime is enforced through official rituals, practices, and expressions of emotions, which Reddy calls “emotives<sup>32</sup>” (p. 129).

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<sup>31</sup> A possible objection would be that the public sector is not driven by commercial interests. However, new public management approaches are based on market logics, and service users are redefined as “customers” (du Gay, 2000).

<sup>32</sup> *Emotives* are available ways of talking about emotions in a community, used by individuals as “tools to arriving at desired states” and to navigate within the norms and expectations of the regime (or in a

Reddy classifies emotional regimes along a spectrum from strictness to freedom (2001, p. 125). At one extreme, *strict regimes* rigorously enforce emotional norms, defining clear goals and values for individuals and providing tools for emotion management. Compliance with these norms is ensured through severe sanctions for any deviation. While strict regimes offer clear guidelines and strong tools for managing emotions, they limit opportunities for self-exploration and emotional navigation.

On the other end of the spectrum, freedom regimes set “few limits on emotional navigation.” While freedom regimes offer more space for emotional expression, the lack of clear guidelines and rules for emotion management can lead to feelings of isolation and anxiety (cf., Fromm, 1960). However, these regimes allow the formation of “emotional communities”, which are subgroups that share specific emotional norms and practices. These communities provide an “emotional refuge”, where individuals can relax “emotional effort” develop unique ways of experiencing and expressing emotions, referred to by Reddy as “emotional styles” (Reddy, 2001, p. 129).

Maneuvering between different goals is closely associated with emotions, as emotions direct cognition, attention, and motivations towards these goals. However, social life is complex and unpredictable, often presenting multiple and conflicting goals. Reddy acknowledges this complexity in his concept of emotional navigation. Emotional navigation denotes a less deliberate and instrumental effort compared to emotional management. While emotional management involves intentional efforts to control and regulate one's emotional expressions and experiences to achieve specific, predetermined goals, emotional navigation is more dynamic and less goal-oriented. It reflects the fluid and often unpredictable nature of emotional life, where individuals must continuously adjust their emotional responses to navigate the various and sometimes conflicting demands of social life (Reddy, 2001, pp. 108-109; 122).

In Chapter 7, I argue that the emotional regime of social services is “loose,” meaning that social workers have relatively high freedom in prioritizing among

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work context, those of the employing organization) (p. 322). Emotives are not merely *descriptive* statements, but also *performative* in the sense that they tools for evaluating and altering our emotions. They are also performative in the sense that they are used to signal to ourselves and others how we want to be perceived, and are therefore instruments to shape, confirm or alter our identities.

goals, as well as constructing their own emotional styles. While such freedom can be rewarding, it requires continuous emotional navigation. However, navigation is made easier through the establishment of emotional communities, where group specific goals and emotional norms are defined and provide strategies and guidance for behavior and action, and therefore reduce ambiguity.

## EMOTIONS AND (PROFESSIONAL) IDENTITY

I see emotions as linked to identity<sup>33</sup> in two central ways. First, individuals seek to confirm both the image they have of themselves (self-identity) as well as the particular identities they act through (role identity) in any specific social interaction. When these identities are confirmed, individuals experience positive<sup>34</sup> emotions; when they are not confirmed, they experience negative emotions (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 2004). Particularly relevant in interactions are shame-emotions, or the anticipation of them (and their counterpart, pride), as they are our “moral gyroscope” that signal moral transgressions (Scheff, 2003, p. 254). Second, individuals *perform* their identities across interactions, and these performances involve emotional displays in pursuit of *identity verification*. For example, if identifying as an empathetic social worker, this self-perception may be confirmed by expressing care and commitment, serving both to verify this identity to ourselves, and signal valued aspects of it to others. Thus, in social interaction, others provide identity-relevant *feedback* (Burke & Stets, 2009).

I understand identity as a cluster of roles that people are more or less emotionally committed to (Stryker, 2004). Building on Mead’s (1934) dictum that “self reflects

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<sup>33</sup> Here I had to make a terminological choice. Some scholars prefer the term “subjectivity” over “identity”. Giddens (1991, pp. 53–54) understands (self-)identity as the ability to sustain a “narrative about the self,” a biographical continuity that is understood reflexively and can be communicated to others. The concepts can be understood in relation to each other – how people experience and understand their lives within the social categories available to them. In other words, subjectivity makes it possible for any particular social identity to be lived, while identity helps specify what there is to be lived (Wetherell, 2008, p. 75). Identity is therefore a deeply social category – embedded within and produced by the social world. Thus, the social world is both enabling and constraining. In this thesis, the distinction clarifies that identity to a greater extent is attached to language – verbal conceptions we hold about ourselves (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1168). In contrast, subjectivity refers to more complex human experiences: a unique personal and embodied experience of being-in-the-world.

<sup>34</sup> “Pleasant/’unpleasant” feelings are more appropriate, to avoid valorizing emotions (cf. Feldman Barrett, 2017, p. 47; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010, p. 4).

society,” this brand of identity theory adopts the idea that there are many different selves corresponding to different positions in society. The “overall self” is organized into various role identities (social worker, mother, co-worker, friend, etc.), aiding navigation in social interactions (cf., S. Scott, 2016). The significance of others for individuals’ notion of self was emphasized by Cooley’s concept *looking glass self*—our imagination of how we appear to others and their envisaged judgment of us. Mead developed Cooley’s theory, and placed emphasis on “self-consciousness,” suggesting that self-image is not so much reliant on the mere imagination of how others perceive us but grounded in experiences from prior social interactions. The self here takes the role of “the other” – both *specific* others (significant individuals in one’s life) that influence one’s identity and social roles, and *generalized* others (a representation of the rules, values, and norms of broader society). Through these others, we continuously monitor ourselves in terms of how we behave and express ourselves, including how we express ourselves emotionally (Burkitt, 2008, p. 42).

Identities can also be understood as social categories to which *groups* associate meanings and expectations (Burke & Stets, 2009). Individuals categorize themselves accordingly through processes of *identification* (Stryker, 1980) and internalize these meanings and expectations as their own. *Professional identity*<sup>35</sup> can be understood, on the one hand, in a *collective* sense to convey the “identity of the profession,” and on the other, *subjectively* as a process through which each worker develops a sense of themselves as a member of the group (Lawler, 2015; Wiles, 2017).

During social work training, students develop a new dimension to their identity; they become committed to the prescriptive feeling rules of a profession (Bolton, 2005). However, when entering an organization, particularly one that operates according to the dictates of NPM, they are expected to align to “pecuniary” (commercially motivated) feeling rules (Bolton, 2005). Consequently, they are expected to abide by *both* the feeling rules associated with the professional identity *and* those of the organizational role. These conflicting feeling rules, as I will demonstrate, cause differences and ambiguities for maintaining a coherent sense of self, verifying this identity through others, as well for how to perform identities.

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<sup>35</sup> Some use the term *organizational identity*, which of course could have a different meaning if we keep in mind the occupational/organizational professionalism division of Evetts (2009), but I simply chose one of them for the sake of clarity. Here, professional identity will signify identity traits prescribed by the ideologies of both the organization and the profession.

*EMOTIONAL AUTHENTICITY AT WORK – OR IS THERE SUCH A THING?*

The notion of identity verification implies considering whether actors perceive themselves as “authentic” in social situations. This brings us back to Hochschild’s (1983) notion of authenticity within the framework of emotion systems theory. Critics have argued that Hochschild’s dichotomy between a private “authentic self” and a working “managed self” is exaggerated. For instance, Tracy and Trethewey’s (2005, p. 174) contend that “this point of view presumes that emotion is more authentic and pristine before it enters the realm of organizations, where it is ‘transmuted’ and thus ‘processed, standardized’ for organizational ends.” This point relates to a wider criticism of Hochschild’s theory, namely that she exaggerates the space for human agency and freedom to negotiate, resist, and misbehave in emotional exchanges in private life, while underestimating these freedoms in public/commercial life (cf. Bolton, 2005; Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Wouters, 1989).

To avoid these muddy waters, I use the term “preferred identity” suggested by Tracy and Trethewey (2005, p. 185). Accordingly, identities are not regarded as more or less “real,” but individuals may perceive certain expressions of self as more authentic than others. Salmela argues that the “core of authenticity” lies in “the commitment to those identities that enable us to express our most important self-values” (Salmela, 2014, p. 133). Feelings of authenticity thus emerge when we manage to reach a *sense of coherence* among one’s values, commitments, and emotions. Salmela summarizes:

This value-based understanding of authenticity provides us a deeper insight into the relation of identity and authenticity by showing that it is not identification with the work role as such but commitment to the constitutive beliefs, values and norms of this identity and their compatibility with the person’s other central, either private or social, beliefs, values and norms that renders emotion management in the work role authentic. (Salmela, 2009, p. 141)

This definition allows for understanding authenticity at work in terms of the compatibility between the workers’ constitutive values, virtues, and beliefs, and those of the profession.<sup>36</sup> Authenticity thus relates to the moral values held by an individual. Morality is here defined as “evaluative cultural codes that specify what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable” (Turner & Stets, 2006, p.

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<sup>36</sup> Given working conditions that include “considerable autonomy, participative management style, social support, and a reasonable workload” (Salmela, 2009, p. 149).

544). Identification is therefore understood as a fluid process;<sup>37</sup> we do not either “identify” as something or not, but rather, it depends on the expectations on our role in relation to others in interactions. Identification with and commitment to certain roles varies greatly between individuals, and individuals are capable of multiple and even conflicting identifications (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

The question of how individuals experience and manage conflicts between the “internalized” values of their profession and the values of the employing organization is central throughout the analytical chapters. However, to understand and illuminate how these values are “internalized,” I now turn to interactional theories and concepts.

## INTERACTIONAL PERSPECTIVES

In this section, I account for interactional theories that provide an understanding of how individuals organize and make sense of and organize their experiences, and how organizational culture and feeling rules are imposed, negotiated, or resisted in interactions. Based on (mainly) Goffman and Collins, I view interactions as embedded within broader social structures of meaning and values. Furthermore, I account for how emotions in interaction rituals play a part in whether these meanings and values are accepted or rejected, reinforced or weakened.

### *GOFFMAN’S DRAMATURGICAL PERSPECTIVE*

Erving Goffman’s concept of the “interaction order” refers to the social structure and norms that govern face-to-face interactions (1982). Goffman emphasized that these interactions are not random, but organized and patterned, forming a crucial part of social life. The interaction order includes the unspoken rules and rituals that people follow during social encounters, such as turn-taking in conversations and managing impressions. According to Goffman, all actors involved in a face-to-face interaction attempt to project a definition of the situation in which they appear, to frame the situation to their advantage by making social “moves.” Typically, individuals engaged in interaction seek to reach an agreement on the “definition of

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<sup>37</sup> There is, however, a tendency among organizational scholars to think in terms of either a stable and fixed identity or a fluid, uncertain one. But, as Sveningsson and Alvesson put it, “We do not have to choose between a sovereign self and a decentered one” (2003, p. 1167).

the situation” to make sense of their own and others’ performances, cooperating to maintain the veneer of consensus (Goffman, 1959, p. 9).

Goffman used the metaphor of a theater stage to illustrate how people move between the front region (frontstage) and the back region (backstage). Front stage performances rely on the actors’ ability to “maintain face,” meaning they must maintain expressive control and perform in idealized ways to elicit desired responses from others. The backstage serves as a space for the team to manage the strains of frontstage performances and rehearse future acts. It also provides a place to relax their roles and drop their frontstage “expressive mask” (Goffman, 1959, p. 121). Goffman introduced a third, a “residual” region, “the outside.” *Outsiders* refers to all individuals for whom performances are not intended (1959, p. 135)

Throughout Goffman’s work, the concept of *role* is central, defined as “an equivalent to specialized capacity or function, understanding this to occur both in offstage, real life and in its staged version” (Goffman, 1986, p. 129). For interactions to be successful, performers must ensure that they display “expressive coherence” in their respective roles (Goffman, 1959, p. 53). Role enactments occur through cycles of face-to-face encounters with “role others,” or *audiences* (Goffman, 1972, p. 75). When an individual assumes a certain position in a social establishment, such as “social worker,” they become attached to specific *role expectations*, which are tied to moral standards held by “real or imagined” audiences<sup>38</sup>. Individuals may also “be their own audience” to calibrate their role enactment according to real and imagined expectations of others (Goffman, 1959, p. 80). Individuals can believe in the role they are enacting and perceive their staged impression as “real.” Conversely, the performer may *not* be “taken in by his own routine.” Goffman refers to these as “cynical performances,” which can occur either out of lack of commitment or because “the audiences will not allow them to be sincere” (1959, p. 18). Importantly, Goffman distinguishes between roles and role performance. *Roles* are normative, representing an *idealized* form, involving the activity an individual *would* engage in if

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<sup>38</sup> A concept similar to Goffman’s “imagined audiences” is Lipsky’s (2010) “reference groups.” According to Lipsky, street-level bureaucrats face goal conflicts and ambiguity not only in terms of conflicting ideals (such as professional ethics versus organizational goals), but also due to conflicting *role expectations*. Reference groups include peers (mainly coworkers embodying professional standards), and the public, who define expectations “although they are not literally present” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 45). I prefer term *audiences*, as it highlights how these conflicting expectations are internalized and influence individuals’ behavior in situated interactions.

they acted strictly according to the normative expectations of their position. *Role performances* are the actual attempts by an individual attempting (more or less enthusiastically) to perform the role, which may deviate from normative expectations (Goffman, 1972, p. 75).

### FRAMES OF REFERENCE: THE ORGANIZATION OF EXPERIENCE

In Goffman's later writing, he introduced the concept of *frame* (of reference) to describe how individuals structure and classify their experiences, which allows them to convey them to, and synchronize with, others (Goffman, 1986, p. 13). This "schemata of interpretation" allows people to answer the question "what is going on here?", transforming an otherwise trivial sequence of events into something meaningful (1986, p. 21). Frames are used by individuals to *define the setting* for a particular interaction, aiding them in understanding what is expected of them. While individuals involved in an interaction typically seek to maintain a consensus of the situation (or the frame of reference), they may discredit it and disrupt the working consensus. In other words, since framing is an active and social process, different perspectives can oppose each other, as individuals may interpret the situation (and the norms of the situation) differently. For example, the same action can be interpreted differently depending on whether it occurs in a playful context or a serious one. This could lead to "ambiguity in framing" – how to define the situation – which will be "translated into felt uncertainty and hesitancy" (Goffman, 1986, p. 302). People move between multiple frames every day, but some frames are *primary*, providing more encompassing definitional references. As Goffman (1986, p. 27) states, "the primary frameworks of a particular social group constitute a central element of its culture." Within primary frameworks, role expectations are typically clearer, as is the purpose of the interaction, and the norms of behavior.

For instance, actors generally agree that a work meeting, as opposed to a private dinner party, involves a facilitator leading the meeting and order of speaking. The purpose is usually stated (e.g., case review), and a norm of behavior is to be respectful (not interrupting, for example). Primary frames provide a structured way to interpret and respond to situations, making them understandable and meaningful, transforming "what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful" (Goffman, 1986, p. 21). In addition to *framing*,

Goffman's frame analysis also contains the concepts of *keying* and *shifting*. Keying involves transforming the meaning of an activity by applying a different frame to it. This can change the way the involved individuals perceive and engage with the activity. For instance, a serious conversation can be "keyed" into a humorous one by changing the tone, transforming it from a serious frame to a relaxed one. Shifting refers to the movement between different frames during an interaction. For example, a formal meeting might shift to a more casual discussion, altering the participants' behavior and expectations (1986, pp. 40; 368).

### *EMOTIVE-COGNITIVE FRAMES*

In line with scholars in the sociology of emotions, I understand frames as organizing not only cognition but also emotion. Hochschild (1979) developed Goffman's concept of frame, arguing that ideology<sup>39</sup> (or "culture") can be understood as an interpretative framework with two complementary aspects: *framing rules* ascribing definitions and meanings to a situation, and *feeling rules*, the "guidelines for the assessment of fits and misfits between feeling and situation" (Hochschild, 1979, p. 566). In other words, framing and feeling rules shape how we (ought to) think about *and* feel in situated interactions. Bergman Blix and Wettergren's (2018) concept of *emotive-cognitive frames* captures how frames are socialized and internalized by individuals, which involves learning to *think, feel, and act* in specific ways. Frames suppress certain emotions and encourage others, thereby directing routine professional activities. Thus, emotions are crucial for understanding how individuals internalize organizational (or professional) norms:

The notion of the emotive-cognitive judicial frame proposes that feeling rules and other social norms or constraints are not merely cognitive but also emotional. Indeed, the fact that these norms are emotional is crucial for their effectiveness—people would not care about norms if they did not feel them. (Bergman Blix & Wettergren 2021, p. 159)

Over time, frames – particular ways of understanding and responding to situations – become so ingrained and settled that people start to take them for granted. In other words, the rules and constraints of the frame are gradually *habituated* by individuals through socialization, training, and repetition. Consequently, emotion

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<sup>39</sup> Ideology is understood by Hochschild in terms of how people within a specific ideological context choose to interpret events reflect their beliefs about how things work or should work. These include normative cultural ideas about gender, love, the value of work, family, religion, education, freedom, etc.

management and adjustment to situational emotion norms become backgrounded (Barbalet, 1998; Wettergren & Bergman Blix, 2022).

The emotive-cognitive frame within a profession or organization is the standard against which employees' performances, actions, and decisions are evaluated as good or bad. This evaluation forms the boundaries of acceptance and inclusion within the profession or workplace, which are experienced both cognitively and emotionally. Emotional rewards such as pride and pleasure are felt when acting in accordance with the frame's rules, while feelings of shame and embarrassment arise when these rules are breached (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018, p. 22). The emotive-cognitive frame thus contains both self-disciplinary and performative functions, as employees evaluate and regulate their own actions and emotions according to its rules (p. 163). In this way, control is exercised not only externally but also internally through self-regulation: frames intertwine with actors' sense of self. This also forms a theoretical link between political control and the individual's self-perception and identity. Workers interpret themselves and their situation based on the established truths about how things are and how one should be, feel, and think.

Frames also shape how individuals (and groups) present themselves to *audiences*. Essentially, the frame helps define the setting of the performance (e.g., professional meetings require individuals to align with the expectations of that frame). Conversely, frames are shaped by the expectations of audiences (such as public beliefs on how professionals should behave).

## INTERACTION RITUALS AND EMOTIONAL ENERGY

Based on Goffman's interaction theory and Durkheim's (1976) ritual theory – which demonstrated how religious rituals produce social cohesion and collective effervescence – Collins (1981) formulated a “radical micro-sociology”<sup>40</sup> theory of *interaction rituals*. In a nutshell, Collins argues that rituals *constitute and maintain* belief, values, and ultimately, social structures, thus reversing Durkheim's theory.

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<sup>40</sup> The *radical* part signifies Collins' attempt to bridge micro- (interaction) and macro-sociology (social structure). In essence, he argues that social structure and the repeated patterns of face-to-face interactions exist in a constant feedback loop; interactions contribute to the emergence and maintenance of social structures, while these structures shape and constrain micro interactions.

The aim of Collins' interactional ritual theory is to widen the concept of "rational" actions. The predominant understanding of the "rational actor," according to Collins, is that "all social action is explainable in terms of individuals attempting to optimize their expected benefits relative to costs of their actions" (1993, p. 203). This conception, Collins argues, is incomplete, as there are groups of behaviors that deviate from cost/benefit analysis: emotional behavior, altruism, and morally or value-motivated behavior. Additionally, actors cannot consciously calculate and compare costs and benefits across situations. Instead, people engage in ritualized behavior, which is informed not by rational calculation but essentially through emotions.

Collins defines interaction rituals as "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention producing a momentarily shared reality, which thereby generates solidarity and symbols of group membership" (Collins, 2004, p. 7). On a collective level, *emotional solidarity* is the primary good of interaction rituals, and all value-oriented behavior can thus be understood as *rationally* motivated toward optimizing this good. On an individual level, successful interaction rituals generate *emotional energy*, enthusiasm, confidence, and feelings of morality (Collins, 2004, p. 49).

Interactional intensity varies from low to high on the following dimensions: First, people need to be in *close proximity* to one another. The number of people present and the length of time they are together involve two processes: 1. The focus of attention, and 2. Commonality of emotion (or mood) (Collins 1993). If people are in close proximity, share the focus of attention, and have a common mood, both the emotion and the shared focus of attention will increase (Collins, 2004). Additionally, the more the group members are *separated from outsiders*, the more *bounded* they become. When these conditions are present, several subsequent processes occur; in the short-term, the focus of attention and intensity of common emotions cumulatively increase. Emotional intensity fosters a *collective consciousness*: the group becomes increasingly aware of itself *as a group*, producing group solidarity and collective symbols.

This is where the concept of *chains* enters Collins' theory (1988). Each interaction ritual is connected to previous and future rituals, and a sequence of successful interaction rituals will keep people motivated to stay in the group and to seek further successful interaction rituals. These chains are crucial because they illuminate how individuals navigate their social worlds, seeking out interactions that will maximize

their emotional energy and reinforce their social identities. Conversely, when interaction rituals fail and emotional energy is low, people experience feelings of apathy and depression, leading them to avoid situations where the rituals have failed. Thus, Collins indicates two *types* of emotions: First, transient emotions such as joy, fear, or anger, which are dramatic and disruptive. Second, emotional energy, which can be understood as longer-term moods, such as enthusiasm and willingness to initiate interaction (Collins, 2004, p. 106). According to Collins, it does not matter which emotions are present in the beginning of rituals, whether it is anger, happiness, or sadness. The point is that when a ritual is successful, there is a *transmutation of any shared emotions into a new emotion*, namely the *collective effervescence* and *solidarity*. Interaction rituals are therefore “emotion transformers” (Collins, 2004, p. 107).

Interactions are strengthened by *collective symbols*, such as values, words, and ideas. These symbols, or *sacred objects*, mark group membership and are emotionally infused, coming to symbolize membership in the group, and therefore have value in and of themselves. These collective symbols have two important effects on subsequent behavior. First, they facilitate subsequent interactions: When a group of individuals values the same collective symbols, these symbols are easily evoked in interaction, swiftly gathering mutual focus and providing content for discussion and action. Frequent use of these symbols recharges feelings of solidarity, chaining symbols and interactions together over time. Second, collective symbols *shape individual thinking*. When individuals select a course of action, they typically do not consciously calculate the cost and benefits of alternatives. Instead, Collins argues, people mostly “decide” unconsciously, guided by the emotional energy associated with various alternatives (Collins, 1993).

Collins’ theory can therefore illuminate how and why individuals “internalize” certain values. Values, according to Collins, are “cognitions infused with emotion” (2004, p. 102). Repeated interaction rituals create collective symbols – such as shared values – which generate group solidarity and emotional energy. Once a collective symbol is created, it can “store” emotional experiences, transforming short-term emotions into long-term emotions. In future interactions, these members are motivated to invoke these symbols to revive emotional energy, recharging (when successful) them with emotional energy, generating a chain of self-reinforcing interaction rituals (2004, p. 95).

*POWER AND STATUS IN INTERACTIONS*

Theodore Kemper critiques Collins' interaction ritual theory by arguing that it overlooks the fundamental impact of power and status in social interactions. Kemper emphasizes that the "objective" social status of individuals involved in an interaction influences how it evolves, but also by situated negotiations of relational power and status (Collins & Kemper, 1990; Kemper, 2011). Thus, according to Kemper, emotional energy and solidarity are not the only motivating factors in interactions, but that people are fundamentally driven by desires to enhance their status and/or power.

The power dimension involves actors seeking *involuntary compliance* over others through means like threats, coercion, force, intimidation, and the infliction of physical or emotional pain. In everyday situations, these means are less dramatic and can include "sullen responses, a raised voice, interrupting the other's talk, inattentiveness, expressions of disdain, withholding affection" (Kemper, 2014, p. 156). Kemper defines power as *repressive*, highlighting an asymmetrical relationship where individuals or groups possess the resources to influence or control others' actions. In an interaction, feeling one's power in relation to others is accurate leads to feelings of confidence and security. A sudden loss of power or sensing that own power is insufficient causes fear and anxiety, while excessive claims for or use of power evokes guilt and remorse.

The status dimension involves *voluntary compliance*, characterized by acts of respect, deference, support, etc. (Kemper 2016, p. 6). When people feel that others offer an adequate amount of status, they feel content and satisfaction. When believing that one is receiving insufficient status from others, the outcome is anger or sadness, while being given excessive or underserved status produces shame and embarrassment. Individuals strive to grant the appropriate amount of status to others, and failing to do so results in feelings of guilt and regret.

Next, I will turn to Candace Clark's work on micropolitics and the "socioemotional economy" (1998, 2004) to elucidate how power and status is translated into situated interactions through emotional exchanges.

## THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL ECONOMY

Expanding on Hochschild's theory, Clark suggests that the "private emotion system" (Hochschild, 1983, p. 76) can be understood as part of a societal socioemotional economy, a complex system of emotional exchanges whereby people give or withhold emotional resources (Clark, 1998). Within this system, emotions are seen as a form of currency with context-dependent rules of reciprocity, framing the daily flow and exchange of "emotional gifts." People create "margins" and "accounts" of socioemotional credits for each other (Clark, 2004, p. 407). What and how much we feel we "owe" others is governed by feeling rules, which depend on the roles people have in relation to each other. Essentially, different roles come with specific expectations of due emotional gifts. For example, a romantic relationship has different expectations compared to the relationship between a manager and an employee.

A central currency within the socioemotional economy is *sympathy*. Clark (1998) argues that within social interactions, there are feeling rules governing how sympathy<sup>41</sup> is distributed and managed. Key concepts within sympathy processes are *sympathy margins* and *sympathy biography*. Sympathy margins refer to the *amount* of sympathy that individuals can *claim* from others. Group members are expected to feel and display sympathy toward each other, but the amount depends on the depth and closeness of their relationships as well as social *status*. For instance, subordinates are not expected to return emotional gifts from superiors in the same way. A social worker might show sympathy to a client during a meeting, but the client is not expected to "repay" with sympathy, as would be the case in a friendship (Clark, 2004, p. 410). Instead, subordinates are expected to respond with emotions such as deference and gratitude. Sympathy margins are not static, but are continually negotiated in interactions. Margins can increase, decrease, or even be used up entirely. Sympathy biography refers to the history of a person's interactions and adherence to "sympathy etiquette" – the rules and norms of sympathy exchanges – which affect the "size" of their margins. Key rules include:

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<sup>41</sup> How sympathy is defined varies between researchers. The concept is sometimes defined as synonymous with *empathy*, while others define sympathy as a component of empathy (Cuff et al., 2016). In this thesis, I understand empathy not as an emotion in itself, but an ability to emotionally tune in with others, and is therefore vital for emotion management (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). Clark defines sympathy as consisting of "empathy plus sentiment, empathy plus display, or all three," highlighting its *social/interactive* qualities (1987, p. 296).

- Do not make false claims: exaggerating/fabricating situations to gain sympathy)
- Do not claim too much: constantly seeking sympathy or claiming excessive amounts
- Accept due sympathy: Accepting sympathy when needed to keep the account active
- Reciprocate: offer due sympathy to others to maintain a balance.

The socioemotional economy is governed by complex “place arrangements” within interactional micro hierarchies. There are continuous negotiations of our *social place* in terms of power and status, which Clark calls *micropolitics* (1990). Clark (1998) argues that theories on how people “internalize” objective social positions are often depicted in a somewhat mystical matter, and suggests that people are sensitive to shifting micropolitical balances in interactions, seeking to understand their social place in relation to others. Understanding one’s social place within an interaction is not merely a cognitive task, but is recognized by individuals through *emotional cues*. These cues can be “a surge of smugness, a little anxiety, a feeling of hurt, or even a pang of guilt,” informing actors about their place, often before they cognitively recognize it (Clark, 1998, p. 232–233). Typically, positive self-targeted emotions (satisfaction or pride) and negative other-targeted emotions (contempt and disgust) mark a subjective sense of powerfulness or superiority, while negative self-targeted emotions (embarrassment and shame) mark our sense of inferiority. Conversely, by expressing positive other-emotions, such as praise or respect, we can elevate others’ place and thereby enhance their self-esteem, or display sympathy without boosting one’s own qualities to reduce the micro-hierarchical gap. These strategies are typically motivated by a desire to generate solidarity and strengthen social bonds (Clark, 2004, p. 412–413).

Thus, emotions *do* something in social interaction: they define and alter people’s social “place,” and people can *use* emotions to make “place claims” to obtain or maintain a superior place and interpersonal power (Clark, 2004). For instance, people can offer sympathy as an “emotional gift,” yet it can be done in a way that emphasizes one’s own advantage and the other’s issues. This “Trojan horse” approach to offering sympathy highlights a larger point: it is “not only the fact that emotions are given and taken, but also *how* they are given and taken, that shapes social interaction and social bonds” (Clark, 2004, p. 405). Other approaches include

flattering a superior, deliberately causing others to feel guilt, or creating situations in which one remains calm while the other becomes emotional (Clark, 1990, 2004).

In the next and last section of this chapter, I turn my attention to individual and internal emotions. This part illuminates how emotions are vital for (rational) action and for cognition and decision-making.

## EMOTION IN COGNITION AND ACTION

Barbalet (1998) critiques the traditional view of rationality and emotions as dichotomous, instead contending that emotions and reason are continuous, intertwined, and inseparable. Emotions play a crucial role in evaluating information, motivating and orienting our actions, and in making decisions. In line with these assumptions, this thesis considers emotions not only as *effects* of social processes, but *causes* of social processes, and therefore a crucial element in understanding social behavior and processes (Barbalet, 1998, p. 9).

While some emotions, depending on intensity, do “disturb” ongoing action – meaning that they become conscious and may alter our action – others are calm and remain below consciousness. Barbalet (1998) distinguishes these types, in terms of *background* and *foreground* emotions. Background emotions lack explicit behavioral expression and are not associated with “being emotional,” but are vital to intellectual activity (Barbalet, 1998, 2009). These emotions are typically undefined, comprising an assembly of emotions or emotional processes that exist at the fringes of our consciousness. They guide routinized action and remain “in flow” with ongoing activities, therefore not requiring conscious management (Barbalet, 2009, p. 41; Wettergren, 2022). In contrast, foreground emotions are consciously experienced and may require deliberate management. They are often perceived as disruptive “emotional states” because they shift focus from ongoing action to the emotion itself (Barbalet, 2011). However, foreground emotions can also be “rational,” in the sense that they bring attention to an initial vague “gut feeling” and motivate us to investigate further (Wettergren, 2019).

Emotions provide information about circumstances and an anticipation of a possible future informed by past experiences, guiding action and decision making:

Emotion is the basis of action; it both directs action to the future, and constructs the resources which action draws upon through the emotional apprehension of the past (Barbalet, 2008, p. 186).

Emotion, action, and temporality are thus closely entwined (Barbalet, 1998, p. 186). Specific emotions contribute to choosing a particular course of action in the absence of possible inference by logic or calculation. Background emotions such as confidence, trust, commitment, or doubt are necessary to distinguish what information is important and ultimately to make decisions. For instance, Barbalet (2008, 2011) argues that showing trust in others is to anticipate the future, acting as though the future were predictable and certain. Trust thus permits action by providing a feeling of certainty concerning the future. Similarly, confidence brings one possible future into the present, providing a sense of certainty about what is fundamentally unknowable, so that one can choose a course of action:

The efficacious 'evidence' or 'knowledge' of self-confidence is a feeling about the actor's own capacities to approximate what they set out to achieve. This feeling is essential for an actor to engage the unknowable future, which all action entails (Barbalet, 2008, p. 83-84).

Similarly, Ortony, Clore, and Collins (2022) argue that emotions arise in relation to how we react to and evaluate events, agents, or objects. Their framework outlines how the outcomes of social relationships trigger *specific* emotional responses through cognitive appraisal processes. For instance, hope and fear are “prospect-based” emotions that arise in response to anticipated events. These emotions help individuals prepare for predicted events, influencing behavior and decision-making processes. Fear alerts us and motivates a desire to prevent anticipated future events. Conversely, disappointment, relief, and satisfaction are responses to the confirmation or disconfirmation of an envisaged event. Thus, these are past-oriented emotions emerging after the event (e.g., disappointment when a desirable event does not occur, and relief when an undesirable event is avoided). Emotional reactions to the actions of agents are responses to the actions of others or oneself, such as admiration, reproach, or gratitude toward others, or pride, self-reproach, or satisfaction toward oneself.

Regardless of whether the emotional “tone” is negative or positive, it provides us with the motivation (energy) to act in relation to something that has *import* to us (Helm, 2009). For us to care about something, it must be worthy of attention and action; you must be reliably vigilant for circumstances affecting it favorably or

adversely and be *prepared to act* on its behalf. Helm (2009) therefore considers emotions as *evaluative feelings of import*; they constitute *background import* (what we care about) which generates active engagement and orients our attention to what matters to us. Similarly, Morton (2009) suggests that emotions can be understood as *motives*, influencing behavior and decision-making by making certain desires and beliefs noticeable to us.

Based on these insights, Åsa Wettergren's (2024) model of *emotive-cognitive chain of evaluation* explores how emotions, action, and temporality are interconnected. Within the model, Wettergren argues that emotions have a *target*, a *source*, and an *object* and imagined outcome. The target of emotion is an emotional assessment based on past experiences, which provide *background import* that orients the actor's attention to the *source* of the emotion. The source is located outside the individual actor, in structural relations and situated interactions. The object of the emotion is the *imagined outcome* driven by a commitment to future anticipated emotions. The model provides a framework for the analysis of specific emotions, by considering how past experiences influence current emotional assessments and how these emotions drive actions toward future outcomes. Thus, emotions are not passive experiences but are actively evaluated and linked to cognitive processes, generating further emotions. This creates a dynamic chain whereby emotions and action continuously influence each other over time. Over time, we accumulate a collection of experiences from the decisions we have made, which are based on factual and emotional outcomes (Damasio, 1999). These experiences guide our "gut feeling" in future decisions, helping to narrow down a set of possible solutions. Certain emotions play a crucial role in our cognitive processes, particularly in the acquisition and evaluation of knowledge. These *epistemic emotions* – such as curiosity, wonder, surprise, certainty, and doubt – motivate us to seek information, evaluate the quality of our knowledge, and revise our beliefs (de Sousa, 2009; Morton, 2009).

## SUMMARY

Emotions are influenced by cultural ideas and values, conveyed to individuals via feeling rules, informing them of what is expected of them and how they understand themselves. Feeling rules exist on different levels: cultural, societal (emotional regimes), structural (e.g., gender expectations), organizational, and in situated

interactions. Seeking to meet external expectations and to have their self-image confirmed by others, individuals engage in different types of emotion management.

At work, feeling rules and norms are embedded in organizational/professional cultures. Together with framing rules, they determine how individuals and groups organize and classify their experiences, suppress or elicit certain emotions, and govern and guide emotional labor. However, groups can develop their own set of feeling rules by repeated interaction rituals, whereby group-specific values and norms are established. These emotionally fused values in turn determine what is important and morally righteous, guiding thinking, action, and decision-making. Therefore, emotions are considered as *causes* of social behavior and processes.

As I will argue throughout the analytical chapters, social workers are governed by two primary emotive-cognitive frames, which I call the professional frame and the organizational frame. While the frames are often contradictory in terms of feeling rules and norms for behavior, both are active in their daily practice, and they constantly relate their actions to them, accepting, rejecting, or negotiating the rules of the frames.



## CHAPTER 4: METHODS AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this chapter, I detail my research design and operationalization. I reflect on my role as a researcher and the challenges I have encountered and navigated. This thesis is methodologically inspired by *institutional ethnography* (Smith, 2005) and is based on a combination of interviews, observations, and readings of various texts relevant to social work in general, and Swedish social services in particular.

First, I will outline the development of my research object and my preconceptions. Second, I will discuss my research strategy in terms of sampling and research logics, followed by an overview of the research sites and participants. Third, I will describe analytical levels and data collection methods. Fourth, I will discuss data analysis and interpretation. Fifth, I will address truth claims and generalizations. Lastly, I will account for ethical considerations.

### ENTERING A NEW RESEARCH FIELD

Before my PhD in education, I had little knowledge of the social work research field. My background is in sociology, and I had previously been involved in a project examining professional emotions in court (Wettergren & Bergman Blix, 2018) and wrote a master's thesis on the emotional labor of defense attorneys (Holt, 2015). In court, the ideal typical (emotional) roles are, to some extent, clear to the professionals. It is common for legal professionals to be guided by a *script of dispassion* – emotions have no place in the legal professions (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018; Maroney, 2011b). Yet, there are expectations of emotional displays, even though they are not recognized as such: the client-loyal defense attorney, the passionate and confrontational prosecutor, and the impartial judge (cf. Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018; Flower, 2018; Maroney, 2011a). I hypothesized that the professional role of statutory social workers is more ambiguous in terms of feeling

rules and emotional labor, due to the fundamental tension stemming from being a profession in a bureaucratic setting.

My unfamiliarity (sometimes bordering on ignorance) with the academic field of social work allowed me to maintain some distance from the subject. Before starting my fieldwork, I studied key social work theories related to the profession, as well as the organization and working conditions of Swedish social services. I also read numerous policy documents, government bills, and official reports. To acquaint myself with the legal framework, I completed the mandatory law course for a social work degree. Additionally, I familiarized myself with the social work program offered by the department where I am pursuing my PhD and have worked as a lecturer for social work students.

### RESEARCH STRATEGY

From the outset, I knew that I wanted to study feeling rules and emotional labor in social services. I kept in mind the idea of *emotions as social phenomena*, as well as the concepts of *feeling rules* and *emotional labor* (Hochschild, 1983) and *emotional regimes* (Reddy, 2001). These concepts served as *sensitizing concepts* – “background ideas that inform the overall research problem” and guide the research process (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259), rather than “definitive concepts” (as in deductive reasoning). Accordingly, my research design can be understood as a reflexive and emergent *process*, gradually narrowing the research focus<sup>42</sup> (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017).

Furthermore, I was not interested in finding out *whether* social workers perform emotional labor or whether there are feeling rules in social services. Instead, I aimed to understand *how* and *why* people perform emotional labor. As suggested above, research on emotions in social work typically focuses on social workers’ psychological reality, omitting analysis of the organizational level. While such

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<sup>42</sup> My research process can be characterized as, primarily, abductive reasoning. My analysis emerged from the empirical material, while being informed by theoretical preconceptions. Consequently, my interpretations were guided by theoretical concepts, with the empirical material serving to elaborate these concepts. However, the analytical process also involved deductive reasoning (e.g., all wage labor involves emotional labor, therefore I deduce that social workers perform emotional labor), as well as inductive reasoning (in terms of more open questions which generated analysis, e.g., what is going on here?). Therefore, my research process can be understood as moving between different stages reasoning (cf. Reichert, 2013).

approaches provide strong accounts of what it *feels like* to be a social worker, I believe that, to explain why and how social workers feel certain ways in specific situations, one must properly understand the structural arrangements within which they practice.

## RESEARCH SITES AND PARTICIPANTS

I came into contact with municipality 1 by asking a friend who had previously worked as a case worker there about it. She introduced me to Emma, a social worker in the children and youth unit. I drafted the initial interview guide and conducted my first interview with two social workers, Emma and her colleague Sara. I met them in a visiting room one afternoon in late 2017. Following this interview, I transcribed and coded the material in Atlas.ti, wrote analytical memos, and conducted theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006, p. 63), gradually expanding these concepts during the coding phase.

Following the pilot interview, Emma and Sara arranged a meeting with their manager. I prepared a presentation, and the manager invited all staff to attend. However, only four social workers turned up, but all of them agreed to participate in interviews. Over the next week, I conducted interviews in their respective office rooms.

Meanwhile, I emailed several managers in other municipalities. One manager swiftly invited me to present my study. I prepared a PowerPoint presentation, and upon arriving at the office, I was met by over one hundred social workers and managers. After the presentation, both managers and social workers approached me, inviting me to join various meetings. In the afternoon, I participated in a group discussion about the ethical guidelines of the Swedish labor union for social workers, focusing on ideal traits of social workers, where I recruited research participants. Subsequently, word spread throughout the organization and interested social workers either emailed me or approached me in the corridors.

After the warm welcome at municipality 2, I attended as many meetings as possible. The adult unit was particularly welcoming, providing me with their schedule and telling me that I was welcome at any time. I aimed to alternate between meetings and individual interviews, joining the meetings scheduled for the days I had interviews. The first thing I learned was that there is a plethora of meetings in a

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

social services office. Coincidentally, I attended a staff meeting with the adult unit where an agenda item was to map the types of meetings and clarify which ones are mandatory to attend:

Celeste (manager): We have this one, the regular staff meeting, methods meeting, morning meeting, and other types of meetings?

Kathryn: Regular method, big method

Mary: Health care meetings

Kathryn: Operations meetings, sometimes meetings with the children- and youth units

Mary: Resource meeting with domestic violence

Susan: Action plan meetings, objectives- and actions meetings

Celeste: That's a lot of meetings.

I counted four different types of meeting related to client intervention strategies, four types of meetings concerning organizational matters, and “process supervision.” Additionally, there were various inter-professional meetings with other professions. Given the staff's struggle to keep track of meeting types, I likely missed some.

Nevertheless, after a few months I narrowed my focus and decided on three types of meetings that were particularly interesting for my research focus, utilizing a theoretically informed purposive sampling strategy (Charmaz, 2006; Rapley, 2014): inter-unit meetings, where social workers from different units discuss clients “active” in two or more units; intra-unit casework meetings (“methods meeting”); and process supervision.<sup>43</sup>

My intention was to evenly distribute the number of interviews and observations in the two social services offices. I planned to include units from all sectors in individual and family care – children and youth services, adult services, and financial aid. I also intended to interview managers and observe management meetings. Alas, the Covid-19 pandemic erupted in the midst of my data collection, leading to several consequences. First, social workers largely started working from home, which meant that I could not conduct observations to the extent I had originally planned. Second, I was unable to include neither financial aid units nor managers (excepts for two

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<sup>43</sup> The purpose of the process supervision is to support the professionals to deal with job-related stress rather than to focus on particular client interventions, and is guided by an external supervisor, typically a psychotherapist (cf. Beijer et al., 2007, p. 21)

individual interviews, which are only briefly referenced in the analysis). Third, I could not conduct observations in municipality 1, except for a few occasions. In *appendix 1* I summarize the participants and empirical material.

Except for two participants, all interviewees are women<sup>44</sup>, and there were very few men in observations. Therefore, to ensure confidentiality (especially internal confidentiality) I use (traditional) women's names as pseudonyms for all participants, including male participants<sup>45</sup>.

I use the following abbreviations in the empirical excerpts when referring to units: children and youth unit: **CYU**; adult unit: **AU**; first response team: **FRT**; foster home unit **FHU**. The municipalities will be referred to as **M1** and **M2**. For the sake of legibility, I use the term "social services", although social services encompass a wide range of sectors. I use "social work" to refer to the profession, and "social workers" when referring to research participants (except for managers and supervisors).

#### **A BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE OFFICES**

The research participants were all employed in the individual and family care sector of the municipal social services<sup>46</sup>. While social services are organized differently across municipalities in terms of specialization, they are commonly divided into specific units. Individual and family services are often organized into a child and family unit, adult unit, and financial aid unit. Although I intended to study all three sectors, due to the Covid-19 pandemic I ultimately only included children and youth units and one adult unit.

All research participants, including managers, had a degree in social work. The social work program in Sweden comprises 210 credits over 3.5 years and is a generalist vocational education. The program is of an interdisciplinary nature, including (primarily) perspectives from social work, psychology, social psychology,

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<sup>44</sup> To my knowledge, none of the participants identified as non-binary.

<sup>45</sup> Studies have consistently demonstrated the gendered nature of emotional labor. Researchers have examined the uneven distribution of care obligations, the financial and emotional costs of caring, the role of the state in fostering recognition and misrecognition of care work (Dahl, 2009; Williams, 1998). Cultural feeling rules also differ for men and women with men being associated with "hard" emotions such as anger, and women with "soft" emotions as having "innate" caring abilities (Davies, 1995, p. 2; Martin, 1999). However, this is not something I can draw any *empirical* conclusions on due to the vast overrepresentation of women.

<sup>46</sup> With the exception of externally contracted supervisors in process supervision.

and sociology; theory of science and methodology; civil, administrative, and social law; training in treatment methods and intervention; and work placements. In the adult unit (M2), several participants had many years of practice experience; several had worked in the social services for over 20 years. The participants in the children and youth units were typically younger, and several had worked only for a few years.

In this study, participants in the adult unit were mainly working with abuse disorders and domestic violence, although their clients were often simultaneously assigned to other units due to homelessness and financial difficulties. The children and youth units dealt mainly with child abuse (with severe cases of physical violence handled by a specific child violence unit), unaccompanied minors, youth crime (including cooperation with special residential homes for young people), truancy, youth substance abuse, custody battles, compulsory care, and out-of-home placements. The social workers at IFO often cooperate, as clients are often involved in several types of interventions. For example, a client might receive support for addiction and financial assistance, while their children are under the care of the children and youth services.

As outlined, the organization of social services varies between municipalities. In M1, the children and youth section consisted of approximately 70 social workers divided into four subunits: first response team, young child assessment unit (ages 0–10), youth assessment unit (ages 10–21), and foster home unit. In M2, the units were similarly divided into a first response team and an investigative unit, although without the young children/youth distinction. In both municipalities, the units had their own office spaces (e.g., different floors). In M1, the participants had their own office room, whereas in M2, they shared offices, with two workers per room.

Typically, one or two social services officers (this varies between municipalities) meet with the client (and sometimes their relatives) to assess their needs, sometimes following a manual or questionnaire. The interventions should, when possible, rely on voluntariness, and often clients themselves initiate contact. However, the meeting may also be initiated by the social services following a report of concern from other professionals or laypersons. Client relationships varied significantly in terms of duration and intensity. Some interactions were limited to a single meeting, while others were assessed and transferred within weeks. For instance, the first response team in children and youth services must decide whether to open an investigation within 14 days of receiving a report of concern. If a further

investigation is warranted, the case is passed to the assessment team, which continues the investigation for up to four months. If a child requires foster care, the foster home unit takes over, and a social worker may work with the family for years. In the adult unit, some client relationships had lasted for decades.

Next, I will describe how the interviews and observations were conducted.

## INTERVIEWS AND OBSERVATIONS

The interviews were semi-structured. I loosely followed an interview guide where the questions were divided into overarching themes: work in general, professional interactions, client interactions, organization and management, emotions and emotion management, the private/professional, education and work experience, and society and the social services.

While the degree to which I strictly followed the interview guide varied between interviews, I made sure to review the guide at the end of each interview to ensure that I had not missed any vital questions. I always asked the participant if I had missed anything important and frequently checked throughout the interviews to ensure that I had understood them correctly. Often, I proposed a tentative interpretation of what the respondent had said to get their immediate feedback. After a few interviews, some questions did not seem to generate anything of interest and were excluded. I also added new questions to the interview guide based on issues that had emerged in previous interviews and observations, and on topics I had read about in, for example, government reports or news media.<sup>47</sup> The respondents also provided me with concrete information, such as official policies and law, as well as local specifics such as organizational structure, task divisions, and routines.

I gave informants written information about the research plan and informed them of their confidentiality before interviews and observations. To ensure anonymity – particularly internal anonymity – I have slightly changed some details, such as clients' ages or number of children. Interestingly, the participants themselves seemed unconcerned about anonymity; some even proposed that I use their real names (which I obviously did not). Before recording, I asked for consent and was typically met with blank stares or a chuckle before answering affirmative. The only

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<sup>47</sup> For example, I the proposal for a new social services act and the media debate following the death of three-year-old "Lilla hjärtat."

exception was when speaking about a specific colleague or manager, at which point they sometimes asked for assurance of anonymity.

All formal interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim using a transcription manual. Immediately after interviews I took notes of feelings and thoughts I had during the interview. For example, if the interviewee seemed guarded or open, the overall tone of the interview, or how I perceived their general mood. Following Bergman Blix's (2014) advice on studying emotions, paralinguistic elements were included: pauses, loudness, emphases, tone (e.g., sarcasm), pitch, and non-verbal vocalizations such as sighing, coughing, or laughing (p. 127). These proved to be useful as a reminder of how I perceived the atmosphere during the interviews and observations.

During observations, I made exhaustive field notes. Having spent several years transcribing interviews as a research assistant, I am a fast typist and attempted to transcribe entire conversations. However, these transcripts are naturally not as precise as those from interviews. After each observation, I immediately filled in any gaps. I also made sure to note body language, facial expressions, and paralinguistic markers.

Observations offer an opportunity to study *ongoing* emotions and short-term emotion dynamics and tensions. However, I contend that the study of manifestations of ongoing emotions during observations is highly contingent on researcher interpretation. Therefore, I aimed to co-interpret emotions together with the research participants. Moving between observations, interviews, and informal conversations proved useful as I could follow up situations that I had observed in interactions either immediately afterwards or later during interviews.

**FANNY IS LIKE A PIECE OF FURNITURE.**

Krista: Well, some days are great, and some are fucking awful... I shouldn't say awful, but some days I feel like I'm going insane.

Joanne: I'm not writing this down.

Krista: No, but *she* is [*pointing at me*]

[*The group laughs loudly*]

Jane: I forgot that she was here. Fanny is like a piece of furniture.

[*The group laughs even louder*]

The quote above is from my field notes from a process supervision session with the adult unit. It is funny how being called “a piece of furniture” can be conceived as a compliment in research contexts. More importantly, the situation raises some questions. First, the question of the level of participation in ethnographic research, and secondly, the impact of researcher presence on research participants. As mentioned, I observed various forms of formal and informal interactions, and my level of participation varied depending on the setting. In non-formal interactions such as breakroom banter, I participated to a higher degree, while in staff meetings and process supervision I took a bystander role, lest I was invited into the conversation by participants.

Furthermore, considering that the participants were aware of my research interest in emotions, this conceivably inclined participants to elaborate on emotions, something that could hypothetically have exaggerated their performances and accounts in relation to emotions. Nonetheless, bearing in mind that I followed them for an extended period, I would argue that such tendencies probably decreased over time. The researcher’s presence may also have a disciplinary effect, as exemplified in the quote above where Krista believes she cannot express herself in certain ways because of me (although, I think she was joking in this instance). However, one can assume that observations are less directly influenced by the researcher compared to direct questions in interviews.

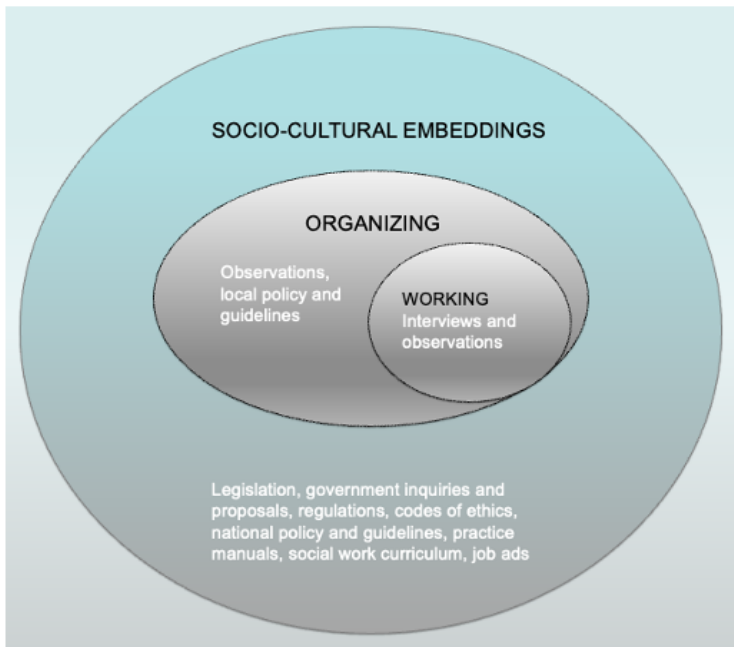
## ANALYTICAL LEVELS

Based on Dunkel’s (1988) and Sieben and Wettergren’s (2010, p. 10) classification of the study of emotions in organizations, I analytically moved between the levels of *working*, the *organizing of work*, and the *sociocultural embeddings*.

The level of working involves considering emotions as: 1. The *object* of work (the object to be *worked on*): when emotional labor is a requirement to perform as part of the job (e.g., being empathetic, committed, staying calm). 2. A *means* of work (*working with* emotions): emotional labor used to achieve other goals or outcome, such as using one’s own emotions to influence the client or to gain knowledge of and understand the client by using empathetic skills, role-taking improvisation, and experiential knowledge. 3. A *condition* of work: when workers are expected to establish a certain *emotional state* in accordance with the *feeling rules* of an organization,

which requires emotional self-control (suppression or evocation of feelings), as well as management of emotional strains (Dunkel, 1988, p. 67). The level of *organizing* includes studying how organizations shape the ways emotions are experienced and interpreted by actors in interactions with others, either explicitly (manuals, rules) or implicitly (interactional cues). This level was researched through observations of (formal and informal) meetings. The level of *sociocultural embeddings* aims to provide insights into how expressed and experienced emotions are shaped by historical, cultural, and societal understandings and values (Sieben & Wettergren 2010, p. 10), for example, the notion that women are “naturally” more caring.

Put into practice, the level of working involves studying how people manage and use emotions at work, encompassing observations and interviews conducted between 2018 and 2020. Parallel to the fieldwork, I read local policies, practice manuals, government reports, codes of ethics, law, legislative history, social work education curricula, job advertisements, and media coverage. See figure 1 for illustration.



*Figure 1: Analytical levels of emotions in organizations (Sieben & Wettergren 2010, p. 10)*

## DOCUMENTS AS ETHNOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL

The selection of texts was guided by what emerged in interviews and observations. For example, during my first day of fieldwork in M2, the social workers had group discussions on the ethical code for social workers (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016). In addition, I utilized a purposive, theoretically informed sampling strategy, identifying texts or sections of texts articulating ideals about larger aims, values, and beliefs, as well as aspirational personality traits and professional conduct and interactions. The purpose of including them was to deepen the understanding of the larger values and expectations, or symbolic orders, of social work. Comparing these to the interviews and field notes allowed me to distinguish similarities and differences between ideals and practice.

Thus, my approach was not a traditional document analysis involving detailed coding and analysis, but an intuitive process guided by ethnographic fieldwork, through which I gradually identified consistencies and inconsistencies between practice and texts. The approach to documents was instead guided by institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), aiming to contrast the day-to-day operations of work. In other words, I understand texts as *active* in organization, motivating and coordinating and people's activities (Smith, 2006, p 65):

The text itself is to be seen as organizing a course of concerted social action. As an operative part of a social relation it is activated, of course, by the reader but its structuring effect is its own. (Smith, 1993, p 91)

Importantly, “texts” refers not only to written words but also to representations activated by people at different times and places, allowing them to play a standardizing and mediating role. Documents are fundamental to social work practice, as they outline and govern what social workers should do and, to some extent, how to conduct themselves. However, while the “whats” tend to be more clearly defined, the “hows” are less so. Many documents – such as value-based policy and guidance documents – outline professional conduct in social work in generic terms like “altruistic commitment to service” or “empathetic and respectful treatment” (cf. Wiles, 2017). Therefore, they are difficult to translate into practice.

According to Smith, “ruling relations” – social structures and power dynamics – shape and maintain the dominant order within a society. Certain groups, institutions, and ideologies define and proper behaviors and values, which gradually become taken for granted. These ruling relations are mediated by “higher order texts,” or

“boss texts,” which are active across various institutional sites, such as government, the market, the mass media, the professions, and the law. They provide regulatory frames or “scripts” that directly influence people’s experiences and behavior (2005, p. 187). Examining “ruling relations” helps illuminate *how* social institutions function and how individuals experience and interact within them. The purpose of institutional ethnography is to reveal these ruling relations, which are often taken for granted and largely invisible within social institutions.

In sum, institutional ethnography aims to illuminate how texts *enter into and coordinate* people’s actions, thinking, and feeling. The approach offers a way to examine everyday language and experience in relation to the “ruling relations” that *shape* local experiences (DeVault & McCoy, 2011).

By shifting between analytical levels I aimed to *understand* not only *what* people do, but also *how* and *why* people do things (cf. Holstein & Gubrium, 2007). In relation to emotional labor, Hochschild (1983) wanted to understand *why* flight attendants smile when dealing with difficult passengers despite feeling angry? What is the *motivation*? The answer is quite simple: because they have been instructed to do so in training sessions and company manuals. Why this is a part of their training is more complicated, but Hochschild’s answer is clear: it is a part of the logics of corporate capitalism; Delta Airlines’ motivation is to make money.

## HOW CAN EMOTIONS BE STUDIED?

Some questions remain to be addressed pertaining to my research methods. Considering my theoretical understanding, the reader may wonder how emotions, particularly the so-called *backgrounded emotions* (Barbalet, 1998) that are not typically acknowledged as emotions but, for instance, as attitudes or habits, can be studied. Arguably then, they are much harder to notice, both in self and others. In contrast, *foregrounded emotions* (Barbalet, 2004, p. 60) are linked to high feelings states such as fear or anger and typically associated to changes in behavior and thus much easier to recall and label as emotions. However, acknowledging and labeling foregrounded emotions – again, both in self and others – come with other complications. Direct questions about emotional experiences often render simplified and perhaps furbished accounts, especially when there is a time gap between the experience and

the recalling of it. Behind the emotional classification offered there are likely other emotions that are difficult to express, often half-conscious and hidden behind euphemisms (Wettergren, 2015).

Next, I will discuss these issues and how I have tackled them, before moving on to analytical strategies.

### EMOTIONS IN OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS: SOME CORE ISSUES

Most people can certainly claim – and rightly so – that they can intuitively understand and interpret what other people are feeling. We can doubt or even dispute other people’s claims about what they are feeling; if a friend says that they are feeling fine, we might question the validity of this claim by considering, for instance, our knowledge of a tragic life circumstance or a perceived sadness in their eyes.

In a research context, however, the question is *how* we do it, and how can we know that our interpretations about other people’s emotions are accurate (cf. Czarniawska, 2008; Wettergren, 2014). First, the question is what we can claim about the accuracy of what we observe. The notion that we can *know* what others are feeling, in a scientifically assertable sense, has been brought into question. Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett (2017) argues that the “classical view” of emotions claims the idea that emotions are universal. Accordingly, they are believed to be a fixed component of our biology, and emotions have neurological, facial, and bodily “fingerprints” that allow us to identify discrete emotions (cf. Ekman et al., 1983). Barrett disputes this:

[e]ven after a century of effort, scientific research has not revealed a consistent, physical fingerprint for even a single emotion. When scientists attach electrodes to a person’s face and measure how facial muscles actually move during the experience of an emotion, they find tremendous variety, not uniformity. (2017, p. xii)

Thus, interpreting what others are feeling based on, for example, facial expression, is not as clear-cut as one might think. Barrett (2017) argues that emotions are not universally expressed and recognizable but are shaped by individual experiences and cultural contexts.

A second issue relates to asking people to account for their emotions. Viewing emotions as (partly) socially constructed, as I do, means considering that people cannot account for experienced emotions without emotion concepts. When

individuals name their emotions, the very act of labeling *forms* or *changes* that feeling (Barrett, 2017, p. 30; Reddy, 2001, p. 105). Consequently, neither I nor the participants can distinguish the *actual* feeling from emotion concepts. I believe that even retrospectively one might reinterpret a feeling when trying to name it. No more can I or the participants be sure that the reporting of feeling is “truthful,” because some feelings are difficult to admit:

We can, for example, feel *schadenfreude* – or pleasure at the misfortune of others, a feeling we may be ashamed to have. And our shame can get in the way of the very act of acknowledging that feeling. (Hochschild, 2013, p. xiv)

This quote also highlights the idea that emotions are not easily distinguishable from one another; the boundaries *between* emotions are rather porous. We do not experience isolated emotions, nor are emotions static states over time. Our emotional lives are rather dynamic processes of multiple sequences and emotional structures (Bericat, 2016, p. 495), and are never finished objects but always in *process*. We can have “emotional reactions to emotional experiences, such as being ashamed of being angry, being guilty of being jealous, and being happy about being in love” (Barbalet, 1998, p. 23). Accepting the view of emotions as *processes* thus means to consider life strains (and pleasures) as condensed in ambiguous and versatile concepts such as “stress,” “anxiety” or “worry,” concepts that can comprise a wide array of emotions (Paulsen, 2020, p. 134).<sup>48</sup>

Despite the rather pessimistic conclusions that may be drawn from these considerations, I will now outline two research strategies that I have used to study and analyze emotions in fieldwork and texts: using my own emotions as research tool, and narrative analysis.

