

# The Influence of an Organization on Strategies to Handle Emotions of Social Workers Working with Vulnerable Children in the Czech Republic

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Original Article

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**Abstract:**

**OBJECTIVE:** The objective of our research was to understand the influence of an organization on the strategies to handle emotions of social workers working with vulnerable children.

**DESIGN:** The research was carried out using a qualitative research strategy.

**PARTICIPANTS:** The research participants were 30 field social workers working with vulnerable children and their families (27 men and 3 women). The average length of practice was 7 years; the minimum length of practice for an informant to be included in the research was 12 months.

**METHODS:** The research included 30 in-depth interviews with the informants thematically oriented on emotions and their functioning in the practice of social work with vulnerable children. The data was analyzed using grounded theory of A. Clarke.

**RESULTS:** Setting rules for expressing emotions has an influence in an organization on the creation of positive/negative strategies to handle emotions.

**CONCLUSION:** Emotions in social work are of a very complex and interactive nature and they are not addressed enough either in the practice or in the research of social work.

**Introduction**

In social work, theoreticians and practitioners lead discussions whether emotions belong to social work. Such discussions are often based on perception of duality of emotions and sense; where emotions are perceived as “*personal, feminine, and irrational*”, thus not belonging to the practice of social work (Knott, Scragg, 2016). References to the rationality of social work can imply the necessity of elimination of human elements, such as emotions, from the personality of a social worker which results in highly unrealistic expectations (Grant, Kinman, Alexander, 2014). D’Cruz *et al.* (2007) state that social workers, in accordance with these expectations, are imposed with high requirements on self-control as a professional skill, particularly handling negative emotions and the art of handling positive emotions.

Numerous authors agree on the fact that emotions cannot be separated from social work and that they are its inherent part (see

e.g. Sheppard, Charles, 2015). D’Cruz *et al.* (2007) summarize the above-mentioned by stating that emotions are part of social worker’s equipment which enables them to better understand a given situation and execution of this profession.

The practice of social work, of course, arouses emotions in social workers as social workers witness emotionally tense situations which bring emotional reactions to them (Dore, 2016). A frequent phenomenon in social work is meeting people who need a certain support of the workers when handling their own (strong) emotions (Ikenbuchi, Rasmunssen, 2015). The execution of social work is then emotionally demanding in cases when social workers work with vulnerable children or experience clients’ traumatic events, such as a loss of someone close (Grant, Kinman, Alexander, 2014). Stanley, Bhuvanewari (2016) add that social work is a highly stressful profession due to working with people in stressful life events such as home violence; experience

with crime; loss of habitat; etc. and their complexity still rises.

Each organization has own unwritten rules for expressing emotions. The fact how employees adjust their emotional expression according to these norms is called emotional labor. Brotheridge & Lee (2002) define emotional labor as a control of workers' public expressions of emotions in a way to be in accordance with the organization's rules of expressing emotions. Thanks to emotional labor, emotions are expressed in a suitable way at a suitable moment and suppressed in all other cases. In the context of the above-mentioned, the objective of our research is to understand the influence of an organization on strategies to handle emotions of social workers working with vulnerable children.

## Emotional Labor in organization's context

In organizations of health and social care, employees are expected, within the context of emotional labor, to handle their emotions (Grandey, Chuen Foo, 2011). The workers are expected to work emotionally in the sense of expressing their interest, worries, sympathies, and suppressing their frustration and anxiety. This can lead to alienation from own self, non-authenticity, and emotional exhaustion (Vannini, Franzese, 2008). Workers are made to suppress their anger and respond to clients' negative emotions positively, thus they have to pretend their emotional expression (Diefendorff, Richard, Yang, 2008). Expressing emotions in health and social professions is viewed as unprofessional (Lewis, 2005). An individual is then caught balancing between authenticity and acceptance by other people (Vannini, Franzese, 2008).

In contemporary social work, there are two phenomena regarding emotional labor in organizations. They concern: **a)** bureau-

cratization of emotions: emotional labor in organizations can slip to their bureaucratization when organizations, using their structures, processes, procedures, rules and regulations, help participants in interactions in distorting, manipulating, redirecting and neutralizing emotions (Ruch, Turney, Ward, 2018); **b)** creation of unclear and unuttered rules to express emotions in organizations of social work. This often leads to workers' tension between their own experience of emotional practice and possibilities of its expression. It further leads to stress, non-congruence, and identity confusion of the worker. Another experience related with the creation of unclear and unuttered rules of expressing emotions in organizations is the feeling of "*breaking rules without knowing them*" (Barlow, Hall, 2007).

Related to the above-mentioned, it is necessary to state three specific facts of field social work with vulnerable children and their families **a)** social work is carried out in "*jungle of regulations*", i.e. directives and regulations given both by legislation and given organizations; **b)** social workers often perceive that these regulations are imposed from above by people who do not know anything about field social work; **c)** social work in the Czech Republic has low prestige and social workers working with vulnerable children and their families are often perceived as "*toothy aunts*" who try to take children away from families (see, e.g., Gojova, Glumbikova, 2015; Glumbikova, Vavrova, Nedelnikova, 2018).