### EMOTIONS AS HEURISTIC TOOLS

As argued in Chapter 3, emotions are inseparable from rational thought and sense-making, guiding focus and evaluations of relevant or irrelevant information (cf., Barbalet, 2011; Feldman Barrett, 2017). Emotions guide our commitment and engagement in the world, and thus the actions we take. They have, as Helm (2009)

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<sup>48</sup> For example, Fineman (2003) comments on the complexity of “stress”: “many of the indicators, or symptoms, of stress are decidedly emotional, such as doubt, despair, panic, worry, tension, frustration, confusion, depression, anxiety, fear, and insecurity. Stress, as a concept, is unique in capturing such a cluster of feelings” (p. 138).

argues, an “evaluative intentionality” in that they guide us toward what is *worthy* of attention and action. Thus, my emotions directed my focus during fieldwork and impacted my selection and interpretation (cf. Jaggar, 1989, p. 160).

Second, I *used*, and importantly, *managed* my own emotions during fieldwork. To gain and maintain access to the field, I had to present myself in a certain way to build trust with participants (cf. Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2014), presenting myself as both serious and agreeable. I built rapport with interviewees and other participants, joking (when appropriate) along with them. I had to consciously set boundaries for myself so as not to get too close to the participants. For instance, I was very flattered when being invited by one of the units to join their sauna party, but instinctively felt that doing so would jeopardize our professional relationship. I also had to be mindful to not interrupt meetings by reacting, instead trying to maintain a neutral face when serious matters were discussed, or amused when the atmosphere called for it. Once, I dropped my computer on the floor in the middle of a particularly gruesome story in a process supervision session (the participants courteously saved my face by joking about it). Asking about emotional experiences can be sensitive, and put interviewees on guard, which necessitates an empathetic and thoughtful approach, managing both one’s own and others’ emotions. In one interview, I probed too deeply, causing the interviewee to cry. While this was interesting for my research purposes, I instantly regretted it.

Third, by reflecting on my own emotions and how they deviated or reflected those of the participants, I engaged in what Bergman Blix (2009) calls *emotional participation* (see also Wettergren, 2014). For instance, there were many situations where the participants spoke of clients’ atrocious life situations or incidents in a seemingly easygoing, sometimes even detached, manner that I struggled to understand in the beginning. I was surprised by the harsh and conceivably cynical sense of humor during observations. I initially felt puzzled by this, when I contrasted my own reactions (however, I tried to maintain a neutral expression so as not to disturb the meetings or interviews). These insights in turn later provided important clues into the role of emotions and emotional labor in the social services: being able to handle such atrocious stories necessitates the ability to not become overinvolved (although, as I will demonstrate, this ability sometimes collapsed).

I was careful to note how I had experienced the overall (emotional) “tone” of the meeting or interaction. They guided me to notice emotional atmospheres and

shifts in interactions. For example, I often wrote that I felt “awkward” or “uncomfortable” in meetings, which reflected tensions in the room. The interplay between interviews and observations turned out to be a useful tool. I witnessed countless emotional interactions throughout my observations, which were later used as relevant examples in interview sessions (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 49). Often, I had an interview scheduled directly after attending a meeting, where I could clarify meanings and emotions immediately after.

The emotional participation and gradual understanding and reinterpretation of both my own and others’ emotions was from the outset infused with theoretical assumptions (cf., Wettergren, 2015). For example, while the participants often struggled to remember ‘emotional’ experiences in the interviews, especially relating to shame and feelings of not living up to perceived expectations,<sup>49</sup> the observations were permeated with stories of such feelings. By considering my theoretical knowledge, I could see how participants collectively negotiated whether certain emotions were valid or not: I could therefore observe how they framed *feeling rules* (Hochschild, 1983), especially when they felt that they had overstepped somehow. Consider, for example, this exchange:

Leah: I’m not *supposed* to snap, or to say what I personally feel.

Joanne: Where did you get that idea from?

Leah: [*sarcastic tone*] School.

[*The group snickers*]

Not from us, someone jokingly says [*Leah laughs*]

In this seemingly minor exchange, I would suggest that we can potentially, based on Hochschild’s emotion systems theory, construe four things relating to feeling rules: 1. The perceived “correct” emotional style when meeting clients (do not “snap”); 2. An idea of what it means to be professional (not saying what we *personally feel*); 3. How ideals of practice – and feeling rules surrounding practice – are something that social workers are socialized into (here during education); 4. How the work group negotiate these feeling rules in situ (“not from us” – we have our own set of feeling rules).

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<sup>49</sup> E.g., the question “do you remember a situation where you felt angry at work?” seemed much easier to answer than “can you recall a situation where you felt ashamed?” Prodding into recollections of anger, however, often uncovered imbued feelings of shame or embarrassment (Scheff, 2000).

## ANALYZING EMOTIONS IN TEXTS: A NARRATIVE APPROACH

The ethnographical material, interviews, and observations consist of approximately 800 single-spaced type-written pages. Sitting down and embarking on analyzing this empirical material was a bit overwhelming at first. The main challenge was to discover those emotions that are ‘hidden’ in the empirical material. Therefore, I turned to a narrative approach, and the key assumption is that human experience has a narrative dimension. A narrative involves a *plot*, which is made up of *segments* that are organized along a temporal, sequential order: ‘before’ and ‘after,’ as well as *characters* and *setting*. Furthermore, Kleres (2011) contends that narratives are *emotionally structured* (p. 188). For example, experiences of regret or even shame can be found in phrases like “I’m not supposed to snap.” Here we can sense an emotional meaning that is expressed in contrafactual thinking (I wish I had kept my temper) and self-scrutiny.

That something happens – a change – is the core of narrative, and contrasts with other textual genres: *descriptions* (a static picture of something), and *argumentations* (evaluative and theoretical–explanatory comments) (Kleres, 2011, p. 183). When a person tells a story, they need to account for the necessary aspects for the story to make sense for the listener. Analysis focuses on comparisons between the narrative elements of the text and its descriptive and argumentative parts, which likely occur at emotionally charged, problematic moments in the narrative. By comparing these textual genres, we can thus “reveal” emotions in narratives that are not expressly stated in emotion words (e.g., “I was so angry”). By considering the specifics of a story, such as the actors involved, the setting, the actions, etc., the *structure* of an emotion narrative can be distinguished. Consider this exchange:<sup>50</sup>

We had this meeting with the childcare center (description), and we knew what was coming, they are so unfriendly (argumentations), and we invited our manager (description) because we wanted support, but she just threw us under the bus! (problematic/emotional moment - narrative).

In this story, one of perceived unfair behavior by others, I interpreted a narrative of expectations and hope turned to disappointment and anger. Thus, by asking questions about, for instance, who did what to whom, we can begin to uncover further layers of the story and seek further context that may uncover emotions. Then

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<sup>50</sup> This is a condensed version of a segment from a focus group interview with the first response team: see Chapter 8.

we might ask, why is this behavior unfair? At this point, we can consider Goffman's (1959) concept role expectation as well as Clark's (2004) socioemotional economy. Conceivably, the expectation that the other person (the manager) in this story should act differently has to do with their respective roles; the social workers in this scene had invited the manager, in a position of higher status and therefore in the "right" to "claim place" (Clark, 2004) on behalf of the group. When she did the opposite (throwing them under the bus), I would argue that the expectations/hope also *amplified* their disappointment and anger; had they not expected something different, the disappointment/anger would conceivably be less intense.<sup>51</sup>

Further, the analytical focus reaches beyond the situation and considers the function of the narratives within larger systems of meaning (considering other interviews, observations, and documents). In less abstract terms, the analysis entails reflecting on interviews, observations, and documents to identify recurring emotional patterns: for instance, anger or sympathy toward certain groups or individuals, or cynicism toward certain ideals, and passion for others. The *meaning* of a story is thus understood in its context, and by how events follow each other and build on other events.

Such narratives construct identities of others and the self (or group), as well as notions of right and wrong, through constructs of identification and alterity. For example, in Chapter 8 I show how the adult unit constructs others as "square," in opposition to themselves as "compassionate" (Kleres, 2011, p. 192–193).

Sometimes an emotional tone (e.g., frustration, cynicism, resignation) can permeate an entire interview or observation. Such emotions can be constructed indirectly – in *opposition* to something else. For example, participants often spoke of how something *used* to be, be it a subjective attitude (when I was new, I wanted to save the world, but now), or a workplace culture (where I worked before that would not be accepted, but here). Such contrasts provide insights into emotional change (I used to be naïve, but now I see things for what they are – a shift from optimism/hope to pessimism/resignation).

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<sup>51</sup> Ortony, Clore and Collins (2022) argue that prospect-based emotions, hope and fear (and related emotions) are followed by outcome emotions, such as relief and disappointment. These outcome emotions are intensified by incongruity – degree of deviation – between the expectations and actual outcome of events or others' actions.

In addition to narratives, emotions can be distinguished on *lexical* and *syntactical* levels. The former refers to more or less descriptive terms for emotional states (emotion words) (Kleres, 2011, p. 194). The latter includes entire sentences that reveal emotional experiences, and metonymy and metaphors, which are particularly useful for communicating emotions that are difficult to categorize and express (Kövecses, 2003). For example, I will show how metaphors such as “I carry him in my stomach,” or “I am the womb” capture deeply felt emotions of responsibility and powerlessness.

## GENERALIZABILITY AND TRUTH CLAIMS

In this section I will address the contributions of this thesis in terms of analytical and theoretical generalizability, and account for how I have produced these generalizations using Weber’s term *ideal type*.

Qualitative research has long been treated as limited in its inferences, as any statements it might make have been argued to be unique to the research setting. However, Smith (2005) argues that this critique “neglects the contemporary realities of how the local is penetrated with the extra- or translocal relations that are generalized across particular settings” (p. 42). Smith argues that institutions are forms of social organization that generalize and universalize *across* settings. The purpose is therefore not to generalize about the participants, but their experience *as a part* of a nexus of institutional relations (Smith, 2005, p. 176). While the empirical material offers a unique insight into the inner workings of the social services (or at least, two municipal social services offices), I argue that the findings of this study go beyond the ‘surface’ of participants’ accounts, in the form of refined *patterns* – or ideal types – that suggest something about underlying mechanisms in society. Thus, participants’ accounts can be extended beyond the individual practitioners. On the one hand, it is possible to make *empirical* generalizations by comparing participants’ accounts and finding similarities, and construct ideal types based on accounts from several participants. On the other hand, *analytical* generalizations are made, meaning that it is reasonable to assume that the overall patterns or ideal types are applicable in similar settings.

Concretely, I have constructed generalized patterns using Weber’s concept of *ideal types*. Weber defined an ideal type as a concentrated fusion of diffuse and

discrete empirical phenomena into a ‘pure’ abstract concept (Weber, 1949, p. 90), analytically accentuating certain elements at the expense of others. Thus, ideal types are *theoretical constructs* based on simplified empirical generalizations<sup>52</sup> stripped of contradictions, and not a ‘true’ reflection of reality. For example, when I speak of an emotional regime of the social services and the ideal typical positions *bureaucratic* and *idealist* (Chapter 8), and the professional and organizational frames (Chapter 7), these *do not exist in reality* in any pure form (cf. Weber, 2019, p. 97).

Although ultimately an empirical question, I argue that the results of this study can be used to understand other social services organizations in the Nordic countries, and to some extent, across the world. This claim is corroborated by previous research that has demonstrated similar patterns; social service practice is lodged between a bureaucratic logic, mediated by law and their related economic–rationalistic demands, and a humanistic care ethos built on relational engagement and client advocacy. As such, the theoretical findings are applicable to other occupational groups that practice within and between two or multiple dominant logics, which, to some extent, includes all welfare professions,

Lastly, I have considered what Giddens (1979) refers to as *the double hermeneutics* in social sciences. This highlights the complexity of interpreting researchers studying interpreting subjects. This may be particularly true in my case, as Alvesson (2011) calls attention to the issues that may arise when interviewing people that have completed their education at the same department as the researcher. This can lead to interviewees using theoretical models and concepts used by the researcher, reinforcing existing frameworks and creating a theoretical cycle of sorts. A notable example is Lipsky’s *Street Level Bureaucracies* (2010). I was often struck by how well the theory *fit* the descriptions of the participants. Lipsky’s book has been a key reference<sup>53</sup> in social work research and education for decades and probably affects practitioners’ interpretations of their job. However, I believe that the theoretical insights from sociology of emotions provide new insights.

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<sup>52</sup> Importantly, Weber’s language is *processual* in that it emphasizes the *flow* of events. Ideal types should therefore be considered as dependent on *history* and *context* (Tribe, 2019, p. 65).

<sup>53</sup> For an overview of the most frequently cited texts in Swedish social work research, see Dellgran and Höjer (2005) and Uhnoo (2012, p. 102).

## A NOTE ON TRANSLATION

I am aware that deciding to write this thesis in English may limit its accessibility in Sweden. However, I chose to do so to make it accessible to international readers. Furthermore, given the above reasoning that emotions are dependent on language and culture (Burkitt, 2008), and that languages have emotion words that have no equivalent in other languages (Barrett, 2017), I will shortly address what might be lost in translation. There is no way around the fact that when translating from Swedish to English, and what the participants have said, some depth, meaning, and nuances might be lost. For example, the Swedish word *oro* can mean everything from (mostly cognitive) concern to worry to (highly emotional) anxiety. I have, however, tried to elaborate on the meaning of such words and tried to provide examples of how they can be understood in different ways. When initially analyzing the empirical material, I did so in Swedish and translated the excerpts after the analysis. Likewise, language-specific idiomatic expressions are impossible to translate. Expressions such as “the spider in the web” may, to a non-Swedish speaker, be interpreted as something wholly different than what it signifies (i.e., facilitating the cooperation between a plurality of different actors). Thus, I have explained such idiomatic expressions, as well as different implications of emotion concepts, in footnotes throughout the analytical chapters.

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

I have touched upon some ethical issues in this chapter, such as anonymity and confidentiality, and consent has been discussed in relation to gathering the empirical material. This project was approved by the Ethical Review Board at Gothenburg University in 2018 (no. 817-18). This did not mean that ethical considerations were a “done deal.” I view ethics as a way of thinking and acting throughout the research process. This does not mean that the aforementioned dimensions of ethics are unimportant, but a discussion on (*re*)*presentation*, *selection*, and *interpretation* is warranted.

The concept of representation to some extent captures all these dimensions. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) account for two problems vis-à-vis representation: first, whose interests and opinions are expressed, and second, how reality is captured

and interpreted. In other words, the problem of representation involves an epistemological as well as an ethical–political dimension (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2017, p. 297). I often found myself conflicted when choosing which empirical data to present. The participants frequently used a harsh sense of humor when speaking about their clients. For instance, in my field notes I had written “they are making crude jokes about amphetamine-induced teeth loss and glory holes.” Throughout the writing process, I have found it challenging to convey that these exchanges were (almost) always delivered with an underlying warmth and genuine care. For an outsider reading this, such exchanges could possibly be construed as unprofessional, even bordering on misanthropic and cynical. It is difficult to capture the emotional tone of an interaction, but I hope that I have been able to present the participant justly.

Furthermore, the selection of research subject, aims, and research questions ultimately predetermine which voices are to be heard. The subsequent sampling and data collection processes and theoretical points of departure are unquestionably influenced by my own background. For instance, my mother, at the age of 52, working as a psychiatric nurse, fell ill with burnout syndrome and could never return to work. My motive to study a female-dominated profession with a high degree of occupational-related illnesses was driven by anger stemming from the devaluation and lack of recognition of both the societal importance and the strains of these types of jobs. Certainly, this has influenced both which excerpts I present and how I interpret them. I acknowledge the tendency to portray social workers as the hero protagonists of the story, while managers – and the organization they represent – are often depicted in a villainous light. This is not my intention. Rather, I have attempted to illuminate how conflicting feeling rules affect social workers, and in this study, managers represent the bureaucratic logic.

Initially, I intended to write a compilation thesis. However, I struggled with the word count limits of academic journals and felt that my empirical material deserved more space. Tracy (2010) argues that qualitative research should aim for transparency and *rich rigor*, which involves offering in-depth descriptions of situated meanings and detail. Therefore, I decided to write a monograph instead, to adequately account for the complexities of the professions and the participants’ stories.

## CHAPTER 5: FRAMING SOCIAL WORK

### MY FIRST DAY AT THE OFFICE

When entering a bureaucratic institution, one might anticipate, at least from the viewpoint of sociological convictions, a scenery where Weber's bureaucratic ideals unfold, in agreement with Parsons' (1951) guiding disposition for the professional body: "affective neutrality." In other words, one generally expects a certain demeanor when observing public bureaucracy officials. As was I. My first encounter with "the field," as it were, came to be by being invited by a manager to present my thesis plan during a so-called "agency meeting"<sup>54</sup> [M2]. To my *delight mingled with terror*<sup>55</sup> I was met by over 100 social workers and managers. Indeed, I felt the anticipated nervous stiffness in my spine, trying to adjust my face to a suitable degree of importance: this is a serious place dealing with serious matters. People presented their, or so I interpreted it at the time, "social work face," to speak in Goffman's (1959) terms – professional, earnest, thoughtful. Some smiled encouragingly, yet I felt out of place. I carried a sense of "so what?" while presenting my prospective research; would they even have time for or interest in this?

After the presentation (of which I remember little), during a short coffee break, other things started shining through the serious demeanor. A woman in her mid-forties with a playful smile passed me and semi-yelled "come down to the first floor, where the *real* social work happens!" whereafter she walked away, laughing. Over the succeeding years I got to know Krista well – the "first floor" was accommodating the adult unit and this was just a first glimpse of her, albeit sometimes

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<sup>54</sup> Swedish: *Verksamhetsträff*.

<sup>55</sup> Swedish: *Skräckblandad förtjusning*.

misunderstood, big sense of humor.<sup>56</sup> After this short encounter with Krista, a steady stream of social workers and managers approached me and offered me their condensed version of the place of emotions in their job. Three managers offered their views as to how the work has changed since they started their careers, “back then you weren’t allowed to feel your feelings and *definitely* not act on them” one said. “That has changed back and forth,” another responded. They all agree that in 90% of the times you cannot go wrong if you follow your gut feeling: “that is where you keep all of your experiences.” I wondered why people were interested in volunteering their thoughts on the role of emotions in their work, but mostly I was relieved that there seemed to be an interest to talk about emotions at work. In retrospect, as I will elaborate on in detail in Chapter 8, I would understand it as a demonstration of a highly self-reflective professional role.

After the coffee break, I was invited to a group discussion about the ethical guidelines of the Swedish labor union. This meeting, I learned, consisted of staff from all the different units in IFO, perhaps 30 in total (I joined one of four discussion groups, each led by a unit manager). Given my subsequent research interest in the emotional regime of the social services, its formative commandments coupled with the emotional labor it takes to perform accordingly, this turned out to be a strange, and lucky, coincidence. Throughout the discussion my anticipations of public bureaucracy workers were further rebutted. I was surprised to be invited to observe a rather relaxed atmosphere and a fairly coarse jargon that everyone seemed to be accustomed to. One of the managers initiated the dialogue by sharing an anecdote about how she, straight out of university, had encountered an aggressive client. She reminisced:

Eventually I lost it and yelled shut up your old devil!<sup>57</sup>, and I immediately felt that I had overstepped. But instead of getting angry he said “wow, you have a good head on your shoulders. [Field notes]

The anecdote came as a surprise. How could it be that something that could be understood as a professional meltdown was cheerfully shared by a manager, and what does this say about the emotional arena and interplay of the social work

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<sup>56</sup> For example, Krista attended a Zoom presentation on my research a few years later, where she cheered “WOOHOO GO FANNY!” during comments. Me being part of a somewhat stiff institutional arrangement (see Bloch, 2016 on emotion culture in academia), that warmed my heart.

<sup>57</sup> Swedish: *Gubbjävel*.

practice? I gradually came to understand that this was nothing out of the ordinary. To my surprise, I found myself being instantly initiated into the backstage life of the social service office, where people were less bothered about the public appearance. I was struck by the element of playfulness and frank jargon that the manager offered, and which set the atmosphere and the tone of the discussion. The manager framed the meeting as an opportunity to relax the professional roles, inviting the participants to share their own instances of losing their professional face (Goffman, 1959). Based on subsequent observations and interviews, I suggest that these humorous tales fostered a sense of team membership, encouraging self-presentations that contradicted the image of contained, rational bureaucrats that I had expected.

The reflexive playfulness I encountered around the social work mission and their professional role made me wonder how the participants themselves understood their role. What reaches people on the outside is typically tragic tales of people that have fallen through the cracks, of homelessness, poverty, mental disorders, and, in the worst case, dead children. In addition, the public learns about an unmanageable work environment for social workers, of chronic lack of resources, long-term sick leaves, and high staff turnover.

### THE STRANGE WORLD OF THE SOCIAL WORK OFFICE

When I asked the participants to evaluate their job, I was met by appreciative adjectives such as “so much fun,” “never boring,” or versions thereof. These optimistic reviews were, however, almost always followed by a “but”: “But it is totally absurd,” “but it is a bit destructive too”, “when I think about it sometimes, I’m like, what the hell am I doing?” The participants frequently declared the impossibility of articulating their job’s full or true meaning to those on the outside, those not *in the know* (Goffman, 1959). For instance, during an interview, Mona reflected on her career trajectory, on how things that seemed strange at first gradually seemed normal, and how she was reminded of her warped sense of “normalness” when talking to outsiders:

Fanny: Do you talk to your friends about your job?

Mona: Many of my friends are social workers too, so they know what it’s like. But sometimes I notice that people who aren’t social workers, when I tell a work story, and they are like “this is *so sick*”, I mean we find ourselves in really messed-up situations that are totally normal to us.

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

Fanny: Yeah, I guess you often get perspective meeting an outsider.

Mona: Yeah, because they are like uhm *what?* And I'm like no, what is weird about me being called the second coming of the devil and being threatened to have my kneecaps smashed? And then it switched to "god be with you" and it felt like a normal day at work (laughing).

Fanny: Yes, I remembered the first day I was here, I was like oh lord.

Mona: Yeah, but it is like that. I think all of us working here are a bit deranged in one way or another, I think you have to be, but sometimes it feels like maybe we are tolerating a lot and when we tell outsiders you're like, right, that sounds kind of crazy, maybe not totally stable. [Interview, AU M2]

The strange world inside of the walls of the social work office seemed to be an open secret among sworn-in members, a world that "outsiders" cannot understand. When non-social workers tell Mona that the story is *so sick*, she is reminded that her (non) reaction is outside of the norm. This could also be seen as a "rule reminder" – of feeling rules broken – the feeling rules of the "normal" outside (Hochschild, 1983). Mona's friend might be suggesting that she should feel something different, more intensely, or experience emotions like offense or alarm. These reminders of deviating from societal feeling norms could indicate desensitization. While Mona is reminded by an outsider, recognizing a deviation could also come from the self (Hochschild, 1983, p. 57):

Linda: Once when I told a client like, your son cannot keep living with you, and it is sometimes like you forget. And sometimes it hits you, now I'm going to work and I'm going to tell somebody that they can't keep their child, when you look at it from the outside, I mean it is weird, it's a weird feeling, and I think that you have to, you have to *keep feeling* that it is weird, because it *is* weird, it's not *normal*.

*Later in the interview, Linda declared:* I cannot really talk to people outside of work, it is not possible to understand I think, if I would tell someone at home they would be like holy shit, because even when I think that something is horrible you know, terrible and super sad, you know if I react, you still think that something is fun even though it's the most terrible thing imaginable, so I would rather talk to a colleague who gets it. [Interview, CYU M2]

Linda's observations highlight self-directed rule reminders that her feelings, at least outside of the social work office, deviate from broader societal emotional norms. Firstly, feeling blasé about taking a child from their parent is outside societal expectations. Secondly, finding something "horrible... terrible and super sad" to

also be “fun” contradicts typical emotional responses.<sup>58</sup> This underscores how Linda’s experience in social work might have altered her emotional reactions, making them seem out of place in a larger societal context.

The absurdity-turned-ordinary could be understood as a process of *habituation*, whereby initially foregrounded and intense emotions are transformed into routine, backgrounded emotions through experience, repetition, and routinization (Barbalet, 2008; Bergman Blix, 2015; Wettergren & Bergman Blix, 2022). For Mona and Frida, emotions that were once intense and conscious, such as fear of implicit threats or distress from telling a parent they cannot care for their child, become normalized over time. What had once felt overwhelming, eventually started to feel normal. Initial feelings of alarm and weight are reshaped by habituation and therefore lose their intensity and need of attention. However, this habituation can lead to self-critical moral feelings of guilt and shame (Turner & Stets, 2006, p. 550) when reflecting over one’s perceived jadedness. This calls for self-reflection and contemplation over their roles. In Chapter 9, I will explore how interaction rituals can alleviate these feelings and even transform them into a shared reality and ultimately into collective solidarity and pride (Collins, 2004).

## DEPICTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK

During the following months of observations and interviews, I set out to understand what the work entailed, both in terms of *what* they are supposed to do and *how* they are to perform their *role*. What immediately struck me when trying to understand their job was that the participants *themselves* continuously reflected on what they were supposed to do, both in terms of actual doing, and on a greater scale, how they are supposed to be at work, as well as a larger ongoing discussion on what “social work” is. I will elaborate on this next.

### THE SIMPLE PICTURE

As it turned out, the expectations that I had when I first walked into the social work office (that I would encounter bureaucratically oriented public officials) was also

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<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the extensive fascination with true crime is indicative of how this is not so norm-breaking after all, although maybe the closeness to “the terrible” is what stands out.

what the social workers – to an extent – expected of themselves. When I asked the participants to describe their work tasks, the greater mission, and their professional role, I was offered certain agreed-upon formal *tasks*, which were typically summarized as *investigating; assessing needs; making decisions*.<sup>59</sup> These tasks correspond to the statutory duties of social workers, of handling individual cases according to legislation, as representatives of a government agency. I encountered various template metaphors such as the spider in the web, a Swedish expression signifying someone coordinating between functions, alongside similar metaphors like “the juggler” and “fire extinguisher.” These metaphors, which I recognized from social work course literature as well as government official reports and proposals (e.g., SOU 2018, p. 38), defined the social worker role as a coordinating hub between client and relatives, government agencies, and healthcare organizations.

How these tasks unfolded during the workdays is hard to pinpoint; often the social workers tried to “prioritize” what would be the most important task of the day. One practice that invariably came up as a must-do was documentation.<sup>60</sup> The general perception was that increased documentation requirements stole time from meeting clients. In a focus group interview with the first response team, the participants reflected on documentation and its consequences:

Stella: What bothers me the most is the administration; it eats up so much time. We spend so much time on it that it has almost crossed the line where one can say it is for legal security. If we spent as much time on actual contacts with clients, [brief pause] but it feels like we are spending more and more time in that box, doing paperwork.

Gladys: It has to look good on paper.

Stella: Yes, it’s very important, and we have structures for documentation, and there are so many steps that take an enormous amount of time.

Angela: Imagine if you could just have a meeting and write things down to remember, not because you have to put it into the system, you could just have the meeting and then move on and not think about that you have to sit down and document everything and how much time that will take.

Gladys: Sometimes it feels like the written product that we produce after a meeting is more important than the actual meeting. Then I feel like something has gone wrong.

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<sup>59</sup> *Formal* decisions are, however, made by the manager or in some cases the municipal board, in accordance with the local delegation order.

<sup>60</sup> As I understood it, “documentation” connoted two (interconnected) things: first, documents as a tool in client interactions, such as questionnaires and manuals. Second, it referred to computerized systems registering work processes for record-keeping and potential audit purposes.

Fanny: Who tells you to document everything, the managers?

Stella: Yes, sure, and the legislation says that everything should be documented, documented, documented. And I think that everyone understand that it is important, in case someone has to go on sick leave, and that it is an issue of legal certainty, so that people can come here, and we know that they have been here. But it's like you say, Gladys, it's almost manic.

Gladys: And in the end, it's like it never happened if it's not documented. And we cannot document everything, it's impossible. [Focus group interview, FRT M2]

In the above excerpt, the participants pinpoint how “manic” documentation demands take time and focus from meeting clients. This conflict between client work and paperwork has been demonstrated in previous research, highlighting growing temporal conflicts when the “culture of measurement” or the “obsession with outputs” generate a shift from relational work to paperwork and time management (Bornemark, 2018; Miller et al., 2006; Yuill & Mueller-Hirth, 2019). Additionally, Gladys even “feels” that the written product has become more important than the meeting itself. An additional consequence is identified: a significant portion of their work is rendered invisible, “it's like it never happened if it's not documented.” While many emphasized the importance of documentation for the sake of securing the rule of law, I had the impression that the core activity – meeting with clients – always came first *as an ideal*, which is also concordant with what *should* be regarded as the core activity in social work curricula (e.g., Hasenfeld, 2010) and government proposals alike (e.g., SOU, 2020:47, p. 35).

In addition to documentation, the social workers were expected to attend a plethora of different kinds of *meetings* each week, in addition to client meetings. Together with the adult unit, I tried to summarize the meetings: four different types of meeting regarding client intervention strategies, four types of meeting regarding organizational issues, and an “external process supervision.” Apart from that there were inter-professional meetings<sup>61</sup> with other professionals within the welfare system, but also other meetings with other professional groups within schools, and with health and welfare, police, and others.

While the formal work tasks of social workers were presented with relative coherence, at least at first glance, the more I got to know the research participants,

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<sup>61</sup> For example, “coordinated individual plan” meeting. Swedish: *samordnad individuell plan*.

the more an enigmatic image began to materialize. This was coaxed by asking seemingly simple questions that did not have simple answers.

### THE NOT SO SIMPLE PICTURE

When putting together my interview guide, I included straightforward questions intended to gather background information on formal work processes. These questions included icebreakers like “tell me about a typical workday” or more dull ones like “what is your job description” or “what are the formal tasks and responsibilities of your unit.” The answers, however, often revealed a work situation that is far from straightforward. Participants claimed to “just know” what they ought to do. When asked *how* they knew, their responses often had a sarcastic subtext: “Well, I gathered from the job ad what I’m supposed to do”; “I made my own binder”; “I still don’t know, but no one has complained”. The uncertainty about the scope and limits of their jobs, as well as the unpredictability, stemmed from various sources.

First of all, the formal work tasks described above – investigating, assessing needs, making decisions – obviously involve interacting with clients. Client work constituted a part of the unpredictability of work; some clients tend to “just show up” on days set aside for paperwork, while others failed to show up for scheduled meetings. While some respondents answered something along the lines of “I usually have one or two meetings booked, then I try to do the administrative stuff” [Interview Lena, CYU M2], they often backtracked, acknowledging that the workday rarely goes as planned. Others just laughed coarsely as if the question were a joke. Leah explained:

Fanny: what does your typical day look like?

Leah: I would like to say that the typical day is one where you have a plan, like, tomorrow I have nothing booked and then I am thinking, gosh that’s nice, I will get a lot of things done! And then at the end of the day I’m thinking “what the hell happened”, having done none of those things. That is the typical day. [Interview Leah, AU M2]

However, the main concern regarding (lack of) clarity centered around organizational issues, involving both collective uncertainties – the responsibilities of the units – and individual ones. A recurring theme in observations and interviews was the lack of job descriptions. I was left wondering why this was such a major

theme. This lack of clarity seemed to create a sense of boundlessness and feelings of inadequacy. Kathryn highlighted this by saying, “If we had a clear job description, we could say no to things, but now we cannot” [Interview, AU M2]. Jenifer expressed the emotional toll of this uncertainty: “In the beginning I cried every evening because I didn’t understand what was expected of me.” On an organizational level, the lack of clarity caused tensions between units, leading to disagreements over treatment plans and budget issues.

For instance, when I first started my observations in the adult unit, there had recently been a “huge reorganization,” and the former *substance abuse unit* was now simply called the *adult unit*. This reorganization had caused confusion regarding their work tasks. Leah explained:

I got a call connected from a worried employer, the employee did not have any substance abuse issues, and she said, ‘but he’s just a child’. The “child” is 29 years old. [laughing]

Jane filled in: We’re a garbage disposal for everybody’s problems; we get the clients that no one want to deal with. [Field notes, AU M2]

Organizational efforts to make tasks and responsibilities clearer sometimes had almost comical results. For instance, during a meeting called “objectives, action plan, tasks,” unit manager Celeste opened by stating that:

Celeste: The last two years have been very messy, especially the adult unit regarding its objectives, we have been thrown between different areas of operations. Anyway, one issue is that we are supposed work for procured housing solutions within the municipality, but that has failed because clients have been denied housing. That is because we have too many [clients], and then we have the protective placements where there are no work routines in place, and now we are trying to take a solve that, and it is linked partly to costs, but also that clients should not stay in the shelters for long, it is not good for anyone. But that is not even mentioned in our goals, we will do that in 2020. Hopefully.

*Krista and Kathryn whisper to each other, deliberately so that I can hear it:*

*Krista: I can’t take this. It’s a joke.*

*Kathryn: It’s a joke, but it’s not funny.*

Celeste: Anyways, back to the objectives. As you know, this is the fourth meeting of this year, and the purpose of the meeting is to understand the objectives of this operation. What I want to get at is that this meeting has had an effect, because you have answered in the employee survey that you are aware of the goals of the organization.

Krista: Most of us are lying.

*[The group giggles]*

Celeste: Very well, but then you are good liars, because the fundamental purpose with the joint operation-meetings<sup>62</sup> was initiated by the head of operations to increase the feeling that the staff knows about the core objectives, because she wondered how it's possible that the awareness was so low, and according to the survey it is much better now.

The group continue to discuss a range of different meetings that shares the purpose of the staff understanding the objectives of the social services in general, and their municipality in particular. [Field notes, AU M2]

What is striking in this exchange is that it epitomizes the purely ceremonial character of the meeting. The humorous tone underscores a rather absurd situation. The employees had, apparently, as Celeste put it, “an impossibly low awareness of the core objectives” of the operation. In response, the organization had introduced recurring meetings with the purpose of clarifying these objectives. Despite these efforts, Krista jokingly points out that, contrary to the results of the survey, they remain in oblivion. After this exchange, they left the topic, and Celeste instead explained why the organization had been “such a mess” lately (citing reasons like reorganization, staff turnover, mold problems and ensuing renovations, and new management). In effect, Celeste seemingly acknowledged the purely ceremonial character of the meeting, which suggests that its purpose might be more about creating an illusion of awareness rather than achieving actual awareness.

Whether or not the staff truly understood the “core objectives” seemed less important than creating a coherent narrative around their assignments. The ceremonial character hints at a paradox underlying the job: the recognition that the point is not necessarily to grasp the core objectives, but to continue working *as if* the objectives are understandable and manageable with the tools and processes provided by the organization. This implies a double awareness, so to speak: the objectives are unclear and incompatible, yet the show must go on. There seems to be a mutual understanding that organizational attempts to define the objectives are sporadic and always incomplete. Social work is inevitably based on uncertainty due to the unpredictability of people and the changing nature of laws, policy, and governance – but they *must act*. Krista's ironic comment articulates this absurdity, while marking a distance from the organization's lack of clarity, which allows the group to recognize the duality of their situation, creating an opportunity to deal with it collectively.

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<sup>62</sup> *Verksamhetsträffar*.

## WHY CLARITY MATTERS

The question remains, why is it that the participants are so concerned with clarity of work tasks? The answer lies in understanding that lives are at stake. A cursory glance could perhaps tell a story of public officials trying to avoid an unbounded workload (Tham, 2007; 2018). While that may be true, there is more to it. The quest for clarity regarding work tasks, the larger mission, and the work role ultimately serves one purpose: how to best help their clients. Krista highlighted this:

Our client group needs *so much caring*, we are fighting for them, and we often get treated the way our clients are treated, condescending. I keep reminding the managers that the clients are not *our* individual clients, they are the clients of the social services, and I can get so angry for the clients' sake when they don't get the help that they are entitled to because we don't have work descriptions. [Interview, AU M2]

Social workers deal with issues such as child abuse, poverty, sexual abuse, violence, mental- and abuse disorders, co-morbidity, and are often processing people and families that society's other institutions, to all intents and purposes, has given up on. Traumatic scenes surrounding a child being removed from their parents have been displayed on newscasts, documentaries, and in popular culture, portraying the agitation and sorrow when parents understand that they have been deemed unfit to care for their own child, and it is perhaps hard to grasp the struggles in having to be the person to tell them. In the adult unit, clients frequently die of substance abuse or violence. It would thus not take much to realize that the job could be stressful and occupied with having to deal with complicated and often arduous emotions. These client encounters, a large portion of which involve involuntary clients, take place in a context in which decision-making regarding interventions is heavily regulated and occurs in an environment of austerity and chronic lack of resources (cf. Clayton et al., 2015; Jupp, 2022).

As an outsider, I only had a vague idea about what municipal social workers deal with, mostly shaped by media portrayals. However, I soon realized that the social work offices are sites with complex emotional upsurges. Hearing stories about clients' dire life circumstances, such as the one depicted in the following excerpt, often made it difficult for me to keep my face in check:

Kathryn: Brenda is in her mid 50s, has eight children, but is not in contact with any of the older ones, the youngest is 13 and under state care, she's not doing well at all [...] Once Brenda had a normal life, she lived in a house, had a job. Recently she's been staying at a house, where she's-, well, she's been abused before but now it's worse, she

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gets beaten and raped, and it is pretty heavy stuff. The police don't take her seriously, and no one really listens to her, she sent letters to the district court, to the Health and Social Care Inspectorate. She thinks the water is poisoned, she's psychotic. She tried to burn a house down. It could happen again, I think. She's not medicated, she has no contact with anyone in the health care system, but she has an apartment and it's going great, but then that man comes there and abuses her. It's horrible, he drugs her and rapes her and shoves amphetamines into her vagina, and then she can't get out of bed and has to ask her abuser for help. That's her life, you know. She's broken, literally. She's had eight kids and-, her genitals are broken, he uses tools. [Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

During Kathryn's narration of Brenda's story, I observed the emotional expressions of her and the rest of the unit. Kathryn spoke in a solemn and exhausted tone, recounting the story matter-of-factly. The group listened with serious facial expressions, clearly moved but composed and seemingly unsurprised. Such stories, I understood, were not out of the ordinary for them.

A bit of context may be afforded: Kathryn had known Brenda for years and knows more about her life than most people. At the same time, Kathryn is expected to help her, to motivate her to report an abusive man, encouraging her to move to a shelter, and supporting her in fighting her drug addiction. Additionally, Kathryn must convince other professionals of the best course of action, sometimes advocating for solutions that may not align with budgetary constraints. Building a trusting relationship with clients like Brenda, who initially often hold suspicion and skepticism toward social services and other government agencies, is crucial. This multifaceted role requires Kathryn to balance her own emotional involvement, practical constraints, and often diverging professional opinions on the best course of action, highlighting the complex and demanding nature of social work.

There are a few success stories: clients who fare better than expected and turn their lives around against the odds. More commonly, however, the victories are smaller: someone adapts to the rules of a treatment home, or a supervised parental visitation goes smoothly. Despite the undercurrents of resignation in these and similar stories, the social workers persist, employing a range of strategies that I will explore in later chapters. An initial observation about the purpose of sharing these stories with colleagues is that they seem to provide both individual and collective *recognition* of the often impossible and absurd mission they share. This acknowledgment reinforces each other's claims and positions on both cognitive and emotional levels. The statement "our job is *so* hard" was repeated so frequently that

it could be described as a mantra. Such sharing serves to affirm their self-image (Honneth, 2014) and their collective professional identity.

I began to distinguish two vastly different images of their job. One was shaped by economic–rationalistic demands, calling for rational bureaucrats, while the other depicted a highly emotionally charged work environment that required a humanistic care ethos. My own confusion seemed mirrored in the participants, reflecting a work situation filled with uncertainty, confusion, and frustration, as workers sought answers and clarity on how to handle literal life-and-death situations and atrocious life stories. The “simple answers” I was offered about what social work is proved incomplete, as radically different pictures began to form.

In addition to the template metaphors mentioned earlier, other metaphors emerged during my fieldwork that revealed a complex web of emotions (Kövecses, 2003), exposing deeply existential questions about the social work mission and role. Social workers frequently described themselves in terms akin to their clients’ *mothers*, and even as a *womb*. They spoke of highly embodied experiences, such as having clients “stuck in their body/stomach,” of sleepless nights and relentless dwelling, of an inability to let go of the job after clocking out for the day.

So, what have we seen so far? I would suggest that social workers try to navigate within a work context that entails different, and often contradictory, expectations. But where do these expectations come from? Next, I will take a step back and consider the sources from which social workers learn to be social workers.

## DEFINING SOCIAL WORK, DEFINING THE SOCIAL WORKER

### *THE PROFESSIONAL CARING ETHOS*

In Sweden, social work has developed from unwaged charity work, based on Christian values of mercy and altruism, to a paid occupation based on professional training and knowledge (Alexandersson, 2018). Although the religious ideas have been replaced by administrative and political deliberations, ethical values have remained central in legislation, objectives, and practice, as is evident in the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453), the legislation that formally governs the social services:

The Social Services shall, for the sake of democracy and solidarity, promote

- the economic and social security of citizens

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- equality in living conditions
- active participation in society.

The Social Services shall under consideration of the person's responsibility for their own and other's social situation, strive towards the liberation and development of the resources of individuals and groups.

Their activities shall be based on respect for people's right to self-determination and integrity.

The portal paragraph has been said to represent an ideal culmination of the narrative of the Swedish welfare state and "the people's home"<sup>63</sup> (Alexandersson, 2018).

This ambitious narrative notwithstanding, the ideals must be translated into practice, and *how* this is and should be done seems to be a point of contention and with large local variation. The Social Services Act is infused with dynamic verbs that "the municipality" – that is, the social worker – should *do* to help clients. These verbs include *promote* (a safe upbringing for youths); *provide* (accurate help for substance abuser); *assist with* (investigation needed for application); *contribute to* (a meaningful occupation for the individual), all of which is up for local interpretation and to be translated into courses of action by the individual worker. Regardless of the interpretation of how to act, *not* acting within exercise of public authority could amount to professional misconduct according to the Swedish Penal Code (SFS 1967:700, Chapter 20, 1 §).

Parallel to my fieldwork, I have also worked as a lecturer in the social work program at the University of Gothenburg. In this role, I have read many basic level social work course books. Titles such as *Understanding Social Work*, *What is Social Work*, and *Making Sense of Social Work* are a dime a dozen. These texts typically begin by stating that there is no all-encompassing definition of social work. In lieu of such a definition, they aim to capture the fundamental mission of the profession(s) in terms of a general "frame of thought" of social work:

Social work involves change work, at the individual level, at the institutional level, and at the societal level, aimed at limiting, overcoming, counteracting, and preventing the misconditions and social problems that have emerged over the past two to three hundred years in connection with industrialization and urbanization in advanced industrial countries. (Swedner, 1983, p. 20, my translation)

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<sup>63</sup> The people's home, *Folkhemmet*, is a social democratic vision of society as a "common home", based on ideals of equality, solidarity, and social security provided by the welfare state, formulated by Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson in 1928.

In addition, social work literature often emphasizes the importance of students understanding not only what social work is, but also what it has been: “It is essential that social work students have a clear grasp of the history and the evolutions of social work practice” (Horner, 2012, cf. Meeuwisse & Swärd, 2016). Many such historical outlines focus on whether social workers should, or could, strive for social change. Professional ethics as well as social work curricula seem to agree that it should. For instance, in an introductory book for social work students, Neil Thompson (2020) establishes that “social justice is now increasingly being seen as an important social work value,” and continues, “To work alongside such injustice [poverty, deprivation, and social disadvantage] without seeking to address it as a serious social problem can clearly be seen as an unethical form of practice” (p. 159). Hence, Thompson is equating “ignoring or colluding with social injustice” – that is, not addressing it as such – with being *unethical*.

## THE IDEAL SOCIAL WORKER

### PROFESSIONAL IDEALS

In addition to themes pertaining to social *work* and its mission, frequent topics are those addressing what a social *worker* is and should be. The term *social worker* can be understood as a social construct, to which (groups of) people attach values, ideas, beliefs, and practices to. Such constructs can be traced to course literature, as illustrated by headlines such as: “how to be a social worker” and “developing your social work self”:

This book aims to teach the reader how to develop and establish their social work identity. This means not only learning how to be a social worker but also understanding how identity is made and appreciating how this self is related to its broader society. It is only through this awareness that we can consciously fashion a social work self – and this is a process which continues throughout our careers. (Dunk-West, 2013, p. 3)

This raises the question, then, of how the “social work self” should be crafted. To explore this, I examined the social work study program syllabuses and reading lists. One particularly interesting module that runs throughout the program is the concept of “professional approach and self-awareness.”<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> PFS, Professionellt förhållningssätt och självreflektion. This element has, at some universities, replaced PPU, personlig och professionell utveckling (personal and professional development).

Furthermore, the course literature underlines how important it is to *use the self as a tool*. This means leveraging the relationship with the client to achieve social work goals, such as facilitating change and improving quality of life (cf. Payne, 2006; Andersson Elmtoft & Whitaker, 2023). In other words, how social workers present themselves and act in client meetings is seen as a *function* to achieve some sort of surplus value for clients. To achieve this, it is argued, social workers need to *know themselves* and be *authentic*:

Use knowledge about one's self. This includes reflexive engagement with one's biography and the socio-cultural setting within which the self is constituted. (Dunk-West, 2013, p. 158)

I believe it is particularly important that social workers embrace the value of authenticity, as to fail to do so has major ethical consequences. Again, this is at two levels. First, how can I honestly expect clients to change and move on in their lives if I feel that I, as a worker, am not able to grow and develop, if I believe that 'I am what I am and I can't change?' Clearly it would be very dishonest of me to expect clients to undertake what I am not prepared to do myself. (Thompson, 2020, pp. 164–165)

In these passages, we can discern several expectations and ideals for social workers. First, you should “know yourself” by reflecting on your own life and the sociocultural setting embracing this self. Second, once knowing yourself, you should not be too attached to this image of yourself but be open to change. Failing to understand the self as flexible is framed as an *ethical* issue, with the risk of alienating the client and becoming “part of the problem.” Thus, ethical practice in social work is achieved through introspection, in terms of *self-awareness* and *self-reflection*. In the Swedish course book *Understanding Social Work* (Börjeson, 2015), the author states that “failing to reflect on oneself as a human being leads to a cynical attitude toward work, resulting in a ‘moral downhill slide’” (p. 374, my translation). Failing to self-reflect is framed as a *moral violation* of one's professional responsibility.

Furthermore, *authenticity* is frequently emphasized as crucial in shaping the social work self:

Second, if I deny client authenticity, then I too am contributing to the range of barriers that may well have held them back in their lives – I become part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. (Thompson, 2020, p. 165)

But what does it mean to *be authentic*? According to Thompson, it means to take responsibility for one's actions:

To be authentic is to refuse to fall into the trap of seeing the causes of our behaviour as being beyond our control, to avoid using convenient excuses, such as: ‘I can’t help it, that’s the way I am.’ (Thompson, 2020, p. 164)

The social workers’ *personal responsibility* is thus positioned as an ideal, and necessary for being authentic. However, other interpretations are offered. For example, Andersson Elmtoft and Whitaker (2023) argue developing the professional self involves a process of *internalization*, described as “a personal anchoring process, or a fusion of beliefs, values, theoretical and conceptual structures, methods and techniques and one’s own personality” (p. 28, my translation). The authors expand, adding, “one should anchor all this in oneself and only then can we appear genuine and authentic in the meeting with clients” (p. 11).

In other words, the social worker role is articulated in such a way that it should ideally be closely bound to the private identity. In the Swedish ethical code for social workers (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016) the purpose is stated to “create clarity about the ethical norms for the occupation,” and to “strengthen work identity and serve as a reminder that a practitioner represents a profession” and that the “social worker’s own values stand in unison with these values” (p. 5). I would suggest that such phrasings are *evaluative* of the professional on the basis of successful/unsuccessful identification with the profession. In other words, the ideal could be interpreted to be to assemble an *authentic* identity in the sense that the private identity should *correspond* to the professional one: the person’s *own* values should *stand in unison with these values*. According to Salmela (2009), feelings of authenticity emerge when individuals manage to reach a *sense of coherence* among one’s values, commitments, and emotions. Thus, if we follow the argument of Andersson Elmtoft and Whitaker (2023), social workers may reach a sense of authenticity in their work role when they adopt the grander values of social work to the point that they become their own.

Based on these conceptualizations of professional ethics, personal responsibility, and authenticity, I suggest that the professional mandates outlined above encourage what Hochschild (1983) calls *deep acting*. Deep acting involves “deceiving oneself as much as deceiving others... making feigning unnecessary by genuinely altering one’s feelings” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33). It represents a successful “transmutation” of the individual’s private emotional system, where the emotional laborer starts to internalize the organization’s prescribed emotional norms as their own.

Furthermore, the Swedish ethical code for social workers (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016) is on the reading list of three obligatory courses.<sup>65</sup> Here, I found clues as to how the social work self should be crafted in terms of personal qualities (p. 11):

Professional social work presupposes required job competence enhanced by a number of qualities. Some of these qualities are of ethical character, indicating a certain level of moral and personal maturity. Primary examples of such ethical characteristics for a social worker are as follows:

A basic attitude of respect, equality and approachability

Personal integrity

Empathy/responsiveness

Commitment/taking responsibility

Objectivity and clarity

Sense of justice – civic courage

Critical self-insight

Tolerance/broadmindedness

Balanced judgment

Patience

Desire to reach understanding and collaborative skills

Independence of mind

Creativity

Humor

As we can see, the list of personal qualities is extensive and ambitious. The qualities can be understood as personal virtues – dispositions or traits that enable the actor to act appropriately in their role – that facilitate the achievement of professional values. Furthermore, several of the listed virtues cannot be realized without appropriate emotions (Salmela, 2014), including intrapersonal as well as interpersonal emotion work. For instance, to be committed demands intrapersonal feelings of import to stay focused (Morton, 2009). To be empathetic means that you must understand the perspective of the client, recognize their needs, and respond in an appropriate manner, which in turn involves emotional reflexivity and imagination.<sup>66</sup> A basic attitude of respect, equality and approachability means to

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<sup>65</sup> University of Gothenburg, SQ4111; SQ4131; SQ4451.

<sup>66</sup> I elaborate on such emotional skills in Chapter 9.

display proper emotions to others, either through deep acting or surface acting techniques (Hochschild, 1983).

The list of ethical characteristics can therefore be understood in terms of professional feeling rules of social work, constituting patterns of behavior that social workers should ideally follow. Bolton (2005) argues that professional emotion management differs from that in service occupations. Bolton calls this form *prescriptive* emotion management, which serves to meet the expectations of their colleagues and the public by presenting the “right image.” The feeling rules governing such emotion work are internalized to such a degree that it is an integral, and mostly invisible, part of the job (p. 123). So, the listed qualities above can be understood as ideal qualities that should preferably be developed. The function of these qualities is implied throughout the text: to maintain the best possible receiving and treatment of clients. The aim is also implied, to help the clients help themselves, while building and maintaining trust in the relationship as well as for the organization and its mission.

### ORGANIZATIONAL IDEALS

At this stage in the research process, I had gathered a rudimentary understanding of how the profession understood the larger mission of social work, as well as the personal qualities that social workers should ideally develop. Now, I wanted to understand how these ideals were put into action. What were the organizations looking for in terms of worker qualities? To crack the code, as it were, I examined what the organizations requested by reviewing job listings. I retrieved and read 100 such ads<sup>67</sup> from the national Swedish Public Employment Services, which I subsequently divided into two broad themes: duties and tasks, and personal qualities. Duties and tasks were rather clear-cut. Here are some prototypical examples:

You will work with investigation and assessment according to the Social Services Act and LVM as applied to addiction and / or mental disorders. The service also includes motivational work, outreach activities and follow-up of ongoing interventions.

You will investigate applications for financial assistance and follow-up of interventions. You will also work closely with other professional groups and networks.

You will investigate reports and applications, assess the applicant’s situation and make decisions on interventions. You may also need to present proposals for decisions to the

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<sup>67</sup> Retrieved on May 4, 2021, from [www.platsbanken.se](http://www.platsbanken.se).

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responsible committee or manager. Part of the work consists of participating in collaborations with other professional groups and networks.

You will work with the investigation of risk factors and protection needs of children and young people, as well as planning and implementing interventions to protect and support them. Development and improvement work is part of the assignment.

In job ads, other personal qualities were accentuated, although many were identical to those endorsed in professional discourse:

As a person, you find it easy to make decisions based on available information and act accordingly. You have good interpersonal skills and relate to others in a sensitive and flexible way. You are good at structuring, planning and prioritizing your work, while at the same time being clear and ensuring that your messages get across in the right way. You are also a flexible person who can see opportunities in change.

We greatly value relational skills and respectful treatment of clients. Humor, patience, flexibility, and a positive outlook on life are other traits that we treasure highly. Personal appropriateness is of great importance.

As a person you are secure and stable, empathetic, positive, hardworking, open, and accessible. You have a flexible mindset, being able to reprioritize your tasks during the workday if acute situations emerge. To you, contributing to method and agency development is a given, and you enjoy<sup>68</sup> a monthly follow-up of your and the agency's goals.

You pursue long-term and persistent social change, both locally and structurally. You are working efficiently under stress, can balance demands and keep your composure in dire situations. Openness, respect, and responsibility are our common values. Additionally, we believe that a meaningful leisure time in combination with a high quality of life makes you enjoy<sup>69</sup> coming to work.

You are development-oriented and passionate about a knowledge-based and systematic approach with the individual at the center. Since the work often involves meeting people with a complex life situation, it is important that you can see opportunities, convey hope and treat people in a respectful way. You work both independently and in a structured way, planning, organizing and prioritizing your work well. You can build relationships and establish contact with people in vulnerable situations. You are calm, stable and can maintain a realistic perspective on situations that arise in the day-to-day work of the public authority.

So, what can be gathered from these sources? The job ads introduce us, firstly, to work tasks, the *what to do's*, in a fairly matter-of-fact fashion: investigation, assessment, decision-making, and evaluations. Thus, these correspond to the statutory duties that the participants themselves formulated as their mission. Others

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<sup>68</sup> Swedish: "Du tycker att det är roligt att gå till jobbet."

<sup>69</sup> Swedish: "Du gillar att följa upp dina och verksamhetens mål månadsvis."

are less clear-cut: “you pursue long-term and persistent social change, both locally and structurally.” The personal qualities, *how to be*, are more complex: “you are flexible and see opportunity in change”; “a positive outlook on life”; “you enjoy a monthly follow-up”; “keeping composure in dire situations”; “have a meaningful leisure time and a high quality of life”; “passionate about a knowledge-based and systematic approach”; “convey hope and treat people in a respectful way.” In addition, qualities such as stableness, empathy, positivity, stress-resiliency, openness, structuredness and calmness are in demand.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

When considering legislation, course literature, ethical guidelines, and job ads, we can begin to discern an occupation shaped by a complex, and often-contradictory, set of ideal qualities. These include intrapersonal (calmness, positivity, empathy, critical self-insight, etc.), interpersonal qualities (patience, responsiveness, openness, etc.), as well as structurally oriented values (social justice, solidarity, equality, etc.).

Translating such ideals into practice means experiencing and/or displaying the appropriate emotions (Salmela, 2014). In the job ads the social worker is called upon to have a *passion* – an emotional commitment – to the rational-bureaucratic machine. On the other hand, they should have a passion for the human being and the interhuman relationship. In being partly professionals and partly bureaucrats, social workers face the dual requirements of both organizational and professional feeling rules (Bolton, 2005; Lipsky, 2010). This is particularly true within the “cultural crusade” (du Gay, 2000) of NPM and its focus on public service efficiency and customer orientation, which is not matched with the necessary resources (du Gay, 2008).

Further, emotions have a paradoxical role (cf. O’Connor, 2020). On the one hand, emotional skills are instrumental for practice (e.g., building client relationships), given that individuals accept the responsibility to control and manage their emotions to prevent them from disturbing the bureaucratic machine; be stress resilient, be positive, stay calm, have a meaningful leisure time. On the other hand, they are articulated as guiding forces, driving commitment and a sense of justice.

Reflecting on my first day at the office, I now understand my own confusion as stemming from two conflicting images of what social work is and is supposed to be.

The social workers play out a scene of absurdity to demonstrate how unmanageable and difficult to navigate their work is, while this simultaneously functions as a way of dealing with this situation by creating a collective recognition of its incongruity, where humor and laughter actively help the group with tools to unite around an understanding of the duality. I was baffled by the humorous tone in such a serious context. I now understand the witty tone as an attempt to make sense of a contradictory reality.

A brief reflection from my work as a lecturer at the social work program is that students frequently describe a “reality check” during their work placements, fathoming the discrepancies between education and practice. A composite reflection that captures this discrepancy might sound something like:

Here (at university), we work with these fictional case descriptions – client X has these problems, and we decide how to respond to them. The interventions are limitless, we can just throw solutions at them, an excellent treatment home that will solve everything. But when we get out there, there are no tailored solutions, and if there were, we can’t afford it, like, ‘sorry sir, we can’t help you.’

These insights, I believe, epitomize what this thesis is about: social workers are trained to esteem a set of emotionally charged values characterized by idealistic notions of what social work *should* do (e.g., social justice, human rights, solidarity) that develop into *collective symbols* (Collins, 1993). They participate in numerous interaction rituals – both during training and at work (see Chapter 8) – that give rise to feelings of group solidarity and emotional energy stemming from these collective symbols. These symbols become keystones for individuals’ sense of identity, and acting and talking in accordance with them confirm this sense of self and reward group members with pride. Once entering the bureaucratic reality of social services, however, an additional layer of collective symbols is added: one that honors a passion for instrumental rationality, measurements, budget mindedness, and efficiency.

Emotions say something *beyond* the situation in which they occur: they inform us about larger symbolic orders which individuals relate to. Thus, they reflect larger structures that shape expectations about how people should act and feel in certain situations (Hochschild, 2009). The dual images can therefore be understood as interpretative frameworks with their distinct sets of feeling rules. As such, the emotions described in this chapter; confusion, frustration, uncertainty, irritation, etc., can be interpreted as embodied manifestations of troubles in reconciling

conflicting frameworks. In the next chapter, I will examine how these two images manifest in practice in terms of (dual) *emotive-cognitive frames* (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018).



## CHAPTER 6: MAPPING INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXPECTATIONS

As we saw in Chapter 5, the participants struggled to make sense of their mission, their role, and even their work tasks. Despite these uncertainties, coupled with the basic condition of the uncertainties in dealing with human beings and the unpredictability of how they will respond or act in the future, social workers *must act*:<sup>70</sup> a decision must be made within a certain time frame, and subsequently be communicated to the client. The imperative to act (Lindwall, 2020) is not limited to responding to clients seeking help; the social services shall work *actively* and *preventively* (e.g., outreach work) (SFS 2001:453).

There are constant pressures to act: organizing and holding meetings with clients and professionals; decisions must be made, decisions must be mediated to clients, decisions must be evaluated; documentation must be written. In addition, social workers are exposed to criticism and pressure from many different directions: hostile media reporting, critique from other professions (particularly legal- and health care professionals), angry clients and their relatives, and the looming fear of legal scrutiny or official audit.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, social workers are exposed to implicit pressure to conform by two overarching and often competing sets of logics that include behavioral and emotional norms. I refer to these logics as *emotive-cognitive frames* (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018, 2021), which provide rules for the appropriate range, intensity, and duration, of emotions, as well as for how to think

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<sup>70</sup> The Swedish Penal Code specifies that *not* acting within exercise of public authority could amount to professional misconduct and a maximum of two years in prison (SFS 1967:700, Chapter 20, 1 §).

and act. Such norms are internalized through “observation and imitation, instruction, trial and error, feedback, and reinforcement and punishment, role occupants are taught to feel and display socially desired emotions” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993, p. 107).

Based on the points outlined in chapter 6, I argue that the practice is positioned between two (overlapping) dominant frames<sup>71</sup>: the organizational (managerial) and the professional. These frames formulate contradictory feeling and display rules (Hochschild, 1983; Bolton, 2005). I will further consider real or imagined *audiences* that may affect social work practice and how the social work role is performed (Goffman, 1959).

## INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL EXPECTATIONS ON SOCIAL WORKERS

The assertion that social workers are lodged between conflicting sets of logics – one stemming from their professional training and the other from their employing organization – is not novel. Julia Evetts (2009) contends that professions, in general, are often torn between two sets of logics that incorporate distinct ideals. While occupational professionalism emphasizes professional autonomy and discretionary judgment based on vocational training, with control exercised by professionals themselves guided by codes of ethics (2009, p. 263), organizational professionalism is characterized by managerial control through externalized forms of regulation, standardization of procedures and practices, and accountability measures such as performance reviews and target settings.

However, adding an emotional lens, the development of work identities and work cultures is not just a cognitive process but an emotional one. Professionals internalize values and norms through socialization, which involves emotional commitments to their roles and ethical standards (Salmela, 2009). I will describe this process using Bergman Blix & Wettergren’s (2018) concept of the *emotive-cognitive*

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<sup>71</sup> I initially referred to these as professional/organizational *scripts*, which is a similar concept of Goffman’s. However, while scripts refer to a set of predefined patterns of behavior that individuals follow in specific social situations, *frames* are broader cognitive structures (and in this thesis, emotional structures) that help individuals interpret and understand their experiences. Thus, the concept of frames implies how individuals continuously interpret interactional situations and adjust their behavior.

*frame*.<sup>72</sup> “Frame” refers to Goffman’s concept *frames (of reference)* (Goffman, 1986), meaning a context for how people understand and interpret social situations. Frames are sets of cognitive structures that people use to organize and make sense of their experiences as more than trivial sequence of events, transforming them into something meaningful (1986, p. 21). However, Bergman Blix and Wettergren argue that social constraints of the frame are not instructed merely as verbal prescriptions but are activated at a deeper level, influencing how interactions unfold.

As such, the term captures how the emotional and cognitive constraints of the frame are entwined, highlighting that the *habituation* of a frame’s social constraints involves simultaneously learning to *feel and think* in specific ways. The emotive-cognitive frame orients professional work by blocking certain emotions by producing shame and embarrassment when expectations are violated while motivating and orienting toward others by emotional rewards of pride and pleasure. In other words, emotions and emotion management are vital for orienting behavior in accordance with the frame’s expectations and feeling rules. Participants *feel* the frames in that they must behave in a certain way or make amends for not doing so; the frames *are* the constraints (Collins, 1988, p. 57). The feeling rules of the frames delineate “a zone within which one has permission to be free of worry, guilt, or shame with regard to the situated feeling” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 565).

Goffman’s concept of frames is deeply intertwined with his concept of *audiences* (1959, 1986). Frames help define the context for performances, and the audience’s role expectations shape how these frames are constructed and maintained. In social services, there are internal pressures to act based on both professional and organizational expectations. Beyond face-to-face interaction, larger public audiences also hold expectations. Social workers practice within a complex web of relations, working with and depending on various occupational groups. In addition, they depend on public trust, necessary to legitimize their professional jurisdiction. Individuals may also “be their own audiences” as we tend to emotionally appraise and respond to both real and imagined social situations (Goffman, 1959, p. 80).

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<sup>72</sup> A similar idea is proposed by Hochschild (1979). Hochschild suggests that *ideologies* can be understood as an interpretative framework that can be described in terms of framing rules and feeling rules. Framing rules are the rules according to which individuals ascribe meanings and definitions of situations, while feeling rules are the guidelines that assess the compatibility between emotions and the situation (p. 566).

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In other words, social workers evaluate their work in response to the role expectations of other real or imagined individuals and groups. Furthermore, these external expectations are internalized and serve as moral yardsticks that determine what is good or bad behavior, mediated through emotions such as pride and satisfaction (good) and shame and embarrassment (bad) (see also Kemper, 2014). In this chapter I consider the following audiences:<sup>73</sup> face-to-face interactants (colleagues, managers, clients, other professionals), “the state” (e.g., the social welfare board, the Health and Social Care Inspectorate, and the legal system), and “the public” (citizens and media).

Throughout this chapter, I will demonstrate how the dual emotive-cognitive frames of social work practice is embedded within a complex web of real or imagined audiences. Taken together, the expectations of the frames as well as audiences often shape incompatible ideals of how to think, feel, and act in relation to:

- the nature of the relationship with clients and how this is to be constructed and maintained
- who to help, how to help, and how to prioritize
- the relationship with the employing organization
- the scope and limits of responsibility toward the organization, clients, and other professions
- what types of knowledge should guide how to interact with clients and decision-making
- how to think about resources in terms of time, money, and efficiency
- one’s own role and emotional style in relation to clients
- how to manage one’s own emotions.

## FRAME CONFRONTATIONS

### NARRATIVES OF A PROFESSIONAL TRAJECTORY

During training, social work students undergo what Berger and Luckman (1966) refer to as “secondary socialization” where they develop a way of seeing things

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<sup>73</sup> These were selected based on what respondents spoke about during interviews and observations.

shaped by professional values, meanings, and ideals of what a social worker is (Fagerberg, 2024). When starting their careers, this self-image is adapted and changed through social engagement within their employing organization and their day-to-day contact with colleagues, who provide constant clues on appropriate ways of acting, thinking, and feeling. Furthermore, social workers encounter various groups of people and adjust their performances in line with real or imagined expectations of different audiences, such as other professions and government agency representatives (Goffman, 1959). How a social worker constructs their professional identity is, therefore, an ongoing process of accepting and rejecting the meanings and expectations about their mission, their role, and themselves.

As Lisa expresses below, during the social work education, certain motives for wanting to become a social worker were more acceptable than others:

Fanny: What urged you to study social work?

Lisa: Well, at the university, everyone said, 'I want to help people', but this one dude said, 'I want to make money'. That was obviously the wrong answer. The ethical code does not list 'greedy' as an ideal quality [focus group interview, FRT M2]

The quote above is one answer offered to one of my interview questions: "Why did you choose to study social work?" Despite the playful tone in the excerpt, the answers were generally well aligned with the profession's ideals, which during education serves as a yardstick to ensure that the "right person" enter the professional value system (Bolton, 2005). As demonstrated in previous research, social workers' motives for choosing the profession often emphasized as idealistic values such as humanism and altruism (Kullberg, 2011; Tham & Lynch, 2014; Liedgren & Elvhage, 2015; Bruhn et al., 2020), indicating that social work students seek to match the idealized image of their chosen profession. These motives are analogous to the idea of social work as a *calling*, suggesting that it should be "more than a job," similar to other feminized care occupations such as nursing and childcare (Ducey, 2007; Monrad, 2016; Selberg, 2013).

From Lisa's statement, we can see that the ethical code is used as a source for guiding principles during the education. Research participants frequently cited idealistic principles when stating their reasons for becoming a social worker: they wanted to "make a difference," "change people's lives," or "equalize class differences." During the group discussion on ethics briefly mentioned in Chapter 6, I jotted down some of the words that came up in the discussion on ideal personality

traits. The same traits would later be repeated in many interviews: humble, honest, empathetic, prepared, clear, engaged, committed, responsive, and communicative. These traits corresponded quite literally to those listed in the code of ethics (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016, p. 11): in other words, when participants were asked to consider traits of “the good social worker” and the analogous traits seemed to agree with what is declared in larger professional scripts. This suggests, at least on the surface, a rather efficacious professional socialization.

Interestingly, while the participants frequently cited both grander ideals and individual virtues in individual interviews, they frequently ridiculed the idealistic character of these traits when talking to each other, not seldom accompanied with a wink in my direction and a playful “don’t write this down, Fanny.” There also seemed to be a temporal aspect to these emotion-laden ideals. As shown in Chapter 6, the social work education urges certain values that gradually become collective symbols and even sacred objects for the group. This is highlighted in Lisa’s statement: helping people is the *raison d’être*, and deviations from it – such as making money – was the “wrong answer.” However, when I interviewed the now practicing social workers, I noticed a marked temporal shift in how they spoke of their mission. Many times, I heard phrasing like “when I was young and wanted to change the world” – often followed by a retrospective reflection that they had been “naïve” at the time, and that they now understood “how it really works,” as becomes clear in the following excerpt:

Lisa: we never say, ‘oh no, not a violence case!’, everybody wants to work with that, everybody is just like *yes*, I want to go! It’s very tragic with emergency protection orders, but all of us want to work with that and that is because we know

Paula [*interrupts*]: Change. You see a change.

Lisa: Yes, you see a change, but we also know what to do, and when to do it, and we know our options and resources, there are interventions, there is a job to do, but the cases that bother me are the ones where we have nothing to work with, we don’t know what to do, it’s frustrating.

Stella: The kids fall through the cracks

Lisa: Yes, and then it’s at the organizational level, or the societal level or whatever, like the unaccompanied boys that belong to no one, it’s *so much fun* [ironically] to have them sitting there in the reception, it’s *awful*, because it’s terrible to meet a person that you cannot help.

Paula: They fall into the void between our units or between municipalities, like ‘it’s not the responsibility of this community’, well, we are the ones who have to meet that person and tell them that.

Lisa: Yeah, that is really heavy, when you think that the society should care, but because it’s not our responsibility, it’s no ones’ responsibility

Fanny: Why is that do you think? Is it deficient legislation?

*The group confers. It must be the law, or? Or is it municipal politics?*

Lisa: In the end, it all comes down to what the municipality chooses to focus on, politically, and then it’s really hard to make a difference because you really cannot change that, and you realized that over the years... In the beginning, when you were new to the field you thought you could influence things and... But of course, you have had to put that to rest.

*[The group laughs]*

Stella: Saving the world and stuff.

Paula: That has passed. There’s very little that you can actually influence, and that is why it feels so important where you can actually do something, you know?

*[Focus group interview, first response team]*

This excerpt contains two seemingly contradictory lines of reasoning. On the one hand, the group refers to themselves as naïve for thinking that they “could actually influence things.” On the other hand, they are nonetheless speaking of cases where they actually *can* influence things (“you see a change”).

I have had difficulties interpreting these dejected and somewhat fatalistic outlooks on their job, and views on how little they can “actually influence.” An oversimplified interpretation is that the rather stoic reality-check style of expression works to protect workers from disappointment. When accepting that things “are what they are” there is less room for further disenchantment.

However, if we consider the structure of the narrative above, an alternative interpretation is possible. The temporalized reasoning in the excerpt above: “In the beginning” there was something else – an ideal of societal change – stemming from professional socialization. There seems to be an acute awareness – and perhaps a lingering attachment – to the idealistic mandates of the professional frame, which ostensibly induced the need for the group to defend their departure from these ideals through sarcasm: “Saving the world and stuff.” Past beliefs, when “you thought you could influence things,” are contrasted with a sober present: things “are what they are,” “it’s really hard to make a difference,” “that is put to rest.” The fact that the

group seemingly need to justify that they are no longer striving to “Saving the world” may indicate feelings of inadequacy, shame, and guilt.

The reality in which they now work is seemingly traced to a concrete source: “it all comes down to what the municipality chooses to focus on, politically.” The group have seemingly accepted that the professional frame has been overruled by the organizational frame. This could possibly be interpreted as a defensive strategy against feelings of inadequacy, shame, and guilt, of not being able to deliver what the professional frame promises. When an individual identifies the *cause* of the problem outside or within the self, it determines which emotions arise. When the self is seen as the cause of the problem, the emotion is turned inwards (shame). If, on the other hand, someone or something else is seen as the cause, the emotion is instead turned outwards (blame) (Kemper, 1978). Here, the group seemingly place the cause of “how things are” outside of their selves, allowing the emotions to be turned outwards.

Furthermore, the initial statement by Lisa, that they – despite what one might think – prefer to take on the “very tragic” violence cases, often including emergency removal orders, is justified by the group by the fact that, in those cases, they can actually *do something*, contrasted by precisely those cases that the municipality have not chosen to “focus on, politically” (here exemplified by unaccompanied minors). Thus, despite the undoubtedly emotionally draining task of removing a child from their parents, it is nonetheless preferred over having to meet someone and to deliver the harsh fact that they cannot help them. Lisa’s statement that “you think that the society should care” speaks volumes. It seems that an idea was collectively sculpted: a distinctive chasm between ideals and practice. The root of this chasm could possibly be traced to a need to manage a situation of conflicting frames: the professional frame and the organizational frame.

A more difficult question to answer is whether these types of accounts indicate a loss of a moral compass – of social workers as “unfaithful angels” (Specht & Courtney, 1995) – a departure from the historic ideals, values, and objectives of the profession. Morality is key in understanding how individuals govern themselves according to an external yardstick of standards, for example, professional ethics. When the individuals perceive themselves as having deviated from these standards, worry emotions are triggered and the self-image comes into focus, prompting a need to defend it: by adapting to new standards, or by successfully presenting arguments

that defend the (temporary) deviation. So, a possible interpretation is that such narratives, identifying the contrast between “naïve” idealism and “reality,” work as a mode for self-presentation. They seemingly seek consensus, from each other and in this case from me – and are ultimately answering to an imagined audience embodying professional ideals – that they are in fact working in a situation thick with contradictions that are hard to reconcile.

What emerges is a confusing ambivalence: they mock the idea that they are to perform the role of the committed and authentic social worker, yet they nonetheless keep trying to live up to these ideals in their work with clients. With this backstage talk within the team, they have seemingly reached a consensus that this is absurd; they cannot do the job the way they have been taught, yet they keep up the performance. Perhaps this could be a means to relieve some of the frustration and to escape despair (Paulsen, 2016). An alternative interpretation is that the cynical tone of the group instead could be understood in terms of them *taking on cynical positions* rather than speaking of cynicism as a personal characteristic that individuals develop *into* when growing disenchanted. In these terms, we can understand that the participants sometimes speak in cynical terms, but how they nonetheless act differently. In other words, we may understand taking a cynical position as a *bracketing practice* where they, collectively and typically backstage, talk about their possible actions and role expectations to address a problematic situation: the irreconcilability of the two frames. As such it may be understood as a technique to deflect cynicism away from the self: they recognize that they have become disenchanted, and they want to reach an agreement that the circumstances are to blame rather than a faulty self. This could in turn be interpreted as a strategy to protect from blows against the ego – and their emotional consequences – when failing to project an ideal role: They themselves talk from a cynical position to preempt an imagined audience attributing that role to them.

Most importantly for the theme of this chapter, however, is the conclusion that the temporal shift in the narrative indicates two competing emotive-cognitive frames. The organizational frame is here presented as the ruling one; what they are focusing on “politically.” Between the lines we can read ideals of objectivity, neutrality, and pragmatism: help those you can help, avoid those not prioritized by the organization. The professional frame and its more humanitarian ideals are

nonetheless looming, hence the need for relating to it and justifying the move away from it.

Framing rules are the guidelines through which definitions and meanings are assigned to situations, determining where responsibility or blame is placed. In the framing rules we find the different ideological directions that formulate, motivate, or adjust emotion, cognition, and action patterns among the employees in their professional practice. These rules carry ethical and moral weight by defining what constitutes a correct, honorable, or responsible course of action. Related to this, there are appropriate ways to feel, which are defined by feeling rules. Next, I will demonstrate how the frames and their framing and feeling rules play out in practice.

## THE ORGANIZATIONAL FRAME

The coexistence of the dual frames became visible when I observed staff meetings. In this section I will demonstrate how the organizational frame – represented by managers – “shut down” emotionalized<sup>74</sup> arguments by countering with “hard facts,” thereby establishing limits for client attachments. Thereafter, I will show that time and money serve as organizing principles and ultimately as an organizational tool to manage workers’ emotions. Lastly, I will illustrate how the ideal organizational actor is constructed in terms of displaying the “right” emotional style.

## LIMITING CLIENT ATTACHMENTS

During so-called methods meetings, the social workers frequently tried to convince the manager to accept what they deemed the best treatment option for their clients, often facing refusal. In the excerpt below, adult unit social worker Susan had attempted to convince manager Celeste to approve a housing solution that she has suggested for her client, but her proposal was rejected:

Susan: But where is he supposed to live?

Celeste: He’s managed before, at his dad’s or some aunt, you have to say that he has to solve his own living situation, be tough, he went on a vacation and if you can manage that then you can manage your-

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<sup>74</sup> I am referring to *emotional* in the traditional sense, and view *rationality* as inherently emotional (Barbalet, 2008).

Krista: [*interrupts*] But he smokes cannabis and gets apathic and incapable of everything

Celeste: If he can't handle the requirements (being drug-free), then we can't grant him anything.

Susan: He won't

Celeste: Well, that's grounds for refusal then.

Susan: He's only 23

Celeste: [*sbrugs*] I know, but... [Field notes, AU M2]

They quickly move on to Sandra's case, where similarly to Susan's case, she is attempting to get the manager to approve a proposal for a certain housing solution. The client, Hanan, is about to face the district court for drug charges.

Celeste: will he get sentenced?

Sandra: He's sleeping in-

C (*interrupts*): I know I know, but will he get sentenced?

What Sandra was trying to tell Celeste is that Hanan is sleeping in a dumpster (this I had learned at the process supervision a week before). Again, like Susan's case, the proposal is rejected, citing a failure on behalf of the client to meet the requirements and personal responsibility. The meeting is fast-paced, and Celeste seemingly has the presumably ungrateful role of having to shut down the social workers appeals for resources to help their clients. Hard factors – budget, requirements, grounds for refusal – are posed against soft pleas for clients in dire situations. Celeste shuts down the emotional pleas quickly, possibly to protect herself as well as the group from getting emotionally involved, engaging in strategic attempts to undermine and redirect the anxieties and moral distress of the social workers (cf. Moisander et al., 2016). They move on to the next client, Mona's case. At this point, a manager from the financial aid unit has joined the meeting.

Mona: When we talk about that it's important for her to talk to us and to connect, I feel like, would we have? If I had several social workers, just thinking about when I was burned out, I didn't talk to anyone about my problems. We have such high demands on our clients that they should open up, trust us, we are complete strangers that work in a government agency

Celeste: We don't demand openness, but independence.

Mona: it's not like we have a wide range of options and see exactly what she needs, we just have to put her in that box (the treatment home) because we don't have anything else, we suggest interventions strictly depending on what our options are and then we try to fit her into that, that's the reality.

Other manager: your job is to get her to the public employment agency

Mona: that's a disservice, we punish her instead of helping her.

While Mona is addressing the relationship with the client and, by emphasizing (by imagining how she would respond if she was in the clients' shoes), she recognizes that they demand much from their clients. Mona even compares the situation of her client to when she was burned out, and the difficulty she experienced to open up to people about her problems. Celeste seemingly sets a boundary for involvement by reminding Mona of what their actual limit of the mission is. Professionalism is associated with bureaucratic objectivity and following predefined standards and objectives, countering emotional arguments with hard facts grounded in legal requirements, rules of conduct, and grounds for refusal ("We don't demand openness, but independence"; "Your job is to get her to the employment agency"). This presents professionalism as entailing the separation of everyday emotions from work emotions. Empathy is thus an example of a professional virtue that signifies *proper emotional involvement*. While Mona seemingly refers to the professional frame (involvement, mentalizing, or "walk in their shoes," Celeste counters with the rules of the organizational frame: distance.

During the break, I spoke to methods supervisor<sup>75</sup> Patty:

It seems hard I say, feeling self-conscious about the hollow-sounding remark. Yes, Patty answers, the issue is not whether the client needs help or not, they do, but there is an organization standing in the way. I ask Patty about delegation; do they not have delegation to make such decision without the approval of Celeste. Well, Patty says, to put it simply they have delegation for things that do not cost anything. [Field notes]

The meeting continued. In the following excerpt, we see how the manager shuts down suggested interventions by veering the discussion to rules and regulations.

Krista: I met with Donna [client], and before I met her, her psychologist had written an attestation, she was at the health clinic, but then they had referred to the affective psychiatry, at least that is what she says. So, the psychologist at the health clinic has written an attestation that I can't start working until Donna has a stable living situation, and I'm wondering where the responsibility lies, she claims to be drug-free but if so, it hasn't been for long. Is the responsibility on us, is the responsibility on the housing unit, what do we think? [...]

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<sup>75</sup> Swedish: *Förste socialsekreterare/metodhandledare*.

Celeste: Let's back up here. Let's say that we contact the housing unit where we say that there is no need for protection and then you could solve it with a hostel, a roof over their head.

Sandra: Yes, yes, but what I'm thinking about and what was said is that we need a long-term solution, hostels are an emergency solution, it can't be considered a long-term solution

Celeste: No, but you don't step into a long-term solution, I think it's quite a short time you've been involved in their own housing, she had a very insecure housing situation before, but she had solved that herself and she had gotten from northern Sweden to here.

Krista: She has an addiction, it's a vicious circle, she takes narcotic painkillers

Celeste: Yes, but that does *not* entitle her to accommodation via our unit.

Krista: No, but this is where it gets a bit difficult, because I've always had a feeling with her that I think she has more addiction than she says, that's what I think, but she also doesn't want to live in a home with other addicts because I think she's worried that she'll end up in it, plus she'll be exposed even more, abuse and that bit, so if you stack up all the things she has, she meets all the criteria for a person who is in the hands of the authorities

Celeste: She has friends.

Krista: Yes, but if you look at how things are right now, she has nothing, she has her car

Patty: What do you think would have been an ideal if you disregard organizational obstacles

*The group discusses some (hypothetical) options*

Krista: I don't know, it feels like she is getting tricked somehow, she gets a written opinion from the probation service, and then one from here, and an attestation from the doctor, "you should do this, you should do that", so she is getting this small hope that someone will solve it, and the more she tries, the more she is met by resistance. The main issue is that she needs somewhere to live, and she keeps getting her hopes up only to be disappointed time and time again, and I feel like maybe we should just stop it, for her sake, because the attestations only give her hope.

Celeste: And we know that the attestations are not-, we can get tons of those attestations [from other professions] but then we would have to help *so many*, and it's just not possible.

The social workers are seemingly motivated, and draw on, emotionalized arguments, as we saw in the excerpts above ("He's only 23"; he's "sleeping in a dumpster"; it gives her false hope), and they are attempting to strategically *direct* empathy, by encouraging Celeste to take the clients' perspective (cf. Flower, 2018). In the above

excerpts, we can see how the dual frames manifest in practice. The manager's role<sup>76</sup> can be interpreted as being a defender of the efficient public bureaucracy, cognizant of budget restraints to safeguard government funds, and ultimately, taxpayers money (that does *not* entitle her to an accommodation; we would have to help *so many*, and it's just not possible). Implicit in this statement, I would suggest, is an ideal of fairness and equal treatment, and to avoid favoritism. The social workers express adherence to professional ideals, particularly those pertaining to the standard of individual responses (cf. Lipsky, 2010).

I suggest that the above section may reflect an organizational fear that social workers feel too strongly about their clients, and that such a commitment might risk them losing sight of objectivity requirements and budget mindedness. The manager's arguments draw on ideals of efficiency (in terms of time and budget), fairness (all clients are entitled to equal treatment), and clients' individual responsibility. This calls for emotional labor to create distancing from the client by suppressing empathy and blocking of attunement with the clients' vulnerability. A particularly harsh example of this took place during an inter-unit meeting, where Krista spoke of client Brenda<sup>77</sup> ("She's broken, literally. She's had eight kids and-, her genitals are broken, he uses tools ..."), whereby one of the managers cut her off, stating that "yeah yeah, she has had eight kids, of course her genitals are broken."

Furthermore, the above exchanges demonstrate how the group are involved in a process of negotiating standards of sympathy margins toward clients (Clark, 1987). While the social workers attempt to increase the clients' sympathy credits, the managers instead seek to decrease them. In Hochschild's (2013) terms, they are engaged in a process of drawing organizational *empathy maps*, that is, outlining rules for how empathy should be distributed within the organization. Empathy maps are guided by moral rules: For some, the moral rule dictates "do not feel sorry, do not empathize... for others, the rule is this: feel compassion. Empathize." (2013, p. 39).

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<sup>76</sup> I do feel, however, that some nuance is granted here. Even though "the managers" were often spoken of as having bought into the ideology of NPM, I want to stress that these are not understood as "personal" qualities, but shaped by the managers' role positions. Typically, unit managers are themselves trained social work professionals that have previously worked in frontline services. However, in their role as managers they are responsible for ensuring that laws and regulations are followed, as well as for not exceeding the unit's budget (cf. Tham & Strömberg, 2021). Therefore, their areas of responsibility - particularly budget concerns - came with the ungrateful role as naysayers.

<sup>77</sup> See Chapter 5.

These maps govern how individuals respond to their feelings, with the organization inserting a “purpose between a feeling and its interpretation” (1983, p. 196). Based on the excerpts above, I argue that the professional and the organizational frames collide. However, Celeste succeeds (probably by means of her higher status) in *framing* the meeting by providing a structured way to interpret and respond: the meeting should be efficient, and we make decisions based on rules, not emotional circumstances. In other words, in these excerpts the organizational frame is dominant, urging a movement from the “caring worker,” sympathetic to clients’ unique circumstances, toward the “rational worker,” limiting emotional attachments to clients. This rational ideal instead legitimized actions by referencing bureaucratic rules and standards (impartiality and fairness), efficiency, and budget mindedness, which I will elaborate on next.

#### TIME AND MONEY AS ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES

This section illustrates how “hard” factors, such as efficiency (in terms of time and money), goals and performance measures, and structures are introduced by management, and met by skepticism by the social workers.

Celeste: I have already mentioned it a few times, that I and the other unit managers were on a study visit, and everyone was like, wow, we are going to see (neighbor municipality’s) LEAN board. It was *exciting*, I was completely *starstruck*, it’s about visualizing. We have, as you have seen, drilled up two whiteboards. And in the children and youth unit they have two LEAN boards;<sup>78</sup> I just want to encourage you to go and look at it. [Field notes, methods meeting, AU M2]

In the above excerpt we can see the manager’s presentation of the new LEAN board that was about to be introduced in the adult unit, where the manager is almost giddy about the efficiency promised by its introduction. Whether this is genuine excitement or not, I would argue that it is an expression of an encouragement for

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<sup>78</sup> LEAN boards in both municipalities were simply big whiteboards with columns and rows, designed to visualize the workflow. Simply put, they wrote the name and age of each client on separate post-its. What the columns included depended on unit regulations. Method supervisor Petra summarized it for me: “In CYU, they must keep track of their investigation times, because if they exceed four months, it’s a problem. So, they include all meetings with other professionals and all the things that need to happen in an investigation. So, we did the same thing here. But then we realized that our problems are different; it’s not the investigation, but the placements. Oh, someone has lived in temporary housing for four months, that is not supposed to happen. So, then you have different placements on one side, then you have month one, two, three, up to twelve, and then we move the tiny post-its.”

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passion and pride in efficiency and rationalization and quite neatly captures the spirit of the organizational frame (cf. Albrow, 1992; Weber, 2019).

However, the participants seemingly did not share that passion, and often used LEAN as an example of how streamlining and budget cuts governed their practice, as synopsised by Krista:

The managers want me to work cheap and fast, they don't put it like that though, they say, 'deal with the absolute *critical*, and nothing beyond that.' [Interview, AU, M2]

In essence, the participants often spoke of how standardizations of procedures and performance management mechanisms in effect reduced their discretionary space as well as their time for processing cases. For instance, in a process supervision session, children and youth social workers discussed how LEAN had affected their practice:

Rita: I feel like we don't have enough time, it's all about cost cutting and efficiency; we don't have time to reflect on what we are doing.

Sara: Right, like when we had those columns on the whiteboard, 'how many individual plans have been implemented, you have to move the post-its.' I mean, we're not against quality development, but it isn't development if we don't talk about *how* we carry through those individual plans.' I feel like we're only measuring things to control the clients, and they call it quality assurance.

*During the break I asked them to elaborate.*

Sara: They are just measuring everything all the time, and they say it's for the good of the client, it's quality assurance so that the client gets what's in their right, but then I feel like I can't do what I feel is right

Fanny: But what do they say is the purpose of all the measuring, LEAN and that, what is their argument?

Emma: Efficiency.

Rita: Reducing the time of investigation, because it's best for the client, but in practice it doesn't *matter* if an investigation takes three or four months. I have never had a client that has said that it's better if it takes less time; they only care about the content and the outcome. [Field notes, CYU M1]

In the above excerpt, the participants highlight different understandings of how best to practice social work. The managers reason that LEAN (and what it represents) is a useful tool for quality assurance, arguing that "it's for the good of the client," so that they get what they are entitled to, within a predetermined time frame. The social workers, on the other hand, express that such procedures thwart their time for reflection, and for understanding *how* they are helping their clients. Ultimately, as

Sara states, she cannot do what she *feels* is right. However, such practices were also met with resistance, and the social workers spoke of how they *created* discretionary space and thereby confirmed their loyalty with their client by distancing themselves from loyalty toward the organization:

Krista: I, among others, *create* a discretionary space sometimes, because we have to do it if we're going to be able to help people. But we don't really *have* much discretion, we have a very small box within which we can do things, and that is hard sometimes, because you feel like you are not really helping people, and we are the ones that have to sit eye-to-eye with people. But then you can say that it's the managers' decision or refer to the head of the administration or the politicians. [Interview]

Maria: I instruct parents on how they should talk to get what they want, you know, through the backdoor. That is not really a part of my job, but I feel like that is the least you can do.

Thus, instead of accepting their reduced discretionary space, they allied themselves with clients, trying to help them “through the backdoor,” for example, by teaching them “how they should talk to get what they want.”<sup>79</sup> When that did not work, Krista suggests a backup plan: referring to the higher-ups and thus distancing themselves from the rules and regulations of the organization.

The skepticism in relation to the intentions of efficiency techniques is also evident in the organizations' attempts to formulate visionary documents addressing the approach to their “customers” (clients), attempts that were seemingly treated as a cynical attempt to project an image of the organization that the social workers did not see as honest. In one of the social work offices, a municipality “branding” project had been commissioned to an advertising agency to formulate a municipal slogan,<sup>80</sup> and aimed to “strengthen the identity of the municipality.” The result had recently been presented at the social services office, framed to function as a “guiding star” of the daily work. The message of the slogan read something along the lines of “Greenville – striving towards excellence in all we do.” While such slogans can be regarded as an archetype for the ideal organizational identity and the self-image of the employees (Hochschild, 2000; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Wettergren, 2014), it was frequently referred to sarcastically by participants when talking about

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<sup>79</sup> Bending or breaking rules has been identified as a common coping strategy among street-level bureaucrats (e.g., Tummers et al., 2015).

<sup>80</sup> Municipality slogans are common in Sweden as a marketing strategy to, for example, increase population or to attract tourism. In this case the slogan was encouraged (in an internal municipality folder) to be acted out by all public servants in their daily work.

expectations versus reality. For instance, during a process supervision, the adult unit social workers spoke of yet another time that inter-professional cooperation had broken down and a client was not met with “excellence”:

Sandra: But we could have cooperated in a different way, I don't mean to blame anyone but more just, you could have done that, because it's a small building, and it's quite amazing how it works, we can sit in the same corridor and still we have no dialog.

Mona: It doesn't help that we see that damned slogan every time we open the computer.

Susan: It's also on the envelopes; it should permeate the whole operation.

I obtained a document stating the municipality’s “treatment policy.” The document states proudly that it, the municipality, “realizes the human rights” and promises to uphold the UN human rights of education; care, health, and personal safety; social and economic security; work and housing. The document concludes that “these fundamental rights should be realized equally for all residents. Our activities must work for everyone regardless of gender, disability, ethnic or religious background, sexual orientation, transgender identity or expression, age or social status.”<sup>81</sup>

Interestingly, while the managers appeared to stand behind such value statements in staff meetings, they too expressed skepticism about their practical feasibility in individual interviews. For instance, manager Kylie had a different perspective when we discussed them in an interview:

Fanny: How are such visionary statements implemented in practice?

Kylie: Everything is reduced and fragmentized until (pauses), and then they are ascribed to the separate units as an activity, like alright, now the district council says ‘alright, how are we going to achieve these goals,’ like the one we just got that ‘every child in the municipality should have equal opportunities,’ how are we going to do that? I mean, the objectives are formulated in very bombastic-sounding words. [CYU M2]

Such visionary documents could be interpreted as an attempt by the organization (or rather, the municipality), to alter the organizational image: in presenting themselves as guardians for human rights, and conceivably to strengthen employees’ pride in their work (cf. Wettergren, 2014). However, such objectives appear to be in vain, as the social workers instead see them as a cynical reminder of principles versus reality. Thus, what becomes evident is a conflation of ideas revealed in the difference

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<sup>81</sup> I chose not to reference the source to maintain confidentiality of the research site.

between “what is said,” and “what is done.” As the social workers are the ones expected to *perform* the policy in practice (Lipsky, 2010), it becomes their responsibility to translate these ideals. Yet, as we have seen, this is not an easy task: they operate within two different frames structured by varying and sometimes conflicting rules, meanings and interests, and these, in turn, come with different expectations on how to feel and how to interpret and act on those feelings.

During my fieldwork, I witnessed several occasions where the participants spoke of the often harsh reality of austerity playing out, in effect counteracting an “excellent” practice, and the slogan seemingly worked as a harsh reminder of this incongruity (“it doesn’t help that we see that damned slogan every time”). The principle of “excellence” was ostensibly recognized as an unrealistic and inflated goal, and as such, a mere symbolic and almost comical mandate. However, although they typically made fun of the slogan, it seemed to serve as a reminder that they could not provide the service that they wanted for their clients. For instance, during a process supervision, the adult unit spoke about a reorganization that had resulted in cases of honor-related violence being relocated to their unit from the financial aid unit. In this case, the unit manager had questioned Susan’s suggestion of moving her client to an expensive women’s shelter:

Susan: My client is really scared. The manager rejected my suggestion for an intervention: she just says *no*, like a Panzer tank. I feel like she (the manager) is only thinking about money. It’s so frustrating that we always have to think about what things *cost* when the client needs something. It’s awful to have to tell the client. I think she (the manager) should tell her herself. I feel like a failure and that I can’t do a good job, and they (the managers) don’t understand, they just want to send everyone to the procured services; it has become a mantra, a rhetoric.

Mary: Sure, we have a budget that we must keep in mind, but the consequences cost so much more. I know that they will kill her or one of her kids and then the social services will have even more to deal with; then we have five kids to take care of, if the mother is killed.

Sandra: We have to invest in these clients; some of them really need *massive* help, and what the managers suggest is not effective, some clients just need *more*, and we have to give them that despite the budget.

Mary: I think it’s all about the cash. It doesn’t matter what you talk about with Celeste right now, everything that cost more than 2000 SEK<sup>82</sup> is just an automatic no. What you have to do is to put everything in columns. What do we get for 2500 SEK that we don’t get for 1800. And there I feel like Celeste only thinks about budget. I ask Celeste,

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<sup>82</sup> The sum refers to the cost per client per day at the shelters.

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what do we get here, what are we after? I know that they [managers] are under pressure because of the budget, and that comes and goes in cycles; sometimes they talk more about it. I know that she is stressed, and you almost have to scream at her to get her to listen.

Susan: I really agree with what Mary says. We have to show the managers what we *get* for the money; there is a big risk of disaster here, and we have to take responsibility for it when we haven't done what we should. I'm going to tell her that she should take the blame if we reject the client.

I suggest that we can see an array of arguments in the above excerpt that are pitted against each other. One is rationalistic and budget-oriented, while the other is more emotional (specifically, worry and fear), morally infused, and client-oriented (cf. Whitaker, 2019).

The social workers are struggling to come up with arguments relating to the safety of their clients to counter fixed tariffs (“everything that cost more than 2000... is an automatic no”) (cf. Lipsky, 2010, p. 83). Mary’s solution is to translate her arguments into a rationalized form (columns) to convince the manager. Further, I suggest that we can see how emotions that surfaced alongside deviations from the mandate of “excellence” (and what that represented) could be directed either at the self (self-reproach emotions such as shame and guilt) or toward others (i.e., blame, resentment), or both. On the one hand, they are identifying the source of their feelings (worry/fear for client) outside of themselves: the manager and, in extent, the budget restraints. On the other hand, however, Susan’s statement that she “feel[s] like a failure” and “can’t do a good job” is directed toward herself, and her inability to help her client. Further, they are also expressing feelings of anguish of having to tell the client that her application will be denied. Susan seemingly concludes that she can relieve herself from the latter when stating that the manager should “tell her [the client] herself,” and “take the blame” if a “disaster” should happen, *if* the rationalized form suggested by Mary does not work. At other times, the participants had seemingly accepted the propensity to think about clients in terms of how much they cost. For example, while I was observing the adult unit, Leah entered the lunchroom, speaking loudly on the phone. After she finished her call, I asked her what had happened, and she explained:

Leah: I was on the phone with [the social services in] a neighboring municipality. We are arguing about an expensive client, and I am trying to convince them that they legally belong to them.

Certainly, social workers are not immune to the managerial discourse. As Sara put it: “How management handle things, of course it trickles down, and shapes us to be more... well, rational and efficient” [Interview, CYU M1]. The trickling-down effect thus meant that the social workers (sometimes) accepted the rules of the organizational frame. This was often associated with “entering a role” that “represented the municipality,” thereby clearly delineating the work role from the self:

Jenna: I enter a role and get kind of square, not because I *am* square but because I work in a public authority. In the end, I represent the municipality. I have grown into that, by listening to my colleagues’ stories. I have worked in other municipalities too, and there are different beliefs of what our mission is; you kind of get shaped into where you are at, the municipality, how they want you to be. [Interview, FRT M2]

Tami: I have worked in two municipalities, and they all have their routines and procedures, how you think about what you grant and what you reject, so I think that the municipality’s own vision and routines shape how you do things. [Interview, FHU M1]

Both Jenna and Tami recognize that their actions are shaped by the organizational culture and the “routines and procedures” of the municipality. Jenna even claims that the “beliefs of what our mission is” varies between municipalities. This illustrates, as does this section as a whole, how the organizational and the professional emotive-cognitive frames offer different understandings of what constitute “good practice” that the practitioners can relate to and summon to justify their actions.

In this section we have also seen examples of micro-level negotiations in which framing rules should rule in different situations. Typically, the practitioners use some type of hybrid logic that is situationally compromised – although the manager, holding greater status and power, typically has the upper hand, as well as the micropolitical right to interrupt and dismiss the social workers (as we saw in Celeste’s shutting down strategies above) (Clark, 1990). The two frames are both attached to external sets of knowledge and value structures, which are translated into the interaction as organizing references that contain different ways for how to interpret, act, and feel about the situated event. The organizational frame directs workers to act according to bureaucratic principles, meaning that predetermined rules and routines should guide their judgments and solutions to client’s needs. This also dictates how organizational resources should be governed. The professional

frame, on the other hand, guides workers to consider individual needs and circumstances and respond accordingly. This highlights a division between personal/emotional and external/rational ideals (cf. Barbalet, 2008). Using time and budget as organizing principles can isolate emotions from decisions – sometimes serving as a shield, but at other times, leaving workers feeling that they cannot perform their job well.

Next, I will outline how the organizational frame formulates the ideal worker and the proper emotional style for social workers.

### AN EFFECTIVE, FLEXIBLE, AND RESILIENT WORKER

Several research participants indicated that “the organization” encouraged staff to embrace an organizational identity characterized by efficiency, flexibility, and resilience. This meant being able to deal with stress and clearly distinguish between the work role and the private self. These ideal traits aligned well with those formulated in the job ads, as outlined in Chapter 5. For example, Jenna (FRT M2) stated that:

Jenna: Many of the people that are glorified by the managers are the ones who are kind of, ‘that is the way it is’ [speaking in a firm tone], they are within their box, and it is like they are thinking their way is the right way, like a [pause]

Fanny: Lack of humility?

Jenna: Yes, or... not as a *person*, but more like they are entering a *role*, the social worker role, who has made up their mind, like, ‘they [clients] are like that,’ but you cannot know that, right? Maybe it’s because people are stressed, but it’s like they are applauded from above, if you are the fastest writer, boom boom. I think that people with personality traits like being a thinker, pondering, feeling a lot, it doesn’t have to be a negative thing, you just need help balancing it. But the tempo is so high, and I’m a person that is twisting and turning things *a lot*. I think it’s important that we are given the time to think about things, put things into words, and maybe that isn’t encouraged, uhm, while at the same time, that *is* our job, listening and talking about feelings and supporting others.

Jenna offers her understanding of what managers are asking for in terms of valued personality traits among the social workers. She concludes that she does not fit that model, which promotes efficiency (being “the fastest writer, boom boom”), over those (herself included) who *ponder* and *feel a lot*, as there is simply *no time* for it. Simultaneously, she recognizes their ambivalent position: listening and talking about feelings *is* their job. While they are expected to be committed to client relationships,

they must also make quick decisions based on rapid judgments of clients and established work routines (*they are like that, that is the way it is*). As I interpret it, Jenna suggests that social workers are implicitly encouraged to maintain emotional distance from their clients. When management “applaud” this approach, it can be seen as a technique to govern behavior by instilling pride in workers who adopt it (Gibson, 2019). The high workload could therefore serve to prevent workers from becoming too attached to clients, and promoting an efficient and resilient handling of things.

Furthermore, participants frequently described how they were encouraged to suppress their own emotions. For instance, Sara claimed that management had “normalized” a culture where difficult emotions should not be taken “personally,” and emotional strains should be silenced and dealt with:

I mean, we can talk about things that affects us in meetings, but not how it affects us as *persons*, at least not in proportion to the emotionally straining meetings we have, how much *shit* we have to take. In relation to that we talk *very* little about it. I think it's normalized, like ‘this is the job’. There is a culture that you are supposed to just deal with it, not take things personally. [Interview Emma & Sara, CYU M1]

Sara asserts that the attention given to social workers’ emotions does not stand in proportion to the emotional strains of their work. She refers to this emotional neglect as a “culture.” As such, withholding emotions can be understood as an organizational feeling rule (Hochschild, 1983; Kunda, 1995). The expectation for social workers to be affirmative, assertive, efficient, and to “just deal with it” aligns with what O’Connor (2020) refers to as a “macho” culture, driven by a culture of austerity, accountability, and performance measurements. Similarly, the hardworking, non-complaining worker finds its counterpart in Berman Blix and Wettergren’s (2018) research on court professionals, which they term “Teflon culture.” This culture emphasizes the ability to quickly “let go” of cases. They argue that emotion management techniques are invoked to self-discipline workers, allowing difficult emotions to bounce off their professional (Teflon) shield (p. 73).

Another example of managerial imperatives on emotional resilience was given by Lisa (FRT M2), who had been working in a unit and was swiftly assigned an overwhelming caseload of unaccompanied minors following the refugee crisis in 2015, after which she suffered from, as she herself called it, burnout:

Lisa: It came after a year or so, the stress symptoms. It was the weight of the responsibility. I communicated to the managers that I was overwhelmed, then I signaled some more, and some more, and I got no response. Then I had to go on sick leave

because I got all these symptoms, nose bleeds and, sorry for saying it, I threw up at work, I had migraines every week, but that didn't render any responses either. And then I popped a bunch of pills to be able to work, because I knew that if I stayed at home no one would cover for me, and then it just snowballed, and I didn't want to put that on my colleagues either. Anyways, then I had a meeting with my manager and said, 'You know what, I've made a schedule, I'm on partial sick leave.' And at that time, I was in the first response team, and we were only two people, and the other one was on sick leave as well. So, I made a schedule, like who is going to cover for us, and I had planned for how this unit is going to *work*. So I asked the manager, 'Have you read the email I sent?' And she was like, 'No, I haven't. It was so anxiety-ridden' [*we both laugh*], and I'm like, 'What did you say?' And she answered, 'Well, not everyone is built for being social workers,' and then she mentioned a colleague that *was* built for it, but not everyone is, she said.

This is a rather unambiguous example of how “the organization” can establish and impose feeling and display rules. We see how the manager's initial non-responsiveness implicitly, through a refusal to recognize Lisa's emotions, and her subsequent response explicitly – by ridiculing Lisa's “anxiety-ridden” email – communicate organizational feeling rules. In this case, the manager bluntly suggested that Lisa had the wrong personality, implying that she was not “built for” it. The manager criticized Lisa's “anxiety-ridden” email as a breach of the organizational culture and compared her to a colleague that *was*, as opposed to Lisa, “built for” it.

When I asked Lisa to describe this colleague, and while perhaps exaggerated for dramatic purposes, she characterized her as “tough, she *never* complains about caseloads.” This illustrates how the organizational frame and its feeling rules orient social worker performances: being a professional social worker means managing emotions properly. Lisa's emotions were seemingly silenced through shaming, as we see in the deriding comment, “It was so anxiety-ridden.” Such shaming practices are not just by-products of practice but *central* to it, serving as a method to ensure compliance with organizational expectations (Gibson, 2019). The threat of shame and the potential for praise influence practitioners to conform to organizational ideals – to be resilient and effective – thereby regulating their identities (cf. Rajan-Rankin, 2014). Such organizational ideals were not only embodied by managers. Some participants I interviewed referred to others as “whiney” and expressed confusion over why everyone complained about the job being difficult. These

participants seemed to have adopted a different emotional style, more in line with the Weberian ideal-type bureaucrat.<sup>83</sup>

In addition to managing own emotions properly (by suppressing “negative” emotions), Krista – a self-proclaimed troublemaker – described how management actively discouraged her from voicing criticism during staff meetings. As a result, she had developed an explicit emotion management technique:

Krista: I used to be the union representative, so I guess I still have it in me, so I often say what I think, but I get a lot of shit for it. The managers have said that [I] create a bad atmosphere, but what I think they are actually saying is that I question their authority, but they don’t put it like that. But I have developed a strategy, that I write it down first, and then I wait to send it until the next day, to see if I feel the same way. So now I don’t send as many angry emails.

Fanny: Not in the heat of the moment, so to speak?

Krista: No, that’s exactly what they’ve told me, that I do a lot of things in affect, if I get angry on behalf of a client. They say that I must learn to think before I lash out, because that doesn’t help and I’m doing myself a disservice. And it’s also a salary criterion, which it is not supposed to be, but it is, based on the fact that it is considered a social competence (snorts), that you’re—

Fanny : [interrupts] Do you get paid based on social competence?

Krista: Yeah, they don’t say that that is what it is, but yes.

Having realized that her anger – at least her foregrounded and displayed anger – was problematic and led to her receiving “a lot of shit,” Krista developed a technique of postponing and thereby altering emotional expression<sup>84</sup> (cf. Moesby Jensen & Nielsen, 2015). She implemented a cooling down period before voicing her critique. This is interesting because, in this example, the anger is written down and can be edited before displaying it to others. Krista’s statement also reveals how “the organization” had set clear display rules (“they’ve told me... I do things in affect ... that I must learn to think”). Thus, voicing criticism and displaying negative emotions are seen as irrational and harmful to practice. Within the organizational frame, there is limited room for criticism, and feeling rules regarding anger, irritation, or agitation are clearly defined and sanctioned when overstepped.

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<sup>83</sup> I develop these ideas in Chapter 8.

<sup>84</sup> I will explore strategic emotion management techniques in depth in Chapter 9.

Further, the notion of concrete – monetary – rewards, or withholding of such rewards, for “social competence” grabbed my attention. Manager Kylie later confirmed in an interview that “social competence” is indeed a criterion for salary determination. While the practice of individual salary is tied to new public management logics that promote market rationalities of performance and competition (Karlsson, 2017; Lauri, 2019), it can also be seen as an expression of the organization’s instrumental interest in and shaping of workers’ emotions. Alvesson and Willmott (2002) argue that management actively influences workers’ identity construction through a process of identity regulation. Offering rewards for adapting to the appropriate organizational emotional style serves to encourage workers to adapt to the ideal organizational actor. The concern of social competence (or social skills) can be understood as a commodification of emotional properties such as self-control and self-reflection (Prieur et al., 2016). Similarly, Illouz’s (2007) concept *emodities* refers to the way emotions have become intertwined with market dynamics, the “fusion of the market repertoires and languages of the self” (p. 107). Thereby, Illouz argues, “emotions have become entities to be evaluated, inspected, discussed, bargained, quantified and commodified” (p. 109).

Further, these examples provide illustrations of the clashing expectations between organizational and professional expectations, in this case regarding emotional expression. Professional ethics compel workers to be critical and resist institutional action that they do not agree with, sometimes referred to as anti-institutional practices (cf. Levin, 2017, p. 70): for instance, in a course book on ethics which states that the ethical responsibility of social workers includes “challenging both the professional’s own role, the professional’s organization and the political mission” (Christoffersen, 2017, p. 57). Krista says that she sometimes lashes out because “I get angry on behalf of a client,” indicating that she is guided by the ethical principle of solidarity with clients. Lisa’s struggle to resist her health problems for fearing that her clients would be left without help in her absence may be traced to ethical ideals of commitment and care.

As we have seen in this section, the organizational frame promotes workers with cognitive, emotional, and/or moral commitments to the bureaucratic principles of the organization. Deviations from these ideals are met with sanctions, while adaptations to it are rewarded. Nonetheless, the lingering ideals formulated by the profession often clashed with organizationally scripted ideals of how to manage and

express emotions, as illustrated by the interviews with Lisa and Krista. Resistance to the dominant ideology, in the form of violations of the organizational framework's feeling and framing rules, can have negative consequences for the practitioner's position in the workplace.

## THE PROFESSIONAL FRAME

While the organizational frame encourages rational-bureaucratic traits and worker's efficiency and resilience, the professional frame emphasized solidarity, empathy, and client-centered care, guided by moral imperatives and emotional commitment to the job and clients. The financial aid units of the social services are frequently described as "the ultimate safety net"<sup>85</sup> of the welfare state. Many research participants in this study, none of whom work in financial aid, had seemingly taken this metaphor to heart, using it to describe their role in society. As Alicia half-jokingly exclaimed: "The social services remain standing when everyone else falls" [Interview, FLU M2]. Others described themselves as "the last hope" for their clients, expected to "keep hope alive" when everyone, including the clients themselves, had given up.

## CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS AND UNBOUNDED RESPONSIBILITY

The professional frame recognizes the relationship between social worker and client as the core of social work. Building a trusting relationship characterized by emotional presence, commitment, empathy, advocacy, and the recognition of the client's suffering, is seen as a prerequisite for doing the job (Bruhn & Källström, 2018; Sjögren, 2018). Indeed, the participants spent a lot of time and energy reflecting upon and managing client relationships, and accomplishing a trusting relationship was a source of professional pride.

An initial challenge in meeting new clients was overcoming the often-unfavorable reputation of the social services, partly due to hostile media coverage (cf. Warner, 2015; Coccozza & Hort, 2010). Consequently, social workers often had to, as Carol [Interview CYU M1] put it, "start at the negative,"<sup>86</sup> struggling to

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<sup>85</sup> Swedish: *Det yttersta skydds nätet.*

<sup>86</sup> Swedish: *Börja på minus.*

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

overcome the initial antipathy and distrust of clients: “The first meeting is often about making clear to people that we are not going to take their children away from them,” Carol continued. Sara and Emma expressed an even bleaker prospect of building functioning client relationships:

Emma: Most clients don’t want to come here, they are coming here because we force them to, so to speak, and if you are able to establish a good relationship on those terms, it is a miracle.

Sara: Yeah, and I guess very few people think that we can actually help them.

Emma: Right, it’s a real uphill battle. [Interview, Sara & Emma, CYU M1]

Nonetheless, some client relationships were described as working well, accomplished in no small part by skillfully crafted emotion management techniques.<sup>87</sup> Once a trusting relationship had been established, several participants spoke of the substantial sense of responsibility that came with their mission. For instance, Alicia reflected on the “existential” responsibility inherent in child protection:

It’s so *big*, the fact that a public authority decides that a child cannot live with their biological family. It has to be good for the child, but it isn’t always. Last year, a girl had to move to a foster home, and *those people* they [interrupts herself] she must move again, and *we* expose her to that. No matter how thoroughly we investigate foster homes according to all the rules, we can’t be completely certain. A big part of me thinks that it just can’t be like this. Should I stop working with this? But I’m not sure that anyone else could have foreseen it either. We live in a culture with the laws we have... I don’t know how to put it; it’s supposed to be civilized. Children shouldn’t have to suffer, then society should do something. These are such big, important questions, almost *existential*. So yes, I can get overwhelmed by it, actually. But I can’t think like that all the time. We must remember that it’s so defining, for the children... it’s heavy at times, *really* heavy. [Interview, Alicia, FHU M2]

Alicia expresses a range of emotions in relation to both her professional role and the societal role of child protection. Her story begins with a tale of failure: how she had failed to place a child in need in a safe foster home. She recognizes that, despite following all the rules and procedures, certainty can never be guaranteed in social work. This event even led her to question whether she could stay in her profession, but she had ultimately concluded that “anyone else” probably would have made the same decision.

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<sup>87</sup> See Chapter 9.

The feelings described by Alicia reflect a discomfort around her professional power in relation to the inherent uncertainty of social work, the “almost existential” questions in relation to “a culture with the laws we have” (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018, p. 115). A decision that *she* makes, she seems to say, can determine the future of a child. Beyond the subjective emotions of discomfort, however, she is expressing larger questions inherent in the job: “Children shouldn’t have to suffer, then society should do something”, reflecting deeply cultural questions of social work’s liminal position between the private sphere of the family and the public sphere of the welfare state (Parton, 2012, p. 98).

Feeling responsible for clients – and ultimately being accountable for mistakes – was further cultivated and amplified in inter-unit meetings,<sup>88</sup> arguably stemming from their social worker’s role as “coordinators” within the welfare state nexus. During a process supervision session with the adult unit, Mary described such a meeting about one of her clients, and how eight people had “all sat there in silence, staring at me, waiting for me to come up with a solution.” In the same session, Krista spoke of client Bonnie, a young woman struggling with substance abuse problems and suicidal ideations. At the time, Bonnie was in contact with four other agencies.

Krista: I try to keep a certain distance, because I immediately felt that I got very close and I like her very much, but it feels like she thinks that I am her last hope, and I feel a bit powerless in it. I get a bit scared simply so I would like to talk about it, the powerlessness and fear. She has a lot of other contacts, in outpatient care, addiction, co-morbidity, financial assistance... then they contact me and ask, ‘What do you think we should do?’

Joanne: That’s a whole army of people

Krista: Yes exactly, it’s ten or 11 people, and I am responsible, I am the social services, I become the whole responsibility in it, even though I outsource it, my feeling is that if we fail within the social services *again*, we have already failed in that she was sexually abused during a placement when she was a child... The social services have been fucking up awfully actually; her fear is that the same thing will happen to her children. She tells me all this; of course it affects me.

Supervisor: Who are you to her?

Krista: I am important. She tells me that ‘I do everything you tell me to do because I trust you one hundred percent, and if you tell me to go and do something, I do it,’ and I

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<sup>88</sup> These meetings had different names depending on who they were co-operating with. I am referring to all meetings in which the participating social workers cooperated with other units within the office, as well as with other agencies and institutions, such as schools and health care.

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just... [*Krista makes a gut-wrenching sound and feigns choking herself, then says*]: If I say the wrong thing, then I'm screwed, and I can't say that I have the answer to everything.

*Elisabeth cuts in*: I keep wondering, what does it stand for, 'I trust you one hundred percent.' I've met such people who confirm you, 'oh I like you, you are very important to me.' But it's them not wanting me to leave them, it means 'don't leave me!' They want something, it's not that they trust me, it doesn't stand for that, it stands for something else.

*The group jokes about some clients wanting to climb back into the womb, them being the womb.*

Leah: She says that she trusts you one hundred percent, and at the same time, Krista is being questioned by the children and youth unit. She must make a decision. And while she is fully occupied with the client she has to respond to other professionals. That conflict is difficult

[Field notes, process supervision AU M2]

This exchange demonstrates how the participants strive to make sense of their tasks and responsibilities toward their clients, which may explain why they requested clearer job descriptions.<sup>89</sup> I observed many similar exchanges where participants described encounters with other professionals that expected them to, as Mary put it "perform miracles," to "wave the magic wand and solve the entire housing market." This captures the frustrating gap between expectations and demands from the outside – a belief that social workers could achieve ideal outcomes if only they made the right decisions and acted correctly – and the reality of their job. Participants often spoke of how a chronic lack of resources often forced them to make decisions that conflicted with the needs and/or wishes of clients. However, in the above excerpt we learn that there are, in fact, "ten or eleven" qualified professionals involved in the case, which in contrast, indicates that lacking resources is not always the issue.

Beyond that, however, the excerpt captures a deeper struggle. Not only are they trying to figure out what to *do*, but who they should *be* in relation to their clients. The process supervision session can be understood as a collective ritual of introspectiveness, aimed at understanding the expectations of their role. Together, they interpret who they are for their clients in light of other professionals' actions: sitting in silence, waiting for them to provide a solution. They see themselves through the eyes of the others as having the ultimate responsibility. In Krista's own words, among the many professionals surrounding Bonnie, she "become[s] the

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<sup>89</sup> See Chapter 6.

whole responsibility.” The womb metaphor, although framed as a joke, encapsulates what the participants are trying to convey about their relationship with (some) clients and the sense of responsibility and care that they are expected to provide. The metaphor evokes the invasiveness of the needs and expectations, the feeling that some clients were, as many analogously phrased it “stuck inside my body.” Frequently, they spoke of their role in relation to their client as that of a “mother,” expected to care for and meet all their existential needs and, essentially, keep them alive. I would suggest that such metaphors, even though they farcically invoked the unreasonableness, speak to how deeply affected they are by their job.

Furthermore, Krista expresses feeling guilty *on behalf of* the entire institution, which in turn produces fear that they (or she) will fail Bonnie again. Krista not only wants to do what is best for Bonnie but also feels compelled to repair the damage done to Bonnie by social services decades ago. She speaks not of past mistakes as something that someone once made, but in terms of “we”: “if *we* fail within the social services again.” This suggests a strong professional identification or *role embracement*, which aligns with the professional ideals that I outlined in Chapter 5 (i.e., the internalization of social work values with one’s personality). As a social worker, Krista feels responsible not only for her relationship with Bonnie and her decisions, but also for the social services *as a whole*. This notion is reaffirmed by Krista’s own phrasing: “*I am* the social services.” What Krista seems to convey is that she not only *does* social work but *is* a social worker, and as such, presenting herself as an embodiment of the entire institution. The session continued:

Supervisor: But why do you want to keep fighting for Bonnie?

Krista: If she kills herself, it’s really mean to her four children.

Supervisor: And then you would have to be mad at her?

Krista: It’s hard to be mad at people who are dead. I think that has grabbed hold on me; I have to keep her above water so that she doesn’t kill herself, because *I am* the social services.

Mona: Bonnie really puts a huge responsibility onto Krista, and Krista puts a huge responsibility onto herself. She’s supposed to make sure that Bonnie doesn’t kill herself? I mean, it’s unreasonable to sit with the feeling that it’s *my fault* as the social services if Bonnie dies. Krista is not a friend that Bonnie can throw her anxiety at and get support and hugs from, and she is not a psychologist who will treat Bonnie’s anxiety. That is often the problem with us social workers, we take on so much responsibility and do so much beyond the core mission. Because if we look at it really

squarely: we are supposed to assess addiction, grant interventions, work motivationally, and yada yada.

Mona's final reflection highlights the sense of boundlessness of their job, and consequently, their feelings of responsibility and the fear associated with it. They recognize that they are taking on more than what is within the scope of their mission yet cannot detach themselves from the fear that something might happen (that Bonnie kills herself) and the anticipated guilt of such an event. Guilt, shame, and sympathy – all of which are expressed in the excerpts above, are examples of “moral emotions” (Turner & Stets, 2006), showing how people commit themselves to moral codes. Morality is *felt*, as a “gnawing sense of unfulfilledness” (Bauman, 1993, p. 80). Therefore, I argue that Krista's drive and the reluctance to relinquish the unbounded sense of responsibility, even though it goes beyond the scope of her duties, can be traced to the professional frame: Krista's emotions are attached to a moral structure that extends beyond her individual role.

The lack of clear role boundaries also seemed to make the participants view themselves and their client as a *unit*, struggling together to navigate within the web of welfare institutions. For example, Elisabeth used a “mountain” metaphor to describe her and her client Anna's (who was suffering from a heroin addiction) struggle to improve Anna's situation:

Elisabeth: I feel helpless, really helpless, and I guess she does too. I guess I feel her feelings; Anna and I are just as helpless against this huge *mountain*. She is technically in contact with so many professionals, but she's not, because the children and youth unit gave up on her very early on, and I understood that she first has to deal with her addiction if she is to see her children, even to get supervised access to them, and that felt very far away from happening, so they [CYU] are not really dealing with Anna. I guess they tried, but she is terrified of them; she is afraid of everyone but me.

Elisabeth's statement that she “feel[s] her feelings” might explain why she perceives a shared struggle with Anna against the welfare complex. Anna had grown so close to Elisabeth that she began to *experience* Anna's feelings of helplessness, attempting to relieve herself from these feelings by sharing them with her colleagues.

While the research participants in these excerpts are aware that the expectations on them – self-imposed as well as imposed by others – are unreasonable, they struggle to reconcile their feelings with this awareness. I argue that they evaluate their performances against the rules of the professional emotive-cognitive frame. The emotive-cognitive frame contains both self-disciplinary and performative

functions, as employees evaluate and regulate their own actions and emotions according to its rules. This section, I argue, illustrates how the professional framework and its idealistic principles, such as solidarity, personal responsibility, commitment, and authenticity, are the standards against which social workers measure their performance. As discussed in Chapter 5, the professional framework compels social worker to align personal values with the values of the profession, which are internalized during education (through deep acting techniques and interaction rituals that create sacred objects). The frame is felt, and when its values are difficult to implement in practice, feelings of shame, self-doubt, inadequacy, and powerlessness emerge.

So far, we have seen that the organizational frame and the professional frame have different prescriptions for how to approach work. These include a degree of closeness to and responsibility for clients, how to prioritize in terms of efficiency or engagement, and how to deal with the strains of the job. In addition to the frames, however, other (real or imagined) groups – or audiences – also hold ideas and expectations – in terms of interests, preferences, rules, moral standards – about what social work is and what should be done. These audiences influence – through shame and pride – social workers’ behavior, either through direct sanctions (when “real”), or indirectly through internalized expectations (when “imagined”).

## MINDING AUDIENCES

### *THE LOOMING FEAR OF AUDIT*

In addition to the discomfort related to the sense of responsibility for clients, research participants expressed a looming fear of having their decisions audited by the administrative courts, or in a worst case, by the Health and Social Care Inspectorate.<sup>90</sup> Frequent references were made to meticulous documentation as a way of “safeguarding,”<sup>91</sup> should a case investigation become subject to an audit, and the worst-case scenario: hostile media scrutiny. For instance, during a case review

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<sup>90</sup> Swedish: *Inspektionen för vård och omsorg (IVO)*.

<sup>91</sup> Swedish: *Hålla ryggen fri*.

meeting<sup>92</sup> in the children and youth unit, manager Hannah exclaimed: “It doesn’t matter who has the delegation, because *I am* responsible for this operation, and *I am* the one that they are going to hang by the neck. No one looks at the delegation order.”

The prospect of “losing face,” and thus one’s professionalism, proved to be a recurrent source of fear, worry, and insecurity among the participants. They were particularly concerned about the prospect of having their professional competency and knowledge questioned by professionals in other fields, particularly those perceived as having higher status, eliciting anticipatory feelings of shame (Kemper, 2011). Especially strenuous was the fear of facing critique from legal professionals. For instance, social worker Tami said that:

The worst thing is when one of your cases is tried in the administrative court. If I have written an investigation report, and I’ve gotten something wrong, and then you have to sit there and defend it in front of the municipal committee or the parents, or in the worst case, *the court*. I think it is, my own performance... my own anxiety, but it’s also... *everything* I do can be audited and scrutinized, a parent can report me to the Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO). So that hangs over me all the time. So, it’s important that every decision I make, every step and every choice I make, I have to document it and be prepared to defend it. Normally I don’t have to defend it, but it can happen, and it can happen whenever, wherever, and with whomever; you don’t know when it’s going to happen and that’s my greatest fear. [Interview, FHU M1]

Tami’s fear of having a case tried in the administrative court had never actually happened; it was a hypothetical yet possible scenario. This fear stems from the inevitable uncertainty and risk inherent in social work decision-making. The unpredictability of working with human beings and the challenge of managing *future potential events* evoked feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. In the excerpt, Tami expressed how the fear of audit is always present, yet its likelihood is unpredictable (“it can happen whenever, wherever, and with whomever; you don’t know when it’s going to happen”). This uncertainty makes the fear harder to manage, as its source (when, where, who) is unknown. Therefore, its outcome is also impossible to predict (how it will affect Tami and hypothetical others). Consequently, this type of fear can be described as *liquid* – uncontrollable and unpredictable (Bauman, 2006). I asked Tami what she think would happen if an audit would actually become a reality:

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<sup>92</sup> Swedish: *Metodmöte*.

Fanny: And what would happen if they would conclude that you did something wrong? I mean, you can't predict every possible outcome.

Tami: No, you can't, so it's... I feel paralyzed when thinking about it; there is nothing I could do if they audited one of my case decisions. But then I hope I will never experience it (an audit)... and I mean if it reaches the media... they never mention any names, but people will know who it is, people will understand. Yuck... of course it looms over me, that it would end up in the papers.

According to Helm (2009) the function of fear is to *motivate action* by alerting us and creating a desire to prevent future anticipated events. However, in Tami's statement we can see that fear arising from a hypothetical scenario, there is no *target* towards which fear can push action. An audit could happen at any time, leaving Tami feeling "paralyzed."

Warner (2015) argues that case reviews are "emotionally active in terms of the way they reflect and generate emotional responses" (p. 113), reflecting and generating feeling rules which "implant feeling and framing rules into the rationalities of practice." In Tami's reflection, we can see that even the *prospect* of a case review elicits anticipated shame. Arguably, the heightened self-awareness and fear about being shamed served to embed the expectation for compliance with organizational rules and procedures,<sup>93</sup> ("every decision, every step, every choice must be documented"). Thus, prospective emotions of fear and shame are not only a product of practice, but *central* to how people act in practice (Gibson, 2019).

While the governing organs are a "real" audience that seldom actually intervene in practice, their *imagined* governance was very present.

### PROFESSIONAL STATUS HIERARCHY AND SELF-DOUBT

The legitimacy of social workers' knowledge, skills, and methods is often questioned. Criticism often focuses on the vaguely defined knowledge base of the social work profession. For instance, harsh media critique broke out in media following the case of "lilla hjärtat"<sup>94</sup> ("sweetheart"), a three-year-old girl killed by her parents after the administrative court of appeals had ruled to return her to her biological parents from her foster home. The social workers were heavily criticized, and the debate revolved

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<sup>93</sup> In Chapter 9, I examine organizational strategies to – as I will argue – shape workers' emotions into tools for risk assessment and decision-making.

<sup>94</sup> This case was widely debated from 2020 onwards, and faced significant public and legal scrutiny, leading to subsequent legal reforms known as "*Lex Lilla hjärtat*".

around social workers' training, skills, and method. Particularly severe criticism came via the editorial pages of one of Sweden's largest newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter*, with the message being that social workers lack appropriate judicial knowledge: "Social workers' assessments are a danger for the rule of law," and that they deliberately and habitually "manipulate and mislead courts to make them follow their opinions" (Björklund, 2020-05-14). Furthermore, they were accused of lacking objectivity, and applying unscientific (irrational) reasoning: "Decisions are made based on personal opinion, faulty logic, claims about what children and others have said that cannot be verified, and so on. It is a question of major deficiencies in legal certainty"; "When I have questioned a social worker and asked how they arrived at a certain conclusion, I have never yet seen a logical explanation and support from research. The answer is, more often than not, 'I think that ...'" (Lagercrantz, 2020-04-21; 2020-05-27).

Although I described the interview extract with Tami above as based on a "feeling" of inferior status compared to the imaginary legal actors, it reflects real status structures. Andrew Abbott (1988) has argued that there are continual struggles between professional groups in the form of "jurisdictional claims" within what he calls a "system of professions." While a well-defined and specialized knowledge base is key for gaining professional jurisdiction, it has been argued, in Sweden as well as internationally, that social work struggles to clearly define and establish a distinct body of knowledge unique to the field (Taylor & White, 2006), and it is debated whether social work can demonstrate the distinct knowledge and technical capacities to qualify as a proper profession (cf. Healy, 2009; Higgins, 2015; Donovan et al., 2017). Consequently, Swedish social workers (as well as in other countries) have faced criticism for lacking objectivity, scientifically proven systematic approaches, and for making arbitrary decisions based on insufficient analytical reasoning (Anderberg & Dahlberg, 2009; Munro, 1999). Previous research has shown that this uncertainty trickles down to the practitioners. Social workers tend to underestimate themselves in terms of their own knowledge and competence (Enell & Denvall, 2013; Levin, 2017). This is evident in an increased use of external assessment and investigation units, external experts, and hired investigators that reflect organizational shortcomings and uncertainty in the evaluation of one's own theoretical knowledge.

Professional status is linked to emotions, as status relations embed and produce emotions in interactions (Clark, 1990; Kemper, 2011). The professional power that

social workers have can be understood through Kemper’s power and status theory, which posits that groups with higher societal power hold influence or control the actions of groups with less power. When individuals feel that their power is insufficient, they experience feelings of fear and anxiety. Shame arises when individuals feel that their status is diminished or threatened. As such, Tami’s discomfort – manifested as (real or anticipated) fear – can therefore be understood in relation to their perceived “place” in the system of professions (Abbott, 1988; Clark, 1990).

### *MEDIA CRITICISM AND PUBLIC OPINION*

The Swedish social services have a long history of facing media criticism. For instance, in 1982 the German newspaper *Der Spiegel* portrayed Sweden as a “Kinder Gulag” due to the “world record” of percentage of children taken into custody<sup>95</sup> (Cocozza & Hort, 2011, p. 91). Nowadays, similar ideas circulate in social media, and are evident, for example, in a recent widespread and highly publicized “disinformation campaign<sup>96</sup>” claiming that Swedish social services systematically kidnap Muslim children (Swedish Government, 2022). Several participants indicated that negative media portrayals also had consequences for practice. It affected their ability to build trusting relationships with clients. For instance, Indra spoke of the initial reluctance among clients to cooperate due to the widespread public opinion:<sup>97</sup>

Fanny: What would you say are the biggest challenges in your job?

Indra: To build trust, I think. I mean it’s like when I tell people, outside of work, that I work for the social services, they are like ‘whoa’ [puts up her hands in a defensive gesture]; people take a step back. And many of the families that we meet, sometimes the first meeting is all about reassuring them that we aren’t going to take your child away from you. You have to build an alliance with them because they have such a negative attitude because the media creates this awful image. [Interview, CYU M2]

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<sup>95</sup> While the accuracy of this claim might be debatable, its significance lies in the impact it creates.

<sup>96</sup> Observe that some studies have shown that Muslim children are indeed overrepresented in cases involving the Care of Young Persons Act (Persdotter & Andersson, 2020).

<sup>97</sup> A recent report by the Swedish Agency for Health and Care Services Analysis (2024:2) establishes that public trust in social services is relatively low compared to other institutions. While the population in Sweden generally has a high level of trust in public authorities, only 31% report having a high level of trust in social services (p. 30). The report concludes that this is, in part, a consequence of the low level of knowledge among the population about how social services function.

Furthermore, the public opinion of social workers impacted the ability to cooperate with other professional groups. For example, I observed a meeting between the first response team and a group of about 20 children's health care nurses. The purpose of the meeting was to improve (and I would say recover) the relationship between the two occupations. This was the second out of three meetings, and Lisa told me that the first had been "very hostile." I indeed experienced the atmosphere as unfriendly. One of the more skeptical pediatric nurses expressed the main dispute: a "lack of trust" they had for social workers:

Nurse: This is not a question, but a reflection. I have reported concern<sup>98</sup> many times and I have *never* received any questions. At best, I have received an email where you report on whether you have opened up an investigation or not. It would be a *huge* improvement in trust, our trust in you, if you would call back and ask, 'Do you have anything to add?' Even if we do everything to write as clearly as we can, the details that are lacking; it's quite difficult to portray how it is within that little box... just a short phone call... because we feel like we are throwing facts into a black hole in space. [Field notes]

I later followed up on my observation in a focus group interview with the first response team. The consensus was that other professions, such as health care workers and teachers, generally expressed such distrust toward them as social workers. The "black hole" metaphor, they told me, was recurring (cf. Rothstein, 2015). They recounted an "information meeting" they had with school personnel:

Lisa: It was kind of funny, we were talking about how we handle reports of concern, and then there's a group in the back, you know, the tough group in the back of the class, with kind of mocking facial expressions. And I joked and said, 'We just run them [the reports] through the paper shredder, we just grind it, and they did not get that it was a joke, they were like 'I knew it!' Right, we don't read it, that's what she thinks.

Fanny: What do you think it's about then, it's obviously not your working group or this office, why does the social services have so little confidence, or the other way around?

Lisa: Yes, but the 'sweetheart' case too, this little comment they left out, just two words on the news report, that little detail that it was the administrative court or the court of appeal that made the decision to let the child go home, but they don't say that.

Angela: But that doesn't even matter, I think, because then they say that we didn't do a thorough investigation, that we weren't clear enough about how serious it is. You can always throw it back at us in some way.

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<sup>98</sup> Swedish: *Orosanmälan*.

The purpose of this section was not to assess whether the beliefs about social workers' knowledge or skills are justified. Rather I wanted to demonstrate that participants' experience that their public image – as a collective – directly impacts practice, weakening the possibility to build trusting relationships with clients, as well as cooperation with other professionals.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This chapter has argued that the daily practice in social services is framed by dual emotive-cognitive frames. These frames serve as a yardstick against which social workers professional actions and behaviors are evaluated as good or bad – both by real others and indirectly against imagined others through internalized beliefs and expectations. Sanctions for breaking the frames' rules are explicit, as illustrated by “social competence” as a salary criterion. However, sanctions and rewards are usually implicit. Social workers are “rewarded” with feelings of pride when they evaluate their performance as good in relation to the frame, whether this evaluation is self-directed or from external sources. Conversely, they experience shame and guilt when they perceive their performance as bad or inadequate. In other words, frames are *felt*. As workers evaluate and regulate their own actions and emotions according to their rules, frames have both self-disciplinary and performative functions; they directly influence actions and behavior.

However, as we have seen in this chapter, the two frames contain different sets of expectations, and what constitutes “good practice” is. This causes ambivalence and uncertainty about how to act, think, and feel in relation to:

- how to manage and express emotions
- degree of emotional closeness or distance from clients (degree of commitment and emotional involvement)
- how to understand one's role responsibilities in relation to clients, other professions, and larger society (e.g., care/control; moral categorizations such as deserving/undeserving)
- the larger mission of social services in society in terms of values (solidarity, equality, humanitarianism, or an efficient, pragmatic, and rational public authority to maintain order in society).

The activities in social services can be understood as *practical manifestations* of larger ideologies embedded in an overarching emotional regime (Reddy, 2001). The frameworks are found and shaped where ideology meets the employee's social practice, and thus their positions shift when the organization's ideology changes (cf. Hochschild, 1979). As such, the paradoxical normative expectations on social workers may be understood in a broader context. The objectives, values, and norms of the professional frame are attached to larger values and historical "utopian" ideals of the welfare state (Börjeson, 2015). Within this frame, the client relationship is seen as the core activity, and encourages commitment, empathy, individual responses to unique life circumstances, and the building and maintaining of trusting and loyal client relationships, as well as a dedication to larger values (humanitarianism, social justice, solidarity, etc.). In contrast, the organizational emotive-cognitive frame reflects how the values of the dominant neoliberal ideology is organized according to bureaucratic logic, encouraging rule following, objectivity, instrumental rationality, and (cost) efficiency. Within this frame, the organizational actor should be effective, flexible, resilient, and loyal to the organization. In addition, social workers should maintain emotional distance from their clients, and not be swayed by emotionalized arguments.

In other words, the frames encompass contradictory framing and feeling rules: distance or closeness, individual circumstances or standardization, rationality or emotional commitment. The role and place of emotions in professional practice is therefore constructed quite differently between the two frames in terms of how to interpret, use, display, and manage emotions. Both frames are present in practice as assumptions, values, and norms through which the participants understand and organize their interactions. When one frame is dominant and all actors in an interaction interpret the meaning and expectations in the same way, the interaction runs smoothly, and emotions are calm and backgrounded.

However, in situations where participants refer to and follow the rules of conflicting frames when making sense of the same event, it creates tensions and conflicts, compelling negotiations about how to think, feel, and act. Which frame is currently dominating becomes clear through feelings of reproach, when somebody (probably someone with higher status) signals that rules are broken. This seems to cause a great deal of frustration, which they collectively try to manage in order to keep working. As we have seen, this management is largely achieved through a

collective construction of their job as “absurd,” satirical contrasts between ideals and reality, or by outward protests and resistance. Sometimes, the conflicting role expectations could be managed through these collective constructions. At other times, their incompatibilities were too major, as evident in emotions arising from not being able to do the job in the way they wanted: self-doubt, ambivalence, anxiety, guilt, and shame. A possible conclusion is that it is the co-presence and amalgamation of the often irreconcilable frames *as such* that cause these emotions of inadequacy and failure.

This chapter has examined and illuminated the complex emotional terrain in which social work is located, governed by competing emotive-cognitive frames within a field of real and imagined audiences, creating contradictory role expectations. In the next two chapters, I will examine how social workers *navigate* this difficult terrain – individually as well as collectively. I will be guided by two central questions: how am I supposed to be? and what am I supposed to feel?



## CHAPTER 7: NAVIGATING A COMPLEX EMOTIONAL REGIME

In this chapter, I examine how social workers navigate and seek to make sense of contradictory role expectations. Based on the suggestion that practice is governed by dual emotive-cognitive frames, I propose that the emotional regime of the social services is ‘loose’ as it encompasses competing values, and therefore various possibilities for managing and performing the professional role in relation to emotions (Reddy, 2001, p. 126).

First, I will analyze how the participants try to make sense of themselves in relation to the perceived role expectations. I will illuminate how these emotional accounts are perforated with contradictions and uncertainties due to the inherent contradictions that were made visible in the previous chapters. Second, I will propose that the emotive-cognitive frames offer a *spectrum of possible role positionings*, ranging from the ideal types ‘the bureaucrat’ to ‘the idealist’<sup>99</sup>. I argue that participants position themselves and move between positions on this spectrum and account these positionings in reference to different justification principles.

While some find comfort in the stricter and more coherent rules and principles of the organizational frame, others seek to move beyond these restricted domains, guided by the values professional frame. The social workers are, seen from this departure, engaged in an ongoing sense-making and accounting for their preferred professional identity across different situations.

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<sup>99</sup> For similar terminology, see Fagerberg (2024).

## DISTINGUISHING EMOTIONAL (B)ORDERS

I transitioned from being a social worker to being *human* [Maria, CYU, M2]

While the quote above points to an awareness of the distinction between the professional and the private spheres, this was in reference to a very specific situation where Maria had started to cry when telling a young girl that she had to, against her will, move from her placement to another. In this situation, becoming “human,” and “losing her mask,” as she put it, had served to display genuine *care*:

I just cried during the conversations with her, because I felt so terrible for having to move her again, but I think that made her realize that I actually cared about her.

Unlike other bureaucratic professions, the respondents in this study often admitted to – and even took pride in – personal engagement and caring for their clients. Nonetheless, distinguishing the borders between “being human” and “being a social worker” and the expectations of these two poles were usually harder to pinpoint. In other words, the rules of engagement are vague.

In this section, I will show how the participants understand, and account for, the role of emotions in their job in relation to feeling rules. In doing so, they implicitly express emotional ideals on which their preferred professional identity rest (cf. Törnqvist, 2017). As we have already seen, rules and norms regarding how to feel and display emotions is dependent on situational and interactional expectations, moving within and between contradictory emotive-cognitive frames. So, to keep in line the emotional order calls for ongoing emotion management. I will suggest that such management is dependent on two parallel capacities, namely, to adequately *frame* the interaction in process, and by means of *emotional reflexivity* (Holmes, 2010).

One of my opening questions in interviews was “What are the traits of a good social worker?” Apart from the template-like traits mentioned in Chapter 6, the participants typically spoke from the position of the role and function of emotions and their capacity to reflect on these emotions:

You can’t be too emotionally driven but at the same time you are following your feelings a lot. But you have to be good at self-reflection [*laughs nervously*] [Indra, CYU, M2].

The fact that the participants knew about my research interest undoubtedly inclined participants to elaborate on emotions, something that could exaggerate the emphasis on emotions. Nonetheless, they substantiate the idea that emotions are conceived as

an organizing logic by which the participants understood their professionalism: How should I feel in my professional role, and how should I act or not act based on tacit and explicit professional feeling rules?

How the participants positioned themselves as professionals in interaction with clients was also expressed in terms of how they approached and displayed their emotions:

You have to be able to show emotions, but not get stuck in your own emotions, to be self-aware, and you have to lift yourself back to your profession [Krista, AU, M2].

Contrary to my expectations, several participants admitted to occasionally crying in front of clients, albeit in a controlled way: “you can shed a tear or two when clients tell sad stories” [Lisa, FRT, M2]. Unit manager Ellie [M2] declared: “you have to be able to react emotionally, it would be weird otherwise, how could you relate to us?” Yet, Krista’s reflection above also speaks of a consciousness of feeling rules and the need for emotion management: you should not “get stuck in your own emotions.” Emotions may thus be understood as an object that could and should be molded and controlled objectively by the means of self-awareness, in reference to subjective realms (professional/organizational feeling rules as frames of reference) by intentionally “lift[ing] yourself back to your profession.” The idea of how to be a (professional) social worker thus recognizes the role of emotions, given that these emotions are subordinate to an objective order that should organize the self.

References to self-awareness and self-reflection speak to a process of *emotional navigation*.<sup>100</sup> Holmes (2010) argues that when social circumstances are complex and feeling rules are unclear, emotional reflexivity is necessary. The participants were in effect involved in a process of *themselves* formulating the feeling rules across different situations. When they aptly framed the situation and performed their role according to the expectations of the nearby audience, they were successful in their self-presentation. In other words, when they were successful in projecting a “definition of the situation” that the audience agreed upon, they held a shared *meaning* of the interaction and could make sense of one’s own and others’ performances. However,

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<sup>100</sup> Reddy (2001) proposes the concept of “navigation” as an alternative to Hochschild’s idea of “management” when it comes to handling emotions. According to Reddy, management implies a sense of instrumentalism, where one decides on a goal and manages emotions to achieve it. In contrast, navigation acknowledges that emotions can have self-altering effects, potentially changing one’s goals. For instance, expressing anger might transform into a different emotion. Navigation also involves making continuous adjustments to stay on course.

“mis-framings” did occur and came to their awareness by feelings ranging from embarrassment to shame, whereby they had to “save face” by impression management, a process which involved additional self-reflection (Goffman, 1959, 1986). As I will argue throughout this chapter, reflexivity is not merely a capability that is “organically” developed by the professional, but also stems from a professional *mandate* to develop reflexivity as a resource

### THE EMOTIONALLY REFLEXIVE SOCIAL WORKER

You must challenge yourself, your humanity, if someone calls and you feel, ‘oh no, not *that* guy,’ but you have to answer. You have to answer despite not wanting to, you cannot avoid your client [Sandra, AU, M2]

As we saw in Chapter 5, the professional frame encourages commitment and “authenticity,” involving unity between private and professional values and roles (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016; Yam, 2004). At the same time, I argued that the organizational frame encouraged other virtues, aligning with the key bureaucratic principle: the “private” self should be clearly distinct from the professional self, and privately held values or moral standards should not affect professional actions, instead advocating ideals such as time efficiency, cost-consciousness, and emotional detachment. These inconsistencies translated into ambivalence regarding how much the “self” should be involved at work, demanding incongruous capacities to *separate* the personal from the work role, while at the same time *using* the personal within the professional role. Figuring out how to be a good social worker therefore involved making sense of *boundaries*; where does the “private” person end, and the professional role begin?

This boundary work involves, I argue, two interconnected processes. First, it calls for self-reflection in interaction, a mutual interpretation of how *others* experience a person in interaction, a process that can take place before, during, or after the interaction (how should I *present* myself at work?). The first process is necessary for all professional practice (and arguably, all interaction) and mainly involves surface acting (Hochschild, 1983). Second, it implies a deeper process of *introspection* regarding how one should approach work as a person (how should I *be* at work?). The quote above from Sandra captures both these processes: *presenting* herself as someone who is responsive and available, while “challenging” her “humanity” by suppressing her spontaneous feeling of wanting to avoid the client.

Similarly, Lena spoke of having to overcome uncomfortable feelings to do her job:

Fanny: Are there things about yourself that you have had to work on in your role?

Lena: Yeah, I feel like I am actually pretty afraid-, or at least that I *avoid* conflicts a lot in my private life. But as a social worker, you can't be, you have to be able to say things that are difficult. I mean, it's pretty hard to have to tell someone that they are a bad parent.

Fanny: I can only imagine. Is that something that you have learned with experience, do you mean?

Lena: I don't know [pause]. Yeah actually, I guess that every time I challenge myself I become more secure in my role, and I always try to remind myself what I would want if I were on the other side of such a meeting. I would want to know the truth, what I am supposed to do to become a good mom.

[Interview, CYU M2]

In Lena's statements, we can see how both processes are activated. She is using her professional role in which she is allowed to tell someone that they are a "bad parent." To overcome the uncomfortable feelings in doing so, she is using *introspection*, reminding herself of what she "would want" if the roles were reversed.

Sometimes, the professional presentation was disturbed by one's "private" person. For instance, when I asked Leah if she felt comfortable in her role as a social worker, she told me that, "Well, I think that I become myself too quickly, I want to be more serious at work." Leah described herself as a "jester" in her private life, and feared that this trait sometimes seeped into her professional role. Lisa spoke of a more carefully crafted role performance and the face-saving acts sometimes necessary when overstepping the interactional expectations:

Lisa: I remember when I was new and first realized that *I* am the one responsible for this meeting; *I* am supposed to connect with the person sitting before me, and to do that I have to use myself, but I also have to be professional, balance it, because something may happen in the meeting where I have to act from my professional position and like *switch*.

Fanny: And the transition gets easier with time?

Lisa: I would say so. Because I use a lot of humor when talking; I pull a joke that didn't sit well, and you have to say that in the room, 'that didn't sit well!', and then it is easier to switch on and off, if I lose myself.

Fanny: So that they see that you are a person?

Lisa: (responds quickly) Yes! I think that it paves the way for a good atmosphere in the room. If you have to talk about serious stuff, and maybe you don't pull a joke, you have

to be tactful talking about that stuff, but also not afraid to. If I don't use myself there is no flow and then I don't get the information that I need. [Interview, FRT M2]

To act before others while in a professional role calls for a degree of deference and respectful treatment, and Lisa was aware that their often playful tone does not always harmonize with the seriousness of client interactions. Lisa speaks of “switching” between role performances. The ideal seems to be to be herself, yet this self-described humorous self does not always “sit well” with the other, which calls for a conscious act of redeeming “face-saving” by acknowledging her mis-framing of the situation (Goffman, 1986). Furthermore, the framing of the interaction could also shift due to new information: “something may happen in the meeting” [Lisa, FRT], compelling a move between roles from a more “personal” approach to a “professional position.”<sup>101</sup> Lisa explained that such information could be, for example, that a parent would admit to harming their child, which called for legal intervention and thus for a more stringent professional role performance.

While Lisa speaks of a self-conscious and spontaneous role adjustment, an interaction between experienced adult social worker Mary and student intern Benny illustrates how repetitive and “habituated” performances may be brought to their attention and reflected upon when discussing them with an “outsider” (not “in the know”):

Benny: I feel really uncomfortable talking to clients, especially when I have to ask them about their sex life and stuff, but I guess you get more comfortable in the role after a while.

Mary: Yes, sometimes *too* comfortable. That is why I like having interns, it makes me reflect on my practice and how I am with clients.

Benny's presence neatly demonstrates how rules for conduct and how to express feelings – the feeling and framing rules – come into focus for Mary when speaking to a newcomer: perhaps one *should not* feel too comfortable when questioning clients about their sex life. While talking about sensitive subjects is routine for experienced social workers, the clients may not be so comfortable. When speaking with Benny, Mary is reminded of this potential disparity and conceivably can use this reflection when engaging with clients. This may in turn be understood as a process of identity

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<sup>101</sup> See Goffman's (1986) term “keying,” i.e., transforming the meaning of an activity by applying a different frame to it: here, by keying a lighthearted conversation into a serious one based on circumstances.

work, as the participants were actively engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, or revising the construction of who they are and wished to be at work.

Yet, Leah's concern to "become myself too quickly" invites a deeper reflection. It suggests an ambivalence when trying to make sense of the borders between the private person and the professional role. What complicates this boundary work is the idea that the "person" *should* ideally stand in close alignment to the professional role. The conceptual pair, *the personal* and *the professional* is recurring throughout key documents in social work. For example, several courses in social work programs in Sweden contain the modules "personal and professional development" (PPU). Correspondingly, the concepts of "self-knowledge and empathy," coupled with "professional conduct" are professional leitmotifs spanning over education, legislation, job ads, and practice regulation and manuals and are one of the degree objectives for vocational education in the Swedish Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100). Addressing the PPU objective, Andersson Elmtoft and Whitaker (2023) argue that PPU is about internalization, described as "a personal anchoring process, or a fusion of beliefs, values, theoretical and conceptual structures, methods and techniques and one's own personality" (p. 28, my translation). The authors expand on this idea: "In other words, one should anchor all this in oneself, and only then can we appear genuine and authentic in the meeting with clients" (2023, p. 11).

The participants seemed to be well acquainted with these ideals, which were epitomized in the recurring metaphor of *using oneself as a tool*. Invoking this metaphor was a prominent pattern among the interviewees in individual interviews as well as in observations. This is not merely an empirical discovery but is a common phrase in core course literature in social work education in Sweden. For example, Payne establishes that "the tool for action is the own person" (2006, p. 55, my translation). Andersson Elmtoft and Whitaker (2023) expand on this notion when stating that professional practice is based on "a *realization* that *the work requires using oneself as a tool*" (p. 11, my translation, italics in original). However, the authors warn that, when using oneself as a tool, there is a risk of emotional contagion, and to not "project one's own feelings onto others," self-awareness is required (p. 57).

Thus, the relationship between the private and the professional, according to such professional appeals, can be summarized as follows: The ideal social worker should, by means of refined self-knowledge, self-awareness, and self-reflection, anchor the private person in the professional role by fusing professional values and

beliefs into one's personality. If such a "fusion" would be possible – which it probably never is in any permanent sense in reality – potential conflicts between self-values and professional values would dissolve.

However, the appeals for continuous self-reflection as a procedure for evaluating one's professional conduct had seemingly been internalized. When in the professional sphere, social workers should be aware of their own feelings to prevent projecting them onto others, and on a deeper level to not "embark on a moral downhill slide" (Börjesson, 2015, p. 374). Venturing beyond the personal into the private spheres can pose risks that must be safeguarded against. In essence, while the importance to be true to yourself is emphasized, this self should be shaped in accordance with professional ethical standards, rather than by private opinions, experiences, and emotions. I will examine participants' notions and meanings of *private*, *personal*, and *professional* next.

### BLURRED BOUNDARIES: THE PRIVATE AND THE PROFESSIONAL

While the importance of self-awareness and self-distance was frequently raised by the participants. In the context of "being your own work tool" it was brought up as a necessary means to separate the private self from the professional. This demanded a careful reflection of one's own emotions:

We have many things at once, we have numerous cases and there's a lot to think about and keeping everything separated, putting your experiences and preconceptions aside, because... well, you use them in a sense, but you need to put them aside [so as] not to judge others and make the wrong decisions. [Interview, Carol, CYU, M1]

You have to be able to mentalize, taking the other person in without losing yourself, being self-aware and keeping your feelings in check, and your prejudices, being in something while simultaneously seeing yourself from the outside. [Interview, Tami, CYU, M1]

These quotes neatly capture the complex place of emotions in social work practice, which seems to involve a balancing act of "putting experiences and preconceptions aside" so as not to judge others, while at the same time using them. This called for the difficult task of "being *in* something, while simultaneously seeing oneself from the *outside*" (italic added for emphasis).

I suggest that participants understood and put into action the idea of "using oneself as a tool" in two different ways. First, it was described in a literal sense: it denoted that the person *de facto* *is* the intervention, an intervention called "advice

and support” by the National Board of Health and Welfare (2021, p. 376). “We grant ourselves,”<sup>102</sup> as Krista put it. This sometimes came with a cautionary note: “but we are not supposed to playact therapists” [Sandra, AU, M2].

Second, it was used in a more essential sense, serving as a cornerstone of the social worker’s identity and a fundamental requirement for the role. This broader interpretation encompassed various meanings. For instance, it could involve developing or refining one’s personality to become a more empathetic social worker. For example, Mona stated that:

I think those are traits that many have before they study to be social workers, and then you realize when you’re working, *I use myself as a tool*. I haven’t learned in school how to meet a person in crisis, that is something you have within yourself and, of course, from work experience. [Interview, AU M2]

The tool analogy suggested an *instrumentalization* of “the self” by learning to *separate* (parts of) the private self from the professional self. This was expressed by another common phrase: *be personal, but not private*. This was a common response to my somewhat broad interview question “What does it mean to be professional?” For example, when I asked Tami what it means to be professional, she responded:

Of course, you have to be personal, but not private. I have to be personal because I must show them that I am only human, I am not a robot, I have feelings. But not private. [Interview, FHU M1]

Similarly, Linda said that,

I think I am personal with my clients, banter a bit, kind of like I am at home, because you have to be personal, but I do not have to share the whole me, like talk about my kids. [Interview, CYU M2]

While “being private” was typically summarized quite effortlessly and practically – in terms of not telling clients about their kids, relationships, or where they live – “being personal” seemed harder to pin down. A possible answer, building on Tami’s response that she “is only human” and “has feelings,” as well as the quote by unit manager Ellie above (“you have to be able to react emotionally, it would be weird otherwise, how could you relate to us?”), is that having and displaying “personal” feelings is necessary to create a bond with clients.

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<sup>102</sup> While the core work tasks of municipal social workers on the assessment side are to investigate and suggest interventions, they may also grant “advice and support,” meaning that they themselves provide clients with supportive counseling.

The “private” was, apart from not revealing “private matters,” elaborated in relation to *self-biography*. Being aware of one’s history was highlighted as a particularly important element in the art of self-awareness. Certain client groups, or at least certain *behaviors* associated with these groups, seemed to challenge the ability to not engage privately. In the adult unit, the “self-appointed victim” type of client was a pet peeve among the social workers, referring to a person exaggerating their victimhood to gain sympathy, and not taking responsibility for their situation. Kathryn explains:

Kathryn: I grew up with parents with substance abuse; I’ve lived in foster homes; I’ve been at the other side, so alcoholic middle-aged women, they could trigger me immensely. I got so irritated, like *get a grip*, just *stop* it. And I understand, you know, given my history. But I have worked on that. I challenged myself; I have no problem with it now. My only problem now are clients that claim a position of victimhood;<sup>103</sup> you can’t motivate those people. But if you are aware of it from the outset then you know if something is a trigger. Like my little sister has been an occasional substance abuser, and someone would come in that reminded me of her and it got harder. But I reminded myself of where I am, trying to put my personal experience aside; I have worked hard on that, actively reflecting. And I bring up people in victimhood... I can’t handle them; I just want to ask someone else to take them on, and *I can’t be professional with them*. I’m like ‘what are you doing, get a grip.’

Fanny: Because it gets too close?

Kathryn: Yes, I’ve had enough of people blaming other people for their addictions. They have excuses. Some people take responsibility, but some clients are just sitting there crying, talking about their crappy childhood, it’s so ...

Fanny: Frustrating?

Kathryn: *Yes!* [Interview, AU M2]

In this exchange, Kathryn’s emotional memories and experiences are presented as being too closely aligned with work tasks: she “cannot be professional.” Thus, this is an example when the private and the professional *cannot* be separated because it reminds her too much of her own past.

Being “your own work tool”, then, demanded a capacity to be “incredibly self-aware,” and “to be whole” so as not to let one’s “own baggage” affect the relationship with clients. This echoes Lipsky’s assertion: “If street-level bureaucrats cannot be restricted in everyday functioning, then self-monitoring must substitute for bureaucratic controls” (2010, p. 202). Therefore, the difficulty in governing

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<sup>103</sup> In Swedish: “*offerkoffia*”. Its literal translation is “victim cardigan”.

street-level bureaucrats makes professional ideals of self-governance essential, substituting what society cannot dictate (cf. Miller & Rose, 2008). I would argue that the importance of not letting self-biography affect professional practice represents one of the key aspects of the Weberian bureaucracy: *sine ira et studio*. Thus, I would argue that the appeals for self-reflection may be understood as a proxy for external governing: the workers must themselves ensure that their “private” emotions and experiences do not affect (arguably) how they respond to and assess clients. As we have seen, such self-governing serves to keep the practitioners within the framing- and feeling rules of professionalism, which is both an individual and collective achievement.

### GETTING TOO CLOSE

While self-awareness and reflexivity were described as fundamental for building trusting relationships with clients, using oneself as a tool sometimes caused difficulties. The social workers had to be mindful of not “getting too close.” This applied both to becoming too close to a client, which could lead to losing sight of their mission as representatives of municipal social services and their professionalism, and to the overlap between their private lives and their jobs.

Contrary to previous research findings (cf., Bolton, 2005; Eriksson & Eriksson, 2002; Lauri, 2016; O’Connor, 2020; Winter et al., 2019), “being objective,” “neutral,” or “distancing oneself from clients” was not promoted by a majority of participants. However, some clear boundaries were expressed through illustrative examples related to how *not to act*: “I got invited to their son’s baptism. But I did not go of course; if I did, I probably should not be a social worker” [Sandra, interview AU, M2]. However, boundaries were often less defined. As we have seen, incorporating “yourself” into the professional role, to some extent, was almost a prerequisite. While being private was posed in *opposition* to being professional, being personal was viewed as *aligned* with professionalism. However, “being personal” was a rather porous concept that the participants struggled to define. While practitioners were encouraged to be committed and involved, there was a risk of becoming *over involved* and thereby overstepping the boundaries of professionalism. This typically happened when workers had been working with a client for too long; the

relationship could “become too cuddly,” as Sandra put it, and “the care can become too big” as Indra said.

For example, Jenifer expressed concern about turning into a “curling parent” to one of her clients:

Maybe I should have been tougher with her, but you know, I know too much about her. I know all about her background and her idiot parents. But you know, it can be a hinderance, getting too close. But I also think that the girl benefits a lot from us being so close: it will help her in life, I think. But maybe she needs a push, so that she learns to take responsibility, I'm sure she could do it. There can be *too much* caring.

The perceived degree of closeness could also affect the “harder” tools of the trade, such as assessing applications. For example, while “being empathetic” was unquestionably the most-referred to ideal trait and spoken of in terms of an important tool for building relationships with clients, sometimes it came up as a liability: “When you feel empathy you feel their feelings to an extent, so it drags you down, and it may even affect your decision-making” [Linda, CYU, M2]. While empathy was stressed as something that should *always* “be there,” it called for caution as it could go “too far” in that the workers could no longer separate their feelings from their client’s feelings. “Being empathetic” therefore necessitated keeping a balance between two potential dysfunctions: detachment and overinvolvement (cf. Salmela, 2009).

While some solved this potential conflict by framing empathy as a cognitive and rational process, of *understanding* feelings, others spoke of an affective process, of *feeling* their feelings and emotionally engaging in the others, as the quote from Krista, above, suggests: “I can attune to their sense of anger.” The closeness was not only spoken of in terms of cognitively *understanding* someone’s feelings, but also that they *felt* emotionally close to some clients. For instance, the participants often spoke of themselves as the “mother” of clients. In the following excerpt, Sandra spoke of client Hanan during a process supervision session:

Hanan is one of the many young, unsupervised minors that had come to Sweden from Afghanistan during the last decade. His parents are dead, his best friend was stabbed to death outside of the town library, dying in Hanan’s arms. He’s addicted to heroin, as are many of his peers, the social workers tell me; it has become an epidemic amongst unsupervised young Afghan men in Sweden. Sandra had been working with him for two years at this point.

Sandra: I’m thinking, what am I carrying? Before meeting him, I feel... I don’t know, anxiety, I’m having trouble breathing. A couple of weeks ago I walked into my

manager's office and said 'Hanan is dead, my gut feeling is telling me that he is in a container somewhere.' I carried that for a week. I've been right before.

Supervisor: What do you need? Do you need to understand why you carry him around in your body?

Sandra: Well, I think I understand that. I could have been his mother, I feel like his mother, he doesn't have a mother, and *I could be his mother*. He is very easy to like, always polite, but maybe I am a bit irritated... but you can hardly be irritated, but you can be frustrated; I guess that's the power of heroin. He had only been at the substitution treatment facility for a couple of hours, then he told me he left. 'Ok, but where are you going?' I said, 'you don't have anywhere to live, no phone, just out on the street?'

Supervisor: Is that what makes it feel more, death is breathing down your neck?

*Mary cuts in:* Nope. For me it doesn't necessarily stick like that when they die, it's more that they are living this horribly destructive life. Because Hanan, there is no network around him other than professionals, and *that* feeling, when *you are the next of kin*; 'Sandra Surname, social worker.' That is sad, it is *tremendously* sad. It doesn't matter if they are 22 or 48, they still settle in your stomach because they can actually *die*.

[Field notes, AU M2]

Sandra makes the connection of "carrying him around in the body" and the idea that she "could have been his mother." The mother-child analogy tells us something as to what Sandra feels that she "owes" Hanan; how much empathy and sympathy she *should* offer. As Clark (1998) has suggested, roles come with expectations of due emotional gifts within a "socioemotional economy." The inability to get him "out of her body" may be interpreted as a feeling that she "owes" him an amount of care that she is unable to provide; that of a mother. The roles (mother/social worker) have merged, and with that the role of obligations and their due "emotional gifts."

The sadness of being "the next of kin" seems to insert the tragic story of clients into their bodies. Embodied experiences frequently came up in relation to clients, across units, particularly "having someone in my stomach," as well as "difficulty breathing" and "feeling skinless." Several participants told me that they had problems sleeping when dealing with a distressing case. As Kathryn [Interview, AU M2] put it: "you punch out and go home, but you don't punch out in your heart." Thus, the inability to separate the private from the professional could have private consequences for workers. I argue that the various references to "the body" serve as metaphors for being emotionally committed: they *feel* their clients in their bodies. "Getting (too) close" thus seemed to go beyond the aim of gaining empathetic understanding of their client, and the will to support them surpassed their professional duties and hinted at something more fundamental. Sometimes it

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

seemed like they genuinely felt close to their clients; they had grown fond of them and wanted to help them.

Reversely, the private could also invade on the professional, when struggling with “having a bad day” while being expected to “shake it off and do your job.” Particularly difficult was “letting things go” when it reminded them of something currently happening in their private lives. For example, Lena said that:

If I am having a meeting with a mom and dad arguing, and then they fight about something reminding me of something that I have just argued about with my husband. Then I must try really hard not to bring my own feelings; I have to be a social worker and listen because they have their own story, and I cannot put onto them what I am feeling and thinking. [Interview, CYU M2]

Similarly, Sandra spoke of feeling like a “rusty tool” while being expected to do her job:

The hardest thing is to find that balance, as a professional *and* as a private person, to find stability, so that it doesn't eat you up, waking up with nightmares. That happens no matter how professional you are. You must work on it constantly; you can work for 20 years, and some people still *get in* [pauses]. Some you keep at a distance, but you are a *tool*, and some people get in. This one client, he has *massive* substance abuse problems, and I guess he feels that his life is in my hands. And that is hard to handle. When I go to work and I feel down, then it's hard to be that tool, if you feel rusty; maybe I should have done something different then, work at the car factory (laughs). [Interview, AU M2]

Sandra's comment, that when the self cannot be used effectively “as tool” when feeling “rusty,” and that an alternative would be to go into material labor (the car factory) underscores the significance of emotional labor in social work. Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor as an extension of Marx's analysis of the *material labor process* under capitalist regimes, shifting the focus to *immaterial labor* in the sense of Mills' “personality market.” The distinction is, while a rusty tool in material labor might refer to a physical incapacity (such as a broken arm on an assembly line), a rusty tool in the context of emotional labor refers to a diminished emotional capacity to perform the job, which can lead to someone “getting in.” Thus, the intrusion of the private into the professional realm seemed to have a synergistic effect: it not only impaired their ability to perform the job but also made it more challenging to maintain a separation between professional and private selves.

There were other examples of the job getting in: “I think about people's alcohol consumption when I'm at a party” [Sandra AU, M2]; or “talking to sexually abused women ruins my own sex life” [Kathryn AU, M2]. Such stories thus spoke of a

reverse corrosion of the border between the private and the professional, where professional matters instead taint the private life. This may, I argue, be a consequence of the professional pleas to construct the professional identity in close alignment with the private identity.

### INTERNALIZING AMBIGUITY

I argue that, above all, the appeals to “be personal” and to “use oneself as a tool” create challenges for workers in understanding and constructing their roles, and in delineating the private from the professional, as demonstrated in the previous section. Thus, on one hand, they are encouraged to fuse the personal with the professional, but on the other hand, they are expected to keep these spheres separate.

In other occupations, the division of self into two separate entities has been shown to be crucial for constructing the professional role, understanding (the limits of) and fulfilling normative role expectations, and managing the emotions required to meet these expectations. For example, Törnqvist (2017) demonstrates how prosecutors draw a symbolic distinction between their professional and private roles by referring to the trial as a “play” where their “authentic selves” are not involved (p. 335). Similarly, Bergman Blix and Wettergren’s (2018) study of judges and prosecutors, and Flower’s (2018) study of defense lawyers, demonstrate that the court setting is an interactional, emotional, and collective accomplishment. Although the different parties (i.e., lawyers and prosecutors) present two competing versions of reality, each role seeks to perform appropriately to ensure the trial runs smoothly (Flower, 2018).

In other words, the interaction order of the court trial is based on a consensual “definition of the situation” where all performers, although adversarial, cooperate to maintain consensus (cf., Goffman, 1959). They share a common understanding of the interaction, anchored in an overarching emotive-cognitive frame, allowing all actors to make sense of their own and others’ role expectations. The frame provides a common principle which allows them to maintain the flow of the interaction: upholding the rule of law, which involves presenting a shared image of justice as “unemotional.” These mutual principles ensure that the “legal professionals

collaborate in a tacit agreement to perform their respective roles” (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018, p. 95).

In contrast, social workers are encouraged to balance using themselves while simultaneously internalizing or “anchoring” their personality to the professional ethos (Andersson Elmtoft & Whitaker, 2023). As we have seen, such ideals cause role ambiguities, particularly regarding what they feel they “owe” their clients emotionally (Clark, 1998). While the private should not be displayed in practice, as illustrated by the catchphrase “be personal but not private,” drawing the line between the private and “personality” appears problematic.

As opposed to the overarching (singular) emotive-cognitive judicial frame, the dual frame in social work necessitates ongoing situated sense-making; what is “good” or “bad” is not always clear. Being good may mean adhering to rules and routines to uphold principles of fairness and equal treatment, or it may mean responding to the individual needs of clients by going beyond the scope of one’s duties. I argue that the “loose emotional regime” and the “ambiguities of frame” for social workers require them to make sense of the definitions and meanings of situations themselves (or collectively within the team), as well as the feeling and display rules (Goffman, 1986; Hochschild, 1979; Reddy, 2001) Ambiguities about how to relate to, interpret, manage, and display emotions across different situations suggest an internalization of the ambiguities of their mission and role by means of emotional reflexivity and self-scrutiny, as demonstrated earlier in this chapter.

However, sense-making may be facilitated by claiming (and moving between) *role positions* that are made possible by the two frames, which I will expand on next.

## ROLE POSITIONINGS

Thus far, I have accounted for how the larger ambiguities of the social work mission play out in practice as struggles of making sense of the emotional order in work interactions, with an emphasis on the boundaries between the private and the professional. I will now turn to how social workers may alleviate the ambiguities by positioning themselves within the emotional regime of the social services.

As argued, social workers are torn between contradictory expectations of what social work is supposed to be. These contradictions create a rather vague professional identity accompanying competing ideologies and values. The

contradictions, I have argued, therefore cause uncertainty in interpreting feeling rules and thus emotion management at work. While this may be true to some extent for all occupations, the bureaucratic reality of social services and the care ethos of social work create a particularly complex set of feeling rules. In Hochschild's (1983) comparison between stewardesses and debt collectors, she describes them as being "polar extremes of emotional labor" (p. 138), the "toe and the heel of capitalism" (p. 16). Yet, the dual frame contains both types of emotional labor. Therefore, social workers are continuously *navigating within a complex emotional regime* and contradictory sets of norms and rules<sup>104</sup> for how to feel and what to express emotionally. In effect, emotional regimes frame the emotional behavior for people by introducing rules for emotional expression and proposing certain "emotional styles" (Reddy, 2001, p. 128), or subject positions, within the regime.<sup>105</sup>

In this sense, the emotional regime, the frames, and the accompanying feeling rules are both *enabling* and *constraining* the medium through which actors relate to and build expectations about each other – the interaction is *framed* so that people can organize their experience and communicate their interpretation to others. Thus, the emotional regime provides a framework that allows people to discipline goal orientation when many goals compete (Hochschild, 1979; Reddy, 2001, p. 108).

## BUREAUCRATS AND IDEALISTS

Before starting my fieldwork in municipality 2, I met with one of the unit managers, Ellie. I asked her to describe the office culture, and she responded that "our goal is to dissolve the dichotomy between being too soft and too tough." This short proclamation holds a lot of what I want to discuss next. I will contour two *ideal types* of social workers, one "too tough" and the other "too soft." I call them *the bureaucrat* and *the idealist*.<sup>106</sup> These correspond to, but are not limited to, the care/control

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<sup>104</sup> I am making a distinction between norms and rules, in that the latter is a more direct form of governance, while the former takes the form of more subtle cues within interaction that actors take notice of to, primarily, avoid shame and embarrassment.

<sup>105</sup> I was uncertain whether to call the normative order of emotions an emotional regime or plural emotional regimes. However, I chose to refer two dual frames within an overarching regime, enabling a variety of emotional styles (Reddy, 2001; Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018).

<sup>106</sup> These ideal types are not new but have distinct counterparts in earlier research, for example, in the conceptual pair *occupational professionalism* and *organizational professionalism* as outlined by Julia Evetts (2009).

dilemma in social work. That is, the inherent tension between two primary responsibilities: providing care and support to clients and exercising control or authority to ensure compliance with laws and policies. This dilemma is central to social work practice and creates a complex dynamic where social workers must balance empathy and compassion with the need to enforce rules and protect societal interests (Lipsky, 2010; Brante, 2015)

I suggest that the organization sustains certain appropriate narratives, or *reflexive emotional styles* through which the workers understand themselves and subsequently serve to uphold (Reddy, 2001). In other words, the organization offers certain ways of how to talk about oneself to ensure that social workers conform to organizational norms. These self-narratives serve to decrease uncertainty of one's role and the meaning of the job, by, as Hochschild puts it, setting "limits to the emotional possibilities" (1983, p. 53). Instead of speaking of these ideal types in terms of individual workers, however, I argue that the ideal types correspond to the two frames, representing each pole of a spectrum available within the emotional regime. The types that Ellie spoke of – "too soft and too tough" – became visible in my subsequent fieldwork. It became particularly clear when participants positioned themselves in terms of *alterity* – they are not what others are, and they are what others are not (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Czarniawska, 2008).

The participants thereby constructed images of their ideal professional identities by providing "accounts" of their role and everyday work (Scott & Lyman, 1968). The ideal-type role positionings were not static; respondents "moved" between the two poles. However, self-presentation was often more closely aligned with one pole, in line with the idea that people hold ideas about themselves and seek to have their identity verified by others, striving to reach a sense of coherence in their identity (Salmela, 2009). I argue that social workers use available positions within the emotional regime to explain, justify, create meaning, and make sense of their roles. As such, the available positions serve as external reference markers onto which they can project their role, thereby reducing uncertainty regarding framing and feeling rules and their role expectations.

On the bureaucratic end of the spectrum, participants declared that others were "whiney," and that their job was, contrary to the (perceived) general opinion, not that bad. For instance, at the end of the interview with Linda [CYU, M2] she explained why she wanted to be a part of my study:

Fanny: Any other thoughts on your job in relation to emotions?

Linda: Erm, well, I thought that your research sounded really interesting and maybe I wanted to participate because I don't really identify with the general image of the work situation of social workers, I have a different experience.

Fanny: That is really interesting, tell me more.

Linda: Well, also in our unit, it [is] so negative, a lot of whining, or like, maybe that sounds harsh, but do you know what I mean? It is so whiney, and that is not my experience at all, actually.

Recurring phrases were “putting on my professional face” and “entering a role” when stepping into the office, a role that meant “stepping out” of the private role. Laws and rules were raised as sources of respite from the potential anxieties of having to make hard decisions: “laws are there for a reason, and it helps me not to work on the basis of my own emotions” [Lena, CYU, M2]; “the laws provide clarity, and I do not have to think so much about how I feel about it” [Indra CYU, M2]; “had I been a counselor it would have eaten me up, because then you don't have that *mandate* to act” [Lisa, FRT, M2]. As argued by Lipsky (2010, p. 149), to reduce the gap between objectives and resources, some workers rigidly adhere to rules and procedures and refuse to make exceptions. By rationalizations such as “those are the rules,” workers refuse their discretionary space, which relieves them of personal responsibility (see also Wettergren, 2010).

Referring to laws and rules was also presented as a self-protection strategy, of keeping clients at a distance and not becoming over involved:

My work role is about protecting myself and not take everything in. I can't be empathetic all the way [Interview, Linda, CYU, M2]

I feel comforted by the fact that we have a Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO), and that we don't have the delegation to make decisions about everything. Because of that, I can make my assessment, and I can make sure that I get it right to the extent that I can. You get emotionally moved, but because you know that there are laws, I know that regardless of what I *want* to do, I cannot always do it, and if I did, I would face legal consequences. [Interview, Krista, AU M2]

Thus, laws could provide boundaries for emotional involvement, and serve to contain the otherwise endless ways in which they *could* potentially help their clients. Furthermore, the participants sometimes positioned themselves in relation to how they *used to be*. As I demonstrated in Chapter 7, the participants reflected on the “naivety” they carried as new social workers. For example, Jenna said that:

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I was so frustrated when I was new and wanted to help everyone, save all the children, but now I understand that there you must demand things from clients if they want help; there is legislation, you must strive for legal certainty. [Interview, FRT, M2]

Conversely, Jenifer [CYU, M1] said that:

When I was new, I was super bureaucratic, I followed the rules to a tee, but now I can step out of all that, try to see the *person*, you know?

Thus, while some suggested that time and experience had provided them with clarity as to how “things really are,” and that rules (legislation) alleviate them from “naïve” ideals such as “saving all the children,” others articulated the opposite, that experience meant stepping *away* from rules.

At the other end of the spectrum, participants spoke of others being “square” or “bureaucratic,” not “daring to go beyond the scope of their responsibilities.” A common point of reference, and watershed, among the children and youth social workers were their opinions of the Care of Young Persons Act (LVU) (SFS 1990:52). In the following excerpt, Emma and Sara speak of how social workers reflect on their legal power in terms of different “personalities” and “ideologies.” The “bureaucrats” were portrayed as using law as a protection against role ambivalence, while they themselves expressed feelings of self-doubt when enforcing coercive legislation:

Fanny: Do you think about the legal power that you hold?

Emma: Definitely. It bothers me a lot. LVU is one of the hardest things in our job, and what we talk about a lot, so it's spoken about. Or at least me and Sara talk about it, you know, and I bet that too depends on what kind of person you are, and ideology, if you really believe in this or if you don't believe in it.

Sara: Some people here actually *like* when LVU is applicable, because it is clear, explicit, pointing with your whole hand, while... well, oneself is maybe more affected by it, that you are acting against someone's personal integrity and autonomy; you question your own decision a lot, whether it's right or not. I think that it's a bit different depending on personality, maybe also ideology, because some people are more like “these are the rules and routines, this I can do, the rest is up to you,” and places it *outside* themselves, while others are more flexible in their role, provide more service... the work tasks that are not really part of your role.

Emma: Yeah, but... that is exactly how I'm thinking too, that it's about *personality*, which is a bit vague, but absolutely ideology too, and there it is... who do you work for? To whom do you owe responsibility, if it is the client or your boss, you know, because I think like that is some sort of divide. I mean, I don't think that anyone would put it like that, but that is what happens when you don't try to interpret it for the benefit of the client, or look for loopholes, if you just want to keep the manager happy.

The personality–ideology pairing seems to imply values detached from, or at least *beyond*, their professional role. The excerpt may be understood as attempts to communicate their *preferred identities*, where “personality” reflects how they understand themselves and want to be perceived by others and “ideology” signals which larger values carry the highest amount of moral content for them (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Turner & Stets, 2006). In other words, Emma and Sara understand their “personalities” as intertwined with a certain ideology in terms of *moral codes* which serve yardsticks for evaluating their professional actions and behavior as right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable (p. 544). In these terms, their feelings of self-doubt and ambivalence can be understood as warning signals, alarming them to a potential violation of these moral codes (ideology), and in extension, a deviation from their preferred identities (Hochschild, 1979, p. 557).

I suggest that Emma and Sara articulate their preferred identity with reference to three interconnected elements. The first element involves *reflective moral emotions*, revealed in Sara’s self-scrutinizing remark: “you question your own decision a lot, whether it’s right or not,” as well as in her other-critical reflection, “people (...) place it *outside* themselves,” alluding to a detached approach to the professional role. This element relates to the previously discussed question of how much to insert the self into the professional role. Furthermore, Sara’s reflection indicates that the bureaucratic position allows workers, to a greater extent, to *externalize* the role expectations by attaching them to something outside of the self, namely rules and laws (cf. Wettergren, 2010), justified by alluding to legal certainty as manifest in the quote by Jenna above. The self may thereby “submit to the order of externals” (Pfaller, 2012, p. 73), and conceivably protect workers from incessant self-scrutiny. The idealistic role positioning, on the other hand, could be interpreted to involve a higher degree of self-reflexivity and self-governance and thus an *internalization* of role expectations, as accounted for above. The second element relates to *loyalty*: “To whom do you owe responsibility, if it is the client or your boss?” [Emma]. If workers feel strong loyalty to the organization, it may be reasonable to suggest that organizational rules and guidelines offer a sense of protection from self-scrutiny; if you follow the rules, there is no point in questioning your decision or whether you could have done more. The third element is connected to *action*, suggesting that the “right” or “good” way to act is to “provide more service... the work tasks that are

not really part of your role” [Sara], as opposed to strict adherence to “rules and routines.”

These questions relate to questions of professional discretion; how social workers – collectively and individually – distinguish and orient between different action alternatives provided and restricted by legal requirements, organizational policy, and ethical standards. I inquired of Emma and Sara about their views on their discretionary space in relation to assessing client needs and proposing interventions:

Fanny: But if you consider that *you* are doing this job and not somebody else, do you feel like you have the power to make certain types of decisions that you feel can make it better for people?

Emma: Actually I have to say the opposite of what a lot of case workers think, the feeling that many have that they can't make a difference... but *I* think of course you can... that you have more discretion than what many think they have, depending on how you interpret your role, or well, I mean we're working according to laws that you can interpret in different ways, sort of, eh, and then it's about how comfortable you are... eh... do you know what I mean?

As demonstrated in Chapter 6, several participants did, in fact, express gloomy outlooks on their ability to help people: “we have very limited possibilities to help people,” or “I have accepted the conditions, I can't really make a difference.” To Emma, the capacity to help clients depends on how you *interpret your role*, which she clarified meant using your discretionary space by providing “extra service” to clients. This, in turn, was constructed in juxtaposition to managerial priorities, as some workers, according to Emma and Sara, felt that their responsibility and loyalty was first and foremost to the organization. Although none of the participants expressed their allegiance in terms of being loyal to the organization as opposed to their clients, several spoke in terms of “fairness.” As such, they spoke of not favoring certain clients by granting them rights that others were not offered. For instance, Linda said that:

Linda: I mean, we can't just give them everything they ask for, even if I *personally* would like to, it's just not possible, we can't afford it.

Thus, instead of speaking in terms of loyalties toward clients or the organization, some participants seemed to take pride in remaining impartial and fair. The reference to what Linda *personally* would want to do may be an additional source of pride, as she does what is required of her *despite* her own feelings.

Further, Emma and Sara suspect that the imperative to “put the client’s needs first” is a rhetoric without content by “the managers” (and by extension those who adhere to the rules of the organizational frame), who in turn “praised” prioritizing budget over clients:

Emma: I mean our manager, she’s... I mean I think that most people who work with this still have a belief that they want what is best for our clients and want to make a change, but they have the responsibility over the budget, the managers, and our manager can still give us praise when we *don’t* grant a client a benefit, and she’s still a reasonable manager. I mean managers *pretend* that helping people and bureaucracy are compatible processes.

I suggest that juxtaposing “client-advocacy” versus “organizational loyalty” are part of the navigation between the dual emotive-cognitive frames. These frames provide social workers with guidance in terms of how to behave and feel in certain ways and thus provide a sense of role consistency. Certain morally infused values, such as client-advocacy, serve as evaluative for behavior and actions. This evaluation contains both cognitive and emotional elements; the process of reflecting on actions and behaviors (how I acted/how I should have acted) is inevitably infused with moral feelings – more or less intense – of pride or embarrassment/shame (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). Next, I argue that the role positionings are ultimately tied to two overarching values: *being fair* and *being good*.

### BEING FAIR OR BEING GOOD?

The positions within the emotional regime were linked to grander ideals. Although the overarching goal across all positions was to be “professional,” the interpretation of what this meant and how to achieve it varied. Certainly, the “bureaucrats” did not see themselves as rigid, nor did the “idealists” view themselves as softhearted do-gooders. Instead, both positions were *tied to notions of a greater moral good*, which I have simplified to the ideals of *being fair* (bureaucratic ideal) or *being good* (idealistic ideal). As argued by Lipsky, bureaucratic organizations also seek to treat all clients equally, while workers tend to seek special treatment for *some* clients (2010, p. 73). These conflicting ideals are referred to as “the existential problem for street-level bureaucrats” by Lipsky (2010, p. 99).

From the bureaucratic position, one could argue that idealists are *unfair* in their over-commitment to certain clients, as it means less time and resources for others. Street-level decisions can be seen as a zero-sum game, where the power to

redistribute and allocate resources ultimately comes at the expense of others; time spent on one client means less time for others, and determining eligibility for some takes governmental funds at the expense of taxpayers and other service users.

From the bureaucratic position, participants argued that adherence to rules and procedures, such as following investigative manuals and questionnaires, served two purposes. First, it served a greater good, upholding legal security and the rule of law by ensuring that clients received equal treatment and adequate support and benefits: “I cannot grant a benefit because I feel sorry for someone or to get someone off my back, that is not how it works” [Interview, Tami, FHU M1]. Second, it served as a self-protective strategy, shielding the self from “getting too close” by constructing limits to (emotional) involvement: “I have a legal responsibility to act, and that has saved me from burning out, knowing the responsibilities and limits to my role” [Interview, Lisa, FRT, M2]. For instance, *empathy* was often discussed in terms of an interactional *tool* rather than an emotional process: “I cannot *feel* what they feel, I cannot be fully empathetic because then I would drown, but I need to make the person *believe* that I am empathetic” [Interview, Linda, CYU, M2].

One of my interview questions was “What makes you feel proud at work.” To my surprise, many participants answered that with “writing a really good inquiry” [e.g., Indra, CYU M2], and receiving recognition of it from others was one of their greatest sources of pride. Certainly, apt inquiries are important for ensuring legal security, but in relation to pride, it can be interpreted as something else. Karen Healy (2009) argues that there has been a cultural devaluation of care work, partly due to conditions of NPM. In this context, professional esteem is linked to *technical competence*, which has become a collective professional striving for recognition. Similarly, Davies (1995) examines the impact of gender in care work and argues that caring for others has been associated with essentialist notions of women’s innate capabilities for affection, rather than being recognized as a professional skill.

From these perspectives, pride in recognition of technical competencies can be understood as a substitute in lieu of pride in the “core activity” – relational work with clients. However, pride in the goal rationality of the ideal bureaucracy proposed by Max Weber and its decree of *sine ira et studio* – without personal motives or emotional involvement – was primarily attainable when positioning in the bureaucratic end of the spectrum (cf. Wettergren, 2010).

Conversely, from the idealist position, one might argue that the fairness ideal fails to recognize the need to respond flexibly to the individual needs or characteristics of clients. For instance, when I asked Ingrid if she had enough time for clients, she responded in a somewhat contradictory manner:

Yes, I do actually, even though we have a *hideous* number of meetings, staff meetings, methods meetings, planning days. A colleague said, ‘what if we only had five cases each, we could do all that.’ But in reality, we have 16,<sup>107</sup> which is normal, but one single case can take the resources of three of us: finding an appropriate youth home, fetching a runaway teenager in Northern Sweden. That is *one* case, and I feel like the cases we don’t scream about, they end up here [*smashing the table*]. I feel like I must pick a few cases that I really *work through* and persevere in, while others I just *manage*. [Interview, FHU M2]

Ingrid simultaneously conveys that she *does* have enough time for her clients, while at the same time telling me that some cases are just *managed* as opposed to thoroughly worked through. The cases that they do not “scream about” (I understood this to mean the most acute cases) are inevitably deprioritized. Prioritizing difficult cases could be understood as an inversed version of Lipsky’s coping strategy of *creaming*, which refers to selecting and prioritizing clients who are most likely to succeed or require the least resources (Lipsky, 2010, p. 107).

A recurring theme among participants were versions of “doing the little extra,” or ‘giving more service.’ Interestingly, providing the *extra* was not a rare exception, but an expectation. Remember, for example, how Kathryn talked about “doing the very minimum” for clients she referred to as being “in victimhood,” which reminded her of her own background. She elaborated that some clients did *not* get “that little extra” that she otherwise felt that she owed clients:

Kathryn: Maybe I’m less committed to that person, less engaged, and then I do the minimum. I mean, I still do what I am supposed to, of course I do. It’s just, with my own history, I can’t fully commit, and you don’t get that little extra; I don’t care a little extra, like bend the rules. Maybe it’s about chemistry; we’re humans after all.

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<sup>107</sup> The number of cases per social worker varied between units. The “normal” number of cases was around 30, while the foster home unit had around 15–20. The investigative children- and youth units typically had 30–35 active cases.

The need to account for and justify *not* doing extra (“my own history,” “we’re humans after all” speaks to the need to protect the self against feelings of guilt. As the *extra* therefore could be seen as the standard, *not* doing so-called-for justifications. This answer raises a vital question: What are the limits to commitment and effort put into client cases?

Weinberg (2014) argues that ideas of “going the extra mile” and “doing a little bit more” are explicitly expected of social workers, as reflected in the US code of ethics (NASW, 2012). In the document, the first principle listed is that “Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service)”. Therefore, Weinberg argues, social workers feel a moral responsibility to go *beyond* the prescribed limits of their duties (Weinberg, 2014, pp. 87–88). Grell (2023) describes a similar ideal among Swedish social workers, noting that “doing extra” by going beyond the scope of one’s formal responsibility is a key element in the informal organization of the social services (p. 287). Among the participants in this study, this did not only involve the expectation of doing extra for clients as a prerequisite, but extended to using their professional skills outside of office hours: “nowadays, if I see a very drunk person on the street, I will absolutely ask him if he is okay; I would never have done that before” [Lisa, FRT, M2], or “if I feel that a man is aggressive towards a woman, I will intervene” [Sandra, AU, M2]. As argued in Chapter 6, the professional ethos as imposed during social work education as well as in ethical guidelines seemed to encourage social workers to not only do good, but to *be* good. To an extent, the boundaries between the private and the professional realms *are* and *should be* blurred – in addition to the aforementioned professional mandates of going *beyond* the scope of one’s official duties (cf. Eriksen, 2015).

Positioning oneself as primarily loyal to the organization by adhering to strict rules and routines may serve as a “defense against discretion” (Lipsky, 2010, p. 149). Workers *could*, theoretically, interact flexibly and responsively with *each client*, but if they did this with too many clients, their capacity to respond flexibly would diminish due to resource inadequacy (2010, p. 99). Modifying one’s perceived scope of action may relieve the sense of responsibility and reduce the strain between resources and objectives, potentially protecting against feelings of guilt (cf. Wettergren, 2010). By following strict rules and routines workers may avoid role tensions inherent in the *possibility* to do more, and provide emotional rewards such as pride, by following the

rules of the organizational frame (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). Conversely, aligning one's actions to the professional frame by positioning oneself as primarily loyal to clients might serve as a "defense against bureaucracy," thereby gaining pride. This involves asserting "discretionary dimensions of their job *to a greater degree than called for in theory* in order to salvage a semblance of proper client treatment as they define it" (Lipsky, 2010, p. 150).

In conclusion thus far, I argue that devotion to ideals of fairness or goodness involves emotional attachments. Adhering to either the bureaucratic or idealistic position, I contend, provides social workers with a sense of coherence in their professional role. The emotive-cognitive frames not only guide professional action and provide professional role consistency, but are closely related to self-identity, as we saw in Emma and Sara's reflection on ideology and personality. As argued by Salmela (2009), to "feel authentic", individuals strive to maintain a sense of coherence in their self-image across different spheres of life. This requires that core beliefs, values, and norms – or self-values – are compatible between these spheres, and that the work role allows for such compatibility. Acting consistently with one's self-image serves to maintain "ontological security" (Giddens, 1991); a sense of continuity and order in one's life experiences. Ontological security shields individuals from ambivalence and existential anxiety, which serves as a powerful motivator for individuals to maintain a coherent self-image and a continuous narrative of the self. Therefore, the demarcations between "how we are", and "how they are" may be understood as role positionings serving as navigation points within the overarching emotional regime, around which a coherent self-image and narrative of the self can be constructed and maintained.

However, the participants moved or slipped between positions, which at times threatened this sense of coherence. When the research participants spoke of such deviations, they often seemed impelled to account for and justify it, which I will show next.

## MOVING BETWEEN POSITIONS

### ACCOUNTING FOR EXCEPTIONS

As we saw in the previous section, while doing the little extra was a rule rather than an exception in the idealistic position, there was still scope for exceptions. As

mentioned above, these exceptions typically involved certain “types” of clients, such as the self-appointed victim client. This client type was mentioned by several participants in the adult unit, both in interviews and observations. For example, during a process supervision, Leah spoke about a client that the group jokingly calls “Cry-Michael”:

Leah: I’ve been his case manager for six months. It was fun in the beginning when I was new and unspoiled. But he needs *so* much reassurance, and I keep looking at my watch. It’s hard to help when he’s crying all the time. The other day I told him that I’m about to go on parental leave, and he started to cry and said, ‘this always happens to me.’ I snapped and told him to pull himself together. Once, he talked about his childhood the entire meeting. I felt that he’s had it *easy* compared to other clients who have lived through hell. And this guy’s dad didn’t hug him enough.

Joanne: How does it feel in your body when you snap at him?

Leah: Bittersweet. Bad on a professional level, but relief on a personal level. It’s relieving to say what I think sometimes, let it out.

In Chapter 8, I argue that the adult unit was guided by an “ethic of presence.” In short, this meant that even if clients were deemed “un-helpable,” there was an agreement that they “need to *step up* and just *be* there,” as Mary phrased it. In this excerpt, Leah has temporarily set aside the (idealistic) principle of the ethic of presence, much like Kathryn when she refrains from doing the little extra.

While the “victim-type” client justified exceptions for the adult unit, the corresponding client type in the children and youth units was the “childish parent,” signifying parents not willing to put their children’s needs before their own and engaging in immature bickering during meetings. For example, social worker Indra [M2], herself a mother of a teenaged daughter, exclaimed that:

The mother I’m meeting this afternoon, she has a teenager that I’ve placed (in a youth home), and she has a way of talking about her own child as a third person, not as her daughter, and it’s such a trigger to sit there and she talks about her sixteen-year-old girl as ‘creepy.’ I’d like to slap her and say ‘You’re the mother, what are you saying? It’s your child, you’ve given birth to her!’

Similarly, Lisa [FRT, M2] exclaimed:

It’s like working in a bloody preschool class: you have to sit there and listen to this *shit* and lecture these grown-ups! They act like children. And then I just shut down, I cannot do my job.

While the ability to show empathy toward “difficult” clients sometimes awarded a sense of pride (which I will demonstrate later), sometimes they refused to do so. In

the above quotes, Kathryn, Leah, Indra, and Lisa all exhibit *diminished* empathy for certain clients.<sup>108</sup> Thus, they are unable to be empathetic, moving to a temporary position from which they allow themselves to deviate from their ideals.

Clark (1990) argues that interactions operate within a “socioemotional economy,” a complex system of emotional exchange where people give or withhold emotional resources. In such a system, feelings act as a currency governed by a logic of reciprocity, framing the flow and exchange of emotional gifts. What we feel we *owe* others within this system of “gifts” is governed by feeling rules, which depend on the respective roles people have in relation to each other. The idealistic role position was usually guided by an ideal to empathize with clients and to display sympathy.

The reference to victimhood indicates that they felt that the clients had broken the rules of sympathy etiquette by claiming too much, overstepping the boundaries of their “sympathy margins”<sup>109</sup> (Clark, 1998). Therefore, the misuse of sympathy claims served as a justification for the social workers to step out of their role ideals (to empathize), allowing them to withhold the emotional duty that they otherwise felt that they owed clients. However, they seemed to realize (cognitively and/or emotionally) that this was a deviation from how they usually act, which is evident in their “accounting” for – explaining and justifying – such discrepancy by labeling clients as difficult, annoying, childish, self-pitying, or unmotivated and unwilling to accept help (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Ultimately, accounts allowed them to deviate from the feeling rules associated with the professional emotive-cognitive frame and its associated idealistic role position. When concerns arise, either from oneself or others, about deviations from a moral norm, accounting for and justifying the exception can be seen as a defensive strategy to maintain a sense of role coherence despite temporary deviations (Goffman, 1986; Salmela, 2009).

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<sup>108</sup> An important distinction between these examples is that, while the adult unit advocates for their adult clients, CYU social workers’ loyalties are towards the children. Yet, the purpose of being empathetic (apart from good treatment) is similar: to motivate the client’s cooperation (for the sake of themselves, or primarily for the child).

<sup>109</sup> While definitions of empathy and sympathy varies between researchers, Clark (1998) defines sympathy as feeling concern for someone else’s misfortune and *expressing* that concern, thereby acknowledging and *responding* to an emotional state. In this context, sympathy involves a communicative component.

This aligns with Lipsky's argument that "reconceptualizing" certain client groups (e.g., as worthy/unworthy; cf., Billquist, 1999; Sahlin, 1994) serves as a *cognitive* shield by narrowing "the range of clients for whom street-level bureaucrats must provide their best efforts" (p. 152), I suggest that such accounts and justifications also function as *emotional shields*. By reducing the scope of one's role responsibilities and the fact that they *could*, theoretically, interact flexibly with all clients, workers may protect themselves against guilt (self-targeted expectations about how one should act), and shame (others' expectations about how to act, whether perceived or actual).

### ROLE SEPARATION

A year after the first interview with Emma and Sara [CYU M1], I had a follow-up interview with Emma, who has since resigned from the social services. In the first interview, Emma asserted that she could "make a difference" if claiming discretionary space within the role.<sup>110</sup> As such, rejecting bureaucratic mandates to adhere to strict rules and procedures can be linked to workers' views on discretion, which may be used to provide more (or less) service to clients. Discretion can be viewed as an intermediate space of action, "betwixt and between" professional and organizational ideals, within which social workers mediate between the organizational frame's commitment to rules and regulations and the professional frame's dedication to considering human complexity and the unique circumstances of individuals.

In the follow-up interview, Emma felt differently; it is *not* possible to "make a difference" in the social services, she said. She now described the notion of "discretion" as a fantasy through which she has been deceiving herself:

I thought that I had some freedom, to help people, or that I took freedom, but I have shifted now. I think I made myself believe that I had freedom, because otherwise it would have been completely unbearable. I thought that only new, super-bureaucratic social workers did not understand that there are loopholes. But, if nothing else, the workload means that you can't, even if you know the loopholes you just can't. I mean, you can be nice to people, respectful, answer the phone, not promise thing that you cannot live up to. But it is not real, I mean, you cannot really make a difference for people, not a real difference.

Emma seemed to be in a process of reconstructing her perception of a professional identity and its embedded values that she had been committed to for a long time.

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<sup>110</sup> See Chapter 6.

The emotional impact of this transition is evident in the excerpt. I suggest that Emma is in the midst of a liminal process. Liminality is defined by Turner as “the gap between ordered worlds,” a state of ambiguity and disorientation within a rite of passage, following the separation from a clearly defined role (1974, p. 47). While working in the social services, the frames provided Emma with a social order, a structure for experience through which she understood herself. Turner argues that the liminal phase allows individuals to stand outside their previous understandings, reflect over and challenge previously held beliefs, and to modify or rethink expectations. Emma’s story also has an element of anger; she seems to resent the fact that she had believed in what she now can see through. Now, she is in engaged in a process of role distancing, a powerful symbolic statement or even a “disdainful detachment,” involving an “effectively expressed pointed separateness between the individual and his putative role” (Goffman, 1972, pp. 98; 96).

Perhaps this indicates, in Hochschild’s terms, that Emma had been engaged in a carefully crafted role by repeated performances of deep acting, thereby managing to “deceive[e] oneself as much as deceiving others” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33). This allowed her to genuinely believe in her freedom and ability to help people without having to feign it. She went on to describe her last weeks at the social services, noting that she had been so stressed that she “had not even taken the time to adjust her chair.” She concluded that “everything outside of case work is deserted; you neglect yourself and everything you know is good for you.” She elaborated:

I feel like there’s more to it now than I wanted to admit to myself before. When you are working, you just *push* your limits, just *doing* it. Like when people have asked me ‘it must be a really burdensome job,’ and I have been like ‘no it is just like any other job,’ I think I have wanted to normalize what I am doing, that I did not want to really think about it, you know? But now, there is a feeling about working in the social services that is just awful, especially when you’re stressed, I feel, well, it’s almost existential. It permeates everything in your life, a sense of *total* alienation and I just feel like a dishrag, really. I just *feel* it in my body how *wrong* it is. I was working towards something that wasn’t real.

The corporeal reference in the quote, “I *feel* it in my body how *wrong* it is” strongly suggests the emotional impact that structural orders can have. Distance from her role seemingly allowed Emma to acknowledge and reinterpret feelings that she no longer needs to align with the emotional regime of the social services. She is no longer stuck in the ambiguous space between the personal and the organizational but is now speaking from an outside position. While employed, she was conceivably able to order and make sense of her emotions in relation to an external realm,

maintaining a belief that she could help people. She could act *as if* she believed, anchored in external belief systems. Now, she expresses an insight that what she wanted to achieve as a social worker is perhaps not what society wants: “I was working towards something that wasn’t real.” Without the emotional regime providing a space and guide for positioning herself (on the idealist side of the spectrum), she can no longer reconstruct her role as a social worker in a meaningful way and has seemingly come to disdain it.

Other participants spoke of similar transitions and their opportunities for self-reconstructions, such as when they had changed jobs or units. While Emma now sees her former commitment and her belief in “being able to help” as self-deception, others described a reversed process. They felt duped by the organization into believing their commitment was inappropriate, but now found pride in their “idealistic” role commitment. For example, in Chapter 6, Lisa [CYU, M2] recalled the period before her burnout, when her manager told her that she was not “built for it” because she was too anxious. Similar to Lisa, Mary [AU, M2] spoke of lacking support from managers when suffering from burnout:

The manager was just *great* [sarcastic tone], *very* supportive. Not. I was like “I am dying”, and my manager, she was stressed herself, I guess. I bumped into her and said, “save me”, and she says, “figure it out for yourself” and just kept walking [we both laugh].

Both Lisa and Mary described how they initially accepted the identities ascribed by their respective managers, believing that they were “too soft” to work in the social services and had slipped too far into the idealistic position, getting too close to their clients. However, after switching jobs, their perspectives changed. They now attribute their softness-turned-burnout to organizational structures rather than a faulty self and view their role commitment as a source of pride. In their new jobs,<sup>111</sup> consulting Hochschild (1979), the interpretative framework (ideology) provided new framing rules, offering new ways of defining and ascribing meaning to situations, as well as feeling rules regarding the sense of rights and duties applied to feelings in situations. They reclaimed their positions as client advocates and the belief that commitment could in fact make a difference. The reverse seemed to be the case for Emma [CYU, M1]. While still working in the social services, she believed in her

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<sup>111</sup> Lisa had previously worked in the first response team, but in a different municipality. Mary had previously worked in financial aid and was now working in the adult unit. Emma had started working as a therapist in the health care sector.

“freedom” to role commitment and providing “extra service” to help people. However, this belief was clearly tied to something grander – the idealistic position within the emotional regime of the social services. In hindsight, having moved to an “outsider” vantage point, she now identified it as self-deception.

### EXTERNALIZING AMBIGUITY

The above sections demonstrate the presence, or more accurately, the *felt* presence of conflicting ideologies – or what I call a loose emotional regime – in the social services, illustrating different ways workers position themselves in relation to these ambiguities. While strict emotional regimes set rigid rules for how to feel and what to express, they may nonetheless provide security by offering a coherent way to feel and display emotions. Loose regimes, on the other hand, set few limits on emotional navigation and allow diverse sets of management tools to be fashioned locally, individually, or through robust subgroup formation (Reddy, 2001, p. 126). The organization offers certain identity positions that impel people to adapt to specific values, norms, and ideas about what is good, important, and praiseworthy (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004, p. 426). Thus, the emotional regime provides a framework that allows people to discipline goal orientation when many goals compete (Reddy, 2001, p. 108). Committing to certain role positions may therefore allow the participants to temporarily disentangle the ambiguities of the emotional regime. This enables them to anchor themselves to a position, clarifying rules and expectations regarding action, feeling, and behavior. It may also enable them to formulate and express core self-values, thereby feeling authentic (Salmela, 2009, p. 141).

Furthermore, while Hochschild (1983) argued that using “private” feelings at work through deep acting may estrange workers from their feelings, others have argued that emotional labor can instead be understood as a dissonance-reducing behavior as part of a project to maintain ontological security via a consistent self-narrative (Ward, 2009, p. 265). In other words, while emotional dissonance arises from struggles to construct a situationally coherent sense of self when dealing with contradictory feeling rules, emotional labor may work to alleviate such dissonance. This process is facilitated by anchoring “the self” along a spectrum of available role positions within the emotional regime, which provides guidance and a sense of coherence among actions, behaviors, and feelings.

From the bureaucratic position, staying in line with organizational rules and routines may relieve workers of excessive self-scrutiny, and ultimately, feelings of despair, a result of when “authority collides with conscience” (Paulsen, 2018, p. 369). Similar arguments have been made by, for example, Alvesson and Spicer (2016) in terms of functional stupidity which may be defined as “the unreflective application of instrumental rationality in an organizational setting” (Paulsen, 2016, p. 189). So, accepting rules and resources without resistance may be understood as a self-protective strategy by *not* inserting the “private” self in the job. This, in turn, may be justified by adhering to a belief that “the system” is working, and that acting “professionally” means working consistent with the rules and expectations within this system (cf., Wettergren, 2010).

The idealistic role position was characterized by less distinct boundaries between the private and the professional spheres, as well as ambiguous limits for professional duties. In addition, the idealistic position emphasized the importance of vigilant self-reflection and self-scrutiny, and perhaps, as implied in the interview with Emma and Sara, a critical reflection and scrutiny of *the external frames* (in this case, the legal frame LVU). Yet, this doubt is not necessarily met with resisting the frame as such, but through individual compensatory strategies (“doing the little extra”) and additional self-scrutiny (did I do the right thing?). The potential relief of sticking to the idealistic position thus seems harder to identify, but I would argue that, in *acting* in accordance with the idealistic values of the professional frame, this may provide workers with a sense of *doing* “good.” This offers a sense of meaningfulness and aids workers in supporting ontological security, provided that the values of the frame align with “personal” values. This is illustrated in Emma’s *liminal* story, where she conveys that the formal structures of the social services allowed her to believe, or rather *make* herself believe, that she could “make a difference.” This belief was congruent with her motivation for becoming a social worker (in the first interview): “balance class differences, create equal opportunities for people.” Now, this belief was in a state of flux. She had come to doubt, and even resent, the belief that making a difference was possible.

Furthermore, Emma’s retroactive reflection that “when you are working, you just *push* your limits, just *doing* it” can be interpreted as an expression of *the materiality of ideology* (Pfaller, 2015; Žižek, 2019), that is, that ideology can reside in a person’s *actions* and need not necessarily reside in consciousness. While Althusser (1994)

argued that people are “interpellated” within “ideological state apparatuses<sup>112</sup>”, through which people recognize themselves as *subjects*,<sup>113</sup> whereby the dominant ideology shape people’s beliefs, behaviors, and interactions. Thereby, they reproduce the ideology, while *believing* their actions and beliefs are their own (Althusser, 1994, p. 471). However, as argued by Žižek (2019), interpellation can never be “complete,” and people can even *disavow* the ideology, yet still continue to act *as if* they believe in it. This allows people to navigate the gaps and conflicts between their beliefs and actions. In Emma’s case, she seemed to be aware of the flaws and contradictions of the ideology (or emotional regime), but nonetheless kept “just doing it” and thinking that “it is just like any other job.”

Emma’s case can also be understood as an expression of *interpassivity* (Pfaller, 2012). Interpassivity refers to the idea that individuals can *delegate* their beliefs and actions to external objects, allowing objects or unidentified “others” (“anonymous illusions”) to believe *on their behalf*. Slavoj Žižek illustrates this idea in an example of the Tibetan prayer wheel. Tibetan monks attach a written prayer to a “praying wheel” that *does* the praying *for* the individual, and therefore substitute the taxing act of praying<sup>114</sup> (Žižek, 2019, p. 36). Thus, Emma’s beliefs may be understood as beliefs delegated to an external realm, enacting the values and beliefs of the professional frame, and that it is a job “like any other.”

The “bureaucratic” position can be understood in a similar way, where individual beliefs are delegated to the external bureaucratic structures and their faith in rules and procedures. Emma also recognized the *function* of believing: “otherwise it would have been completely unbearable.” It seems to express a retroactive understanding

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<sup>112</sup> Althusser (1994) distinguishes between “repressive” state apparatuses (police, military) and “ideological” state apparatuses (schools, family, media). While the former enforces power through coercion, the latter operates through “softer” institutions, promoting certain norms and values which reflect and reinforce the dominant ideology.

<sup>113</sup> Compare to Foucault’s (1982) concept *subjectification*, where the subject is understood as a product of power-knowledge structures (institutions, norms, power relations), which the individual reproduces through reflexive evaluation rituals of the self, whereby they become “tied to [their] own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (p. 212).

<sup>114</sup> Another example of interpassivity given by Pfaller, which left me with a bitter taste of recognition, is the “intellectual” who “often photocopy hundreds of pages from books in the library and then go home with a feeling of deep satisfaction” (2015, p. 28).

that *believing* served to shield her from what would *otherwise* be “unbearable,” attaching emotional and cognitive engagement to external structures. Emma thereby hints at a self-deception, where she seems to recognize that she made herself believe that the job was manageable.

The point, then, is that workers may be understood to appear to believe in things that they are expected to believe in. Belief is understood here as a cultural and/or social duty imposed externally on the actors that should be fulfilled to maintain social order, “involving moral commitment to maintain rituals of deference and demeanor which offers a sense of stability and ontological security to participants” (Bolton, 2005, p. 97). The frames offered a point of reference and a set of possible actions that actors take, as well as a set of beliefs and norms. When stepping out of the framing and ceasing to perform the actions, the beliefs and moral commitment (and the emotions involved) to an ideology may also change.<sup>115</sup>

Therefore, I would argue that the workers on both “sides” of the spectrum within the emotional regime maintained a sense of authenticity shaped by organizational and professional narratives. I would suggest that this process allowed them to *externalize* the ambiguity of the emotional regime, to an extent. If we again consult Pfaller (2012), sticking to rules may relieve the actor of the often painful act of reflecting over one’s capacity as a helper, and believing in the rules and routines they follow. Instead of *fully* believing, the person can then *act as if* they believed (“acting” here refers to Althusser’s materiality of ideology; Emma “just *doing it*”). Thus, the person would be the subject not of *their* belief, but of that of *others* (by “bureaucrats” belief in the legislation, manuals, and rules of the state apparatus, or for “idealists,” the belief that discretion accorded a space to “make a difference,” as per the professional ethos). Thereby, the whole issue of believing or not is externalized to *other* people’s illusions, referred to by Pfaller (2012) as “illusions without owners.” The quote by Emma above may accordingly be understood as her now having seen through such an illusion and construed it as self-deception.

Further, I suggest that the workers acted *as if* they believed in the values attached to the positions, and therefore the sense of identity was tied to continuous

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<sup>115</sup> “In effect, the sense of ourselves becomes so tied to the continuous participation in – and reproduction of – a set of practices [...] that any potential disruption is defined not just as a change in behaviour but as a threat to our very identity.” (Knights, 1990, p. 325)

participation in sets of *practices*, and when the acting ceased, as in Emma's case, the belief attached to that identity (or role position) crumbled.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

An overarching theme in this chapter was the ambivalence felt by the practitioners about the place of emotions in their practice, and in the boundaries between their private and professional spheres.

A couple of questions have been left unanswered and perhaps lie outside of the scope of this thesis. First, what is the point of “anchoring” the “self” to the professional role? What purposes may this ideal serve? Second, why should some professional acts lie outside of the scope of the role duty – the persistent ideal to do the little extra? This seemingly caused uncertainty in deciding what constitutes sufficient effort on the part of the professionals and difficulties in navigating the moral landscape – when have I done enough? Such questions seemed to surface in feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. The appeals to merge the private identity with the professional role through processes of perpetual self-awareness and self-management caused ambivalence among the participants. At the heart of things seemed to be a struggle of the boundary between the personal and the professional, epitomized in efforts to make sense of ideals of empathy, self-awareness, and reflexivity. As we have seen, the participants often spoke of not being able to help their clients as signs of their own deficiencies, instead of lacking resources or societal inequalities. The discrepancy between the mission of the social services and the actual ideological political atmosphere in which individuals are responsible for their own lives, combined with the commitment and emotional closeness to (some) clients, made them *feel* that they had failed.

Varying ideological stances have different sets of framing and feeling rules, and here I have defined the two (dominating) ideal-type “ideologies” as bureaucracy (organizational frame) and idealism (professional frame). The coexistence of these frames requires ongoing sense-making and navigation regarding how to approach the job. I suggested that this navigation involves claiming certain role positions available along the ideological spectrum, which can serve as protection from the inherent uncertainties of the job. The idealist position provided protection from feelings of meaninglessness, of being a faceless and replaceable bureaucrat. The

bureaucratic position aided to protect the private self from work, and thus from the times when they “failed” at work. The different positions were guided by different values and definitions of “good practice”. The ideal-type role positions correspond to the dual emotive-cognitive frames, which function as evaluative frameworks for behavior, actions, and feeling – mediated via feelings of shame and pride – through which participants self-evaluate and adjust their behaviors to align with the framing and feeling rules of the emotive-cognitive frames.

“Bureaucrats” typically had a clearer understanding of the limits of their duties, which potentially saved organizational resources in terms of money and time. The “idealists,” on the other hand, utilized their discretionary space more extensively and sometimes exceeded their perceived duties by using personal resources (compensatory work). Some described a process of repositioning over time, following a “reality check” that led them to alter their initial “naïve” approach, gradually accepting the bureaucratically constrained reality. By adjusting the standards by which they once defined themselves, they managed the guilt, disappointment, and perhaps even shame of not being able to “save the world.”

Moreover, social work literature suggest that anchoring professional ethical standards into their self-image, aiming to preserve an ethos of care and preventing practitioners from developing a cynical approach and becoming too distanced from clients. This is echoed in the ethical code for social workers: “Particularly in professions that involve supporting other people, the work itself can contribute to ethical personal development. But this does not happen automatically. Such professions also run the risk of losing their ethical and professional integrity and falling into an insensitive routine or even cynicism” (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016, p. 23, my translation). The ideal of intertwining professional ideals with personality varied depending on how the social workers positioned themselves along the spectrum; “bureaucrats” had, to a greater extent, constructed a professional role distinguished from the private sphere. All in all, the available positions (or professional identities) formulated by the frames define boundaries for engagement; protection from becoming *too* involved, or conversely, *too* detached.

When things were working well, meaning that the participants were in a good place privately as well as professionally, the nature of the job as unpredictable and self-organizable was often described as “exciting,” or “you never know what the day is going to bring, and I love it.” Most respondents appreciated the freedoms

associated with the job. Both the autonomy in time-planning, and to some extent the discretionary space within the exercise of authority when working with clients, were mentioned as positive aspects of the job. A particularly rewarding aspect of the job was when participants managed to help somebody, particularly when they had stepped outside the scope of their duties. However, during the interviews, other feelings regarding the flexibility of the job often surfaced: the downside of the same qualities could sometimes feel unmanageable due to an inability to adequately prioritize. This led to participants feeling anxiety-ridden, frustrated, and experiencing inadequacy and powerlessness. These feelings could, however, be allocated to various external factors, more or less successfully. In accordance with previous research, I would nonetheless argue that this chapter demonstrates that emotional labor is not, as per its definition, merely oppressive and alienating, but can be a source of meaningfulness and pride, and is fundamental element for maintaining a coherent sense of self (Ward, 2009).

In this chapter I have primarily focused on *individual* navigation and role positioning within the emotional regime. In the next I will examine *collective* navigation, and how successful interaction rituals within “subgroups” establish group-specific feeling rules. (Collins, 2004; Reddy, 2001).



## CHAPTER 8: INTERACTION RITUALS AND COLLECTIVE NAVIGATION

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed differences in atmosphere between the children and youth units and the adult unit. These differences appeared to stem from each unit being guided by distinct sets of rules and for presenting themselves as professional collectives. These rules were shaped by their distinct positionings within the networks of professional interactions and audiences, as well as the unique characteristics of their client groups and the loyalties associated with them.

In this chapter, I will demonstrate that, within the emotional regime and between the dual emotive-cognitive frames, the groups create emotional communities that allows relaxation from emotional effort and reduce emotional dissonance resulting from the role conflicts and conflicting feeling rules embedded in the emotional regime. Within these emotional communities, participants are allowed to feel and display "inappropriate" emotions, creating an *emotional refuge*, allowing for a "relaxation of emotional effort" from emotional norms (Reddy, 2001, p. 129). I examine how the units through repeated interaction rituals collectively navigate and manage the ambiguities of the emotional regime by constructing group-specific collective symbols, feeling rules, and framing rules, shaping group-specific "emotional styles" (Collins, 2004; Reddy, 2001, p. 125; cf. Rosenwein, 2006).

## INTERACTION RITUALS AND GROUP SOLIDARITY

Here I will show how the units engage in interaction rituals which – when successful – generate emotional energy, group solidarity and collective symbols of group membership (Collins, 2004). Once established *as* group, an “emotional refuge” is established where members can collectively construct specific feeling rules, manage emotions retroactively, and relax their emotional efforts.

In the following excerpt, I demonstrate how a process supervision session may be understood as a successful interaction ritual, where the initial pessimistic emotional tone is transformed into collective emotional energy and solidarity which serves as a motivator to keep trying. At the beginning of the session, the energy was low; the group seemed disenchanted and lethargic. Krista had initiated the meeting with the following declaration:

I'm completely numb, it's almost as if I don't feel. I mean, I get angry, I do, but I've never been like this, that I don't care if somebody dies. But now I feel that it doesn't *matter*, because I'm completely useless, and the client is not doing a damn thing right. But I'm surprised that I feel this way, hard and cold.

Jane followed up this gloomy sharing with:

My client had quit rehab and then I felt 'now I'm gonna feel that frustration,' but I didn't; I felt that, 'whatever, he can contact me if he feels like it.'

Elisabeth seemed to share the mood:

Elisabeth: I feel resigned today, almost indifferent. I'm so tired of this client; I feel like I almost don't give a damn about her.

The group disclosed, and perhaps encouraged each other to disclose, stories of feeling “numb” and “indifferent.” Yet, by the end of the session, the atmosphere was radically different. They had settled on a mutual recognition that they are “only human,” and that the job is – while “just a job” – also “really difficult” and “absurd.” What had unfolded was that, when talking about their respective clients, it became clear that they were not so indifferent; the problem was that they had gotten lost in their own feelings, attributing their lack of success to their own perceived inadequacy. However, sharing their emotions with the group, they were allowed to reinterpret these feelings and attribute them to external circumstances:

Krista: I was feeling alone in it; I was carrying her around in my body. This was great, we have the answers, but it becomes so muddled; we project the clients' feelings, but I feel like ten kilos has fallen off me, great session.

Mary: We have to remember that this is just a job; we can't save the world!

Mona: The problem is that when we engage with our clients, we do it as *people*. But you can't control how she is going to act, you are not responsible if she dies, it is absurd.

Elisabeth: We have to keep reminding each other that we are good at this, but we are only human; this job is really difficult. Last time, when Leah talked about her client, I thought it was beautiful. What she was describing was what it means to be a *human being* – she described herself, our role; we are *people*, and everything that comes with that. We get stuck in these situations; we become someone we do not want to *be* in this professional role.

As we can see from the excerpts, the group bonded over shared experiences and mutual recognition, providing them with *emotional energy*. Thus, the session can be interpreted as an example of a successful interaction ritual, an instance of transmutation “of *any* shared emotions into a new emotion: the collective effervescence of *solidarity*” (Collins, 2014, p. 300, emphasis added). By mutually establishing certain “truths” they translated their experiences into collective and sanctioned ways of feeling and acting. These truths were invoked frequently as summaries of each other's stories, and almost always entailed one or more of (versions of): “We are only human”; “this job is really difficult”, or “absurd.” These declarations produced a momentarily shared reality and recognition of their struggles, neatly summarized by Krista at the end of the session:

We constantly get confirmation here that we handle *very* difficult cases. It's a huge relief. These “truths” can be understood as *collective symbols* (Collins, 1993, 2004), Collective symbols can be values, words, or ideas which are used frequently in interaction rituals within a well-established group, whereby they are recharged with feelings of solidarity (Collins, 2004, p. 151). Once established, collective symbols become easily evoked in interactions and provide guidance for how to interpret events. In the above excerpts, we see how they allowed individual group members to reinterpret their feelings (indifference) and actions (not doing a good job), as well as generating in-group solidarity. Furthermore, such successful interaction rituals provided the individuals with emotional energy and shared acknowledgement of process supervision as a place where such energy can be gained. As Leah put it:

It is a great feeling waking up on a Thursday morning and knowing that I'm going here. However, throughout my fieldwork I noticed that process supervision *as such* did not automatically offer a venue in which successful rituals occur. Whether or not process supervision produced group solidarity and emotional energy was contingent

on participants sharing and bonding over shared emotions. This became evident when observing a children and youth unit [M1] during three process supervision sessions. The atmosphere was much less animated, and while the adult unit in M2 had to jointly decide a priority system regarding whose case to process, these sessions were characterized by prolonged and awkward silences when the supervisor asked who wanted to share their story. Furthermore, when the participants did share their stories, the focus was mainly on procedural matters, such as how to interpret legislation or choosing the best-suited care facility. After one session, I spoke to Sara, who I had noticed attempting to talk about more “emotional” matters. She explained:

Sara: People don't talk about the things that are hard for real about this job. They talk about their cases. They might say 'I'm so irritated,' but the more *revealing* feelings, they keep locked in. Sometimes I feel like I take more responsibility than the supervisor. Sometimes I even exaggerate my feelings to encourage others to share, you know?

Sara's revelation that she sometimes exaggerates her feelings to “encourage others to share” and be understood as an attempt to elicit mutual recognition of shared emotions and thereby activate a flow of emotional energy and group solidarity. While the adult unit in this instance was successful in collectively transforming emotions such as frustration, indifference, and anger into emotional energy and solidarity, the latter example demonstrates that this process is contingent on participants putting their emotions *into* it. In Clark's (2004) terms, interactions are governed by the logics of a *socioemotional economy*, where *emotional gifts* should be offered and reciprocated according to interactional rules. In the excerpt above, Sara feels disappointed not only in her colleagues not reciprocating her attempts, but also in the supervisor for not “taking responsibility” to stimulate a flow of emotional exchange.

It also illuminates that emotional labor does not only involve individual efforts to suppress or elicit emotions, but also the centrality of *collective* emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983, pp. 114–116). This requires a collective effort to construct and maintain a certain emotional tone, by offering, accepting, and reciprocating emotional gifts.

Furthermore, I noticed how a strong mutual focus of attention arising in critical situations generated high amounts of emotional energy. In Chapter 6, I showed how the members of the first response team shared an inside understanding, that they

preferred “tragic” cases over those where they lacked the authorization to vigorously intervene: “We never say, ‘oh no, not a violence case!’... everybody is just like *yes*, I want to go! [Focus group interview, M2]. Lisa returned to this in a later interview:

Fanny: What are your best and worst days at work?

Lisa: My worst days have to do more with managers than working cases. For example, that girl we took custody of because of sexual abuse, you would think that is the worst, but, excuse this expression, that was one of the *best* days. Because we worked as a *team*, we were boosted, *bam bam bam*, everyone had their tasks, and the hours just disappeared. And we did it good, for everyone.

*Later in the interview, I ask Lisa what is meaningful in the job.*

Lisa: When everyone is doing their part, it just flows, we work toward the same goal. Then I feel good, then I can work until midnight, no problems. I sit here in the office at nine pm and feel more well-rested than ever before, it brings so much energy. People tell me to go home, but I’m like no way, I want to keep going. [Interview, CYU M2]

In this excerpt, several elements for generating a successful interaction ritual are present. The group members are separated from outsiders, fostering a collective consciousness that they can find “the worst” cases rewarding. They describe interactions where they are in a state of flow – illuminated by the alteration of temporal experience (“the hours just disappear”) – cooperating towards a clear goal, having a shared focus of attention as well as shared emotions (urgency). Despite the – from an outsider perspective – atrocious nature of the case (child sexual abuse), the flow of the interaction ritual provided the members with individual emotional energy and the group with collective solidarity. The emotional energy seemingly *overrode* what would otherwise, conceivably, trigger unpleasant emotions related to the nature of the case, as well as bypassing the exhaustion one would expect at “nine pm”. Instead, the collective flow was highly rewarding, creating collective effervescence and group solidarity, as well as individual emotions of confidence and enthusiasm (Collins, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

## ALTERITY AND GROUP IDENTITY

Just as alterity played a key role in how individuals positioned themselves, it also influenced collective identity construction. These *others* could also refer to previous workplaces, as discussed in the section on liminality in Chapter 7. Mona had herself previously worked in a financial aid unit and, and shared her opinion about its culture with the group:

I was *fed* that stuff at financial aid, the idea that demands and squareness can help clients move forward, but it was like if someone admitted to drinking alcohol, they would be kicked out immediately. [Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

Nonetheless, “others” usually referred to other units or occupational groups, of which they had formed certain impressions. During meeting observations, I often noticed how participants spoke of other units and professional groups as embodiments of certain values, beliefs, and actions which they distinctly distanced themselves from. For example, there were recurrent narratives characterized by hyperbolic descriptions about *other* social work offices, where “they” were “super-bureaucratic” or “super lenient.” Stories about others ultimately worked as counter-symbols for proper behavior. Groups that I classified belonging towards the idealistic end of the spectrum warned about being like others that they deemed “square” (rejecting applicants based on formalities) but to be empathetic and to “see each client and their individual needs.” Just as managers were depicted as being driven by “hard” factors like time and money, other units were similarly portrayed:

Mary: I feel like the other units can only focus on how much money she costs. She has made fantastic progress; we’re euphoric about what she has managed to do, and all they can focus on is the *cost* of warehousing her stuff.

While others are portrayed as being guided by a singular objective – *money* – the unit bonds over other shared objectives and values – here in appreciating the client’s progress. The social workers thus constructed their identity through interactions with unit members, *contrasting* it with identities driven by monetary goals. This *other* identity, in turn, reinforces their own.

They also seemed to accentuate their reputations, finding pride in being defined as a unit with their own unique traits:

Mona: We’re a strong group, uhm, many... it’s kind of funny, many people in the office fear my unit – they think that we are scary.

Fanny: [*laughs*] So I’ve heard.

Mona: Maybe not me personally, but many have said like, ‘God, I have to go and talk to *them*.’

Fanny: I see, it rubs off on you?

Mona: Now we’re the cool kids on the block.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Swedish: *Dom coola niondeklassarna i rikrutan.*

Fanny: [*laughs*] That must feel awesome!

Mona: Yeah, *finally* I'm one of them [*laughs*]. [Interview, AU, M2]

While the adult unit had – if we believe Mona – the reputation of being “scary,”<sup>117</sup> other qualities were ascribed to the other units. For example, the child- and youth services were described as self-important and demanding (in terms of attention and resources), while the financial aid units were perceived as relentless and square bureaucrats. Narratives of *what we are* and *what others are* (and by extension, what we are not) enhance feelings of team solidarity.

Further, according to Collins, once group solidarity has been established, people tend to seek more solidarity by invoking rituals. In turn, successful interaction rituals produce “collective symbols,” which, I argue, these self-descriptions may exemplify (Collins, 1993, p. 212). Additionally, actors tend to offer their observers an *idealized* impression to fulfill their observers’ stereotypes and maintain smooth interactions (Goffman, 1959, p. 35–36), arguably reinforcing such collective symbols.

## HUMOR AND GROUP COHESION

In previous chapters we have seen examples of how humor may facilitate role distance and therefore offer relaxation, and a space to manage feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and powerlessness. It has also been mentioned as an instrument to facilitate relationships with clients.

In this section, I will show how humor can provide a space for collectively managing difficult emotions as well as fostering a sense of community, solidarity, and group identity. For example, during a tense inter-unit meeting, Mona clarified who she was speaking about by saying, “that guy who always calls the answering machine during weekends and blur *I love you*,” which immediately elevated the atmosphere. A social worker from financial aid laughingly filled in, “is that the guy who always stands in a garbage bin on main street [she turned to me and elaborated] – and I mean stand *inside of* the garbage bin.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> The participants in other units I spoke to did not use the term “scary,” but I heard “loud” and “blunt.”

<sup>118</sup> I was frequently invited into the group by them addressing me directly. For instance, during a process supervision with the adult unit, I dropped my computer, ill-timed, on the floor amid a sad story. Leah exclaimed “There goes the research!”, whereby the group burst out in laughter and then returned to business.

Contrary to what one might expect, humorous and harsh interactions were not limited to typical lunch break banter but occurred in all kinds of meetings, sometimes regardless of whether the manager was present (or, apparently, a researcher). This apparent break from traditional ideals of professionalism was also sometimes displayed in front of outsiders. For example, during a method meeting with the adult unit, Mary retold a story for my benefit about literally – *manually* - trying to stop a client from using drugs:

Mary: And I remember seeing Susan out there in the bushes, from the window of my office, trying to wrestle the pills out of his hands, her head was bobbing up and down.

Susan: Hands-on social work. [Field notes, AU M2]

The social work office in municipality 2 is conveniently located near the city center, attracting daily foot traffic from people walking their dogs or picking up their kids from preschool. Despite this, judging by this story, there was little concern about how the public would conceive of their professional practice.

Further, mutual (and for an outsider, rather mean) nicknames for clients, such as “giant babies,” or more personalized nicknames like Cry-Michael, “mean-Mason,” and “toenails-Elmer,” frequently surfaced during observations. In essence, such insider jokes strengthened the group in ritual interactions by references to repeated jokes and stories, nicknames, and shared memories, composing a “mutual focus and emotional entrainment,” making the group increasingly conscious of itself *qua* the group (Collins, 2004, p. 65). Shared humor thus emphasized the common insider status, and in effect, produced group solidarity (cf., Fine & DeSoucey, 2005). While such crude jokes at the clients’ expense may seem contradictory to their moral standards, I would rather see this type of gallows humor as a commentary on their own role, allowing them some distance from their self-righteous role as morally superior.

Joking also served to relieve tension when telling gruesome stories, and thus “provide a space for escape as much as a means for engagement” (Bolton and Houlihan, 2009, p. 560). For example, during a particularly grave process supervision session, everyone shared atrocious stories of abused women. For instance, Mona said:

The violence is really bad – he strangles her and rapes her, anally too. He’s a psychopath, and I think he’s going to kill her one day. Her dad also sexually abuses her.

In my field notes I had written that “the atmosphere is heavy, no jokes for once,” and “I’m feeling very upset and struggling to hold back tears.” At the end of the session, they discussed possible solutions but came up short due to malfunctions in “the system.” Supervisor Joanne tried to summarize, addressing Mona:

Joanne: It is like you have looked into the abyss, and you see all this terrible chaos and you want to know where to begin.

Krista [interrupts]: We could hire a hitman.

[the group breaks out in laughter]

Susan: That’s something! Quit the social services and become an executioner!

Elisabeth: What if he accidentally falls...

[laughter]

Joanne: Have you gained something today?

Susan: Not a lot of energy [*the group laughs*].

Krista: I take with me that we keep hanging in there, and we are not totally out of our depth, but our cases are *so* difficult and *totally* absurd, but we have each other and are not alone with the hopelessness and frustration. And yes, we are a bit dumb to stay in this job, but we obviously think that there is some hope, and we can have fun.

Mary: Like I said, it’s hard to work with people, and it’s hard to understand how people can go back to their abusers. I confirmed it again; I don’t understand people, they are *weird*.

Leah: It’s a dark void. [*the group laughs out loud*] No, but we talk about it in this way, and if a bloody IT-guy had heard this, they would *drown*. We’re still trying to be creative and lift each other out of the darkness, but we’re bloody sick in the head, all of us, but that’s a good thing.

[Field notes, AU M2]

Despite Susan jokingly asserting that she had not gained “a lot of energy” during the session, I felt the atmosphere shift. I was immediately relieved when Krista cracked a joke about hiring a hitman; the knot in my stomach melted away. Playing with the notion of solving their clients’ terrible situations by executing<sup>119</sup> their abusers seemed to lift some of the hopelessness and powerlessness the social workers felt. The session provided a sense of mutual recognition in shared emotions and collective relief. It also tested and confirmed the team’s loyalty and solidarity, as they knew that such jokes were sanctioned within the team when separated from

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<sup>119</sup> Amusingly, this joke is an allegory of gallows humor, though in its original form, the joke was made by the person about to be executed.

outsiders. This created certain “collective symbols” for the group: a shared understanding of the absurdity and difficulty of the job, and the acknowledgment that they are all “sick in the head” for staying in the job and continuing to try, ultimately serving to enhance group cohesion and solidarity.

Such humor might be understood as “subversive fun,” a type of fun that may undermine the organization’s image and upset the status quo (cf. Bolton & Houlihan, 2009; Fincham, 2016) by constructing an emotional refuge there they could relax from the emotional effort required frontstage (Reddy, 2001). Its functions include consolidating a sense of group identity (the in-group) while excluding outsiders to reduce tension, enhance cheerfulness, relieve boredom and escape rules. Despite the potential subversive potential of such a subculture, I would argue that it ultimately served the organization’s purposes by encouraging workers to *keep trying*. In Collins’ (2004) terms, such rituals accumulated emotional energy and solidarity within the team, transforming feelings of anger, sadness, and hopelessness into motivation to persevere (cf. Summers-Effler, 2002).

#### SOLIDARITY AND BETRAYALS: DYNAMICS OF DRAMATURGICAL LOYALTY

A performance involves various actors, the audience (onlookers), co-participants, and potentially, outsiders. A *group* of performers that cooperate to stage a routine is referred to by Goffman (1959) as *team*. All members of a team depend on cooperation to maintain a particular definition of the situation (Goffman, 1959, pp. 82–83). To sustain the “staging of a routine,” the team must maintain a “coherent front.” This requires agreement on what they are to perform and maintaining *dramaturgical loyalty*, meaning each team member should be “taken in by own performance” and cooperate to uphold the given definition of the situation, so as not to “give the show away” by, for example, denouncing a team member’s performance. To achieve this, teams should develop *high in-group solidarity*, avoiding affective ties with the audience and maintaining loyalty to the group (Collins, 2004).

To demonstrate the importance of such dramaturgical loyalty, I will illustrate what happens when it fails, when a team member “gives the show away.” In an interview with Lisa, she provided an example of this when speaking of a previous employment in a different municipality:

We were all really unhappy, overstressed, disappointed, and everyone agreed that we had to do something, to protest. Later that week, we were at a meeting with politicians, and suddenly *I* was the spokesperson for the whole group, talking about how the organization didn't work, and everyone else just *sat* there, and I was like 'why aren't you saying anything, you have lots of opinions!', and my manager says: 'don't speak for the whole group, speak for yourself—like, in front of *everyone*, it was like she was saying that *I* was the problem, and then I just gave up. [Interview]

From Lisa's perspective, her teammates failed to cooperate to maintain the agreed-upon performance. Lisa had prepared for this meeting with her co-workers, expecting to gain emotional energy from collectively pointing out organizational deficiencies. However, she felt betrayed when they suddenly remained quiet, effectively "giving the show away," breaking dramaturgical loyalty. This drained Lisa of the built-up emotional energy and threatened the solidarity or the "social bond" within the group (Scheff, 2000).

Instead, the manager was given the opportunity to present a competing definition of the situation, suggesting that Lisa was contaminating the atmosphere and disrupting the frontstage performance the manager was trying to stage. Blaming Lisa could be interpreted as a case of *face-saving behavior* on the part of the manager. In other words, and perhaps this is an overinterpretation, the manager felt the need to perform a certain way in front of the audience (the politicians), and her status and pride were possibly perceived as undercut when Lisa criticized the organization of the unit. Consequently, the blame was shifted back to Lisa "in front of *everyone*," plausibly as a way for the manager to regain pride by putting Lisa "in her place" through a micropolitical strategy (Clark, 1990). By using what Clark calls a "place marker," the manager undermined Lisa's criticism by "other-targeted emotion" (Clark, 1990), invoking feelings of embarrassment in Lisa and leading to her resignation.

As Kemper (1990) argues, anticipated gain of emotional energy from an interaction will make the experience of loss more profound. Unanticipated loss can cause an even greater loss of EE, as it signals that trusted sources for EE – established through past interaction rituals – are instable (Collins, 2004; Summers-Effler, 2002). Such disturbance of entrusted sources signals to group members, as Scheff (2000) puts it, a threat to one's "social bond" to the group. Conceivably, Lisa had prepared for this meeting together with her co-workers, expecting emotional energy when collectively pointing out organizational deficiencies, and felt a sense of betrayal when they were suddenly quiet. Thus, I would interpret this as a

combination of lack of anticipated emotional energy, as well as a realization of instability of Lisa's "source of emotional energy" (the colleagues) – and therefore caused even greater discontent.

During a process supervision, Jane told a similar story:

*[From field notes, AU, M2] Jane tells the group about a meeting at an addiction treatment home. The staff at the home were upset about one of Jane's clients, Tommy, who repeatedly broke the rules. Jane felt attacked by the staff and subsequently betrayed by her manager for not standing up for her.*

Jane: I was called to a meeting with the staff at the treatment home. When I arrived, they are *all* sitting there, and our manager is there. I walk in all happy, and then they are all like, 'we've said this so many times, we've turned a blind eye for so long now.' And I'm turning to my manager like, I know that, and we have decided to look for a different placement for Tommy. And the manager of the treatment facility says: 'and that's why we are having this meeting, *Jane*.' I felt that he blamed *me*, that *I* had done something wrong. It is so unfair. And my manager says, 'maybe we should forget who's done what and focus on what to do next,' but I feel like, why are all these idiots sitting there, attacking me? And why do they talk about it like my manager was not in on my decision? We talked about this! And someone says, 'Tommy is a mythomaniac.' Yeah, what the hell did you expect, he's a *heroin addict!*

*[The group laughs out loud]*

Jane: I felt that everyone was against me, and our manager was like 'you're the state agency representative, you're the one who is responsible.'

*Someone in the group whispers 'that is so fucking low.' They are all shaking their heads, laughing in disbelief.*

Process supervisor: How did that make you feel?

Jane: It's so unfair, I don't understand why our manager is sitting there, and I'm like, who are you? Do you understand what kind of people we are working with? Why do we even have these treatment homes?... and now I feel, how are we going to work together?

In this example, Jane felt betrayed by her manager for not standing up for her, similar to Lisa's experience of not adhering to the agreed-upon definition of the situation. This excerpt also demonstrates a high degree of in-group loyalty, as the group expresses consensus with Jane's definition of what had happened.

An observation may be made regarding the role of the manager. Sometimes, the manager was depicted as being part of the team, participating in the relaxed realms of the backstage area, laughing and making crude jokes. Some managers were portrayed as being one of the team in frontstage performances, with statements like "I know that she always has my back." However, in the example from the meeting, the manager was "part of the play" in the role of a director responsible for delivering

a correct performance frontstage (in front of the politicians). I would suggest that *team* is applicable when the manager and the unit members share an agreed-upon definition of the situation and foster such performances frontstage. In this position, the manager may be seen as a director who assigns team members specific parts and the “personal front” that should be presented by each part. The director is responsible for ensuring that the team maintains the line of performance, and holds “dramatic dominance” over the team (Goffman, 1959, p. 102). This involves instructing on the proper display of “affective involvement” (p. 99) and suppressing one’s own improper emotions and those of teammates “in order to give the appearance of sticking to the affective line” (p. 217). However, when the manager fosters a competing performance, they are not part of the team. This dual role of the managers, with their *potential* to direct both frontstage and backstage areas seemed to add to the general unpredictability of the work environment.

An additional example of how competing definitions of the situation were performed frontstage occurred during a meeting between the childcare center and the first response team. The team had prepared in detail how to present themselves (for instance, by making a PowerPoint presentation). In Goffman’s terms, they had attempted to create *dramaturgical discipline* (1959, p. 135) by preparing a clear narrative of their role responsibilities, routines, and actions. Nonetheless, in a subsequent focus group interview with the unit, they said that the manager had “thrown them under the bus.” One of the unit members who had not attended the meeting asked the group:

Trisha: Was our manager there?

Emelie: I’m not sure, I mean, she was *physically* there.

Hannah: We expected to have a manager there that would put the foot down if they were hostile, to say ‘you can’t say that, it’s not okay, you have to be humble,’ but the manager just let them speak of the social services as ‘a black hole,’ no reaction.

During the meeting, I had written the following in my field notes:

The group prepare for the presentation together with the manager, and they jokingly anticipated what was to come. The manager jokingly said ‘you don’t do anything! No, I trust you.’

And later I had written:

During a coffee break, I noticed that one of the more hostile nurses approached the manager and complained that the team was not doing their job and that they never

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reported back what was going on. The manager responded, 'I hear you; we have to be better,' while some of the unit members eavesdropped and shook their heads in disbelief.

When the manager did the opposite of what they had expected (throwing them under the bus, supporting the nurses instead of the team), I would argue that the expectations and hope of how the manager should ideally have acted – demonstrating their group solidarity – *amplified* their disappointment and anger. The pre-meeting statement, "I trust you," contributed to these expectations. Had they not expected something different, the disappointment and anger would conceivably be less intense.

In sum, I argue that repeated successful interaction rituals (or ritual chains, as Collins terms them) of mutually focused emotions generate emotional energy and lasting solidarity, which strengthen the group's identity and sense of membership. These mutually focused emotions are attached to certain "collective symbols" such as humor and pride, which the group mutually constructs and maintains. The emotional energy within the group serves to sustain group solidarity during frontstage performances. When the expectations are broken, however, and expected rewards of emotional energy do not come to fruition, emotions of disappointment and anger emerge. Additionally, the team's collective identity, if successfully upheld, can facilitate the emotional navigation within the emotional regime and provide relief from perceived violations of one's preferred organizational identity (or role positioning) and its attached feeling rules.

Next, I show how collective identities, including client loyalties and moral yardsticks, were affected by the units' target groups.

## CLIENT LOYALTIES AND MORAL STANDARDS

As the different units dealt with different client groups, they were responding differently to societal moral values. Such values build upon general societal attitudes towards segments of the population, and are dependent on stereotypes and simplifications, which gradually become institutionalized (Lipsky, 2010, Hasenfeld, 2010). The institutionalization of societal stereotypes seemed to be a point of conflict between the different units, particularly when it came to how respond to clients (Liljegren, 2008).

The adult unit social workers spoke of how other units did not understand, or even looked down upon, their target group. In the adult unit they frequently spoke of breakdowns in inter-unit cooperation attributed to a “different view” of “their” clients. Such cooperation could either mean that a client was “active” in two or more units concurrently, or that two or more individuals in the same family were active in different units. For example, Leah said the following of the children and youth unit:

Leah: I am always feeling insecure when cooperating with the children and youth unit, because they often enter as a *savior*: “take the children!” They see our clients in a different way than we do. I wonder how outsiders would look at it, if they think that the social services are *one* unit. [Field notes, process supervision observation, AU M2]

In this case, Leah’s client struggled with alcoholism, and despite her now being sober, the children and youth unit had placed her children in protective care, which Leah was now left to explain to her client. Later in the same process supervision session, they revisited the cooperation difficulties with other units:

Kathryn: They don’t understand how we think. I have been in meetings with parents with abuse problems, and they have demonstrated that they are clean, but they [CYU] say no. And the clients don’t know what they want; some people in other units are so *square*. And the financial aid unit, if the client doesn’t have a certain *paper*, they don’t get any money and then lose their home.

*The group mumbles in recognition. “Right!” someone says.*

Mona: I lost it at an inter-unit meeting, Fanny was there; I got so angry at Helen from the other unit. She is a moron. You want to cooperate with your colleagues and do something good, and no one wants to help. It’s a huge frustration; we’re supposed to be *one* social service, but it’s like everyone just keeps blaming each other for doing things wrong. [Field notes, process supervision observation, AU M2]

During the inter-unit meeting that Mona refers to, I had written:

Helen: I wish that Maddie would take more initiatives; she’s gotten used to cruising around.

Mona [*strained voice*] You can’t plan with Maddie, that’s what I’m trying to tell you.

*Helen says that it’s very sad that these kinds of people are un-helpable. Mona and manager Tina exchange looks, the irritation is palpable.*

Helen: I would like to demand more from her.

Mona: But she doesn’t *want* to, it will be like throwing her to the wolves! We need to build *trust* with Maddie, that’s the way to go. We should be happy that she is talking to us at all.

*After the meeting I talked to Mona in her office.*

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Mona: I cannot cooperate with Helen! The purpose of me arranging this meeting was to show the others what I am dealing with – not Maddie, *Helen*. She demands way too much of Maddie. Helen tells Maddie that “you better accept the help that we offer you.” I see it as a threat to take away her benefits. It doesn’t work to make a paraphrased to-do list for Maddie; everything is about to make Maddie *trust* me, and Helen is *destroying* that trust. Maddie has made *huge* progress just by finding the *courage* to tell me who is abusing her, and Helen doesn’t even take that into the assessment – the governing logic at that unit, it is about quid pro quo; it’s all they care about!

[Field notes, M2]

In these excerpts, we can see how social work specialization has resulted in variations among social workers from different units in terms of their closeness to the messy reality of their clients. In the interaction between Mona and Helen, we can distinguish a structurally embedded contempt for some clients of the adult unit (in this case, those suffering addiction disorders). Mona is trying to argue in favor of empathetic understanding, while Helen sees Maddie as “cruising around,” and that they must demand more from her. Simply put, this excerpt can be seen as a manifestation of the care/control division in social work. Mona is much closer to Maddie, with frequent meetings over time, while Helen, in her role in the financial aid unit, has had a few, and brief, assessment meetings with her. The units thus seemed to have different ideas of how to manage the approach to clients, which caused friction between units.

A further example of such friction is outlined below, where adult social worker Jane has been assigned a client, Amelia, who was already active in the children and youth services due to a custody battle with her ex-partner. She discussed the case during process supervision:

Jane: It went wrong from the outset, the situation with the children and youth unit, how they talk about Amelia, the case workers, and other people... it has messed with my head; I feel really disturbed about it.

Supervisor: Tell us from the beginning.

Jane: I was in my office, and a case worker from the children and youth unit comes in and says ‘you’re about to meet this woman; she has a small child and has accused her ex of abusing her, but just so you know, nothing she says is true; she is crazy. It is the dad that you should feel sorry for.’ And then I asked about the kid, and she said that the kid is with Amelia, and I felt like, the kid is in danger. But then the case worker says, ‘Amelia was on [a dating reality show] a few years ago,’ – she had recognized her, and [she said] that she had rewatched old episodes and seen how manipulative Amelia is, like ‘she’s so manipulative on that show.’

Supervisor: but... isn’t everyone?

Jane: Yes! But I didn't say anything, but I felt like, if she has decided who Amelia is based on a TV show, then I decided just as quickly that the case worker is wrong – I shut her off; I don't believe her. But then I felt like now I am not neutral, and that is also wrong. Anyway, I talked to Amelia later, and she feels really judged by everyone, misunderstood. [Jane speaks for ten minutes about Amelia's case.] Anyway, I feel so bad about it, how we – including myself! – talk about a case in almost a triumphant way, instead of doing things objectively, problematizing; it is like you get personal – like how I as a person get provoked and become myself, working as myself instead of working professionally.

Supervisor: You're moralizing?

Jane: Yes, and now everyone else in Amelia's case are [is] on the social workers' side – they say that she is unreliable, manipulative, lacking respect, demanding too much, and being ungrateful. And I feel like it's unfair, but I don't know what to do.

Leah cuts in: I think it's great that you bring that feeling up here and question it, because I have problems with children- and youth services too, because they make their assessments, and we don't really understand them. But it's great that you question their assessment; maybe the client will get a fairer treatment in the end. It feels like their moralizing helps them – they can lean back and think that the person is mentally ill, so she can't care for the child; that person is an alcoholic so we can take the child, and it's easier for them, while we see the person behind the mental illness or the alcoholism or whatever it may be. I have noticed when speaking to them that a great deal circle around their child perspective.

In the case of Amelia, at least according to Jane, the children and youth unit social workers, together with the shelter where Amelia and her child lived, have all accepted the view of her as manipulative and a liar. How the case was initially presented to Jane, justifying an assessment of Amelia's personality based on a reality dating show, seemed to cause an almost reflexive defiance in Jane. Jane's story is full of contradictory dos and don'ts regarding how to be professional. She attributes her feeling "disturbed" to the biased and unprofessional decision-making process of her colleague, as well as her own, equally unprofessional response to this colleague.

Jane's reaction to how the children and youth unit social worker talked about Amelia, and the subsequent recognition of her colleagues, could, however, be understood as something else: a collective unit culture in which they are expected to give their clients the benefit of the doubt – a "cleansing" of stereotypes when taking on a new case, which in turn could be interpreted as a sacred value of the group (Collins, 2004). Over time, Jane has habituated the unit's way of thinking and feeling – a collective consciousness – and thus reacts spontaneously to this situation with irritation and anger (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). The irritation and anger

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expressed by Jane can thus be understood as a reaction to a violation against her (and her team's) sacred values (Collins, 2004).

Leah suggests that the adult unit sees the person behind the mental illness or alcoholism, while the children and youth unit are helped by their "moralizing," indicates how judgments of client segments are anchored in larger moral structures. Larson (1977) has argued that professionals are often contaminated by the social status of their clients. Due to prevalent negative class-based stereotypes toward poverty and people with addiction disorders, some social workers have felt embarrassed to disclose their profession (Warner, 2015). For the children and youth unit, the loyalty is ultimately to the children (the "child perspective"), which arguably reflects the larger ideology of society. As Warner argues (2015, p. 12; cf. Ahmed, 2004), children are *the* moral referent in the "hierarchy of innocence" and are therefore the most "worthy" of clients, thus *a priori* legitimizing the children and youth social workers' "moralizing." The adult unit's moral yardstick, of "seeing the person behind," is a more specific norm that it attached to their role position, being the advocate for their target group.

Next, I will demonstrate how collective pride is produced by their client loyalties, and how this in turn shapes local feeling rules.

## COLLECTIVE SYMBOLS AND PRIDE

By engaging in successful interaction rituals, the units also established feelings of *collective pride*, which was attached to certain morally infused ideals. The adult unit was guided by the ideal of seeing the person behind, in addition to an ethic of presence, as mentioned Chapter 7. In short, this meant that even if clients were deemed "un-helpable," there was an agreement that they "need to *step up* and just *be* there," as Mary phrased it. I noticed a sense of dignity in sticking up for "hopeless" clients, those deemed by others as "unworthy" (Billquist, 1999) or undeserving of sympathy (Sahlin, 1994). The participants frequently expressed pride in their clients for what would often go unnoticed by outsiders.

A similar ideal was expressed by the first response team. They spoke of their ability to empathize with certain people that others could not:

Sara: Tell me, just *tell me* about any lawyer or whatever profession that would want to sit in front of a dad who has sexually abused his three-year-old daughter and *sit* there and have a nice conversation with him. Because our goal is to make him a part of this

objective that we have so that it does not happen again, *that* is our goal. Just tell me that one of those people would want to have that conversation; I don't think so.

Paula: No matter how much you dislike the act, a *person* is sitting there in front of you, a dad.

Lisa: Who didn't want to harm his child, not really; of course this dad did not want this for his child, and then you have to be able to carry these feelings that you really didn't want... he has no value at all, but he *does*, because our objective is to protect this child.  
[Focus group interview, first response team]

The capacity to empathize is here framed as a *sacred object*, involving a sense of *moral righteousness* (Collins, 1975). Empathy is presented not just as a professional means to an end (relationship building), but as an emotionally infused collective symbol, representing membership in the group and has intrinsic value as an end in itself. Being able to empathize with people who, from an outsider perspective, do not deserve empathy goes beyond the scope of the interaction at hand. It seems that the group has already established this as a moral standard, a sense of what is right and wrong, which becomes embedded in the collective symbols and practices of the group.

Here, empathy is governed by feeling rules: suppressing other-critical moral emotions (e.g., of contempt, anger, and disgust; see Turner & Stets, p. 553), which is central to how the team members find larger meaning in their job. There is a mutual recognition and celebration of empathetic qualities that demonstrate persistence and determination, which in turn serve as a higher objective: "to protect this child." They also establish boundaries that confirm their insider status by suggesting that other professions could not possibly "sit there and have a nice conversation" with such people and consider them "a *person*." I would therefore suggest that empathy here illustrates how the team members construct collective pride and establish a collective emotional style (Reddy, 2001).

Working with clients who, from an outsider's perspective, would be considered unworthy of help, such as addicts and pedophiles, has been labeled as "dirty work" that may involve physical, social, and moral "taint" (Hughes, 1951). While workers dealing with such taint have been seen as stigmatized, in that society projects the negative qualities of the "dirt" onto them, others have demonstrated how dirty work can be a source of pride, strength, and belonging (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ward & McMurray, 2016).

The group members seem to take pride in emphasizing with their “morally tainted” clients and in their ability to empathize with those whom others cannot empathize with. They construct collective pride in their ability to “cross empathy walls,” as Hochschild puts it (2016, p.5). This collective pride also serves as a “collective symbol” within the groups, which in turn strengthens their solidarity (Collins, 2004). Empathy as a collective symbol guides the group members by way of moral rules governing the collective idea of the “right” sort of person to be and determines who to empathize with (Hochschild, 2016). Thus, when choosing to act according to an eternal moral norm (treat all clients with respect) over their spontaneous internal moral reaction (e.g., disgust over child abusers), they experience professional pride.

According to Collins (2004), moral values are internalized through collective interaction rituals, generating emotional energy. The collective symbols are subsequently linked to individual self-perceptions, mediated through self-evaluating feelings of pride and shame when aligning to or breaking these moral values, heightening awareness of the professional self-image and thereby encouraging self-regulation and adaptation by the individual actor. Furthermore, collective symbols become habituated and inform individuals’ behavior, sometimes to the extent that they do not have to think about how they should act, guided by a *feeling* that it is the right thing to do (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018).

Nonetheless, the group could warrant exceptions from honoring such collective symbols. I would like to revisit the process supervision session where Leah struggled to understand why she “snapped” at Cry-Michael. Supervisor Joanne tried to understand why Leah felt “bad on a professional level,” and the following exchange neatly captures how the unit collectively constructed local feelings rules:

Leah: I’m not *supposed* to snap, or to say what I personally feel.

Joanne: Where did you get that idea from?

Leah: [*ironically*] School. [*The group snickers. Not from us, someone jokingly says. Leah laughs.*]

*The group reassures Leah. They’ve all been there. Her reaction is normal; it is not Leah’s job to be Cry-Michael’s therapist.*

Mona cuts in: I think that the bitterness is interesting, the shame of feeling unprofessional. Where *does* that idea come from? And I’m thinking, how did social work begin? It’s the idea of a *calling*, rich women in America needing something to do, help the needy, somehow that is what preoccupies us, what *we* “do,” so to speak, no wonder we feel like failures.

In this exchange, we can see how Leah outlines the perceived “correct” emotional style when meeting clients: do not “snap.” Having overstepped the feeling rules, this urges her to seek advice from her colleagues. She also articulates the boundaries for what it means to be professional: not “say what I personally feel.” Furthermore, she locates the source of these professional feeling rules in social work education. Mona expands on these feeling rules and traces them to the philanthropic genesis of the broader meaning of social work and “rich women in America,” which I understand as a reference to those credited as the founders of social work (e.g., Jane Addams and Mary Richmond). Lastly, we can see how the group collectively navigate and challenge such feeling rules in situ: “not from us” – we construct our own feeling rules.

Thus, there is an awareness of the emotionally charged collective symbols that they are trained to cherish during education – here epitomized by certain historical figures that represent a broader collective identity of social work and its moral standards. The interaction demonstrates how the group critically review the feeling rules attached to such sacred symbols. Recognizing that they are unreasonable and make them “feel like failures,” they engage in a process of constructing group-specific feeling rules that allow space for deviation from such fantastic ideals.

The way different units interpret feeling rules is contingent on their relationship with their clients. For the children and youth units, the child is their client, and their loyalty is to them, conceivably sometimes generating an authoritative and often skeptical approach to their parents. In contrast, the adult unit views the client as the primary stakeholder who needs protection, often from themselves. The adult unit typically has long-term clients, necessitating a more personal relationship to build trust.

The expectations on self-presentation also depend on work duties and extent of legal power. The first response team, especially in forced care cases, must present themselves as legal enforcers, requiring a more authoritative and professionally correct demeanor. Conversely, adult unit social workers adapt their self-presentation across client meetings. Additionally, the adult unit’s perception of financial aid and housing unit social workers suggests that their emotional labor is more externally determined and standardized, likely due to stricter rules and shorter client interactions.

Thus, the nature of and demands for emotional labor vary, depending on intensity and longevity of client relationship, intention (building trust or enforcing law), and self-presentation (authoritative or caring).

## GROUP CULTURE AND EMOTION MANAGEMENT

Lastly, the teams seemed to hold a collective standard on how to manage emotions in their respective roles. I would like to revisit one of the most emotionally charged observations I made, previously discussed in Chapter 7. This was the “cooperation meeting” between the first response unit and workers from several childcare centers and illustrates quite powerfully how unit (emotional) cultures and identities are constructed.

During a previous staff meeting, the first response team mentioned that they consider themselves “the face” of the social services’ children and youth units. This means they often meet with other professionals and the public to explain the function, methods, and mission of the social services. The meeting with the pediatric nurses and midwives was organized to enhance cooperation between the agencies, which, as I was told, “was terrible.” Veteran social worker Gladys, with 35 years of experience, remarked that “nothing has changed” in this regard since she started.

*The discussion centers on the perceived lack of feedback experienced by the pediatric nurses and midwives when they report concerns about a child. The social workers explain that they cannot provide feedback due to confidentiality legislation. The atmosphere is tense and bordering on hostile from some of the nurses. The social workers respond dutifully and calmly, and I am surprised that they do not snap back. One nurse exclaims:*

It makes you wonder, where did the worry go? When I send that report of concern to you, I don’t want to think about it anymore; we want to know that someone else worries now. Otherwise, we are left with that worry; we want to share it, that someone else is worrying about that child. But we get *nothing* from you! It’s like sending the report out into a black hole in space!

[Field notes, meeting observation]

In the subsequent focus group meeting with the first response team, I suggested, “It seemed like there were things in the room that you could not say?” They laughed and responded ironically, “Really? You got that?” Lisa humorously summarized the substance of the meeting: “That time in 1997 when I sent a report of concern, and

nothing happened, [*whiney tone*] and the parents got really angry at me.” They then offered their interpretation of the situation:

Hannah: Many professionals that report concern, they are so emotionally invested, it’s so *emotional*, and they get frustrated because we are like a wall, that is our role; we have this framework that we have to relate to. And we feel like they should understand; they are in a work role too, but it’s *so* emotional, it’s so hard for *them* not to know; maybe it doesn’t even affect the child, but for *them* it’s so hard not to know.

Emelie: They have a different perspective; they don’t have the same view and requirements for integrity and secrecy.

Lisa: Yeah, it’s not the child’s situation we are talking about, it’s *much* more about *their* experience in relation to what they find out [about the child], but *we* are in and out of meetings: at ten we meet Anna who has been beaten by her dad, and at twelve we meet Pelle who has been sexually abused, *bam bam bam*, and then we go to lunch. That is what our days look like: we go in and out of serious things, and we have to handle it; we harbor<sup>120</sup> the worry we might have, because we have this framework that we can relate to. We have *really clear* frames to our role, and they don’t; it’s like school counselors, they may have worry that can be intense, because they do not have those frames; if we didn’t have the frames we would be in the same place, just *psssss*, everything would just *pour over*.

Hannah: That makes it hard to meet with other professionals, *all* other professionals outside of the social services; we don’t get worried because we see these things all the time, but to them the worry is great, but not in our ears. And that is how it has to be to work with this, you have to stand *outside* of it; like if I tell people, they say, ‘how can you work with this,’ and I’m like, it’s not that hard.

[Focus group interview, FRT M2]

The excerpt shows how the group collectively articulate norms for how to approach their own (how to manage felt emotions and how to display emotions), as well as others’ emotions, particularly in relation to *worry*. While others (such as the childcare center) are portrayed as being overly emotional and absorbed in “their experience,” they, in contrast, can attach their emotions (worry) to an exterior (legal) framework, preventing their emotions from pouring over. Occupations that cannot order their emotions into such a framework, they contend, consequently experience free-flowing and personal worry. Furthermore, worry is described as a regular experience for them. Their work days consist of going in and out of meetings where they hear stories of child abuse, which they have learnt to “stand outside of,” meaning not becoming personally involved but managing procedurally and efficiently: “*bam bam bam*.” Thus, emotions that are foregrounded and distressing for “others” have,

<sup>120</sup> Swedish: *Härbärgera*.

through repetition, experience and collective sense-making, transformed into backgrounded emotions that no longer require conscious management (Barbalet, 2008; Bergman Blix, 2015).

Given the legal power inherent in their position, they also emphasized the importance of presenting themselves “professionally” to achieve successful cooperation with other professionals, even when they sometimes feel attacked. This issue arose when one of the childcare center workers insinuated that she did not always report concerns:

When we don't hear anything, should we still report concern when something happens again [with the same child] – should I report it every time?

[several of the social workers burst out with] YES! *Every time*, of course, it's even *more* important that you report it then!

[Field notes, meeting observation]

The group subsequently discussed this exchange in the focus group interview:

Gladys: Apparently, we have to be careful how we present ourselves; if they do not trust us, they apparently don't report it to us? That's *really* serious.

Lisa: *Every time*, in *every* meeting and *every* time the phone rings we roll up our sleeves and listen; we cannot be irritated, cranky, or snap. Even when it's that same person, that *really* hostile person calling *again*. Those phone calls or emails are not pleasant, but we must be like [*exaggerated friendly voice*] 'absolutely! We will take that into consideration' [*the group laughs*]. We must be humble regarding the role we have and the responsibility it carries.

Hannah: I mean, we are at the top of the hierarchy in that sense; we have all the power. And we must be approachable and not snap like they do, for the clients' sake.

Lisa: But it does something with us, both my professional self and my private self, to take all that *shit*, and to just lay down and take it so that I don't offend someone, because we have the power, and we must be humble, even though it's frustrating that they don't understand our role.

[Focus group interview, FRT M2]

In my field notes, I had noted that the social workers appeared very patient, sometimes bordering on impenetrable to the criticism they received. During the observation, I was puzzled by this, given the intense emotional displays by some of the childcare center workers; the interaction seemed lopsided. This observation now made sense, as it was framed as a deliberate strategy achieved through emotional labor: power necessitates a humble face. Thus, while the excerpts above from the adult unit speak to an emotional culture based on seeing the person behind, this

example illustrates a culture focused on being able to deflect personal emotions to an exterior framework: the legal frame. We can understand these interactions as rituals through which unit members internalize shared values and sacred symbols, tokens that epitomize the group's identity and meaning (Collins, 2004). Such rituals guide employees to position themselves emotionally in alignment with the unit culture. Therefore, I argue that the teammates perform their collective identity by communicating certain ideals, often in contrast to “rival” teams, thereby upholding role expectations by determining and differentiating themselves from “the other.”

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, we have seen how the different units construct and maintain themselves *qua* a team. This is achieved through repeated interaction rituals producing group solidarity and emotional energy, whereby the group becomes increasingly aware of themselves as a group by: 1) Constructing themselves as *different* to other groups (alterity); 2) Constructing group-specific collective symbols that produce emotional energy and group solidarity. These symbols can be “truths” about their jobs, or morally infused standards of committing to and treating clients. Together, the creation of the group as different from others, together with their collective symbols and group solidarity, 3) Involves the construction of and maintenance of group-specific feeling rules.

Once established, the group forms an emotional community, working as a refuge wherein emotions can be (more) freely expressed, allowing relaxation from emotional effort and temporary relief from the conflicting feeling rules and role expectations embedded in the overarching emotional regime. I also showed how the groups construct their own set of feeling rules. Furthermore, there seemed to be group specific norms for performing emotional labor, contingent on their target group and the nature of their relationship with their clients.

I demonstrated that the groups establish a collective sense of humor, which strengthens their group cohesion and relieves tension. I have also given examples of when rituals fail due to a member of the team diverging from the agreed-upon definition of the situation in front of an audience. Lastly, I argued that the group form ideals of how to manage and display emotions.



## CHAPTER 9: MAKING EMOTIONS WORK

In this final analytical chapter, I demonstrate that emotions are not merely a consequence and side-effect of practice that social workers must manage so that they do not interfere with the core activities, but an essential and crucial part of this practice.

This chapter builds on the premise that (certain) emotions are integral to instrumental action (Barbalet, 1998, p. 29), and provide us with information necessary to make decisions. Emotions are not inherently disruptive to the functioning of a rational organization; rather, they are a prerequisite. However, this requires complex emotional labor skills and the capacity to manage both one's own and others' emotions. First, I will examine how and for what purposes social workers manage their own and others' emotions. I will show that emotions are managed for various purposes, such as achieving appropriate self-presentation in line with feeling rules or influencing others' emotions to achieve specific outcomes. Second, I will analyze emotions as epistemological resources, used to gain understanding and knowledge about clients, as well as for motivating and guiding actions and making decisions. I will pay particular attention to background emotions and the temporal dimension of emotions. Lastly, I will demonstrate how organizational structures embed emotions and emotional labor, transforming workers' emotions into organizational resources.

### MANAGING EMOTIONS

In Chapter 6, the participants described a professional trajectory, initially motivated by a desire to “save the world,” but had since had a “reality check.” There were

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frequent reflections about their limited prospect to help people, and sometimes even of making things worse:

Lena: I feel like sometimes we see that there are difficulties when we start working with a family, but when we leave, these difficulties have only worsened... we have actually managed to make things worse by poking around, breaking the whole family system [Interview, CYU M2]

Fanny: But do you feel like you would have done things differently?

Lena: Well, I guess not, but sometimes it's hard to push those feelings aside, when you only see all the things that went wrong, and maybe you know logically that we could not have done anything differently considering our conditions, but there is still a longing and a wish that things could have turned out differently, which is sad.

Although such reflections were often riddled with feelings of sadness and guilt, as we can see in Lena's statement, I identified several strategies for managing such emotions. One strategy was to clearly separate oneself from the job:

Jenna: When I was new, I couldn't sleep, thinking about all the things that I didn't manage to do, all the people that I could not help. But then a colleague told me to think of this as only a job, *only a job*, and to enter a role. That helps me to cope, I guess.

Jenna expressed how she has learned to compartmentalize her work-related feelings from her private life by cognitive reappraisal (it is *only a job*).

Another strategy was to allocate feelings of guilt to external circumstances:

Sara: I have accepted the conditions, that I can't really do a great job. It's not like I'm not trying but, I have to prioritize, and what you prioritize is the acute stuff, putting out fires. [Interview, Sara & Emma, CYU M2]

Indra: People have big hopes, that the social services is [are] the safety net of society, but we actually have very limited possibilities to help most people. [Interview, CYU M2]

Mona: No wonder we feel inadequate, considering how limited we are in our possibilities to help our target group. [Interview, AU M2]

While guilt is, by some, understood as the reaction to one's perceived moral worth within a group (Turner & Stets, 2006), these excerpts suggest instances where participants (attempt to) redirect their guilt about not being able to "do a great job" onto larger structures, "the conditions" and "limited possibilities." This can be understood as a technique of separation where the participants distinguish between their own person and their professional role. The professional role is subsequently limited to tasks that are deemed critical or possible within the available resources of the organization. As such, separation techniques in this case help practitioners to

separate and set aside emotions that might be distressing and professionally dysfunctional.

### EMOTION MANAGEMENT AND CLIENT WORK

In Chapter 7, the participants discussed the importance of reflecting on and managing their emotional demeanor when interacting with clients. In this section, I will demonstrate how emotions and their management involve interactional and temporal dimensions, and how the participants recognized how emotion management is an essential skill for doing their job. For example, Indra spoke of how she managed her self-presentation to connect with young clients:

This idea of being personal but not private is important. We are, after all, human beings, and we have to show that to build trust and alliances with our clients. You can't just be completely detached and hard; you have to be a bit relaxed, if I can put it that way. I think, especially with young people, you must be a bit relaxed, otherwise they think, 'Who are you? Just a stiff bureaucratic hag,'<sup>121</sup> as we call it. I don't share details about my family and children with my clients, but I still think I'm personal in meetings. You can draw parallels and be personal by, for example, supporting the same soccer team. [Interview, CYU, M2]

Indra stresses the importance of building “trust and alliances” with clients. This involves managing her self-presentation to be “relaxed” rather than hard and detached. She explains how she combines managing displayed emotions with other strategic means, such as bonding with younger clients to avoid being perceived as a stiff bureaucrat, by talking about mutual interests (soccer team). However, building trust is not the end goal. Social workers operate in a “liminal” position, navigating the space between the objectives of the state and the private sphere of the family (Parton, 2012), which involves asking clients to share private and often shameful stories to help (or regulate) them adjusting to societal norms.

I suggest that building trust serves as the foundation for reducing anxiety and fear that clients may have when being involved with the social services, encouraging the client to open up, and ultimately motivating clients to cooperate<sup>122</sup> (e.g., accepting an intervention or changing problematic behavior). In other words,

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<sup>121</sup> Swedish: *Sockärring*.

<sup>122</sup> Most interventions available to social workers should be based on voluntary participation, with the exception of coercive measures. Therefore, motivational work is a crucial component in some client interactions.

Indra's statement highlights *how* she manages her emotional self-presentation and *why* this is important. This involves a temporal aspect of emotions; Indra recognizes that how she manages emotions in the *present* affects the client and thus has implications for *future* outcomes. The excerpt also emphasizes the *interactive* aspect of emotions and emotional labor. In managing her emotion, as an *object* to be worked on, simultaneously serves as a *means* to achieve a goal – building a trusting relationship with the client (Dunkel, 1988). This, in turn, serves the ultimate objective of helping the client. Similarly, Leah describes managing her self-presentation to alleviate clients' feelings of shame, and ultimately, to gain understanding of how to best help the client:

Fanny: When you meet a new client, how do you build their trust?

Leah: I try to be relaxed, especially as my work involves addiction, to remove the shame or whatever the person might feel about their own addiction. I do this by saying they can be exactly how they are and that I don't judge them at all, whether they are high at the meeting, drunk, or whatever. The goal is to meet and figure out what kind of help the person wants and what would be best for them, to try to alleviate any anxiety they might have about the meeting. I try to be normal, not to lecture, but just to hear how things are going.

In this excerpt, Leah addresses how she manages clients' emotions that may obstruct the main objective: to help the client. Specifically, she reflects on how clients' feelings of *shame* may hinder them from talking openly. She mentions two strategies: first, by telling them that they can “be exactly how they are... high or drunk or whatever” and to not lecture them, making it clear that she does not judge them for it. Second, she reflects on and adapts her self-presentation, to “be relaxed” and “try to be normal.” Like Indra, Leah recognizes the temporal and interactional aspects of emotion management and how they serve to achieve an imagined future outcome. Thus, when aiming to understand and influence clients' emotions, practitioners' own emotions can serve as a *regulative function*, orienting action and completing the task at hand (Dunkel, 1988).

As we saw in Chapter 7 (as well as in Indra's statement above), the participants stressed the significance of *being personal*. This, in turn, served many purposes. In Chapter 6 the social workers spoke of fighting an “uphill battle” [Emma, CYU, M1] due to the negative public image of the social services. Lisa indicated how being personal could serve as a tactic to repair the image of the social services.

Lisa: Those days that you don't even want to be here; I have played with the idea of having this meeting without being personal. I wonder if I could have a meeting and just ask questions following some manual, be non-personal. I wonder how that would come across. But it is on *us* to show that the image of the social services that people have, show that it's not always true, it can feel okay to come here. If we did *not* use those personal traits, would we connect to people at all? [Focus group, FRT M2]

While the feeling of “not wanting to be here” could conceivably be alleviated by *not* being personal and adopting a distinct professional role (“following some manual”), this was not a preferred strategy. Lisa suspects that this approach would make it difficult to *connect* with clients. In other words, Lisa's statement shows how she manages her uncomfortable feeling of wanting to withdraw by reflecting on grander purposes – repairing the image of the social services and connecting interactively with the client.

Balancing being personal with principles of professionalism proved to be challenging; they should *be themselves*, but not *too much*. The opposite of being human and oneself was often described using a “robot” metaphor. For example, Ingrid said that:

You can't be a robot; I can't sit [and] be a stiff suit; I need to feel like I can try to help. I have to keep within the framework of the law, but I have to have a will to help. Sometimes you have to give very bad news, and then I can show that I think this is really tough, that it feels awful. You meet them with a feeling that you understand and recognize that their situation is tough. Be clear about what my role is but not be a bureaucrat and a stiff rule follower. It might not be very professional to hug a client, but it's like a social lubricant, a bit like offering a cup of coffee. [Interview, FHU M2]

In this quote, Ingrid accounts for deep acting strategies, for trying to produce a feeling in herself: “I need to feel like I can try to help,” “having a will to help.” She also recognizes the *utility* of emotions: “meet them with a feeling that you understand,” and how “unprofessional” acts such as hugging a client serves as a social lubricant.

While displaying intense emotions – such as bursting out in anger, or crying – is typically seen as unprofessional, participants emphasized that this was part of showing their humanity. This could mean revealing that their private selves did not always agree with the professional decisions. For example, Krista said that “I will make it clear to the client that I think that the decision is crap; I can attune to their sense of anger.” Thus, foregrounded emotions that are traditionally assessed as “negative” or “disruptive” were not necessarily deemed in need of management or suppression but were, in some situations, conceived by participants as a way to foster

trusting relationships with clients (Barbalet, 2008). However, it must be noted that this could also be a self-protection strategy, as the inconsistent messages from social workers can conceivably be confusing for clients. In other words, the symbolic act of standing on their clients' side is perhaps more comforting for the social worker than the client.

While certain emotions were sometimes justified for the sake of “displaying humanity,” others were banned:

*I am the social services for clients, and I cannot be unprofessional: you should not show unprofessional emotions like confusion, forgetting things. [Tami, CYU, M1]*

Similarly, boredom and disinterest (for example, by looking at one's watch) were considered unprofessional. Furthermore, managing one's self-presentation could also be motivated by a desire to hide feelings that were deemed unprofessional. For instance, Mona spoke of dwelling on her insecurities and self-doubt:

*I am pretty new in the adult unit,<sup>123</sup> and often, while sitting in client meetings I'm thinking 'my god, when are they going to realize that I know *nothing*.' Some client is talking about all the drugs he is using and I just, I know nothing about it. I take notes and try to look *as if* I know things. But once a relative to the client joined the meeting, and she was a social worker too, and I thought 'now you see right through me, that I know nothing.'*

Mona attempts to hide her feelings of self-doubt that might expose her as incompetent, and the anticipated shame of presenting herself as such. She mentions a clear-cut strategy for doing so, trying to project a self-presentation based on how she imagines the demeanor of an experienced social worker with an adequate stock of knowledge: “I take notes and try to look *as if* I know things.” Furthermore, the participants frequently spoke of humor as an important tool for managing nervous and tense clients. However, they stressed the importance of being clear about their power over clients:

*Lisa: We have to be aware that we are in a position of power: someone exposes their entire self, and I am making an assessment based on that; I have the power to start an investigation, I can decide to take somebody's child away, so I have to take responsibility for that power. But sometimes, I can step outside of my role and make a joke, and that can sometimes lighten the atmosphere in the room, even if we talk about serious things. You know, making a joke can remove that feeling... you know, that I*

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<sup>123</sup> At the time of the interview, she had worked in the adult unit for six months (six years of previous work experience in the social services).

should not be a person that people are afraid to meet; I want people to remember a year after, remember that meeting and not be afraid to call me. [Interview, FRT, M2]

Sara stressed the importance of acknowledging their position of power and noted that work experience may make it easier to recognize and become comfortable with such power:

Sara: You have to be clear about the conditions, that it's not voluntary, be clear about our mission and our statutory obligations, and I think you get more comfortable with that with time. It feels like new social workers might have an idea that they should be friends with the client, maybe because they are uncomfortable with having authority, or maybe they don't recognize their power. I don't know, maybe they feel like that is the easiest way, being overly friendly to connect with clients, being their buddies. I think that I was uncomfortable with that power in the beginning, and that I tried to conceal it somehow, but that is not fair to the clients. [Interview, Sara and Emma, CYU, M1]

The statements of Lisa and Sara highlight how social workers must balance using their “private selves” in client meetings with a recognition and openness about their power and authority. While using humor can “lighten the atmosphere,” it must be used with caution so as not to obscure their position of power. Sara observes, drawing on her own experiences as a new practitioner, that new social workers tend to be overly friendly with clients because they feel uncomfortable. Thus, social workers must learn to manage their own feelings of power discomfort so as not to mislead their clients. Being overly friendly might serve as a relief in the present but can have damaging consequences in the future, a recognition of which may motivate social workers to learn to manage power discomfort and the feelings of self-doubt that this might entail.<sup>124</sup>

### *CULTIVATING EMPATHY*

Most participants emphasized the centrality of empathy in client work. However, what was meant by “empathy”<sup>125</sup> seemed to differ. Sometimes, it is presented as a purely cognitive process, used to “understand” a client’s emotional state, while avoiding emotional contagion (feeling their feelings). At other times, it was described as an affective process, involving emotionally engaging with clients and “imagining

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<sup>124</sup> See also Chapter 6 on power discomfort.

<sup>125</sup> In my understanding, empathy is not an emotion in itself, but a capacity to imagine the situation of others, emotionally tuning in with another person. Thus, it is a vital tool for emotion management (Wettergren and Bergman Blix, 2016).

their feelings.” As highlighted in chapters 7 and 8, empathy was also framed in moral terms: they *should* empathize with the client, even those (or especially those) whom society considers undeserving of empathy. Doing so could bring them a sense of pride. Nonetheless, empathy was unanimously considered a vital tool in client meetings. This necessitated a cultivation and refinement of empathy as a professional tool, which involved a number of emotion management techniques. First, the participants stressed the importance of self-reminders:

You have to remind yourself that a routine meeting for us can be the scariest thing a client has ever experienced. [Interview, Lisa, FRT M2]

It is important to imagine how I would want it if I was on the other side of the table. I know that I am not the client, but I have to think about the situation as if I were. [Interview, Alicia, FHU M2]

If I were to end up at the social services office and need help, I would have to share my private story. It’s incredibly vulnerable, but people still do it, with complete strangers. [Focus group interview, Stella, FRT M2]

If someone were to take my kids away even for five minutes I would go  *loco*, so I understand them [Interview, Ingrid, FHU M2]

From these quotes, we can see that the participants engage in *as if* imagination, imagining themselves in their clients’ shoes – by *cognitive reappraisal*: deliberately modifying thinking to feel a desired emotional state (Maroney, 2011a). In these examples, the purpose of reappraisal is to elicit an appropriate sense of urgency even though the meeting for them may be “routine.” Thus, reminding themselves the fear that they might have felt in the client’s situation or the strain of having to share their private life with strangers, served to heighten their focus and adjusting their demeanor to the weight of the situation. These strategies can also be understood as a form of *deep acting*, as the purpose is not only to display (but also that) appropriate emotions but also to *feel* the appropriate way.

Further, empathy could involve reflecting on private “baggage” that may interfere with one’s ability to help, as well as a reinterpretation of clients’ feelings

You need to be able to reflect upon yourself. I have baggage of my own, experiences that show up sometimes, and you have to, you have to be *incredibly* aware, I think, of yourself. Because *you* are the tool, you have to be whole to be able to help. [Interview, Kathryn, AU M2]

If I meet a person that is very stressed and angry, and understand that he is actually very sad... and I cannot get his or her emotions mixed up with my *own stuff*, uhm, I gradually fine-tune them, I think. [Interview, Mona, AU M2]

The above excerpts illustrate how empathy *how* Kathryn and Mona cultivate and practice empathy through simultaneous self-reflection and interactional appraisal of the other. In other words, they try to assess the client's emotional state while paying attention to their own, while distinguishing between them. In Mona's example, she describes purposely trying not to be offended by someone else's anger by reinterpreting their anger as sadness. While empathy can be an automatic response, how individuals respond depend on context (Zaki, 2014). As professional social workers, for example, empathy is a prerequisite, and in a private context Mona might have reacted differently. Therefore, these excerpts show how empathy is cognitively and emotionally regulated and managed, involving vigilant self-governing of bodily reactions, thoughts, and demeanor (guided by feeling rules), while appraising and reinterpreting others' emotional reactions.

While the above examples reflect a more situational strategy for cultivating and practicing empathy, Elisabeth described more complex form of empathy refinement during a process supervision session. In the following excerpt, Elisabeth recounted her efforts to help a young woman grappling with heroin addiction and the inability to care for her children. Elisabeth struggled to understand why her "motivational work" was not effective. She spoke of not being able to understand why the client acted like she did, it made no sense to her why she would choose heroin over her children. To better understand her client, she had turned to literary fiction to gain better insight:

Elisabeth: I've focused on the addiction and tried to coordinate all the actors involved in her case; I've tried to listen to her, and to not scare her off, because it's so delicate. I have seen that she's in such terrible trouble, so it's been my motive to *keep* her, because what will happen if she disappears? I read this book, *The Antarctica of Love*, and I had her [the client] in the back of my mind throughout the book. These heroin addicts, they are so hard to reach and often disappear, and are so hard to help. And when I read it... I understood why she cannot care for her kids. [Elisabeth whispers] *'and to love your children, it does not matter, it is impossible.'*

*The Antarctica of Love* by Sara Stridsberg is narrated from the perspective of a young heroin addict. The story is told from the perspective of a murdered and dismembered young woman, observing the media reporting on her own death: "I was the sort of news that drew a circle of light around the reader and inside that circle there was warmth and sharing, where you were safe. Outside the circle was where we were, the shadows" (Stridsberg, 2022, p. 127).

Elisabeth describes, I suggest, sophisticated form of empathy training. In lieu of her own *emotion memories* (Hochschild, 1983, p. 46), she engages in a goal-oriented deep acting strategy based on “as if” imagination to understand her client, and how she can choose heroin over her own children. Elisabeth also seeks to maintain the client’s trust to not “scare her off”, recognizing the delicacy of the situation. Thus, Elisabeth’s deep acting technique serves both to manage her client’s emotions and to maintain her own dedication and motivation by gaining knowledge of the overpowering force of heroin addiction. Conceivably, this shields her from morally charged emotions such as contempt and anger, which might be anticipated in response to the violation of society’s moral code involving a mother’s neglect of her children (Turner & Stets, 2006).

While the aforementioned examples all pertain to deep acting, characterized by the management of one’s emotional state through cognitive reappraisal or trained imagination, other respondents described more strategic forms of empathy that primarily involved surface acting (Hochschild, 2003):

Fanny: You said that it is important to be empathetic – what does that mean to you?

Linda: Ehm, what does it mean [pause]. I think it’s about acknowledging their feeling, rather than [pause], because I cannot go in and feel what they are feeling; I mean I can’t be empathetic all the way because then I would drown, but I have to make the person I meet *feel like* I am empathetic; I guess that is the balancing act.

Linda emphasizes the importance of outlining the limits to her empathy (“can’t be empathetic all the way.”) Similar to Mona’s excerpt above, Linda also stresses that she must separate her feelings from. However, while Mona frames this as a requirement for understanding the client achieved through self-monitoring, Linda rather speaks of a self-protection strategy (not to “drown”) achieved through surface acting. She describes *performing* empathy designed to make the person *believe* that she is empathetic. In other words, Linda’s empathy strategy involves *buffering* her own emotions from her performance; whether or not the emotions are “genuine” is inferior to what the client believes. This conceivably allows her to maintain distance while still displaying enough concern to build rapport with clients (Hochschild, 1983; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995).

Becoming too empathetic, in terms of too emotionally involved, was described as a potential threat to one’s professionalism. Mona [AU M2] described a phase

during which she struggled to establish boundaries between her own emotions and those of her clients:

Mona: You have to recognize that the feelings of your clients are not your own.

Fanny: How do you do that, not getting too emotionally involved?

Mona: Well, that's a problem, because when you work with yourself as a tool and try to establish boundaries to not be too affected, sometimes I fail; I become too empathetic. Before I suffered my burnout, clients dug their way right into my core. Everybody's problems were my problems; I carried the whole agency on my shoulders, it was unmanageable. [Interview, AU, M2]

Thus, being *too empathetic* means, in this example, a failure to distinguish between clients' and own emotions. However, this is not the most interesting (nor very surprising) part of Mona's story. She speaks of a more all-encompassing experience, a loss of a sense of boundedness. Rather, she seems to indicate a loss of ontological security (Giddens, 1991), a temporary loss of the ability to delineate between different spheres of her life. She was unable to distinguish between herself and her professional role, and between her professional role position within the agency and the agency as a whole. While it is difficult to draw any conclusions about causes and effects here – did Mona become over-involved with clients because of a loss of ontological security or vice versa – the experience was evidently overpowering. Lacking boundaries between her clients and self, as well as between self and the organization, she crumbled under the weight of responsibility.

When becoming too emotionally involved, a possible strategy was *shutting off* emotions. For instance, Krista told me that:

When a client makes me sad, speaking of empathy, I had one client where I felt so much but then I felt like I had to shut off. But, like I told you, you can't work here if you're all cold, but I can't let it consume me up either, you have to forgive yourself and remind yourself that you are only a person, a cog in the wheel where I can't affect everything

In Krista's statement, we can see how she "shut off" her feelings of sadness. In turn, this seems to have triggered feelings of guilt, which she managed by reappraising herself as "a cog in the wheel" and "forgiving herself", permitting herself to "shut off."

Some of the participants spoke of feeling *antipathy* toward certain client, which required surface acting strategies to hide such feelings and maintain a professional

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demeanor. Social workers in the children and youth unit believe parents behave “childishly,” or are “using the social services as a battlefield”:

Frida: Sometimes I just have to stare at the floor for a while and collect myself to be able to look a person in the eye, so as not to jump them (laughs). No, but I really have to work at myself in those... and collect myself and be nice even though I'm thinking, you're a moron, you shouldn't be allowed to have children. But I can't say that to a parent, but sometimes I want to, or in a way we do... that maybe the child shouldn't live with you for a while, we can make that talkable, but like, being nice, I have to work on that.

Frida recognizes that she must suppress certain emotions, such as anger and revulsion. To maintain professionalism, she therefore employs a bodily strategy, staring “at the floor,” to conceal her antipathy.

An additional strategy for dealing with antipathetic emotions was to avoid the client altogether by asking a colleague to take over the case, which seemed to be common. This latter process of transferring the client (and thus the emotional impact) to colleagues could also occur spontaneously, and collectively, *in situ*:

Lisa: Because you are the tool, it sounds really lame, but that is how it is, *you* are the tool, yada yada, and of course we are different people... some colleagues are simply better at not taking things personally.

Hannah: It also depends on your mood that day, and who you meet that day can really rub you the wrong way; you can perceive people very differently in just one conversation.

Jenna: That's probably why we are always two social workers in client meetings: something can set me off and annoy the *crap* out of me, while you [addressing Hannah] might not even react; some cases may trigger me. Of course, it matters how much experience you have, how many years you have worked, but also how you have lived your life. You have a life alongside your profession, even if you sometimes forget about that.

Lisa: Exactly, and then I can just glance at Jenna, for example, and she gives me this look like, 'I've got this, you can take a step back.'

[Focus group interview, FRT M2]

In this excerpt, the group highlights several interesting aspects relating to emotions and collective emotion management strategies. First, they recognize that their capacity to professionally perceive, react to, and manage emotions in client meetings does not follow a predictable pattern, but is influenced by exterior circumstances (“your mood that day”) and individual factors (“some cases may trigger me,” “how you have lived your life”). Jenna attaches importance to the fact that they typically

meet with clients together with a colleague precisely because it allows them to safeguard against such unpredictable triggers: “something can set me off and annoy the *crap* out of me, while you don’t even react.” Thus, working together allows them to maintain their professionalism by smoothly designating the interactional responsibility to their colleague. The unspoken understanding underlying such smooth and spontaneous cooperation calls for tacit and emotional communication (“I can just glance at Jenna”) (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018), to collectively *do* (and maintain) professionalism.

An alternative collective emotion management strategy was to imagine possible outcomes, thereby allowing them to prepare for potential events before the meeting:

Jenifer: Sometimes I decide with my colleague beforehand, if I know that we are meeting an annoying or scary client. Like, ‘if I lose face in there, you have to take over.’

We can also see how Jenifer and her colleague reflected on their *past* experiences with the client (feeling that they were annoying or scary), thus allowing them to imagine *future* outcomes (of feeling scared or irritated), which potentially would help them with emotion management in the *present* during the meeting.

An additional strategy was to *withhold* empathy and instead display antipathetic emotions. While displaying empathy and exercising a “low-arousal approach” are key approaches for social workers, the participants recognized that this was not always functional. Emma and Sara discussed this in relation to threatening clients:

Emma: When someone is aggressive, I am not using a low-arousal approach; I can be really confrontational. I know that I’m not supposed to, but it works pretty well, because some clients need to know that I have feelings, and then I can’t be empathetic, I can get really angry, and then it’s like they recognize that I have feelings.

Sara: Exactly, and to be empathetic when someone is angry, it rarely works when people are pissed off; it only provokes them. I need to show them that there is a limit to how much shit I can take.

Sara recognizes that “being empathetic “can sometimes have the reverse effect and instead provoke clients. Therefore, withholding empathy and displaying other-targeted negative emotions (like anger) could both serve to display their humanity (“they recognize that I have feelings”) and help regulate the clients’ emotions. While professionalism typically involves managing foregrounded emotions that disturb professional behavior, such as anger, the participants here instead suggest that it can serve a professional purpose. It could also serve to signal to clients a violation of the situational status hierarchy, with participants reclaiming their social place in the

interaction, and thereby protecting a sense of self-esteem (“there is a limit to how much shit I can take”) (Clark, 2004). Linda had a similar reflection:

Fanny: When do you feel pride and satisfaction at work?

Linda: Well, sometimes I have lost it and like yelled angrily, and in the moment, you can feel like it worked really well, but afterwards you can think like, ‘that wasn’t really professional’, but then I think that it was probably what that person needed. And it may sound stupid to say that I can feel proud that I lost it, but I think that you have to have the courage to say what you think, like you have to pull it together!

Fanny: So, what happened?

Linda: It was this dad who can be so rude, tell me to shut up, say mean things. Anyways, I told him that he should take responsibility for what he is doing to his child, but he just kept feeling sorry for himself, and then I just told him to stop feeling sorry for himself, I kind of yelled, and he hung up the phone. But I feel like he has to hear it, because he does not deserve feeling sorry for, and I think he had to hear it. I don’t think it really helped though, but anyways.

Linda admits that she felt a sense of pride after ‘losing it’ and yelling at a client, even though she acknowledges that it ‘wasn’t really professional’. Interestingly, despite believing that her outburst did not help the client take responsibility, Linda still maintains that it was the right thing to do. Her recollection reveals an episode of *righteous anger*, which she used to justify her reaction as morally just. Linda also establishes a clear sympathy margin for her client, asserting that ‘he does not deserve feeling sorry for’, rejecting his claims for sympathy (Clark, 1987, 1998). By expressing righteous anger and withholding sympathy, Linda not only diminishes the client’s social standing but also elevates her own, which in turn rewards her with a sense pride. Conversely, there were instances when managing foregrounded emotions failed, where overwhelming anger could not be contained, and ‘losing it’ did not bring about feelings of pride:

Normally I manage to stop myself, because I think of my professional role, I can’t behave however I feel like. But sometimes I have lost my act, I stood up and threw the papers in the air and yelled ‘I don’t give a damn about you, I am thinking about your kids!’, I felt like I can’t *take it*, or I didn’t even have time to think, I just reacted and threw the papers, and I don’t know what’s going to happen with that. The father recorded the meeting, so there is a sound recording. [Interview Maria, CYU M2]

In contrast to Linda, Maria’s quote reflects feelings of remorse upon realizing she had violated professional feeling rules. This remorse appears to be less about her professional behavior towards the client and more about her worry over the potential consequences of her actions

## EMOTION MANAGEMENT IN PROFESSIONAL INTERACTIONS

While the previous section mainly addressed the emotional labor strategies used in client work, I will here demonstrate how social workers perform emotional labor in relation to professional groups as well.

In Chapter 6, I explored the role of social workers as coordinators among various professional groups within the welfare state nexus, navigating diverse expectations. In this section, I will show that to be able to fulfill this role, participants employ several emotion management strategies, such as *suppressing* and *hiding* emotions, *revealing* emotions, and *eliciting* and *displaying* emotions to influence others' emotions.

One aspect of work involved managing criticism from other professionals, which in turn necessitated subduing and hiding one's own emotions for the sake of cooperation, as illustrated by this excerpt:

And it's up to us, in *every* meeting, *every* time the phone rings, *every* time someone makes a report, we roll up our sleeves and relay the information again, and not be irritated, not be cranky or lose it in those conversations where – beep – calls yet *again* and is being *extremely* unfriendly. And we know, when that person calls us again, it's not going to be a fun conversation, and we have to be like [*exaggerated friendly tone*] 'Yes absolutely! We will take that into consideration!' We have to carry that burden, go to work, listen, and inform and inform and inform about *our* rules and *our* Secrecy Act, and we have to subdue and just take the criticism and to be humble in the role we have. [Interview, Lisa, FRT, M2]

Lisa's strategy involves feigning friendliness while suppressing her feelings of irritation and crankiness, despite feeling that "that person" is behaving unfairly. This can thus be understood as a surface acting technique, differing from the deep acting techniques mentioned above (such as "as if" imaginary) (Hochschild, 2003). Lisa indicates that she sees this as part of her professional responsibilities, implying feeling rules advising her to suppress her "private" feelings and accept criticism without showing her irritation ("we have to carry that burden"; "we have to subdue and just take the criticism"). Acting professionally by suppressing feelings of irritation and resentment for unmerited criticism serves a bigger purpose; being a representative for social services as an agency.

Reversely, displaying what could be conceived as "unprofessional" emotions could serve to improve cooperation with professionals:

Mom would go through fire for that little boy. When I talked to the family therapist about it, I started to weep. It's terrible; I get emotional talking about it now too. I'm so

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

worried about mom and the boy. Then the therapist said, ‘it feels like you are the right person for this,’ and I think it was because I revealed that I am emotionally affected too; we just have different roles. So, to be more emotional with other professionals tears down the barrier, because maybe she thought that I was squarer than I am. Now she knows that I care about Mom too. [Interview, Ingrid, FHU M2]

Ingrid’s experience highlights the power of emotional transparency in building professional relationship. By *revealing* her sadness, she was able to break down perceived barriers and foster a deeper connection with the family therapist, whom she suspected before this moment thought of her as “square.” This shared emotional moment helped them bond over a coming feeling, which in turn generated solidarity and strengthened their professional relationship. By being open about her emotions, Ingrid was able to transform her relationship with the therapist from one of potential misunderstandings, due to their different roles, to one of empathy and cooperation.

The participants also spoke of *using* emotional displays in professional meetings to make things happen:

Fanny: Can you think of a time where you used emotions strategically?

Indra: Well, I can get pretty upset in meetings with other professionals, when you sit there and all they talk about is money instead of trying to find solutions. Then I can use some aggressive, upsetting feelings maybe, to make things happen. Then I can bring out some emotions, sometimes consciously, or like stand up and walk out. I don’t really care what they think of me, like, ‘what’s wrong with her?’ I don’t care if it’s for standing up for what I think is important. Then I might be a bit aggressive, but it makes things happen in the room, and if it’s for a good cause, I don’t care.

Indra’s approach to *using* “aggressive, upsetting feelings” to shift the focus of the meeting, from money to solutions shows how emotions can be used strategically to influence others. Indra justifies her emotional display by referencing a larger, morally good cause. This justification helps her manage potential feelings of embarrassment or self-reproach, as she frames her actions within the context of a greater good.

During a process supervision session with the adult unit, the group spoke of the difficulty of cooperating with the other units:

Leah: I feel like we can be really irritated with each other, and we just talk around things, and it’s all so diplomatic, and much of the frustration just simmer[s]. I had a conflict with CYU, and I just want to say ‘you’re an idiot’ but I try to stay diplomatic. But sometimes maybe we should just be angry, because it takes so much energy, always trying to be the bigger person and not be frustrated, but eventually it will overflow.

Leah identifies a key feeling rule of the organization: to be diplomatic. This rule highlights an important aspect of emotional labor, requiring workers to suppress or

hide their feelings of frustration and anger, which in turn “takes so much energy.” Leah asks herself if letting themselves be angry would relieve such a loss of energy, suggesting that there might be benefits to allowing expression of felt emotions. This might be understood in terms of *emotional dissonance* (Hochschild, 1983), which occurs when there is a mismatch between experienced emotions and rules for how to express them. Research suggests that it is not emotional labor per se that leads to workers’ dissatisfaction, but emotional dissonance, which is associated with individual consequences such as burnout and stress, as well as organizational issues, such as reduced worker commitment and staff turnover (Abraham, 1999). However, others have argued that it is not dissonance *as such* that is detrimental for worker’s health, but where the dissonance stems from a violation of the core values associated with one’s identity (Salmela, 2009; Ward and McMurray, 2016).

Krista’s describes what can be understood as a violation of her core values:

Krista: We are taking care of a group of clients that need a lot of caretaking. We are fighting for them tooth and nail. I wish for a meeting where people would say ‘my job is this and this’; I’ve started saying that at meetings: ‘What are your expectations of me? What do you think we do down at the adult unit?’ [...] I can get really angry on behalf of the clients when I don’t think they are getting the help that is in their right because we don’t have job descriptions. I have some tricks up my sleeve nowadays; I’m constantly working on myself [laughs], trying to write down what I want out of the meeting beforehand. Then I let other people talk first. [Field notes, AU M2]

Krista attributes her anger a moral responsibility to duly help their clients. She defines the source of her anger not as an affront to herself, but to her clients – she is angry *on behalf* of clients. Krista’s experience can be interpreted using Wettergren’s (2024) model of the “emotive-cognitive chain of evaluation”. By identifying the *source* of her anger – clients being deprived of help due to a lack of job descriptions – Krista is engaging in an emotional assessment based on past experience, providing *background import*. This assessment orients her attention to the structural issues causing her anger and frustration. Her strategy of writing down her goals before meetings and letting others speak first can be theorized as a form of *anticipatory* emotion management. She anticipates future anger and frustration based on past experience, which helps her stay calm and focused during the meeting and to maintain her professionalism, which is the *object* of her actions. By imagining how her behavior will affect others, Krista is engaging in an emotive-cognitive evaluation of potential future outcomes. This process of bringing future emotions into the present as anticipated feelings helps her discriminate between different courses of

action. The foregrounded emotion of anger prompts her to evaluate her feelings and the reasons behind them, drawing on past cognitive and emotional experiences to influence her future actions. This example illustrates how emotions, actions, and temporality are interconnected, in line with Wettergren's (2024) model. It also highlights the importance of anticipatory emotion management in achieving desired outcomes (cf. Barbalet, 2008; Helm, 2009).

The session continued:

*Mary is talking about a frustrating meeting with the CYU, where she was left with the feeling that they just dump everything onto her.*

Mary: And at the end of the meeting, the CYU social worker just looks at me and says, 'I bet you will figure it out,' and I just felt that I almost smacked her on the neck as she walked out.

Joanne: But you didn't.

Mary: No, I just collected the teacups and walked out, but I won't hold it together for much longer. It's affecting our clients that we can't get along within the office.

Kathryn: I identify with Mary in that I get so bloody angry. But now I've started to lay low – I let everyone else talk during the meetings and just wait. Suddenly, everyone expects much less from me, and then they don't dump everything in my lap. So just wait, stay silent, it works great. It has taken me a long time to figure out and I am still practicing not getting so affective and involved. I feel like I'm on the verge of igniting and starting to scream, but then I get everything dumped in my lap, but if you stay silent, someone must take responsibility

Like Krista, Mary identifies that her anger, in part, is founded in how their clients are negatively affected by a dysfunctional cooperation within the office, as well as in a feeling that she is allocated an undue amount of responsibility. Kathryn suggests a clear-cut strategy to affect the latter, which is also mentioned by Krista: "Let everyone else talk... and just wait." Kathryn contends that this strategy drives others to take responsibility. I argue that the strategy, which I call "silence as a means," creates an atmosphere of discomfort in the room which drives others to act. This involves deciding *before* to "shut down" anticipated foregrounded – and thus potentially disruptive – emotions (Barbalet, 2008), a strategy that Kathryn consciously practices and refines. Again, we can see how Kathryn draws on past experience – of being affective and involved – evaluating this course of action as deficient, and instead preparing to stay passive and emotionally neutral, imagining a future outcome where others are forced to take action. Furthermore, Kathryn's

strategy of “doing nothing” – displaying emotional neutrality – is actually *doing something*; it sets things in motion in the room (Flower, 2018).

## USING EMOTIONS

In this section, I will illuminate how emotions are inherently integrated into practice. I will show how specific emotions motivate and guide action through a temporal chain of evaluation, linking cognitive and emotional processes. Second, I will explore the role of emotions in professional knowledge and decision-making processes.

## EMOTION IN ACTION

I identified two commonly used strategies for coping with the job: *making compromises* and *keep trying*. Making compromises denotes either adjusting one’s sense of responsibility or putting in extra effort for *some clients*, similar to Lipskys terms “mortifications of conceptions of work/clients” (2010, pp. 142-156). Keep trying signifies “sticking” with clients despite feelings of hopelessness. Based on field notes from process supervision sessions with the adult unit, I will demonstrate how such strategies became evident. In the first example, Kathryn described how she felt abandoned, along with her client, by other professional groups:

Kathryn: I feel hopelessness, but I just have to keep trying. It’s really hard to hear how badly she is being treated by authorities; I feel like she won’t make it. I still haven’t found a way to help her, but at the same time I guess that I have done so much for her, in her world I have probably done a lot, but I want so much more

Joanne: Why?

Kathryn: Why? Because I like her, and she is all alone, and no one gives a crap!

Similarly, Elisabeth spoke of *sticking* with a client that other agencies had given up on:

Elisabeth: I have not given up on her; I have stuck with it I think; I try to encourage her.

Joanne: Why?

Elisabeth: Well, it has not felt very meaningful, but it has been the only way to build motivation, the only way not to lose her.

Joanne: And why is it important to you?

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Elisabeth: I have felt that, who would she have if I weren't there? Nobody.

Joanne: Do you like her?

Elisabeth: If I like her? Yeah.

Joanne: Why?

Elisabeth: She is a lonely young woman; I have empathy for her.

Joanne: But your group don't always have empathy, sometimes you have really annoying clients, and you just feel a huge relief when you can close the case.

Elisabeth: No, I haven't done that with her.

Joanne: So why are you hanging on?

Elisabeth: She needs someone, she needs *someone*.

Joanne: Because you see the loneliness.

Elisabeth: Not loneliness, vulnerability, she is very, very vulnerable and abandoned, and that leads to loneliness and substance abuse, and then I have felt that it is my responsibility as a social worker to keep hanging in there.

Sandra, discussing her overwhelming feelings of responsibility for her client Hanan, mentioned in Chapter 7 ("I could have been his mother, I feel like his mother, he doesn't have a mother, and I could be his mother"), similarly talked about her continuous efforts:

Sandra: I am worried about the health care, that they feel hopelessness, because this is a hopeless guy, and they just sigh when I call about him; he doesn't want anything. But then I defend him, because that is the dumbest thing I've heard; he is a traumatized 22-year-old with a heroin addiction, do you think he will dance into the treatment facility? They have to work with him and motivate him. It feels like that is obvious, but they don't do that. I guess his hopelessness is contagious, and I am trying to resist it, but it triggers worry in me when he puts it like that, that nothing will get better, and he thinks that he will die from the heroin, or end up in prison, but he doesn't care.

Joanne: But what drives you? Many would have given up on this guy, but not you, why do you keep trying with this boy?

Sandra: I see a young guy with his whole life ahead of him, and sometimes he says he wants a regular job and a life without drugs. This is not what was supposed to happen.

Joanne: So, what drives you?

Sandra: Nobody, *nobody* should have to live like this, he is worth something better.

Joanne: So, it's about the inherent value of human beings?

Sandra: Yes, but I also like him.

Several common themes and emotions can be extracted from these conversations. First, the stories are permeated by feelings of sadness and despair, driven by feelings

of hopelessness and fear about the future. Despite this, the social workers stress the importance of perseverance, of *keep trying*, motivated by their care for (and *liking* of) clients, and a desire to alleviate the clients' suffering and prevent future tragedy. Second, they express anger toward an unfair system and the inaction of other agencies (health care, treatment facilities, etc.). Third, they are driven by ethical motivations and a desire to act in a morally good way, conceivably aiming to alleviate guilt and to maintain pride and professional dignity.

Thus, the excerpts all demonstrate how *specific* emotions motivate them to keep working. As Helm (2009, p. 251) argues, emotions can be understood as “intentional feelings of import,” explaining how people commit to certain things and motivate action. Here, we can see how anger, stemming from moral indignation of perceiving others as committing an unjustifiable act (or rather, inaction: “no one gives a crap!”) served as a motivator to stick with their client, paired with responsibility (“she needs *someone*”) (Turner & Stets, 2006; Barbalet, 2008). The moral values<sup>126</sup> of the group served as a background guide for “doing the right thing” despite bleak expectations. Additionally, genuinely caring for, even *liking*, their clients is here evident as a legitimate motivator of performance. This could be understood as a compromise, doing for some clients what aligns with workers' ideal conceptions of the job, thereby alleviating guilt and eliciting professional pride (Lipsky, 2010, p. 99).

Furthermore, the prospect-based feeling of fear, experienced as an unease at the prospect of undesirable future events (what might happen to their clients if they give up), plays a significant role (Ortony et al., 2022). Fear alerts the subject and elicits a desire to prevent anticipated, real, or imagined outcomes (Helm, 2009; Wettergren, 2024). This was evident in the following statement by Sandra, attempting to verbalize her feelings about not being able to help Hanan:

I guess I feel guilt; sometimes I get these thoughts – if he dies, it is my fault? I know logically that it is not true, but should I have done more? And I'm thinking, the love of the drug is stronger, you want to chase that feeling, the ever-decreasing window of happiness... well... [Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

Sandra's feelings of guilt for events that *might* happen can be understood as an emotion of *anticipated remorse*, imagining the regretful feelings consequent of not living up to her responsibility. To feel responsible for another person and how they

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<sup>126</sup> For example, *the ethic of presence* (see Chapter 8).

may fare in the future makes people worry about possible unexplored aspects and unexcluded possibilities (Morton, 2009). The prospect of anticipated remorse urges Sandra to question herself and if she has done enough, which in turn motivates her to keep trying. Furthermore, the participants spoke of trying to *maintain hope* in seemingly hopeless situations. As argued by Wettergren (2024), hope is an emotion of future projectivity, which can provide the motivation needed to continue trying when other future-oriented emotions such as trust, and self-confidence, are lacking. Maintaining hope could be achieved by *doing*: even though they had given up, keep *acting as if* they had not, keep suggesting interventions, just *keep doing*. Hope was also sustained practically through interactions with colleagues:

[Kathryn responds to Sandra's story of Hanan]

Kathryn: I hear, it's a lot of hopelessness, but she's still defending him when others express even more hopelessness, so I think there's hope and she's trying to maintain it, and it is the right thing to do. In this group where clients feel that [they] are very lonely and they're not welcome anywhere, the heroin abusers, the health care doesn't want to touch them; we're really fighting an uphill battle, and others feel like there's no use.

Hope was thus not a mere reflection of a perceived objective situation but could be invigorated by participants reminding each other of the meaningfulness of their struggles. It helped them to maintain their cherished values (doing the right thing). At times when hopelessness had taken over, they instead spoke of trying to keep this from clients:

Sandra: The hope is faltering, and I don't want him to notice. I am trying to be firm and steady. He says that he won't live for very long; he has no hope of a better life; he has given up. His hopelessness is contagious. I'm feeling it too, my stomach is in knots, I'm really worried.

Krista: I know that he would have wanted us to do so much more, but we can't, because he is not here. Then it does not matter what I do; I can send someone to rehab but if they don't want to be there it's pointless, and then I have to figure out how I should work with this so that I don't lose hope, or at least so that the client does not notice that I have lost hope, that is the key.

The fact that Sandra and Krista emphasize the importance of *displaying* hope even when feigned suggests that it serves an interactive purpose. This is further substantiated by Sandra's statement that Hanan's "hopelessness is contagious": *displaying hope* could function to elicit hope in others.

In this section, I have argued that specific emotions – guilt, fear, anger, care, responsibility (worry for others), and hope – all motivate social workers to keep

doing their job. These emotions constitute background import that orient their attention to what matters to them and motivates action. We have seen how participants are driven to struggle through a desire to correct perceived injustices (spurred by morally infused anger and genuine care for their clients) and to confront reality in a *good* way (driven by guilt, hope, and fear). Thus, we have seen how such emotions are translated into action over time, and that emotions are not just *consequences* of practice that social workers must cope with but are integral to *practicing* social work (O'Connor, 2020).

### EMOTION AND DECISION MAKING

The participants expressed ambivalent attitudes toward the role and usefulness of emotions in decision-making processes. On the one hand, emotions – expressed in terms of “gut feeling,” “intuition,” or “my heart tells me” – were seen as a compass that facilitated decisions. On the other hand, emotions were described as potential threats to professional practice and should be approached and evaluated with caution. This ambivalence mirrors a broader debate about the nature of knowledge in social work and its practical application. Despite a trend toward developing systematic approaches in assessments and decision-making, research shows that professional decision-making often relies on a trial and error, intuition-driven process due to the inherently uncertain nature of working with people, where available information is inevitably incomplete and potentially unreliable (Munro, 1999, 2008; Forkby et al., 2015).

### EMBODIED FEELINGS AS INFORMATION

Gut feelings were typically talked about as feelings of alarm, of foregrounded feelings of worry that raised a sense of urgency (Barbalet, 2008). These feelings were typically described as embodied experiences – a stomach in knots or the heart telling them that something is wrong. For instance, during a methods meeting, Susan urged her manager to take action, referring to a feeling of urgency:

Susan: This is a *very* serious domestic violence case, and we must really know what we are doing because this case is drilled into my stomach; if you meet this woman and her kids you feel so vulnerable, you feel what they are feeling [Field notes, methods meeting, AU M2]

Susan is relying on her nagging gut feeling – of worry and fear – and attempts to transfer these feelings to her manager. Her embodied feeling, of having the case “drilled into [her] stomach” provides her with information that something must be done. Similarly, during an interview, Krista described how she was sometimes unable to let go of her job when going home:

Fanny: You mentioned that you sometimes ‘bring your clients home’ – can you talk more about that?

Krista: Well, when you’re in the middle of a process where a lot is going on, that happens, it’s not like I have a stomachache because of them, I don’t. Well, that happens though. Like that case that I have right now, this young woman where I decided to enforce LVM.<sup>127</sup> Because I know that it can really go bad, and we have tried everything in our power, but nothing has helped, and then I take it home and I feel really horrible... when I know that we have done everything and I know that if she makes one more bad decision she will die, then I can’t let it go...] Because our clients frequently die. Sometimes it’s expected, like old men that has [have] abused alcohol their entire lives, but sometimes deaths hit me really hard, when it feels unfair, when you are unprepared for it, it has to do with age, I guess. I had this one client, he was young, and I had put him in foster care, but he overdosed and died, and that was awful; he was such a sweet guy, and it hit me hard. I cried so much. [AU M2]

Krista is using her experiences as grounds for her decision-making (enforcing LVM). She relies on her stomachache – a visceral feeling that alerts her to potential undesirable future events, such as the death of her client – based on her previous experience. She does not only recall the factual result (a young client dying), but also the emotional impact (“it hit me hard”; “I cried so much”). Therefore, her professional knowledge encompasses both the consideration of past outcomes and the emotional experiences resulting from them, which serve as a source of valuable information in her decision-making process. These excerpts demonstrate that, in a decision-making situation, the participants consider alternative courses of action based on a hypothetical visions of what *might* happen, and the anticipatory emotions of how this would make them feel, consulting past experiences.

### PROFESSIONALIZING GUT FEELINGS

While several participants stressed the importance of gut feelings, they often added a cautionary note: it is crucial to avoid reacting impulsively to emotions that emerge during client interactions. Instead, one should consciously acknowledge and reflect

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<sup>127</sup> LVM: The Care of Substance Abusers (Special Provisions) Act (SFS 1988:870) is a compulsory care legislation for individuals with severe alcohol or drug dependency.

on these emotional responses. Reflection, in turn, involved both self-reflection – consulting one’s experiences – as well as conferring with others. The former involved a parallel process of using experiences, while also scrutinizing their influence, as illustrated by Indra and Jenifer:

Indra: The interventions are major, and they can’t be entirely driven by emotions, but I think we often rely on our feelings about what we believe. So, you have to be good at self-reflection, not just rushing into things, and process decisions carefully. [Interview, CYU M2]

Jenifer: You have to put your experiences and preconceptions aside, because [pauses briefly], well, you use them in a sense, but you need to put them aside so as not to judge others and make the wrong decisions. [Interview, CYU M1]

These extracts show how practitioners recognize the utility of emotions as a guide: “we rely on our feelings”; “you use them in a sense.” However, while feelings were depicted as potential sources of information, they must be unpacked and reflected upon. In other words, intuitive feelings are portrayed as a potentially valuable resource, but if not critically reflected upon, they could negatively affect decision-making (cf. Cook, 2017).

Emotions arising in client meetings served as a source of information *beyond* the factual matters of the case. For instance, when talking about empathy, Maria described how “attuning” emotionally to clients could provide her with insights that would otherwise remain hidden:

Fanny: I’m interested in how you draw the line, being empathetic and not getting too close, do you have any strategies – or is it what you said, about being able to analyze yourself, thinking ‘why did I react this way?’

Maria: Yeah, being aware that, well, having an openness and being emotional while being knowing about... for example, projection, countertransference; I am trying but not always succeeding. A few weeks ago, I was talking to a foster home parent, and I felt that I was getting sad somehow, or I could almost feel my eyes filling up. But anyways, she eventually told me that she couldn’t cry, it would feel so good she said, and it became clear to myself that I had picked up on her sadness, and I understood that she genuinely cared about the child but that she was struggling. We as humans are affected by one another, if one person is very sad or angry... if you are open to it and can feel it then you might get some information about what is happening in the room because of it. [Interview, CYU M2]

Maria interprets her own feelings of sadness as a sign that the foster home parent “genuinely cared” for the child, suggesting that her emotions provided her with information that otherwise would be unattainable. Jenna expressed a similar view:

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Jenna: Sometimes when parents are acting like children, fighting like preschoolers, I get so irritated, and my focus is on the wrong thing, the parents and not the child. But if I reflect on my irritation after the meeting, I can use it as a sort of mirror of what the child might feel, if I get irritated, what is it like for the kid to be in the middle of this, and then I kind of just know what to do.

Jenna recognizes that foregrounded irritation may interfere with her ongoing action, thwarting her focus to the “wrong thing.” However, it appears that Jenna is saying that, by subsequently reflecting on her irritation, she can use her feelings as a source of information about the situation of the child. As such, Jenna expresses that she uses her empathetic skills to make a decision based on an intuitive knowledge (“I kind of just know what to do”); reflecting on her irritation provided her with a clue that something must be done. Conversely, while Maria understands empathy as attuning emotionally with clients, others caution that it could be a liability, potentially clouding rational assessment of “how things really are” and unduly affecting decision-making:

Tami: Empathy makes it hard to do your job, because then you feel part of their feelings, and that can really drag you down. But it can also affect your decision-making, making it impossible to see things for how they really are, so that’s really bad.

Several participants described how their emotions were gradually professionalized through work experience. This process involved developing emotional reflexivity, which includes monitoring one’s gut feelings and subsequent actions. It also required learning to critically reflect on intuitive feelings when assessing clients, whether they were negative or positive:

Fanny: Do you think that your personal feelings, if I can call them that, affect your assessments?

Tami: In the beginning I think they played a big role, because then I was very emotionally driven, and then colleagues and others could help you deliberate on alternatives. But, I guess they still play a major role, because, if I am visiting a family and I get a feeling that this is a good family [pauses], because you do use your gut feeling when making decisions, you actually do, because you don’t really have any other tools [...] but this one [foster home] family, someone filed a report, and it was really serious stuff, but my feeling was that everything they had done for this child was incredibly positive, so I really had to put my gut feeling aside, because my colleague and I were in disagreement on whether to open an investigation or not. But then I used my experience and decided that, yes, we should investigate this, and maybe the report wasn’t true at all, and I don’t think it’s true, based on the feeling I got when I was there, but what if it *is* true. So, then I had to set aside this positive gut feeling and really think professionally; we are the social services, we have a control function, and I had to stop

myself, because feelings can guide you in the right or the wrong direction. But they also have a central role, so, it's really difficult to explain.

Fanny: Right.

Tami: And then it depends on your own mood – did you, for example, just break up with someone, or did someone die in your family; you have to consider that, and [for] your colleagues and manager to know that so that they can help you, because you don't really notice yourself if that affects you, so you need someone else to have your back. [Interview, FHU M1]

Tami describes how experience has taught her to critically examine her gut feelings, by setting aside “positive gut feeling and really think professionally.” The excerpt contains two seemingly contradictory statements. On the one hand, gut feelings are described as a crucial tool in difficult decision-making processes. These situations were those characterized by lack of decisive information or contradictory information, where consulting colleagues could not provide enough guidance to make a decision. On the other hand, gut feelings are depicted as a liability that must be “set aside” to be able to “think professionally,” here referring to their “control function.”

Tami also stresses the importance of consulting colleagues to become aware of how her own mood might be contaminated by personal circumstances, potentially affecting her professional judgment. She acknowledges that her experience has taught her to approach her intuition with caution, recognizing the inherent uncertainty in social work decision-making: “I used my experience and decided that yes, we should investigate this... what if it *is* true.” This illustrates how she has learned to scrutinize her emotions by fostering self-doubt. The excerpt demonstrates how practitioners gradually develop emotional reflexivity, which involves monitoring their own and others' emotions, and is depicted as a crucial component of decision-making practices. The other component of reflection involved a collective processing of emotions as a practice of sense-making. For instance, Jenifer described how gut feeling, along with “concrete facts,” must be put “on the table” to enable other professionals to make their assessments:

Jenifer: When I meet with other professionals involved, I have to account for how I reached that decision, because I am the one who has met the client, and it is my gut feeling. And I must put everything on the table, and one of those things is the gut feeling. But when you write an assessment you must have concrete facts, it needs to be both. [Interview, CYU M1]

Thus, gut feelings were recognized as a part of the process of making decisions. Practitioners collectively engaged in deciphering their own and each other's gut feelings, treating them as potentially relevant sources of information. Sometimes these gut feelings aligned with the concrete facts, while at other times, they prompted critical evaluation of those facts. For example, the first response team encouraged Stella to open an investigation based on her gut feeling:

Stella: It all looks good on paper, but I just feel that there is something fishy; I can't put my finger on it. I just felt uncomfortable with the way the mother behaved, it seemed forced, like she was trying too hard, like she is trying to prove something to us.

Angela: Well, I think that it means that we have to investigate this.

Paula: I agree, you have to trust your gut.

Collectively reflecting on Stella's emotions allowed the group to critically assessing the available information. So, while gut feelings were sometimes described as unreliable (as in Tami's excerpt), they were at other times central for sense-making. This process involves evaluating the appropriateness of others' emotional responses, here deemed *too much*, causing Stella to suspect "something fishy" despite "look[ing] good on paper," warranting further investigation.<sup>128</sup> Her feeling that something was amiss therefore elicited feelings of doubt and suspicion that served as a clue to take action (consulting colleagues), ultimately guiding decision-making.

Furthermore, the participants frequently spoke of consulting colleagues to critically examine one's gut feeling (like Tami's reflection above) to avoid one's *mood* contaminating assessments:

Angela: Your mood on a particular day can greatly impact how you assess someone – it's like that in all occupations where you meet people that you have to assess. Of course, you have your own personal opinions and thoughts and feelings that impact how you feel about someone, but as long as you can talk about it with colleagues, you can somehow peel away the feeling that you need help with, because we can perceive people very differently based on a single conversation. [Focus group interview, FRT, M2]

Angela describes how collectively reflecting on one's feelings with colleagues can serve to distinguish useful emotions from disturbing ones: "peel away the feeling you need help with." Thus, her reflection indicates that while some gut feelings may

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<sup>128</sup> However, it should be noted that children and youth social workers typically applied a 'better safe than sorry' approach, meaning that they rather investigate too much (more on this later).

guide you in making a rational decision, others may disturb such objectives and must be excluded from decision-making processes.

Next, I will further explore and illustrate the connection between temporality, emotion, and cognition, and their role in decision-making and action, by delving into a fundamental aspect of social work: uncertainty.

### *PROPOSING A TYPOLOGY OF UNCERTAINTY: SOURCES, FUNCTIONS, OUTCOMES*

Uncertainty is recognized as a core condition of social work (cf. Fook, 2007; Ponnert 2013). In this section, I propose a typology of uncertainty. I will demonstrate how uncertainty – and its counterpart certainty – involve a network of emotions, depending on its sources and anticipated outcomes. As such, uncertainty can either facilitate or debilitate decision-making and action, as well as serve as a moral guide. First, I examine what I call *ontological uncertainty*, relating to the fundamental lack of certainty regarding information about clients, and how professional decisions and action may affect them in the future. Then I consider *epistemic uncertainty*, which refers to social workers' evaluation of the quality of their professional knowledge. Lastly, I examine what I refer to as *moral uncertainty*, where uncertainty is understood as a moral virtue, prompting professionals to reflect on their relative power and status, as well as providing guidance for how much to investigate, intervene in, and control clients.

### *ONTOLOGICAL UNCERTAINTY*

We have seen that prospect-based feelings such as worry, concern, and fear served as epistemic emotions providing information and motivation to act. Developing professional decision-making skills, involving risk assessment based on future predictions and past experiences, meant refining emotions into professional tools. For instance, we saw that decision-making involved consulting one's own and others' gut feeling in anticipating the potential consequences of decisions. However, utilizing such feelings was a double-edged sword that prompted counterfactual thinking, eliciting anxiety and self-doubt:

Sandra: I guess I feel guilt. Sometimes I get these thoughts, if he dies, it is my fault? I know logically that it is not true, but should I have done more? [Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

Mona: If I make the wrong decision, will this person die? It's easy to make the decision to place someone in a shelter, because it's better to place one time too many than one

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

time too few. But then, now I'm standing here thinking, is it safe for this person to leave the women's shelter, or will something happen? In those cases, I'm always afraid of making a mistake, because the consequences are *huge*.

Fanny: But how do you know, you just read all the information and make a decision based on that?

Mona: Well, there is the fantastic gut feeling, but then you have to weigh the options... what happens if I place the person in the wrong place, you know, am I doing more harm than good? But... different kinds of wrong decision come with different consequences – in some cases it's not so bad, in others it means death, so. [Interview, AU M2]

In these excerpts, we can see how the participants struggle with painful emotions – nagging fear, worry, anxiety – in relation to decision-making. These emotions, I argue, arise from the fundamental uncertainty of working with human beings – never fully knowing if the information is sufficient or accurate, nor how your professional decisions and actions will affect the client – coupled with the fact that social workers *must* act, they *must* make decisions (Lindwall, 2020). The arduous emotions arise in relation to hypothetical consequences of those actions: ultimately whether one's own decisions and actions will contribute to or even determine whether the client lives or dies. Sandra and Mona's anxious questions (If he dies, is it my fault?) testify to emotional pressure saturated by counterfactual<sup>129</sup> thinking, which I argue is a consequence of utilizing emotions in decision-making. Furthermore, we can see how anticipated fear functions as a motivator to keep investigating, to “do more”; emotions stemming from uncertainty prompt action. In addition to agonizing about potential future events, the participants also expressed *retroactive* dwellings:

Fanny: Did you ever ‘fail,’ so to speak, when deciding on a course of action for a client?

Indra: Well, I, um, we [hesitates], I have been in situations where we in this unit have talked about things like, ‘did we get it right in this case,’ you know, when things have happened, could we have done anything differently; where you really feel the feeling that we didn't act, we didn't do enough. It hasn't happened in any of my cases, but it's always difficult. You can never really *know* what could have happened, or what will happen. [Interview, CYU M2]

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<sup>129</sup> In Kahneman & Tversky's (1982) original conceptualization, they distinguish between *counterfactual* and *prefactual* thinking, where the former means imagining what might have happened if events had unfolded differently in the *past*, while the latter involves imagining different scenarios and outcomes in the future. For the sake of simplicity, I will only use counterfactual thinking when speaking of “what-if” scenarios and related emotions.

The vast feeling of responsibility for clients seems to provoke endless representations of things that could have been (hindsight bias) or that will possibly be, typically articulated as “what if” questions (Paulsen, 2020), activating feelings of regret, anger, and shame.

Based on the, potentially endless, information that *could* be obtained, as well as the numerous theoretically possible courses of actions that *could* be chosen, I wanted to know how they reached a feeling of having investigated sufficiently, a feeling of confidence rising from information saturation (de Sousa, 2008). While there were time limits to investigations in the children and youth units (typically four months) that provided an external limit, knowing when the investigation was sufficient seemed hard to pinpoint:

Carol: It’s about distinguishing the boundaries; how much *can* you know? You shouldn’t investigate *too much*, but my biggest fear is to make the wrong decision because I haven’t investigated enough. [Interview, CYU M1]

While Carol emphasizes the importance of “distinguishing the boundaries” for what *can* be known, she nonetheless struggles with balancing not investigating “too much,” but sufficiently to mitigate her fear of making the wrong decision. This kind of uncertainty – albeit ontological in the sense that you *can* never *know* for certain – differs from the life-or-death situations described above. In essence, the level of *impact* – what is at stake – matters. Carol’s uncertainty seems to revolve around not interfering too much about the client’s life, while maintaining her professionalism and not making the “wrong decision.” Equally, Krista described striving for a desired feeling, “feeling safe,” by attempting to manage her fear:

Krista: I want to know how to approach this case, so that I can make a decision that will feel safe for the client and for me.

Joanne: But why are you feeling insecure? You have done so much good for her.

Krista: I am trying to think rationally about it, squarely, making a list of all the people involved and all of her abilities, because she is really strong at the same time. But my heart is telling me something else.

Joanne: What does your heart tell you?

Krista: That it’s not enough, it’s not going to end well.

Joanne: You feel scared and insecure. If those feelings weren’t there, what would you do?

Krista: I would have done more

[Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

Krista seeks to navigate and manage her fear and worry stemming from anticipated and undesirable future events. By disclosing her fear to her colleagues and process supervision supervisor, she seeks to reach a desired emotional state, one of hope and relief (Ortony et al., 2022; Scheer, 2012). Previous attempts to master fear and insecurities by “think[ing] rationally” and seeking comfort in thinking of all of the things that speak in favor of a positive outcome for her client (“making a list of all [the] people involved” and her client’s abilities) has failed, as her gut feeling will not align (“my heart is telling me something else”). While her gut feeling provides her with information (that it is not going to end well), it is simultaneously described as debilitating as opposed to motivating professional action; were the feelings not there, she “would have done more.”

As argued by Barbalet (2008, p. 83–84), to make a rationally informed decision – that is, a decision based on a *feeling of knowing* (de Sousa, 2009) – people are guided by background emotions. Among these are *trust*, described as a “feeling of certainty,” and *confidence*, which allows us to “bring[s] one possible future into the present” (Barbalet, 2008, p. 186). Such positively balanced emotions aid processing and the managing of large amounts of potentially relevant information. Krista’s inability to distinguish a course of action (at least in her own experience) suggests a lack of such trust and confidence, incapacitating her.

The question is why Carol and Krista (along with many of their colleagues) seem to blame themselves – at least anticipating that they *will* blame themselves – if they cannot accurately predict future outcomes. A possible answer may be the neoliberal discourse within which professionals are *accountable* for mistakes following a culture of auditing as a central mechanism of governance and control in the public sector (Power, 1999). The consequences of individual accountability can further be understood in relation to *risk management*. Risk management, involving calculation, assessment, and management of potential future events has become a standard practice in social work (Munro, 2011). However, social work is inherently unpredictable, and risk can never be predicted and eliminated, and therefore *uncertainty* is a central condition of social work (e.g., Fook, 2007). The participants’ fear of making mistakes could thus be understood in a wider context: that the modern individual has, in Paulsen’s words, “developed an inability to live with uncertainty” (Paulsen, 2020, my translation). Paulsen argues, based on Weber’s

concept of *disenchantment* (2019) and Beck's *risk society* (1992) that individuals in rational modern society tend to think of the world in terms of cause and effect, that we can eliminate risk *if only* we have the knowledge that allows us to calculate things accurately. Weber summarizes:

Thus, increasing intellectualisation and rationalisation does *not* mean an increasing general knowledge of the conditions in which we live. It means instead something else: the knowledge, or the belief, that *if one only wanted*, one *could* establish what these conditions are— that there are, in principle, no enigmatic and unpredictable forces that are here at work, but rather that all things – in principle– can be *controlled through calculation*. (Weber, translated by Tribe, 2019, p. 66, emphases in original).

In sum, I argue that the social workers struggle to manage and accept what I call *ontological uncertainty*, that is, the fundamental condition that future outcomes *cannot* be predicted in people work, causing feelings of fear (of future outcomes) and blame (self-directed guilt for imagined outcomes). The intensity of these emotions vary depending on the anticipated impact of their decisions.

Such counterfactual feelings are reinforced by political and media discourse portraying social workers as incompetent following the death of a child, which activates *collective* shame and status-related insecurities about the profession as a group (Warner, 2015, p. 126). Next, I will examine this type of uncertainty – that which concerns practitioners' doubt of the quality of their professional knowledge and competencies (Ponnert, 2013<sup>130</sup>). While this type of insecurity stems from a collective sense of inferiority relative to professions with higher status, it is experienced individually too.

### **EPISTEMIC UNCERTAINTY**

As we have seen, the participants recognized the value of unmeasurable skills such as intuition and gut feeling and empathetic understanding in practice. In other words, they (occasionally) esteemed their practically acquired knowledge. However, the participants, particularly in the adult unit, frequently expressed doubt and discontent over the quality of their knowledge. When I asked what they had learned

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<sup>130</sup> See Ponnert (2013) for a similar typology of uncertainty, although not specifically in relation to emotions.

from social work education, participants spoke in terms of learning “a way of thinking” or “way of being”:

Paula: I feel like that is what the education was about, a way of being, a way of thinking, it was pretty clear what we should feel about society. [Focus group interview, FRT M2]

Carol: Well, I guess that... well [what] I learned was not really facts and stuff, but more a way of thinking, a way of seeing the world. You know, perspectives, and being open and understanding. [Interview, CYU M1]

Sara: I didn't learn that much really; maybe we should have had more practical training, learning to weave together practice and theory. I can't really think of anything that I learned that I could use, maybe more of a way of thinking or an ideology maybe. [Interview, CYU M1]

The social workers in the children and youth units reported that they had acquired the necessary skills – exclusively referring to knowledge about agency policies, methods, and procedures, as well as social policy and legislation – through practical experience, particularly those with longer work experience. Knowing how the law worked provided them with a sense of security, of giving them a mandate to act and distinguish the boundaries for their responsibility (see Chapter 7). Contrariwise, the adult unit social workers often talked about how they *lacked* crucial expertise, specifically regarding their target group, such as knowledge about diagnoses and drugs.

Mona: We work with really complicated individuals, and it's important to understand how much drugs mean to people and why it is so difficult to let go. But sometimes it feels like managers forget why it is important to understand. When I say, I want to know more about drugs, they say 'your job is to investigate.' Sure, absolutely, but to investigate I must be able to understand why people do what they do, right? Sometimes I feel like I learn more from Flashback<sup>131</sup> than from anything else. [Interview, AU M2]

Sandra: I feel like we're not developing very much. I want more knowledge about different diagnoses; I feel like I can't understand my clients and why they behave like they do.

While the adult unit participants also asserted having sufficient knowledge about legislation and social policy, as well as agency procedures and treatment options, they declared that they lacked certain areas of knowledge necessary to sufficiently *understand* their clients. For example, during a process supervision session, Jane

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<sup>131</sup> Flashback is a Swedish online forum where people anonymously discuss a wide range of topics.

struggled with feelings of incompetence due to lack of knowledge about how “mental illness and diagnoses” affected the trustworthiness of one of her clients:<sup>132</sup>

Jane: I feel so uncertain, and I need to know if you hear and understand something different than what I understand and don't understand. The case is about protective placements, and our responsibility for the child, and our knowledge about mental illness and diagnoses, because I feel like I don't know *anything* about that. I don't know how to assess and approach it, and I feel that I work in the social services, and a problem that I think that we have as social workers – we run up and down the hall and ask people, then we run to the office and google it, and then we talk to a colleague from a different unit. It's just so *mesy* and then I wonder how we actually come to conclusions about things.

Joanne: How do you think knowing about diagnoses would help you?

Jane: I just feel that if she has all these diagnoses, how do we handle it next time we meet a person with a lot of diagnoses and we don't know whether she is telling us the truth or not, how the hell do we manage that?

Jane expresses doubt regarding how decisions are made, describing the process as far from transparent and systematic: “we run up and down the hall” and “google it.” She also seems to believe that if she only had the knowledge of diagnosis, she could somehow appraise accurately the trustworthiness of her client. I suggest that the above excerpts demonstrate participants' *epistemic uncertainty*, prompting meta-cognition about the quality of their professional knowledge (de Sousa, 2009). While confidence in one's knowledge generates feelings of pride, confidence, and control, and facilitates decision-making and action (Törnqvist & Wettergren, 2023), lacking such confidence seemed to debilitate decision-making.

Jane's feelings of doubt in the quality of professional knowledge may therefore be understood in relation to occupational status, and reflect a larger tendency of social workers' doubt in their knowledge that can be understood in relation to their relatively low status within the system of professions (Abbott, 1988). While professionals in high status occupations can use their expert knowledge and power as *status shields*, low-status professions lack such barriers (Freund, 1998; Hochschild 2003, p. 136). For instance, surgeons can cite their credentials and expert status to deflect criticism from, for example, patients or the media, interpreting a patient's death as an unfortunate consequence of a well-executed operation (Kolb, 2008). Furthermore, Eriksson and Flisbäck (2010) argue that, in addition to the external

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<sup>132</sup> Jane talks about this client – a woman that had been in a TV dating show – in Chapter 8.

status shields, internal *belief* in one's professional knowledge can serve as a status shield, thereby protecting workers from their own self-doubt.

Furthermore, what is represented as *true* knowledge has narrowed following neoliberal ideals, where knowledge is defined as scientifically proven, devoid of personal opinions and emotions. Devaluation of unmeasurable skills, such as intuition and relational skills, may therefore reduce social workers' lack of confidence in, and pride of, their knowledge. Barbalet contends that pride in one's expertise and skills and satisfaction in one's work are emotions that facilitate and motivate instrumental action (Barbalet, 2008, p. 60). While legal professionals, particularly judges, hold a high societal status, social workers do not. Jane seems to draw the conclusion that, in lacking epistemic knowledge (as compared to, for example, medical doctors' knowledge of diagnoses), she doubts the quality of her practical knowledge, which therefore debilitates her capacity to act.

### MORAL UNCERTAINTY

Lastly, uncertainty was also described as a form of moral virtue, prompting social workers to examine their relative power and status in relation to clients, as well as providing guidance in deciding whether further assessments and interventions were granted. While ontological and epistemic uncertainty were often incapacitating and an impediment to practice, moral uncertainty manifested as emotional reminders in weighting moral standards and navigating ethical dilemmas. This was particularly obvious in instances where they considered whether to enforce coercive legislation.

Sara: It is such a huge thing, and I get really uncertain in that moment, and you have to weigh it... It's a violation you know, and it has to be in proportion to the risk of not enforcing it. And it's very speculative, it's speculative even though it's not supposed to be, trying to calculate the risk, because you never *know*. [Interview, Emma & Sara, CYU M1]

Maria: It is really uncomfortable, having to make a decision like that, and it *has to be*, it has to be uncomfortable, when you don't feel it, I think you shouldn't work with this anymore. And you really have to reach that level of certainty, but... I don't really know how I do that honestly; I mean we talk in methods meetings and that, but I honestly don't know how I do it. [Interview, CYU M2]

Linda: Once I told a client, like, your son cannot keep living with you, and sometimes you forget the weight of it all. But sometimes it hits you – now I'm going to work and I'm going to tell somebody that they can't keep their child. When you look at it from the outside, I mean it is weird, it's a weird feeling, and I think that you have to, you

have to *keep feeling* that it is weird, because it *is* weird, it's not *normal*. [Interview, CYU M2]

These extracts show how practitioners (account for how they) attempt to resolve inherent ethical dilemmas that advocate contradictory actions, such as the principle of autonomy and the principle of harm reduction (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2016). We have seen numerous examples of counterfactual thinking and feeling throughout this chapter, where social workers struggle to reach a desired emotional state of certainty by attempts to reduce fear and anxiety and reach a state of calmness. Sara and Maria describe the impossibility that is to *know* what will happen, and thus the insufficiency of a purely cognitive reasoning. Thus, in dilemmatic situations in which rational information about the “correct” course of action is absent, they must rely on affect (Barbalet, 1998; Ortony et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the excerpts demonstrate that they experience “moral residue” in relation to decision-making (Zerbe, 2009). The phenomenological experience of this moral residue, I argue, is anticipated regret (a feeling of sadness or disappointment) and/or remorse (morally charged feelings including guilt), describing a foretaste of the regretful feelings consequent of failing to live up to their responsibilities. Linda and Maria even describe actively trying to elicit uncertainty: “you have to *keep feeling* that it is weird”; “it *has* to be uncomfortable.” In turn, this seems to spur on a careful and persistent effort to weigh all possible courses of actions and imagining the outcomes of such actions (Morton, 2009, p. 10). This diligence can be seen in their self-reminders of the high stakes of their actions and their power position, “It’s a violation.”

While the subject of ethical dilemmas is a common research focus (cf. Banks, 2016; Weinberg, 2014), I propose that emotions play a vital part of how social workers respond to such dilemmas. In the above excerpts, we can see how the practitioners attempt to deal with *obligation dilemmas*, situations in which more than one feasible action is compulsory while only being able to pursue one course (that is, either acting according to the standard of autonomy *or* the standard of harm reduction). During the social work education, students learn to be self-reflective and how to develop professional uncertainty and self-doubt. They are thus trained to be complex *moral reasoners*, and thereby, according to Zerbe (2009) are more likely to experience unpleasant emotions when in a decision-making situation, particularly when the stakes are high, as in applying coercive legislation.

While moral uncertainty is arguably a necessary skill to safeguard the rights of clients, the question is what the consequences are for professionals. As argued above, it is reasonable to imagine that the collective low confidence in their knowledge base and the criticism that social workers face might elevate feelings of fear of wrongdoing and anxiety among social workers.

So far, this chapter has shown how practitioners manage and use their emotions in practice. In the next and last section, I will show how the *organization* and its structures govern and shape how practitioners manage and use their emotions in practice.

## ORGANIZING EMOTIONS

In this section, I will show how organizational structures embed emotions and emotion management techniques. I will show that practitioners' emotion management strategies are not just individually developed skills based on notions of how to be professional, but that the organization actively attempts to shape workers' emotions and emotion management skills into organizational resources.

## A TIME AND PLACE FOR EMOTIONS

While the relaxed atmosphere in the office has initially surprised me,<sup>133</sup> I gradually discerned various organizationally imposed feeling and display rules (Hochschild, 1983). Some feelings – or at least their expression – were allocated to certain rooms at certain times. The participants named a central place for managing undue – in other words unprofessional – emotions: the private refuge of their offices with trusted confidants:

Lena: We talk about psychotic breaks, when clients are super annoying. But I try to hide it, and then I can go to my colleague after the meeting and just pour it out. Or like, it *steams* out of me. And we can make jokes and be a bit sarcastic, and joke about that there better not be a hidden camera from *Uppdrag Granskning*<sup>134</sup> in this room. [Interview, CYU M1]

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<sup>133</sup> See Chapter 5.

<sup>134</sup> An investigative journalism program known for, among other things, exposing misconduct in public agencies.

Certain metaphors were frequently invoked to describe these interactions: “venting,” “steaming,”<sup>135</sup> and even “psychotic breaks,” all of which I interpreted as built-up emotions kept inside of the body until finding a proper space for release. It suggests both a *temporal* as well as a *spatial* organization of emotions; there is a performative order for when, where, and in front of whom to display certain feelings. The encounters were described as crucial, and often humorous, respites away from the potential gaze of improper onlookers. Typically, display rules came as “prompts from an unseen director,” a *sense* of proper behavior befitting professionals in a bureaucratic agency.

However, display rules were also communicated via *direct* prompts from an outside “director” (Goffman, 1959):

I’m at a staff meeting with the first response team in the child protection unit. The purpose of the (weekly) meeting, I am told, is to go through their respective cases according to the principles of ‘Signs of Safety.’<sup>136</sup> The supervisor asks the group how things are, *jobwise*, she adds quickly. Let’s not talk about personal stuff today, okay? [*They exchange knowing glances, eyebrows raised.*] When I later asked about this situation, Lisa told me that the supervisor says some version of that every time: ‘Don’t talk about personal stuff.’ [Fieldnotes, FRT M2]

This seemingly minor exchange is more explicit in its purposes than usual: the social workers are asked to report on how they are doing *jobwise*; the supervisor wanted to know about the number of cases and the manageability of this caseload – not how these cases affected the group members in terms of “personal stuff.” I observed many similar situations in staff meetings. Less explicit were the subtle glances that, just as I expected, bore a common understanding: personal feelings are to be sequestered, and dealt with elsewhere, so as not to disturb professional practice. An additional organizational strategy to regulate the experience and expression of emotions was to *redirect* them.

Emma: I went through a rough period last year where I felt bad at work. We had a lot of conflicts with other professionals, and I had difficult clients and a high case load, then I turned to management to vent, because I needed support, and they couldn’t handle it, so they told me to turn to the occupational health service, and kind of just shut down. [Interview, Emma and Sara, CYU M1]

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<sup>135</sup> Swedish: *Pysa*.

<sup>136</sup> The *Signs of Safety* approach is a strengths-based, safety-focused risk assessment framework designed for child protection casework (Turnell & Edwards, 1999).

Emma's statement shows how management uses a *buffering* technique to segregate potentially disruptive emotions from practice, in effect, also prescribing the rules for what is acceptable or not by advising Emma to seek professional help (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). Other examples of such organizational recommendations were to "go out and run" and mindfulness to deal with negative emotions [Interviews, Jenifer, CYU M1; Mona, AU M2]. As argued by Neckel (2009), such proposals can be understood as a neoliberal form of subjectification, where developing emotional skills and improving well-being by "self-care" strategies is aimed at optimizing individual capacities to improve efficiency or to better "cope" with stress and "negative" emotions at work. These instructions to isolate emotions from practice and manage them elsewhere can be understood as organizational attempts to devalue certain emotions and establish rules for how to express feelings at work. As such, the traditional dichotomy between rationality and emotionality is reproduced, where emotions in their unmanaged form are seen as opposite to "real" bureaucratic activities (Barbalet, 2008).

### MANUFACTURING THE EMOTIONALLY SKILLED WORKER

While dealing with emotions was sometimes allocated to external places, as we saw in the excerpts above, the key place designated for managing emotions was process supervision. While process supervision was, at least for some, a highly valued and helpful component of practice, its *intention* can be understood in different ways. So far, I have interpreted the process supervision from an interactionist perspective, arguing that the process supervision may be understood as a successful interaction ritual that provides the workers with emotional energy, and builds in-group solidarity and a collective identity. Considering a different point of view, process supervision can be interpreted as an organizational tool to produce proper emotional workers, a place where social workers can increase emotional reflexivity and manage and calibrate emotions into useful practice tools (Neckel, 2014). During methods meetings, I frequently noticed that managers said things along the line of "yes, but that is not for this meeting, you have the process supervision for that" [field notes, methods meeting, AU M2].

In a study on process supervision, Beijer et al. (2007, p. 21) summarize the key aims of process supervision (also called supportive supervision) as helping

practitioners manage work-related stress and to develop attitudes and feelings that lead to the best possible work for clients and users. Based on a survey, social workers report that process supervision serves to discuss and understand their own work-related feelings (93%); improve the relationship between practitioner and client (84%); discuss emotional problems related to certain types of clients (73%). Only 6% report that it serves to assist in treating their own problems (p. 68). Managers reported that the key aims (for social workers) were to counteract stress and burnout, improve client understanding and treatment, develop professional methods, and promote self-insight<sup>137</sup> (p. 78).

Interestingly, while the aims described in the study (Beijer et al., 2007) are distinctly work-related, in job ads<sup>138</sup>, process supervision is commonly listed as a “benefit” along with, for example, wellness grants and flexible working hours. This warrants the question, should developing professional emotional skills be understood as a “benefit,” distinct from the “actual” work?

The process supervision was, while predominantly appreciated by the research participants, also a place that the organization *expects* workers to manage emotions and develop emotional skills. Thus, to thwart skepticism about the purpose of process supervision, it can also be understood in the context of a larger cultural trend, where organizations seek to train workers’ emotions into an organizational resource that can be exploited for profit or efficiency. Encouraging the development of abilities such as empathy and emotional reflexivity can be seen as an organizational enterprise to optimize individuals and make them more resistant or resilient (Neckel et al., 2017). Reflecting on and utilizing one’s emotions as a professional resource has been described as an economization and commodification of emotions, or developing “emotional capital” (Hochschild, 2003; Illouz, 2007).

Furthermore, in Chapter 8 I explored process supervision as interaction rituals which produce team solidarity and as a potential emotional refuge where specific feeling rules can be established. However, a gloomier reflection is that process supervision can be used as a means for worker exploitation, and that group solidarity may also lead to compensatory practices, where workers “covering” for each other ultimately serves to preserve a dysfunctional work situation. In a study of workers

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<sup>137</sup> These were the highest-scoring parameters (all above 90%).

<sup>138</sup> See Chapter 5.

in the hotel and restaurant industry, Paula Mulinari (2011) highlights the dual functions of solidarity through the concept of “trap of solidarity,” observing that workers covering for each other under conditions of chronic understaffing and heavy workloads. This includes helping each other finish on time, working extra-long hours, or working on days off. References to empathy and solidarity elicit feelings of guilt and shame when not covering for colleagues, and the desire to prevent such feelings compel workers to go beyond the scope of their responsibilities. While strengthening group solidarity, it also entraps workers by “forcing” them to work more while concealing and normalizing harmful work conditions.

I argue that the trap of solidarity also applies to social workers (cf. Lauri 2016, p. 203). For instance, team solidarity may urge workers to cover for colleagues, while collectively constructed moral standards may compel them to balance the discrepancy between resources and demands by developing compensatory strategies (Astvik & Melin, 2013; Selberg, 2013; Lauri, 2016). For example, the participants spoke of taking over each other’s cases when they deemed that a colleague had too heavy a caseload. Additionally, in all of the units there seemed to be an unwillingness to go on sick leave, and several participants stated that they frequently worked while sick. Sara described it as a “culture”; “there is a culture here to work even when you’re sick” [Interview, Emma & Sara, CYU M1], implying that taking sick days was discouraged. Others said that going on vacation was often stressful, as they worried about things “piling up” while absent. Tami even described vacation time as “the worst part of the job,” and that she habitually offered to help colleagues with their caseload even when on vacation (despite her manager telling her not to):

Tami: I always get the most stressed when I am about to go on summer vacation, then you have to look over all of your cases to ensure that somebody can cover... maybe I can enjoy the last week of vacation, but it’s like the worst part of the job, to go on vacation.

Fanny: Wow, that sounds awful.

Tami: I make sure to tell everyone that they can call me even if I’m on vacation, just call me if you have any questions. Of course, my manager tells me not to do that, that I should be off work on vacation, but I would hate if somebody got into trouble because of my cases. [Interview, FHU M1]

In this excerpt we can see how group solidarity can lead to compensatory practices. Tami’s care for her colleagues compels her to (offer to) work on her vacation time,

and her worry that “somebody [get] into trouble” motivates her to scrutinize her cases before vacation, triggering stress.

In summary, workers’ emotions can be understood as a source of affective capital for the organization, a “covert resource, like money, or knowledge, or physical labor” (Hochschild, 1993, p. xii). However, to make emotions “productive,” they must be properly managed (suppressing certain emotions while eliciting others), buffered and redirected (deal with personal emotions in certain places at certain times). By designating when and where emotions should be managed (e.g., the health services and process supervision) organizations also prescribe the norms and rules for acceptable emotional behavior, while delineating which emotions are “appropriate” (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). While process supervision was highly valued among most participants, the (tacit) request to collectively manage emotions can simultaneously be understood as an organizational tactic to produce emotionally skilled workers, and group solidarity can be exploited by organizations, causing workers to compensate for organizational flaws.

Next, I will demonstrate how the different role positions and duties permit managers to maintain a distance from clients by using social workers as emotional shields. This protects managers from clients’ emotions, such as anger and blame, and allows them to endorse ideals of efficiency and budget mindedness. In contrast, social workers must perform emotional labor in client meetings to compensate for financial restraints, policy directives, and organizational shortcomings.

### SOCIAL WORKERS AS EMOTIONAL SHIELDS

In their capacity as *street-level bureaucrats* (Lipsky, 2010), social workers are responsible for the task to deliver statutory decisions in face-to-face interactions (or by telephone) with clients. These decisions are made within the constraints of limited resources and complex legislation and regulations, and social workers need to balance the needs and rights of their clients with the requirements of the law and organizational policies. However, most decisions are *formally* made by a manager or the municipal social welfare committee, who may overrule the recommendation made by individual social workers.

*PRESERVING CLIENT DISTANCE*

In Chapter 6, I argued that managers sought to outline limits for client involvement. However, the extent to which workers *can* keep a distance from clients depends on their specific organizational role functions and responsibilities. Social work code of ethics encourage social workers to establish trusting relationships with clients and act as their advocates. In contrast, managers tend to be *institutional guardians*, meaning they are emotionally, cognitively, and morally committed to maintaining existing institutional structures (Creed et al., 2014). The participants recognized the distinct role expectations and their integral boundaries for client involvement. For instance, during process supervision, Jane questioned her own “emotionality” by comparing herself to their method supervisor<sup>139</sup>, Patty:

Jane: I wish I was more like Patty, more like ‘Stop! What are we doing? Purpose!’ – that I was rational like that; I’m quite emotional, I sit and feel a lot and then I can’t keep it in. Patty also feels a lot of things but still manages to be rational.

Sandra responded to Jane’s reflection:

Sandra: I’m thinking, how can she [Patty] be so rational? Well, she’s *not* the client’s mother, she has a different role; I imagine it’s easier because she’s not the one who meets the client. You can’t blame yourself; you have a different role.

[Fieldnotes, AU M2]

Jane’s self-critical perception of herself as irrational and emotional, is measured against a wish to be more “rational.” She believes that Patty is better managing her emotions and therefore succeeds to be rational *despite* “feeling a lot.” Sandra reasons that Patty’s ability to be rational is contingent upon her specific role, rather than her personal disposition. Sandra suggests that Patty’s role permits a greater distance from clients, which protects her from self-blame. While Jane attributes her feeling incapacitated to her inability to manage (suppress) her emotions, while Patty manages to focus on procedural matters (“Stop! What are we doing! Purpose!”) allowing her to be rational.

The impact of meeting clients face-to-face was frequently described as embodied experiences by the participants:

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<sup>139</sup> Swedish: *Metodhandledare* or *förste socialsekreterare*.

Susan: The manager at the housing unit is fighting tooth and nail not to take on this case. But when you meet this woman and her children you feel really vulnerable; the case really settles in your stomach.

Mary: The managers are too far removed from our clients.

[Field notes, process supervision, AU M2]

Susan's reflection, that carries the "in your stomach," and Mary's claim that managers are "too far removed" from clients, neatly captures the degree of distance that organizational roles allow. Managers, as well as methods supervisors, rarely meet clients face-to-face, but evaluate their problems and needs based on documentation and written assessments. When documenting, social workers are translating the life circumstances of clients into an institutional language, purifying and ordering a "dirty" reality into technical accounts and legal code (Tilly, 2008; Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). Only encountering these purified versions, managers are protected from *experiencing* the often-gritty details of client's circumstances. During the break of the process supervision referred to above, Susan told me that "it's easy for managers to say that we should do nothing." The reason why it is *easy* is arguably that they are spared the emotional impact that meeting clients can have.

Due to their different roles as well as their relative status within the organization, social workers thus often shield managers from clients' grievances, as well as from experiencing the reality of clients' lives. In this respect, social workers function as *emotional shields* for their superiors. By meeting clients face-to-face and in their capacity as translator of reality into technical accounts, they protect superiors by buffering the emotional impact of client work. This, it may be argued, in turn allows for managers to deflect moral responsibility and remain loyal to bureaucratic principles.

### **DEFLECTING BLAME**

The participants, especially in the adult unit, frequently spoke of the arduous task of delivering bad news to clients and the emotional toll of these encounters.

For instance, during a process supervision session, Jane shared an experience where a client had reacted harshly when receiving bad news. She explained that the client had become aggressive and threatened her, leaving Jane feeling scared for her own and her client's safety. Despite the severity of the situation, the manager evaded her pleas for assistance:

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

Jane: I tried to make it clear to the client that I am not the one that had made the decision, it is my manager. The thing is, I wanted to grant him what he asked for, and not just because he is creepy and I'm scared of him, but because I thought that it should be granted. But my manager told me that it would probably not be approved, despite not reading it [the request]. And when I told the client it would probably be rejected, he told me that 'you have blood on your hands, Jane, and you and the social services are responsible for what will happen now,' and then he hung up. And I thought he would kill himself, so I called the emergency services. But then he called me, and I put him on speakerphone because my manager was there, and he is *pissed*, and told me that I just want to watch my own back and hide the fact that I am incompetent. And it was so hard to know what to say; I wanted to tell the client that I am sorry, but I did not know what to say because the manager was listening. I couldn't be my private self *or* my professional self; I couldn't be anything. I was nothing.

Joanne: Because you disagreed with the decision?

Jane: I didn't agree, and the manager hadn't even read my assessment, and I begged her to read it or at least call the client and say that it wasn't me, just tell him that it wasn't my decision, but she refused. And I was awake all night looking through the peephole in my door. It was like the manager wouldn't stand up to the power that he has.

Joanne: How does that make you feel?

Jane: I feel a bit stupid in a way, also because we often end up in situations where we kind of have to answer to clients when we can't approve an application, and we have to answer to their frustration whether we want to or not.

[Fieldnotes, process supervision, AU M2]

In Jane's recollection of the phone call with the client, she describes neither being able to be her private self nor her professional self, because her manager was listening. This situation illustrates Jane being trapped between her desire to explain to the client that she disagreed with the decision and her need to show loyalty to her manager. Thus, being unable to anchor her professional role neither to the organizational frame (because the client scared her, and she did not agree) nor to the professional frame (because her manager heard her) left her without guidance for how to manage the situation. While interactions always entail a degree of uncertainty of how to act, in this situation the impact of frames as behavioral guides becomes very clear. Realizing that her client and her manager have opposite expectations of her, she experiences an acute form of role conflict and is left to navigate without a compass.

Furthermore, and more on the topic for this section, Jane's story illustrates how managers can effectively avoid blame and clients' emotional reactions by using social workers as emotional shields. Research indicates a link between status and emotional labor, showing that individuals with lower occupational status are less protected

from the negative consequences of emotional labor. Those with higher status can often redirect would-be critics elsewhere (Hochschild, 1983; Stenross and Kleinman, 1989; Kolb, 2011). More precisely, an individual's social position and status within an organization determine the resources available to them to assign responsibility for handling client's grievances through "status shields" (cf. Hochschild, 1983). In this case, Jane felt that her manager had abdicated their power responsibility by using Jane as a status shield, leaving her to deal with the emotional consequences. Unable to reassure the client that she disagreed with the decision, she felt incapacitated and lost: "I was nothing."

Being responsible for delivering bad news also impeded the prospect of building trusting relationships with clients. During a different process supervision session, the participants discussed their dual role responsibilities of trying to help their clients while also being responsible for reprimanding them when misbehaving:

Susan: We are supposed to build an alliance with clients, but then we have to [tell] them that 'you can't live here.'

Kathryn: It shouldn't be our responsibility to evict people; when we have placed a client somewhere and they tell us that it isn't working, the client has misbehaved, it's like they [the housing officer] want us to be a bloody debt collector<sup>140</sup> that pushes them out of their apartment – it's not possible.

[Fieldnotes, process supervision, AU M2]

This short exchange neatly captures what Hochschild calls "the toe and the heel of capitalism" (1983, p. 16), and the "polar extremes of emotional labor" (p. 138). While flight attendants ("the toe") are required to perform empathetic emotional labor, bill collectors ("the heel") perform *antipathetic* labor (Ward & McMurray, 2016). While neither type is necessarily rewarding, being expected to perform these incompatible types of emotional labor simultaneously hampers the ability to build well-functioning relationships with clients. There were strategies to resist this dual role and the obligation to shield managers from clients' emotions. Participants described deflecting responsibility and blame by referring to the delegation order to their clients when delivering bad news:

Sandra: I mean, you should be loyal to your manager, but sometimes you can blame the manager – it can be a relief to say, 'I have written my assessment, but the manager disagrees, and I can't do more, because I don't have the delegation.'

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<sup>140</sup> Swedish: *Kronofogde*.

An additional strategy was to offer to help the client in appealing the decision:

Mona: Sometimes we want people to make an appeal, and I can offer them help [in] writing the application. Then they know that I have their back, you know.

Krista: The only advice I have is to offer to help with the appeal and say, ‘then you’ll have to contact the method supervisor yourself, here’s her phone number.’ I can’t do more, I’m just a messenger, this is my job, I get very square.

In these excerpts, we can see how the participants refused to accept the role of emotional shields, instead ricocheting the blame back to managers or citing procedural rules (“I get very square”). This served to preserve client allegiance and relieve them of the emotional labor of managing clients’ anger and blame.

### SYSTEMIC FAILURES AND COMPENSATORY EMOTIONAL LABOR

Granting (or coercing) interventions did not necessarily ensure that clients were satisfied or received the help they needed. In addition to the lack of tailored solutions for the unique needs of each individual client (cf. Lipsky, 2010), there were instances where social workers had to deal with the consequences of malfunctioning treatment facilities or care residences. For example, Leah told me that she had finally found a treatment home that suited her client and seemed to be helping. However, there had been an incident at the treatment home:

The director (of the treatment home) told me that two people had to go to the ER by ambulance due to heroin overdose. It turns out he lied to me; there were three of them, and one of them was a staff member. The director kept talking about his tough private life, trying to gain sympathy. Anyways, there is no way that we can extend the stay for my client now. This affects him tremendously, and he gets pissed off, which I understand. [Interview, AU M2]

I heard similar stories during my fieldwork. For instance, Emma [CYU M1] told me about a youth home and care residence<sup>141</sup> that had “been in the newspaper several times,” due to allegations of staff members sexually assaulting the youth. The lack of approved<sup>142</sup> and municipally procured treatment facilities often left social workers with no other options, leading to several consequences. The participants faced both the *qualitative* emotional burden of dealing with angry or disappointed clients. This

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<sup>141</sup> Swedish: *Hem för vård eller boende* (HVB).

<sup>142</sup> A recent report from the Swedish Health and Social Care Inspectorate (IVO, 2024) reveals widespread and serious deficiencies in operations and governance of Swedish home and care residences. Only 30% of the 300 operations under IVO’s supervision were assessed to be without deficiencies.

required of them to compensate for a faulty system in terms of demanding emotional labor in face-to-face interactions with clients. Handling clients' and their relatives' anger or worry was particularly taxing when better solutions were unavailable. Social workers also had to manage their own worry and disappointment when placing clients in facilities they did not trust, often feeling like they had failed their clients. Additionally, it resulted in a *quantitative* increase in workload. Social workers had to search for and convince clients of other options, which were sometimes rejected by management due to budget constraints. They also had to check up on their clients more frequently due to distrust of cooperation partners.

### CONTAINING EMOTIONS

In this last section, I will argue that a standardized assessment tool functions to control and restructure workers' emotions into professional instruments.

During a methods meeting with the first response team, I observed how the group used *signs of safety* to assess risk during case reviews. They followed a structured approach using three columns to list “worries,” “what is working well,” and “what needs to happen.” Afterward, they summarized their assessments of their “worry/concern”<sup>143</sup> on a scale of 0–10, with 0 signifying “extremely worried” and 10 “no worry.” Signs of safety was a fairly new assessment tool in municipality 2, and the group informed me that it had “come from above.”

Method supervisor: Let us start by examining how high the worry is in this room [she draws a scale of 0–10 on the whiteboard]. You should consider these questions in relation to the factual circumstances: will it be worse? Will we receive any police reports on the child? Will mom and dad fail to establish routines so that he completely stops going to school? 0 is really worried, 10 means that mom and dad will manage this with the support of a psychologist.

Paula: I have to go with a 6. The behavior is alarming; why is he so aggressive if everything is working well?

Supervisor: What would have to happen to reach a 10?

Paula: Give it time, get a hold of dad, and see if he shares mom's assessment.

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<sup>143</sup> Swedish: *Oro*. This word, as with many emotion concepts, is difficult to translate. Roland Paulsen's book, “Tänk om – en studie i oro” is translated to, “What if – the new age of *anxiety*.” Yet I would argue that in Swedish the concept is wider in terms of emotional intensity and encompasses feelings from concern to worry to anxiety.

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

Angela: 4. The mom says that she's not worried, he just has to change his attitude, calls it an identity change. If he has to go to therapy, there is something more going on. I think mom has a worry that she is not telling us.

Jenna: 5, it's unclear what the purpose of the psychologist is.

Lisa: I will land on a lame 5; I can't get my head around that this has happened before and then they consulted a doctor.

*The group is now instructed to summarize their thoughts, which should take no more than five minutes. Lisa, who is responsible for the case, collects the notes and puts them in a folder.*

Fanny: Why exactly five minutes?

Jenna: They say that that is the structure of signs of safety.

Angela: It's a disease that us social workers have; we can talk and immerse ourselves completely and analyze things in absurdum, so the thought is that five minutes allows you to list the most important things.

Jenna: And to practice yourself to understand what is most important.

Paula: Right, and to not get stuck in your feelings; comparing them with your colleagues can maybe help you see if they are reasonable [looking around to see if the colleagues agree. They nod.]

In this excerpt, we can see that *worry* signifies something dissimilar to the emotionally intense and anxiety-ridden worry that we saw earlier in this chapter. Certainly, this may be explained by the fact that this particular case was less dire than some of the examples above (causing the practitioners to wonder, "if he dies, is it my fault")? Nonetheless, here they are instructed to *use worry instrumentally* as part of their professional practice. This definition of worry requires workers to objectify their own emotions as well as those of the clients. For example, Angela suspects that "something more is going on," and is measuring the appropriateness and likelihood of mom's self-reported worry against the fact that the child is seeing a psychologist. Furthermore, the five-minute time limitation is framed as a safeguard from "immersing ourselves completely" and not "getting stuck in our feelings," while also guiding them to distinguish and focus on "what is most important." Thus, emotions are framed in a rather ambivalent manner. While worry is used as a structured assessment tool, "getting stuck" in emotions is simultaneously considered an obstacle to distinguishing what is of importance. By assessing worry on a scale from 0 to 10, it can be measured against others' assessment to conclude what is a "reasonable" degree.

Earlier in this chapter, I showed how practitioners rely on their gut feeling in decision-making. However, the recognition of such practices gave rise to doubt and

uncertainty in relation to “future work” and professional knowledge. This uncertainty can be understood within a larger context where ideals of objectivity frame gut feelings as unreliable and unprofessional (cf. Barfoed & Jacobsson, 2012). Working according to an evidence-based,<sup>144</sup> standardized assessment tool can conceivably shield social workers from their epistemic uncertainties, while also introducing the possibility to measure whether one’s gut feelings are “reasonable,” which may mitigate ontological uncertainty. At the same time, such practices create an ambivalent position for emotions in practice, as they are perceived both as a source of information *and* as a liability that could potentially thwart attention and rationality (cf. Hardesty, 2015).

So, the question is whether standardized, manual-based approaches can contain social workers’ thoughts and feelings of self-doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety regarding imagined future outcomes. While my empirical material does not allow me to establish whether this may be the case, I can propose a theoretical hypothesis: that assessment manuals may alleviate practitioners’ uncertainties and anxieties by creating the illusion that *if only* the designated boxes are ticked, the responsibility for decisions can be externalized. However, this can only work if one *believes* that the assessment tools are reliable. Consulting Robert Pfaller (2012), this belief does not necessarily need to come from within. Even beliefs can be delegated to an exterior belief system – the system believes *for* them, only requiring that individuals *act as if* they believe.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that emotions and emotional labor are not merely consequences of social work practice, but pivotal for practice (cf. O’Connor, 2020). Social workers perform emotional labor in client interactions as well as in professional meetings, which is essential for building and maintain working relationships. Furthermore, emotions motivate and orient action, and emotive-cognitive processes of evaluation are vital for decision-making (Barbalet, 1998; Wettergren, 2024).

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<sup>144</sup> Stated on the official website: <https://www.signsofsafety.net/research/> (retrieved January 9, 2025).

I have also shown that the *same* emotion, or cluster of emotions, can serve different functions and yield varying outcomes. For instance, expressing anger on behalf of a client can demonstrate professional dedication and moral standing, and serve to create a sense of urgency in others, compelling them to act. Conversely, anger can also signify a loss of professionalism and a breach of organizational and professional feeling rules. *Uncertainty* might indicate doubt about the quality of one's professional knowledge, thereby debilitating decision-making and action. It could also be an expression of the inherently unpredictable nature of people work, requiring workers to manage and accept this unpredictability. Uncertainty could also be an expression of appropriate moral reflection, prompting social workers to consider the power imbalance between social worker and client. *Empathy* (while not an emotion per se) was sometimes framed as a purely rational-cognitive means to an end, such as influencing the client to act in a desired way. At other times, empathy was described as a tool for gaining knowledge about, and understanding, the client. However, empathy was also portrayed as a potential liability, leading to an emotional over-involvement and thereby jeopardizing professional rationality and objectivity.

Furthermore, I have shown that social workers perform multifaceted forms of emotional labor, and develop complex emotion management skills. These include using *own* emotions as a source of information and sense-making, as well as managing their own emotions to align with the often-contradictory feeling and display rules of the emotional regime of social services. Social workers also manage *others'* emotions to achieve specific outcomes, such as motivating clients and facilitating professional cooperation. However, *how* to perform emotional labor is ambiguous due to the rules and expectations of the dual emotive-cognitive frames. As Hochschild argues, organizations insert a *purpose* between a feeling and its interpretation (1983, p. 196). The *purposes* of the organizational and the professional frame differ and therefore affect how one's own and others' feelings are interpreted and managed. The organizational frame encourages social workers to clearly separate the private and professional sphere and to objectify their emotions, either by suppressing them to avoid disturbing rational action or by transforming them into organizational resources. The professional frame incites using feelings as reminders of professional moral values, which should be aligned with private values. The organizational frame encourages influencing clients' emotions to ensure they follow the conditions and rules for receiving help, while the professional frame

advocates encouraging clients to form a trusting relationship with the social worker and thereby motivating a will to change.



## CHAPTER 10: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this thesis, we have gained an insight into the emotional world of the social services office. We have seen the complex emotional labor done by social workers in their job. This occurs in face-to-face meetings with clients and professionals, involving managing both one's own and others' emotions. It involves "harboring," as it is often called, clients' stories of terrible life situations. It also requires managing one's own self-presentation, displaying care and empathy, parallel to discerning a practical decision about a suitable intervention, if such is available. Emotional labor may involve managing other professional groups' often negative perceptions of social services, patiently informing them about the boundaries of their professional responsibility and their legal requirements. Not least, it involves managing one's own emotions about the professional role. It is about accepting that the idealistic ambitions with which one entered the profession are often not possible to realize within the bureaucratic framework in which the social services office is embedded. It is about learning to cope with not knowing the boundaries for what can, should, and *could be* done. It involves managing self-doubt in relation to one's professional knowledge base and one's own abilities, and learning how to accept that mistakes are made, that disasters cannot always be prevented, and where personal responsibility lies.

But emotions also operate on a higher level. Emotions are conditioned by societal norms, values, and beliefs, which define feeling rules for individuals, and how they should feel and express emotions. We have seen how such feeling rules are sometimes contradictory, and there are expectations on social workers that are

grounded in conflicting societal ideologies. The ideal of the “good” social worker persists, in notions of the committed and authentic professional who is not motivated by economic interests, but out of love and care for fellow human beings. At the same time, the organization prescribes the worker to manage their own emotions as well as their clients’ to meet the standards of a “fair” bureaucracy, guided by efficiency, instrumentality, measurability, and individual responsibility.

The empirical chapters are permeated with feelings of ambivalence, uncertainty, confusion, frustration, incompetence, and guilt. These reflect, the inherent contradictions of the dual frames and, in extension, broader political and historical conflicts regarding social work’s societal mission and role, as well as the values that should guide its practice. Regardless of which frame is dominant in a situation, translation of its norms and rules into practice requires emotional labor, both in terms of displaying the appropriate emotions (e.g., displaying patience and concern), and experiencing the right emotions (e.g., being committed to bureaucratic rules or to understanding the unique needs of an individual). As such, social workers are positioned within an emotional crossfire of contradictory expectations, and engaged in ongoing identity construction processes that include interpreting their role, discerning the boundaries for their responsibilities, and the place of emotions in practice. The same individual can swear allegiance to the ideals of equality and well-being for all, while emphasizing rules and legal requirements for qualifying for help.

It must be noted that this thesis is based on the perspectives of social workers. Consequently, as mentioned in Chapter 4, I acknowledge the tendency to portray social workers as the hero protagonists of the story, while managers – and the organization they represent – are often depicted in a villainous light. This is not my intention. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate the consequences of social workers trying to realize two largely antithetical projects into practice, which I have called the professional and the organizational frames. I want to underscore that these are ideal types and represent the conflict between the historical social justice project of social work and the neoliberal project’s economization of human relationships, between which practitioners in the social services are lodged.

In this concluding chapter, I will first summarize the empirical chapters and their contributions, and thereafter discuss some key issues that have emerged, followed by a final reflection about what we have learned.

## SUMMARY OF ANALYTICAL CHAPTERS

Chapter 5 introduced the peculiar and sometimes absurd world within the walls of a social work office. This world, the participants emphasized, could not possibly be understood by outsiders. Participants' narratives revealed two contrasting images of their job. The first depicted social workers as bureaucratic representatives of a bureaucratically governed government agency, handling individual cases in compliance with legal requirements. The second, more enigmatic image, emerged when discussing *how* these formal duties and tasks were (or should be) performed. These narratives were riddled with confusion, citing a lack of a clear work description and boundaries for their professional responsibilities. This image reflects the inherent ambiguities of social work – the unpredictable nature of working with and on complex human beings, which renders decision-making inherently uncertain.

In chapter 6 I examined how the two images manifest in practice in terms of dual emotive-cognitive frames (Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). The frames postulate often-contradictory ideals, which in turn expose social workers to inconsistent feeling and display rules (Hochschild, 1983). In addition to the rules and expectations of the frames, I argue that social work practice is located within a complex web of real or imagined *audiences* (Goffman, 1959, 1986). These audiences include face-to-face interactants as well as governing organs, public opinion, and media. I demonstrated several ways in which the participants struggled to reconcile the two frames. One strategy involved reconstructing the meanings and expectations of the social work mission role by contrasting a past, “naïve” self, with a current, pragmatic self that, upon encountering reality, had accepted the conditions and limits of the job. However, such narratives were riddled with ambivalence, which I argued can be interpreted as an expression of the discord between the frames.

Interactions between social workers and management revealed how the organizational frame orients social workers toward bureaucratic objectivity and rules, while curbing (emotional) attachments to clients. Time and money functioned as organizing principles, promoting efficiency and correctness. Furthermore, the organization valued individual traits such as flexibility and resilience, encouraging a “deal with it” culture. Deviations from these standards were punished by symbolic acts of shaming. The professional frame manifested in feelings of powerlessness and guilt, stemming from feeling existentially responsible for the welfare of clients,

illustrated by metaphors of “motherhood” and “womb.” The values and rules of the professional frame were internalized by the social workers, leading to self-monitoring and self-criticism.

The awareness that all decisions *could*, potentially, be audited by governing organs caused emotions of anticipated fear and shame, which in turn prompted social workers to comply with risk assessment and administrative rules. Furthermore, media and public criticism of the social services cast doubt on the quality of their professional knowledge, as well as hindered building relationships with clients.

As the frames contain different feeling and display rules, they cause ambivalence and uncertainty about how to manage emotions, as well as how to interpret the larger mission of social work and the social work role. Therefore, I argued that the dual frames are embedded in a societal emotional regime (Reddy, 2001), reflecting larger historical and political and historical ideologies.

In chapters 7 and 8, the analysis focused on how participants *navigate* the emotional regime. In Chapter 7, I argued that the frames offer a spectrum of possible role positions along which practitioners can position themselves, ranging from “the bureaucrat,” corresponding more to the organizational frame, to “the idealist,” aligned with the professional frame. Role positioning required emotional reflexivity to establish and present a coherent narrative about oneself in the “right” way. These narratives revealed how symbolic boundaries between private and professional spheres were constructed, the scope of responsibility toward clients, and the degree of emotional closeness/distance in relation to clients. The idealistic position, to a greater extent, required emotional involvement and to use the private self as a professional tool, and vice versa. Consequently, the bureaucratic position allowed workers to limit role expectations by referencing rules and laws, enabling them to blame external factors and shield them from guilt. Conversely, idealists were inclined to question their own capabilities and feel guilty about not doing enough. Positionings involved references to grander moral goods. The idealistic position was guided by the principal ideal of *doing good*, while the bureaucratic position was driven by *being fair* in relation to discretion and boundaries for professional duties. Drawing on identity theories (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 1980, 2004), I argued that role positionings served to construct and maintain a coherent self-identity. When deviating from this identity, participants often sought to justify these deviations.

Chapter 8 focused on *collective* identity constructions. I argued that through interaction rituals the units shape group-specific standards of professionalism and certain emotional styles (Collins, 2004; Reddy, 2001). Collectively, they constructed certain truths about the job, such as calling it “absurd” and “really hard,” as well as “truths” about “who we are” in contrast to what “others are.” While these assertions express powerlessness, resignation, and dejection, they simultaneously serve to construct a shared reality and collective symbols, which in turn foster chains of successful interaction rituals, producing emotional energy and solidarity. Furthermore, the interaction rituals construct and uphold sacred values, which serve as moral yardsticks. Acting in alignment with these sacred values produces feelings of pride. The team also produces norms for how to manage and display emotions, providing guidance for navigation within the emotional regime.

Chapter 9 demonstrated that emotions and emotional labor are not mere side-effects of social work practice but are essential to its core activities. Furthermore, emotional labor is not limited to client work: Due to the complex web of professional interactions and dependencies, social workers must manage their own and others’ emotions across many different interactions and adapt to different feeling and display rules. The participants had developed and refined an array of emotion management strategies, ranging from clear-cut surface acting (such as staring at the floor to suppress an angry outburst), to complex deep acting techniques (such as training the emotional imagination to produce empathy). I highlighted the temporal dimension of emotional labor, demonstrating that past experience and anticipated outcomes facilitate the process. The frames’ feeling rules motivate the worker to manage emotions according to their values and standards. For instance, I demonstrated how social workers strive to maintain hope driven by professional ethics of commitment and responsibility. Such feelings, in turn, prompted action. For instance, hope impelled them to “keep trying.”

Furthermore, emotions were examined in relation to decision-making. I argue that emotions serve as sources of information and guide action. One such feeling is uncertainty, and I proposed a typology of uncertainty that demonstrates its varying functions. I suggested that *ontological* uncertainty stems from counterfactual thinking, eliciting anxiety and self-doubt, ultimately debilitating action. *Epistemic* uncertainty arises from doubt about the quality of professional knowledge, reflecting the status hierarchy within the system of professions (Abbott, 1988). While sometimes

debilitating, it urged social workers to seek more knowledge to better understand their clients. *Moral* uncertainty surfaced from emotional reflexivity, where the participants recognized their power in relation to their client, reminding them of ethical standards and serving as guiding posts when contemplating ethical dilemmas.

I demonstrated how organizational structures embed emotions and emotion management techniques, separating “private” (unprofessional) emotions from practice by allocating their display and management to certain places and times. By encouraging workers to manage “negative” emotions through self-care practices and developing resilience, I argued that the organization creates an archetype for how the emotionally skilled worker should be crafted (cf. Illouz, 2008; Neckel, 2009). Thus, the worker’s emotions are instrumentalized as an organizational resource. In this capacity, they shield managers from the emotional impact of client work – for example, when conveying unwanted decisions or compensating a faulty system with empathetic emotional labor. Lastly, I suggested that standardized assessment tools served to contain workers’ emotions by providing clear structures for how to use them.

## PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY AMID CONFLICTING FEELING RULES

When summarizing the empirical chapters, one central theme stands out: What it means to be a social worker and doing the good and right thing in the municipal social services is complex and often ambiguous. Social work is located within a crossfire of often conflicting expectations, held by different audiences, regarding how to be, what to do, and for what purposes.

A core assumption in this thesis is that identities are experienced through and enacted with emotions. It has been argued that individuals strive for a sense of coherence in their overall identity, which in turn involves a commitment to a set of values that span across one’s various role identities (Erickson, 1995; Salmela, 2009). When these values are violated, the individual experiences morally infused emotions such as guilt, shame, and anger. The social worker’s narratives are understood as embedded in dual frames within an overarching emotional regime, reflecting the broader political and historical context of the social services in terms of its grander mission and societal function. Navigating within this ambiguous emotional regime

means that social workers must manage often-contradictory expectations on how to construct their professional identities

A possible way to sustain a sense of coherence in professional identity, and ultimately a coherent sense of self, was to anchor oneself on a spectrum of role positions made available by the two frames. This was both an individual process and a collective one, as the units established a shared understanding of “how we are.” Establishing the *qua* team involved interaction ritual chains within which moral values, feeling rules, and emotional styles were internalized by its members. The positions thus served to clarify feeling rules and influenced how to feel and display emotions, as well as how to interpret emotions in terms of sources of information.

However, we have seen that the organizational frame and its incitement to more distinctly separate between the private person and the professional role permit actors to diverge from personal values and enact the professional role mainly through surface acting techniques. This separation led to participants reflecting on whether they had become cynical performers, and occasional questioning of whether the job was meaningful. The professional frame, on the other hand, encouraged an amalgamation between the private and the professional spheres and their values, and to construct an “authentic” professional identity committed to idealistic values. Consequently, failures or difficulties in translating these – often boundless, because you *could* always do more – values into practice led to deeper self-criticism and doubt, occasionally leading to practitioners questioning their fitness for the job.

## PRACTICAL MANIFESTATIONS OF LARGER CONTRADICTIONS

Nonetheless, social workers are always defining their role in relation to both frames; they are both bureaucrats and professionals. Regardless of how participants positioned themselves within the emotional regime, they were aware of the incompatibility of frames. This recognition emerged in narratives of a professional trajectory. These contrasted a past “naïve” self, driven by altruistic motivations and a belief that they could “make a difference” with a present “realistic” self, governed by budget restraints and hardened by past disappointments. It also surfaced in collectively constructed stories of an absurd world that outsiders could not possibly understand. While *the absurd* sometimes referred to strange client encounters, it primarily served a grander purpose. Constructing a collective image of their job as

absurd helped them to grasp and manage the practical manifestations of inherent contradictions on a societal level.

The social services and their employees are central actors in the Swedish welfare system. While there are many similarities between social workers and other public service workers, the profession is unique in its moral role of enacting society's beliefs of what is socially acceptable and what is required of its citizens, while at the same time being "the ultimate safety net" when citizens cannot meet these standards and when all other societal systems have failed. It is also a profession shaped by the "utopic" discourse of the Swedish "people's home" that remains as an historical artifact in the Social Services Act, while the practice is governed by the far less idealistic principles of new public management. Their mission can, in part, be understood as solving these contradictions, through a role that includes elements of uniformity and tolerance, control and care.

Yet, the societal contradictions caused ambiguous instructions about *how* to do this, and how to draw the boundaries for intervention and the conditions for providing help. The professional frame poses ambitious, yet vague, values that should guide practice. The organizational frame instead presents clear rules and routines. However, such rules and routines are often too blunt to manage the complexity of working with human beings. This ambiguity was *felt* by practitioners as confusion, frustration, and even despair. I argue that the recurrent requests for a clear job description can be understood as attempts to manage such emotions.

There are exceptions – extreme cases that indisputably warrant coercive measures – bringing momentary clarity in how to proceed. For instance, society's stance on child abuse is unequivocal, translating into temporary clarity in role responsibility and how to proceed, and therefore also as barriers that alleviate ambiguity and frustration stemming from the contradictions of frames. This was illustrated by the first response team in Chapter 6: "we never say, 'oh no, not a violence case!'", everybody wants to work with that." Furthermore, intervening in a case of child abuse by means of forced legislation does not necessarily contradict the professional frame. Children hold a cultural meaning in society as *the* moral referent in the "hierarchy of innocence" (Warner, 2015, p. 12), and are therefore the most "worthy" of clients. This eagerness to intervene was contrasted with the reluctance to deal with unaccompanied minors, that due to a lack of "organizational and political focus" consequently "belong to no one." In contrast to "the child" as

inherently innocent, the political discourse on unaccompanied minors is less consistent and their “worthiness” in society is questioned in a neoliberal discourse of personal responsibility. As such, the lack of “political focus” means that there are no instructions for how to deal with such cases, leaving practitioners in a state of powerlessness and uncertainty. The reluctance to deal with this group of clients may also be understood as a consequence of how organizational priorities fundamentally clash with core values of the professional frame, as well as the portal paragraph of the Social Services Act.

As has been argued by social work scholars, clients are classified based on their perceived moral worthiness, reflecting societal normative views of how citizens should act (Billquist, 1999; Järvinen & Mik-Meyer, 2003). In the Social Services Act (SFS 2001:453), there is an emphasis on the personal responsibility of people and their social situation<sup>145</sup>, enabling categorizing clients as “pitiable” and worthy of help or as “blameworthy” and therefore unworthy. With this in mind, the suspicion among the adult unit social workers that their clients are de-prioritized might be more than a feeling. Despite Sweden’s self-image as a progressive welfare state, Sweden has an unusually repressive drug policy. This culminated in the late 1980s when the *consumption* of narcotics was criminalized (cf. Lindwall, 2020). In contrast to the inherent worthiness of children, we have seen throughout the chapters (particularly in Chapter 6) that these political and cultural ideals are channeled through the organizational frame, emphasizing personal responsibility and meeting the requirements for receiving help. Attempts to negotiate the mandates of the organizational frame, referencing the professional frame, are shut down by counterclaims attached to “objective” bureaucratic standards. Thus, the incompatibility of frames can be traced to larger societal contradictions. While the Social Services Act defines the core objectives as equality in living conditions, individual well-being, and a worthy life for all, neoliberal politics, which emphasizes personal responsibility, simultaneously *conditions* the realization of these objectives.

Feeling rules constitute the link between individual experience and social context, and interpretation of and negotiation of these feeling rules take place in situated interactions (Hochschild, 2003). We have seen this in interactions between

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<sup>145</sup> Personal responsibility is accentuated in the recent government proposal for a new Social Services Act (2024/25:89) titled ” A Preventive Social Services Act – for Increased Rights, *Obligations*, and Opportunities” (emphasis added) (Swedish Government, 2025).

social workers and managers, where pleas for sympathy are countered by “hard” factors. Pleas for sympathy can in this context be understood in relation to professional values, while managers and their budget responsibility necessitates complying with the economic requirements of government. The economic rationality is translated into keeping clients at a distance to avoid emotional attachments and influencing decision-making. For that same reason, the coping strategies which influence practice (Lipsky, 2010), such as doing extra for some clients, sticking by clients in seemingly hopeless situations, or to strictly follow rules and routines, can be interpreted as isolated efforts to manage the expectations and feeling rules of the dual frames.

In their professional role, social workers sustain the ideal of social work as the epitome of the caring welfare society. This ideal is rooted in professional values and ethics and necessary for professional legitimacy, and provides practitioners with a sense of doing a meaningful job. As bureaucrats, however, their responsibility is to implement political objectives as defined in national legislation and specified in municipal objectives. Bureaucratic principles include strict rules and predefined procedures, and to execute tasks in an *objective* manner, free from personal motives and interests. In this study, notions of objectivity are found in the bureaucratic ideal of being *fair* (chapter 8). But what does it mean to *act objectively*?

Weber (1946, p. 220) argued that the bureaucrats’ behavior and objectivity is guided by the “ultimate guiding star” of “reasons of state.” State bureaucracies reflect shifts in political ideological climates, and acting objectively means for the individual social worker to be in alignment with the current politics of the government. Maintaining the stability of the state justifies actions that might otherwise be considered morally questionable. This is echoed by Lipsky, who argues that the procedures within bureaucratic organization function to preserve the status quo of the state: “In the ideology of the welfare state humanitarian impulses are coincident with the requirements of system maintenance” (2010, p. 183). Therefore, bureaucrats must make pragmatic and “callous” decisions based on the state’s needs. As we have seen in this study, as a consequence of their budget responsibilities, managers must typically enact the reasons of state.

In the current neoliberal political climate, acting objectively in state bureaucracies means acting in accordance with economic rationality and based on ideals of the personal responsibility of citizens. Sweden follows the general global

pattern of moving toward increased inequality in income and living standards over the past three to four decades (SOU 2020:46). Simultaneously, social issues stemming from broader economic, employment, and housing market conditions are increasingly understood as individual problems rather than social problems (Dahlstedt & Lalander, 2017). Social workers are ultimately set to address these problems by individual-focused interventions. At the same time, social services are instructed to “promote long-term structural measures [that] can significantly contribute to overall sustainability and reduce the need for individual interventions” through early interventions and prevention (SOU, 2018:47; 2020:47), while also “empowering communities” and “promoting social inclusion, equity, and justice.” Therefore, social workers’ perceived inability to adequately help their clients can be understood as a reflection of the incongruity between the Realpolitik of the state and the grandiose ambitions of social services’ goal formulations.

The picture that emerges is that it is increasingly difficult for social workers to live up to the professional standards and the ambitions of the portal paragraph of the Social Services Act. The persecution of undocumented immigrants, as evident in the proposed law that requires certain public sector employees<sup>146</sup> to report them to authorities, does not align with the ideal of solidarity. Tax policies which disproportionately benefit high-income earners do not signal efforts for equality in living conditions, and neither does the lowered age limit for free dental care. Therefore, it may be argued that the space for practitioners to act in alignment with the professional frame has decreased. Nonetheless, it is present in their consciousness. They often know what they morally *ought* to do, and they experience the inability to translate the professional values into practice emotionally, through feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, guilt, and even shame. The frames provide contradictory sets of emotionally fused values which in turn are based in larger ideologies, or emotional regimes. The “cynicism” expressed by some of the participants should therefore not be understood as a personal trait or an “attitude.” Rather, it should be recognized as indications of political inconsistencies, which literary scholar Sven Anders Johansson refers to as a “cynical state”:

Cynicism is the discrepancy between theory and practice, pretentious values that are not put into action; courage at a safe distance from danger; promises without intent;

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<sup>146</sup> Ultimately, after massive protest, social service officials and other professional groups were made exempt from this requirement.

systems without meaning; cheerfulness without joy: hope without substance (2017, p. 53, my translation).

### THE ERA OF INDIVIDUAL RESPONSIBILITY AND SELF-CARE

While NPM is often reduced to political economic principles affecting the public sector, it can also be understood as a practical manifestation of a wider cultural shift toward neoliberalism. This wider concept denotes ways in which the capitalistic principles of neoliberalism have transformed not only the work sphere, but also social relationships and individual identities. This also includes the commodification of emotions, where individuals are supposed to craft their emotions into sellable resources.

In the field of tension between the dual frame, we have seen that the ideal social workers should manage their emotions to produce an emotionally complex and skilled emotional laborer. The professional frame emphasizes genuine commitment and authenticity, which encourage social workers to bring their personal emotions into the workplace (Illouz, 2006). It also promotes a capacity for complex emotional reflexivity to produce and refine empathetic skills needed to really understand their clients. The organizational frame formulates the ideal worker as one with a “positive outlook on life,” and that a “meaningful leisure time” should facilitate an ability to deal with the difficulties of the job. Such demands were evident both in the job ads and in interactions with managers, where resilience, efficiency, and flexibility were posed as ideal qualities. The job ads also called for workers that *enjoy* coming to work (and to enjoy monthly goal evaluations). Such ideas, I argue, are an expression of the “new capitalism,” where workers are expected to “flourish” at work through self-monitoring and happiness-based repertoires (Cederström & Spicer, 2015; Cabanas & Illouz, 2019). “Negative” emotions are treated as problems from a management perspective, and are expected to be managed by workers in predefined spaces, isolated from the core activities. These could be provided by the organization, such as the process supervision of occupational health care, or privately. This may be understood as an ethical imperative of *self-care* (cf. Rose et al., 2025). Such formulations are also evident in the international code of ethics for social workers (IFSW, 2015), which states that “social workers have a duty to take necessary steps to care for themselves professionally and personally in the workplace and in society, in order to ensure that they are able to provide appropriate services”

(Weinberg, 2014). Indeed, in Maslach's groundbreaking work on burnout, workers are given advice such as "focus on the positive," "start a personal fitness program," and "participate in an emotional resilience program" (Leiter & Maslach, 2005, p. 37; 55–56).

In the context of austerity, such aspirations could be understood as individualized responsibilities to deal with the consequences of work intensification and dealing with disappointed clients (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005). When the emphasis is placed on the professionals' ability to evaluate, scrutinize, and better themselves, it implies that the problem lies with the individual.

Research has shown that social workers frequently experience psychological strains such as sleeping disorders and anxiety, and long-term sick leave due to stress-related illnesses and burnout is high in the social services, compared to other occupations in public services. But what is the *content* of these work strains? Stress and burnout may mean a multitude of ailments. It may be the qualitative moral stress of a social worker not having the time or resources to help a client, or an overwhelming quantitative caseload and documentation duties piling up. Individualized responsibility is epitomized in the highly valued "*eldsjäl*," an individual who is passionate and enthusiastic about social change. This serves as a cultural icon and a standard to which individual effort is measured: achieving change is possible if you go above and beyond and show great dedication and commitment.

As I argued in Chapter 9, social workers serve as emotional shields, as they must compensate for shortcomings in the welfare system through emotional labor in face-to-face encounters with clients. As such, the self-presentation of social workers is a condition for the legitimacy of the social services. This is mirrored, I argue, in a recent committee directive for the review of the Social Services Act (2017:39). Accordingly, the main objective for the new legislation was to increase the quality of social services, emphasizing preventive work, accessibility, and a knowledge-based social services based on scientific evidence and proven experience. However, while government-initiated directives for the municipal sector are normally under the *financing principle*, meaning that the state must provide the necessary funding for increased responsibilities and tasks, this particular directive explicitly prohibited

increased cost<sup>147</sup> (Swedish Government, 2017). This raises the question of how increased quality should be achieved. Part of the answer may be found in the final Swedish Government Official Report (SOU, 2020:47), which includes a suggestion to introduce a requirement for respectful treatment in the new Social Services Act:

The formulation that individuals should be treated in a ‘respectful manner’ aims to emphasize that all interactions within social services should be based on respect for human dignity, which is equal for all people, and on the individual differences that make everyone unique. It is particularly important that people in vulnerable situations feel respected when interacting with authorities and public services. Respectful treatment is a prerequisite for interactions that can also be characterized by attentiveness, responsiveness, kindness, compassion, and an egalitarian attitude from the staff. (SOU, 2020:47, p. 518, my translation)

In lieu of suitable funding to meet the demands for increased quality, such formulations may indicate that the individual social worker is responsible compensating for economic shortages. This places additional pressure on social workers, who may already be dealing with high workloads and limited resources. The emphasis on preventive work raises important questions about how social workers can find the time to implement these practices effectively. Preventive work, which aims to address issues before they escalate, requires significant time and effort. Without adequate funding and resources, social workers may struggle to balance these responsibilities with their existing caseloads. Certainly, such “good treatment policies” are not unique for the social services but represent a broader cultural shift toward service orientation of state bureaucracies (Du Gay, 2008), requiring state officials to develop emotional skills. As such, we may find that social workers will be increasingly evaluated in terms of customer satisfaction rather than professional skills. One of my respondents told me that, “in my last workplace, we had one of those similar to those at the pharmacy, where clients could press emoji buttons whether they were happy or angry about the meeting” [focus group interview, FRT M2]. While creating additional pressure for social workers, such legal formulations simultaneously highlight the centrality of emotional labor in social services. However, it remains an unrecognized and undervalued aspect of the job.

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<sup>147</sup> However, in the yearly state budget proposal (Swedish Government, 2024/25:1), the government announced that 8 billion SEK will be allocated to support the transition to a “sustainable social services.” This was criticized by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, the unions SSR and Vision, and the Association of Swedish Social Service Managers for not being proportionate to the ambitions.

## THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Lastly, I would like to highlight some theoretical implications beyond this particular case, and possible directions for future research.

First, ideological shifts in welfare policy concerning beliefs, opinions, and ideals regarding which people should receive or are entitled to societal assistance or care, and how such assistance and care should be designed, manifest as tensions and goal conflicts in public bureaucracies. The mission of public bureaucracies is to implement political decisions, regardless of ideological stance. However, the individual bureaucrats are, in social services and other public agencies, also members of a profession guided by ethical values that may conflict with political decisions.

Second, different ideologies comprise different sets of feeling rules, regulating how we should experience and display emotions (Hochschild, 1979). As argued in this thesis, feelings such as uncertainty, ambivalence, frustration, and guilt, can be understood as embodied symptoms of conflicting ideologies and their moral orientations. Such feelings are ultimately indicators of role tensions stemming from conflicting (emotive-cognitive) frames of reference. It is often difficult to discern what to do, how to do it, and when enough has been done because the guidelines for understanding duties and yardsticks for evaluating performances diverge between ideologies.

In social services, these goal-conflicts and role tensions are particularly palpable. However, I contend that they are inevitable in all professions practicing in public bureaucracies, although the degree of discrepancy is contingent on many factors. These include, among other things, the historical formation and development of the profession, societal mission, and specific value foundations, as well as the specific field of competence and purpose (social control or social integration).

Therefore, the empirically grounded findings presented in this thesis can be applied to other professional groups practicing in public bureaucracies. These findings include, amongst others: practical manifestations of competing emotive-cognitive frames, emotional navigation and role positioning, collective navigation through interaction rituals, how and why emotions are managed and used in practice, and how organizations shape and utilize workers' emotions.

Suggestions for future research (besides similar professional groups in Sweden) social services in other countries. This could offer contextual and comparative

## EMOTIONAL NAVIGATION IN SOCIAL SERVICES

insights into how welfare politics and historical transformations impact public sector professions. In addition, future research focus on other sections of social services would allow a deeper understanding of how, for example, the stricter regulations (more limited discretion) and shorter-term client interactions in financial assistance units affect emotional labor.

Lastly, gaining an understanding of managers' experiences of these conflicts and tensions, as well as their emotional navigation and labor, would be exceptionally valuable to nuance the findings.

## *Epilogue*

A few years after my first visit to one of the social work offices, I found myself pushing a stroller with my sleeping one-year-old through the same city district. Suddenly, I noticed a series of motivational quotes displayed on signboards among the weathered apartment buildings.

**Shine on! You never know who needs you. Positive energy is contagious!**

**Whining is like riding on a swing, you have something to do but you are not getting anywhere.**

**Where you find struggles, you also find success.**

**The happiest people don't have the best of everything, they just make the best of everything.**

I snorted loudly, annoyed by the chirpy tone. At the time, I felt harassed by the positive messages, attributing my reaction to the sleep deprivation of parenthood. For unclear reasons, I photographed the messages, perhaps to be able to indulge in resentment and misery at a later time.

When I recently discovered these photos on my phone, I read them as epitomes of the tenets imposed by the positive psychology movement: By developing emotional skills such as resilience and optimism, everyone has the potential to flourish in life and at work regardless of circumstances and conditions. The suggestion is that anything is possible with the right attitude and effort, accentuating personal responsibility; if you fail, it is your fault.



## SVENSK SAMMANFATTNING

Den kommunala socialtjänstens arbetsvillkor och arbetsmiljö beskrivs återkommande som en verksamhet i kris. Under de senaste två decennierna har forskning och rapporter pekat på en hög personalomsättning, rekryteringssvårigheter, och höga sjukskrivningstal bland socialsekreterare i hela landet. Utöver denna dystra statistik lyfter forskning fram mer svårångade problem. Socialarbetare upplever minskad arbetstillfredsställelse och meningsförlust. Många rapporterar psykologiska besvär såsom ångest, sömnsvårigheter och depression. En del av dessa problem härleds till de kvantitativa konsekvenserna av nedskärningar i den offentliga sektorn i kombination med socialtjänstens ovan nämnda arbetsvillkor. Personalbrist och hög sjukfrånvaro skapar adderar till den redan höga ärendemängden, skapar instabila arbetsgrupper och leder otillräcklig tid för klientmöten.

Denna avhandling fokuserar på arbetsvillkor och arbetssituationen i socialtjänsten. Dock är det huvudsakliga fokuset mer specifikt än så. Avhandlingens övergripande syfte att studera socialarbetares<sup>148</sup> emotionsarbete och socialtjänstens känsleregler. Denna utgångspunkt vilar på förgivetta tagandet att vår tillvaro styrs av känsleregler för hur vi ska uppleva, hantera, och framställa känslor. Detta gäller inte minst på arbetet, där idéer kring vad det innebär att ”agera professionellt” samtidigt innebär förväntningar och regler kring hur känslor hanteras.

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<sup>148</sup> *Socialarbetare* åsyftar här kommunalt anställda socialsekreterare verksamma inom individ och familjeomsorgen, närmare bestämt olika enheter för barn och unga och en vuxenhet.

Genom intervjuer med socialarbetare och observationer av professionella interaktioner undersöks hur emotioner uttrycks, talas om, hanteras, och används i den dagliga praktiken. Vidare undersöks vilka normer och regler som styr uttrycken för, talet om, hanteringen av, och hur emotioner används, och hur dessa normer manifesteras för, styr, och förhandlas av socialarbetare.

### *DEN EMOTIONSSOCIOLOGISKA INGÅNGEN TILL FORSKNINGSPROBLEMET*

Enligt den emotionssociologiska teoribildningen förstås dock känslor inte enbart som spontana kroppsliga reaktioner i sociala interaktioner. Känslor ses som *sociala* fenomen, som *formar* hur vi betar oss och därför också *formar* sociala interaktioner.

Dessa interaktioner pågår dock inte i ett oberoende vacuum, utan är inbäddade i socio-kulturella sammanhang som anger normer för emotionella upplevelser och uttryck. Känslor är betingade av strukturer som klass, kön, status, och så vidare såväl som av kulturella normer, värderingar och idéer (Hochschild, 2003, Illouz, 2014; Kemper, 2011). Känslonormer kan i sin tur vara övergripande för ett helt samhälle, och skiljer sig ibland från normer i andra kulturer eller nationer. I Sverige, till exempel, styr jantelagen, medan det i USA är mer accepterat – eller rent av förväntat – att framhäva sin egen förträfflighet. Andra normer är mer universella, och anses vara en förutsättning för det civiliserade samhället - gå inte omkring naken på stan, spotta in på folk. Eller kanske lite mindre dramatiskt – ställ dig längst bak i kön, avbryt inte en överordnad när denne talar, tramsa inte under en begravningssceremoni.

För att inte störa dessa vardagliga interaktioner innebär detta alltså att vi måste lära oss att hantera våra känslor. Lägg band på din ivrighet och vänta på din tur, tänk dödens allvar och spegla detta i ditt uttryck. Det finns med andra ord, i varje samhälle, förväntningar och normer för hur känslor bör upplevas och uttryckas. Dessa normer är dock inte deterministiska, och individer kan göra motstånd mot dem, och strategiskt manipulera sina känslor genom emotionshantering (Hochschild, 2003; Reddy, 2001). Känslor ses också som en grundläggande del av hur vi uppfattar oss själva och hur vi vill framstå i interaktion med andra. Genom emotionshantering försöker vi verifiera vår självbild och hur vi uppfattas av andra. Vidare så menar bland andra Collins (2004) att känslor kan vara *kollektiva* fenomen, som genereras i interaktion med andra och formar hur vi tänker, vad vi värderar, och hur vi tolkar situationer.

I denna avhandling är dock andra uppsättningar av emotionsregler och normer i fokus – nämligen de som styr på arbetet. Inom vissa yrken är dessa relativt entydiga, som Hochschild (1983) visade i en studie av flygvärdinnor och skuldindrivare. Medan flygvärdinnorna förväntades förmedla värme och medkänsla genom att producera ett genuint leende - även mot de mest osympatiska kunderna - för att leva upp till flygbolagets motto *our smiles are not just painted on* och därigenom öka bolagets profit, var skuldindrivarnas uppdrag det motsatta. Dessa skulle i stället frammana antipatiska känslor – ilska och antagonism – i syfte att frammana känslor av underlägsenhet och skuld för att förmå låntagaren att betala. Med andra ord så styrdes yrkena av olika uppsättningar av känsloregler. För att följa arbetsgivarorganisationens känsloregler krävs det att den anställde hanterar sina känslor, något som Hochschild (1983) kallar emotionellt *lönearbete* (labor).

För socialsekreterare är normer för hur känslor ska upplevas, framställas, och hanteras dock mindre explicita och mer komplicerade. För det första så förväntas en mer mångfacetterad uppsättning av emotionella uttryck beroende på vad situationen kräver. Ibland är klientmötet terapeutiskt inramat, varvid socialsekreteraren bör uttrycka medkänsla och omsorg. Andra gånger är mötet snarare av en disciplinerande karaktär, vilket kräver att socialsekreteraren uppvisar befällande och auktoritära känslouttryck.

Detta är dock bara en del av komplexiteten i socialsekreterarnas emotionella arbete. Ett mer centralt bekymmer är att känsloregler inte bara styr känslomässiga uttryck, utan även vad individer faktiskt ska *känna*. Professioner i allmänhet styrs inte av explicita regler för känslor, utan inte sällan av tvetydliga förväntningar. Dessutom så förväntas professionella, i motsats till servicearbetare, att *internalisera* professionens värden. Det vill säga att de tro på och vara genuint motiverade att förverkliga, eller åtminstone sträva efter att förverkliga, dessa värden i sitt yrkesutövande. Det sociala arbetet styrs av humanistiska värden, såsom solidaritet, social rättvisa, och jämlikhet. Den enskilde socialarbetaren ska i sin tur inneha eller utveckla vissa moraliska personegenskaper, såsom empati, engagemang, kritisk självinsikt, med mera.

Samtidigt är socialsekreterare anställda i och beroende av en byråkratiskt styrd organisation. I dessa organisationer styr, i varierande grad, andra typer av värden. Dessa inkluderar opartiskhet, effektivitet, och likabehandling. Den enskilde byråkraten ska drivas av målrationalitet och rättvisa och agera korrekt i enlighet med

regler och lagar, och inte påverkas av politiska övertygelser eller subjektiva sympatier för vissa klienter. Dessa ofta svårförenliga uppsättningar av förväntningar och normer kring känslor grundar sig, menar jag, i historiskt föränderliga samhällsideologier. Idealet om den goda socialsekreteraren lever kvar, i föreställningar om eldsjälens som gör det sociala arbetet inte av ekonomiska motiv, men av en kärlek till och omsorg om sina medmänniskor. Samtidigt styrs den offentliga sektorn av nyliberala idéer, där effektivitet, mätbarhet, och individuellt ansvar står i fokus. Avhandlingens huvudsakliga fokus är att undersöka hur dessa motsättningar manifesteras och hanteras i praktiken.

### SAMMANFATTNING AV DE EMPIRISKA KAPITLEN

I kapitel 5, det första av fem empiriska kapitel, beskriver den säregna värld som jag mötte när jag klev in på socialkontoret. Kapitlet tar språng i min egen förvåning när jag möttes av en högljudd och skojfrisk grupp, i stället för de stela byråkraterna jag hade väntat mig. Framför allt så kände jag en stor förvirring kring socialtjänstens uppdrag. I min strävan att förstå frågade jag socialarbetarna kring deras arbetsuppgifter. Initialt framträdde en relativt tydlig bild av arbetet, beskrivet i termer av formella arbetsuppgifter – utreda, bedöma behov, fatta beslut. När jag grävde vidare framträdde dock en annan bild. För det första så fick jag ganska omedelbart ta del av en komisk mötessituation, där syftet med mötet – det fjärde i ordningen det året – beskrevs vara ”att förstå verksamhetens mål och arbetsuppgifter.” Denna form av möte hade utformats för att socialkontorets chef, som enhetschefen uttryckte det, medarbetarna hade en ”omöjligt låg” kännedom om verksamhetens mål. Tonen var humoristisk, och i slutändan framstod det som mindre viktigt att förståelsen hade ökat än att mötet hade genomförts. Bilden av otydlighet växte när jag började intervjua deltagarna, som ofta skämtade om att dom inte förstod sitt uppdrag, men att detta, som en av deltagarna sa ”ju stod i jobbannonsen”. Skattet fastnade dock i halsen när jag fick ta del av berättelser av klienters fruktansvärda livsöden och förstod *vad* som ska ”utredas, bedömas, och beslutas” kring.

Jag bestämde mig att parallellt med fältarbetet försöka läsa mig till socialtjänstens samhällsfunktion. Gradvis blev det tydligt att det inte finns någon entydig definition, och att frågor kring socialtjänstens roll, uppdrag, och inriktning – likt det sociala arbetet i en bredare förståelse – alltid varit konfliktfyllt och politiskt laddat. Dessa

frågor kretsar kring huruvida socialtjänstens kärnuppdrag bör vara att bidra till jämlikhet genom att, som det heter i socialtjänstlagen, främja ekonomisk och social trygghet och jämlikhet i levnadsvillkor, eller att skydda majoritetssamhället från avvikande individer genom uppfostran och kontroll. Utöver motsättningar gällande det större uppdraget och *vad* som ska göras, uppmärksammade jag gradvis olika uppfattningar kring *hur* det ska göras och hur man ska *vara* som socialarbetare. Med andra ord, jag började urskilda spänningar mellan olika idéer kring hur den professionella identiteten som socialarbetare ska gestaltas. I socionomprogrammets kurslitteratur och professionens etiska kod, vilket jag senare skulle förstå som delar av *den professionella ramen* (se nedan), framhävs en uppsättning av värden och ideala personegenskaper. Den *organisatoriska ramen*, å andra sidan, vilket så här långt utgjordes av jobbannonser och initiala observationer, framhövdes andra värden. Professionsramen betonade värden som solidaritet och social rättvisa, och personegenskaper som empati och engagemang i relation till klienter. I jobbannonserna framhövdes – om än delvis samma – andra ideal, som effektivitet, ”en passion för uppföljning” och stresstålighet, men även ”en positiv syn på livet” och ”en meningsfull fritid.” Dessa värden relaterar i sin tur, menar jag, till olika normer och regler kring hur känslor ska hanteras, användas, och uttryckas i det professionella arbetet.

Den förvirring som framträder i detta kapitel utgör en del av avhandlingens kärnpunkt. I de efterföljande kapitlen visar jag hur relaterade känslor – ambivalens, osäkerhet, självtvivel, frustration och skuld – kan förstås som uttryck för större motsättningar och konflikter kring socialtjänstens och det sociala arbetets uppdrag och roll, och framförallt hur socialarbetare bör vara och genomföra sitt arbete.

I kapitel 6 kallar jag dessa för den organisatoriska respektive den professionella emotiv-kognitiva (referens)ramen (Goffman, 1986; Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018). Emotiv-kognitiva referensramar består av förväntningar för hur yrket ska praktiseras, och det är gentemot denna som den professionellas agerande värderas. Dessa värderingar sker genom både emotionella och kognitiva processer. Genom känslor av exempelvis (och framför allt) skam och stolthet utvärderar och reglerar den professionella kontinuerligt sina handlingar, baserat på både internaliserade ideal och genom andras reaktioner. Med andra ord så vilar denna studie på antagandet att

emotioner inte bara är *effekter* av sociala skeenden, utan även att de *påverkar* social handling och interaktion (Barbalet, 2008).

Efterhand blir vissa sätt att tänka, känna, och agera på förgivettagna och sker utan större eftertanke. Dock så gör samexisterandet av de – ofta svårförenliga – idealen gällande professionellt agerande att den professionella upplever emotionella krockar. Att agera byråkratiskt korrekt innebär ibland att den professionella etiken får stå tillbaka, och vice versa. Med andra ord så upplever socialsekreterarna ofta att de bryter mot någon av ramarnas regler för handlande, tänkande, och kännande (Hochschild, 1979; Bergman Blix & Wettergren, 2018).

Krocken mellan de olika ramarna blir synliga i den vardagliga praktiken på socialtjänstkontoret, vilket uppmärksammas i framför allt kapitel 6 i. Här ser vi förhandlingar och konflikter mellan enhetschefer och socialsekreterare gällande sätt att agera, tänka, och känna i relation till sina klienter. Dessa konflikter relaterar till frågor om lojalitet och ansvar, närhet kontra distans, och regelföljning kontra flexibilitet i klientarbetet. Konflikterna gäller även hur de egna känslorna ska uttryckas och hanteras, vilket är ett återkommande tema genom de empiriska kapitlen.

Därefter hävdar jag att socialarbetarna även värderar det professionella handlandet gentemot reella eller föreställda externa aktörer, eller ”publiker”, som tillsammans med referensramarna formar ofta konfliktfyllda uppfattningar rörande socialtjänstens samhälleliga uppdrag, roll, och inriktning (Goffman, 1959). Dessa skilda åsikter speglas i större politiska och mediala diskurser, och manifesteras i socialsekreterarnas möten med andra professionella, klienter, och allmänheten, som jag visar i kapitel 6. Dessutom skapar de förvirring och ambivalens kring socialsekreterares egentliga arbetsuppgifter, kunskap, och metoder.

I kapitel 7 argumenterar jag att de dubbla ramarna och samhällets ofta motstridiga förväntningar kring socialtjänstens uppdrag kan förstås som en komplex *emotionell regim* (Reddy, 2001). Detta innebär att socialsekreterarna relativt självständigt kan forma sin praktik och sin professionella identitet – och i förlängningen sin emotionella ’stil’. (Reddy, 2001). Dock innebär avsaknaden av tydliga regler att de måste hantera en hög grad av osäkerhet, både vad gäller professionellt agerande och emotionellt arbete. Detta innebär att socialsekreterarna måste navigera olika ideal för hur den professionella identiteten ska formas, inte minst till vilken grad den

professionella rollen ska avgränsat från den privata personen och grad av närhet till klienter. Detta kräver i sin tur att de utvecklar en hög grad av *emotionell reflexivitet*, genom vilken det egna agerandet, tänkandet, och kännandet kontrolleras och kalibreras (Holmes, 2009).

Jag argumenterar för att den emotionella navigeringen underlättas genom *rollpositionering*. För att illustrera hur denna positionering går till så föreslår jag att deltagarna orienterar sig längst ett spektrum av möjliga rollpositioner, där ytterligheterna utgörs av idealtyperna *byråkraten* och *idealisten*, vilka korresponderar till den organisatoriska respektive den professionella emotiv-kognitiva referensramen. Den byråkratiska positioneringen innebär att regler och lagar följs, att den professionella rollen är tydligt avgränsad från den privata personen, och att den vägledande principen är likabehandling (*being fair*). Den professionella positioneringen premierar handlingsutrymme, att ”använda sig själv som verktyg”, och vägleds av principen att göra gott (*being good*). Byråkratpositionen erbjuder ett större mått av tydlighet och gränser för rollen och uppdraget, vilket dämpar känslor av ambivalens. Professionspositionen betonar i stället vikten av att utnyttja handlingsutrymmet, vilket medför att gränserna för ansvaret och den egna insatsen är mer otydliga. Detta, menar jag, kan skapa känslor av osäkerhet och otillräcklighet. Dock så innebär positioneringen *i sig* att uppdraget och gränserna blir tydligare, då den utgör en måttstock mot vilken de egna prestationerna kan bedömas.

Slutligen så understryker jag att även om deltagarna typiskt sett identifierar sig (enligt min kategorisering) främst med en av positionerna, så skiftar eller glider de mellan dem. Detta framkommer när de agerar på ett sätt som går emot denna identifikation, varvid de känner sig manade att förklara och rättfärdiga dessa avvikelser.

I kapitel 8 demonstrerar jag att rollpositioneringen i hög grad formas i och påverkas av kollegorna inom den egna enheten. Genom interaktionsritualer skapar grupperna specifika ’kollektiva symboler’, vilka i sin tur ger deltagarna emotionell energi och skapar gruppsolidaritet (Collins, 2004). I dessa grupper förhandlas och etableras också specifika regler för känslohantering och uttryck. Med tiden utvecklas interaktioner med gruppen till en emotionell fristad, där gruppmedlemmarna kan uttrycka känslor och tankar som annars inte är tillåtna (Reddy, 2001).

Till exempel så visar jag att vuxnenheten, vilka jag menar kan placeras på den idealistiska delen av spektrumet av rollpositioner, solideras av en gemensam kamp för klienter som de menar att ingen annan bryr sig om. Detta genererar i sin tur känslor av stolthet när de står upp och kämpar för dessa klienter i interaktioner med andra enheter och professioner. Här lyfts processhandledningen fram som en särskilt viktig plats för dessa solidaritetsgenererande interaktionsritualer. Utöver klientlojalitet så lyfts gemensam humor fram som en central del förandet av dessa delregimer; att våga använda sig av galghumor blir ett uttryck för gruppens ömsesidiga tillit och solidaritet. Gruppens överenskomna värderingar och normer blir som ett slags kompass för medlemmarna, vilket – om gruppen är sammansvetsad – underlättar navigeringen i den emotionella regimen.

I kapitel 9 visar jag att emotioner är en central del av den professionella praktiken. För det första argumenterar jag för och visar hur den emotionella självpresentationen används för att frammana känslor hos andra, i syfte att uppnå vissa mål. Detta kan vara att motivera klienter att ta emot en viss insats (genom att få dem att känna tillit och självförtroende), men också att skapa känslor av empati eller angelägenhet hos andra professionella för att på så sätt motivera dem att handla på ett visst sätt.

Jag visar också att emotioner används som redskap för att bearbeta information och fatta beslut. Till exempel så visar jag att ”magkänsla” beskrivs som någonting som med tiden professionaliseras och därmed kan användas för att bedöma information. Även empati beskrivs som någonting som med tiden utvecklas, varigenom såväl klienters känslor som de egna utgör en informationskälla utöver ärendets faktiska omständigheter.

Vidare så visar jag att känslor driver och orienterar handling och beslutsfattande, förutsatt att dessa uppmärksammas och reflekteras över, antingen individuellt eller tillsammans med andra. Genom att föreställa framtida känslor baserade på ett visst beslutsalternativ orienterar socialsekreteraren mellan olika möjliga handlingar. Dessa utvärderas i sin tur på känslomässiga erfarenheter av tidigare handlingar och dess konsekvenser.

Slutligen visar jag hur organisationen utvecklar regler och strategier för när, var, och hur socialarbetarna ska hantera sina känslor. Jag lyfter fram processhanledningen som den centrala platsen för detta. Samtidigt definierar dessa

regler och strategier idealen för hur känslor bör upplevas och uttryckas i arbetet, när vissa känsloupplevelser och uttryck talas om som problematiska.

### SAMMANFATTANDE REFLEKTION

Avhandlingens genomgående tematik kretsar kring socialarbetarnas pågående översättning av, och navigering mellan, större ideal till praktik. De empiriska delarna genomsyras av känslor av ambivalens, osäkerhet, frustration, självtvivel, och skuld, vilket jag menar kan tolkas som uttryck för idealens inneboende motsättningar.

Dessa motsättningar skapar otydlighet i hur den professionella identiteten ska utformas. För det första så är det ofta otydligt vad som ska *göras* i arbetet, och på vilket sätt. Deltagarna ger uttryck för en känsla av diffusa gränser. Detta tycks gälla gränssättning *mellan* privatlivet och arbetet, vilket blir tydligt i deltagarnas berättelser om att ”komma för nära.” Det tycks också gälla gränssdragning *inom* arbetet, som visar sig i deltagarnas sökande efter svar på när dom har gjort tillräckligt. För det andra så är det oklart hur man ska *vara* i arbetet, som uttrycks i frågor kring till vilken grad ”personligheten” bör användas i den professionella rollen, och hur engagerad man bör vara i sina klienter.

Avhandlingen visar det komplexa och mångfacetterade emotionella arbete som socialarbetarna utför i sitt vardagliga arbete. Ibland innebär detta en hantering av de egna känslorna i emotionellt laddade situationer, om att ”härberga,” som det brukar kallas, klienters berättelser om hemska livsöden eller deras ilska och sorg när ett beslut förmedlas som går emot deras vilja. Det handlar också om att forma sin självframställan, visa omsorg och empati, eller auktoritet och beslutsamhet, beroende på vad situationen kräver och vilken känsla man vill frammana hos klienten. Hantering av känslor och uttryck kräver i sin tur pågående självreflektion och självkontroll för att agera i linje med yrkets känsloregler. Det handlar också om att stötta kollegor i svåra situationer, om att försöka övertala chefen om en viss insats, eller att dölja sin frustration när sådan övertalning misslyckas.

Inte minst handlar det om att hantera de egna känslorna inför yrkesrollen. Det handlar om att acceptera att de idealistiska ambitioner som formuleras i socialtjänstlagen ofta inte är möjliga att förverkliga i den byråkratiska inramning i vilken socialkontoret verkar. Det handlar om att hantera självtvivel i relation till den professionella kunskapen och den egna förmågan. Om att hantera att inte veta gränserna för vad man kan, bör, och *skulle kunna* göra. Om att inte veta vad ens

beslut och agerande får för konsekvenser. Om att lära sig leva med insikten att misstag görs, katastrofer inte alltid kan förhindras, och det egna ansvaret om så skulle inträffa.

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# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX I: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS AND EMPIRICAL MATERIAL

**TABLE 1: RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

	<b>Municipality 1 Interviews</b>	<b>Municipality 2 Interviews</b>	<b>Other participants (observations)</b>
Adult unit		Krista, Mona, Leah, Kathryn, Sandra, Elisabeth	Jane, Mary, Karen, Susan, Joanne (process supervisor), Patty (method supervisor), Celeste (manager)
Children and youth units	Emma, Sara, Carol, Jennifer, Tami	Linda, Lena, Indra, Maria, Ingrid, Alicia, Lisa, Jenna, Nina,	Paula, Stella, Angela, Gladys, Trisha, Emelie, Hannah (manager)
Managers		Kylie, Ellie	

**TABLE 2: EMPIRICAL MATERIAL**

Empirical material	Municipality 1	Municipality 2	Length	Comments
Individual interviews	6 (including 1 follow-up)	19 (including 2 follow-up)	35 hours	Adult unit: 6 interviews; Children and youth units: 17 interviews; Managers: 2 interviews
Focus group interviews		1	2 hours	First response team, children and youth unit
Internal meetings		25	60 hours	Methods meetings, case reviews, staff meetings etc.
Inter-unit and other professional meetings		6	15 hours	
Process supervision	3	6	27 hours	
Other		1	8 hours	Social work conference (with adult unit)
Informal observations		Approx. 30 workdays		



## GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE

Information till dig som är personal på socialkontoret och som tillfrågas om att medverka i en studie som ingår i avhandlingsprojektet:

### *Emotioner och emotionsarbete i den svenska socialtjänsten*

Syftet med forskningsprojektet ”Emotioner och emotionsarbete i den svenska socialtjänsten” är att studera känslor och känslohantering i den svenska socialtjänsten. Reformförändringar i välfärdssystemet under de senaste decennierna har medfört ändrade arbetsrutiner, bland annat med ett högre fokus på dokumentation och utvärdering. Arbetssjukdomar inom yrket har ökat drastiskt under de senaste åren, och frågan väcks vilka förutsättningarna som finns för lyckad känslohantering i yrkesgruppen. Att ”vara professionell” är mångtydigt, men inte sällan har det att göra med hur den professionella uppför sig i relation till känslor. Tidigare forskning har dock visat att känslor också är viktiga för att kunna fatta beslut och handla rationellt.

Frågor som projektet ska besvara är hur socialsekreterare lär sig hantera känslor för att kunna utföra ett gott socialt arbete; dels mellan kollegor, dels i mötet med klienter. En annan fråga är huruvida känslor används som en del i yrkesrollen och i så fall hur.

**Förfrågan om deltagande:** En forskare kommer att följa och observera olika situationer i det dagliga arbetet. Min avsikt är att observera möten och samtal, så som teamkonferenser, handledningstillfällen och beslutsmöten. Eventuellt kommer också möten med klienter att observeras, detta med godkännande från dig som arbetar som socialsekreterare samt klient vid varje enskilt tillfälle, samt samtycke från andra personer som är närvarande, till exempel en professionell från en annan organisation. Under klientmötet kommer fokus att vara på dig som arbetar som socialsekreterare, och inte på klienten, eller på dig som är där som professionell från en annan organisation. Observationerna följs, i mån av tid och intresse från din sida,

upp av intervju om tankar om det som utspelades under mötet/samtalet. Som ett komplement till dessa observationer genomförs längre fram i studien en gruppintervju med personal, där vi kommer att prata om olika teman som kommit upp i observationerna. Individuella intervjuer genomförs också med personal och chefer för att få enskildas tankar kring arbetet och känslor i arbetet.

**Datainsamlingens genomförande:** Datainsamlingen består av intervjuer med socialsekreterare och chefer, samt observationer av det dagliga arbetet. Jag kommer också att följa med ett begränsat antal personer under några dagar upp till en vecka för att få en mer sammansatt bild av hur det dagliga arbetet ser ut. Intervjuerna beräknas ta 1 till 1,5 timme. Tid och plats för intervjuerna bestäms tillsammans med respektive deltagare. Intervjun kommer att genomföras av Fanny Holt. Med din tillåtelse önskar vi spela in intervjun, då detta underlättar analysarbetet samt medför att dina utsagor kommer kunna återges på ett så korrekt sätt som möjligt.

Fokusgruppsintervjuerna kommer att genomföras på institutionen för socialt arbete vid Göteborgs universitet, Sprängkullsgatan 25. Intervjun kommer att genomföras av Fanny Holt. Intervjun beräknas pågå i ca en och en halv timme. Med hela fokusgruppens tillåtelse önskar vi spela in samtalet. Inbördes sekretess gäller, vilket innebär att du som deltagare förpliktigar dig till att inte sprida vad som sägs utanför gruppen.

**Vilka är riskerna:** Deltagande bedöms inte vara förknippat med några direkta risker för dig som enskild. Om intervjun eller observationen skulle väcka obehagliga känslor eller tankar till liv så är det bra om du signalerar det under intervjun för att inte ytterligare gå in på dessa områden, alternativt avbryta intervjun. Du bestämmer hela tiden själv hur mycket du vill berätta. Om du skulle ha tankar om intervjun, eller vilja ha någon kontakt för att diskutera något som uppkommit under intervjun av obehaglig karaktär kan du vända dig till någon i forskargruppen som kommer att hjälpa dig till en relevant kontakt. Under observationen kommer syftet med studien *inte* vara att bedöma ditt arbete. Om du har några frågor om detta, så kan du vända dig till någon av de ansvariga för studien, i första hand till Fanny Holt.

**Fördelar med att delta i studien:** Förutom att bidra till att utveckla kunskap om känslor och känslorarbete inom socialtjänsten, kan det för dig som enskild vara en positiv upplevelse att få prata om känslor och frågor som är relevanta för din yrkesutövning.

**Ersättning:** Deltagande i forskningsprojektet görs utan ersättning. Kompensation för förlorad arbetsinkomst ges inte. Dialog kommer att föras med chef för enheten som godkänner din medverkan.

**Hantering av data och sekretess:** Datamaterialet som samlas in kommer att

behandlas förvaras så att inte några obehöriga kan ta del av det. Alla namn på intervjuad eller deltagare, samt annan information som skulle möjliggöra att en person identifieras ersätts med koder, som förvaras åtskilt från övrigt material. Efter avslutad studie sparas datamaterialet på ett USB-minne i ett läsbart och brandsäkert skåp i 10 år, som finns på institutionen för socialt arbete vid Göteborgs universitet. Materialet sparas för att möjliggöra efterföljande granskning. Vid publicering från projektet kommer data att presenteras kodat så att inte någon enskild person eller organisation kommer att kunna identifieras. Alla uppgifter om dig och tredje person kommer att behandlas i enlighet med EU:s dataskyddsförordning (GDPR).

Personuppgifter hanteras i enlighet med Dataskyddsförordningen och kompletterande lagstiftning. Ansvarig för dina personuppgifter är Göteborgs universitet och Kristina Ullgren är universitetets dataskyddsombud (kristina.ullgren@gu.se Tel: 031-786 1092).

**Frivillighet:** Deltagande i studien är helt frivilligt och du kan när som helst, utan särskild förklaring, avbryta din medverkan. Om du önskar avbryta din medverkan ska Fanny Holt kontaktas (se kontaktuppgifter nedan). Som en del av frivilligheten kan du även välja att inte besvara enskilda frågor som ställs under intervjuerna. Om någon i personalgruppen uttrycker tveksamhet till att Fanny Holt närvarar och observerar när något specifikt ämne, någon specifik fråga eller en specifik klient diskuteras, kommer Holt att lämna rummet.

**Resultat och publikationer:** Studiens resultat kommer att offentliggöras i form av en eller flera böcker/forskningsrapporter, och i form av vetenskapliga artiklar och konferensbidrag. Resultaten kan också komma att diskuteras på seminarier och i undervisningssammanhang. De kan vidare komma att användas i populärvetenskapliga sammanhang som t.ex. debattartiklar eller föredrag. Kortare, anonyma (transkriberade) utdrag ur intervjuer och observationer kan komma att användas i alla dessa sammanhang.

Kontakta Fanny Holt via mejl om du vill delta i studien och/eller önskar mer utförlig information om studien.

*Med vänliga hälsningar,*

Fanny Holt, doktorand  
Kontaktperson för studien  
fanny.holt@socwork.gu.se  
Tel: 0708-638185

**Ansvariga för forskningsstudien:**

Forskningshuvudman är Göteborgs universitet, institutionen för socialt arbete. Huvudhandledare för projektet är Torbjörn Forkby, socionom och professor i socialt arbete. Biträdande handledare är Therése Wissö, doktor i socialt arbete. Ansvarig för att lokalt genomföra studien är Fanny Holt, sociolog och doktorand vid institutionen för socialt arbete.

Torbjörn Forkby  
Professor och huvudhandledare  
torbjorn.forkby@lnu.se  
Tel: 076-8724700

Therése Wissö  
Doktor och biträdande handledare  
therese.wisso@socwork.gu.se  
Tel: 031-786 6386

Representant för forskningshuvudman:

Anna Dunér  
Professor och viceprefekt  
anna.duner@socwork.gu.se  
031-786 5720