## Research methodology

The research was realized using a qualitative research strategy due to our intention to understand the subject perspective and to get an insight into organization's influence on strategies for handling emotions of social workers working with vulnerable children. The research included 30 in-depth in-

interviews thematically focused on emotions and their functioning in the practice of social work with field social workers working with vulnerable children and their families. The selection of the communication partners (CP) took grounds in targeted criteria selection with the following criteria: a) *realization of field social work with vulnerable children*<sup>1</sup>; b) *length of practice minimum of 12 months*; c) *voluntary participation in the research*. The research involved 27 women and 3 men; the average length of practice was 7 years. The minimum length of practice was 1.5 years and the maximum length of practice was 35 years. The data was analyzed using the grounded theory by A. Clarke. In particular, we performed open coding, intentional coding, and axial coding, which lead to the creation of categories. Then we created positional maps, which graphically depict partakers' positions or phenomena in relations to the cross-section of (identified) factors affecting these positions (Clarke *et al.*, 2018). The research was held in compliance with the Ethical Principles in Human Research (APA, 2010). Every communication partner provided informed consent: every communication partner was also familiarized with research objectives; participation in the research was voluntary; researchers committed themselves to keep

confidentiality. Regarding the data limits, it is necessary to reflect possible social desirability in the communication partners' expressions, which can be characterized as a degree of preparedness to answer questions in a way the partaker believes the researcher (society respectively) expects or wishes.

## Research results: Data analysis and interpretation

The crucial point for the communication partners to set the strategies of work with emotions was setting rules for work with emotions in the organization. The communication partners distinguished two characteristics of organization's rules, which they considered important for setting their own strategies to handle emotions. The first was (un)clarity of the rule and the second was strictness versus freedom of the rules.

Social workers often spoke about the **lack of clear rules** in the organization (existence of unclear rules respectively) for expression of emotions. Thus, there are situations when the workers do not know when and how they can express emotions, which lead to the fact that they do not express emotions at all (and within their group feeling, it only strengthens this strategy), or they express them but in secret or in places where "no one can hear or see them"; because "one has to let it out sometimes". According to the communication partners, unclear rules often lead to the fact that they do not express emotions at work and they take them home, which "can interfere into their partnership". "In our organization, it is not clear with the emotions, I feel it that everyone rather keeps them inside... we're kind of iron men, we have to withstand everything... of course, we let it out sometimes... when I cannot go on any more, I go to the toilet and cry there." (CP16)

Setting **clear rules**, on the other hand, led to a certain feeling of safety and the creation

<sup>1</sup> These organisations function in a regime of Social activation services for families with children as defined in Section 69 of the Act No. 108/2006 on Social Services are as follows: "Social activation services are outpatient or outreach services in nature provided to persons of retirement age or to persons with disabilities at risk of social exclusion. The service according to ... contains the following basic activities: a) Mediation of contact with the social environment, b) Social therapeutic activities, c) Assistance in the exercise of one's rights, legitimate interests and personal affairs."

of safe environment where the workers can express their emotions without being afraid of irrespective or even condemning approach from their colleagues “*Well, I think that we respect each other here, each personality and we also know what, how and where to do... it gives us certain safety...*” (CP3)

The second characteristics of an organization’s rules which influenced the strategies of expressing emotions was **strictness versus freedom** of expressing emotions. Communication partners pointed out that where the rules for expressing emotions are too **strict**, there is too limited space, limited by time or place in a way that is hardly reachable for the workers in moments when they really need it. “*Social work is an arduous profession, full of emotions... I can’t give those emotions a command... I can’t say to myself to feel delightfully next Tuesday after a meeting with a client when I have supervision.*” (CP30) On the other hand, **more freedom for the rules** was related with the amount of (informal) support by colleagues in a moment when the workers needed it. “*We have it set so... when somebody comes from the field and needs support, they get it... we have a habit that when someone comes and needs to spill their guts, it would be impolite to say no... it’s an unwritten rule... to listen to each other, discuss... nothing formally set, it just works here like that.*” (CP28) Setting more freedom of rules created certain open space at the workplace for the workers to verbalize emotions. In relation to the freedom of rules, the workers pointed out that rules and restrictions for expressing emotions are necessary in organizations as a worker cannot be emotional, i.e. expressing emotions uncontrollably. On the contrary, a worker must handle emotions in social work so that they, worker and client, reached the objectives of their cooperation. “*We can’t just collapse or be hysterical... it’s rather about using emo-*

*tions to work with a client to achieve what we want.*” (CP30).

Concerning the strategies to handle emotions, the communication partners’ narratives distinguished two variables determining those strategies. It concerns their (non-) adaptivity in relation to the achievement the objectives of the cooperation with a client and their focus inside or outside. **Adaptivity** was described by the communication partners in terms of strategies to handle emotions in a way that would lead to positive results both of the client and the worker. Adaptive strategies were typical for being aware of emotions, their acceptance, verbalization, and authentic expression of own feelings. “*To accept that I feel positive emotions as well as those negative ones which influence me... to learn how to handle them, accept them, name them, talk about them... to keep own identity... just to be in harmony.*” (CP2) **Non-adaptivity** of emotions was related with the opposite of adaptivity. It concerned a denial of emotions and unauthentic self-control leading to a gap from client’s relationship and inability to process own emotions. “*I try to keep this distance... not to express emotions in front of a client... not to show any weakness... just to keep authority at any price...*” (CP6)

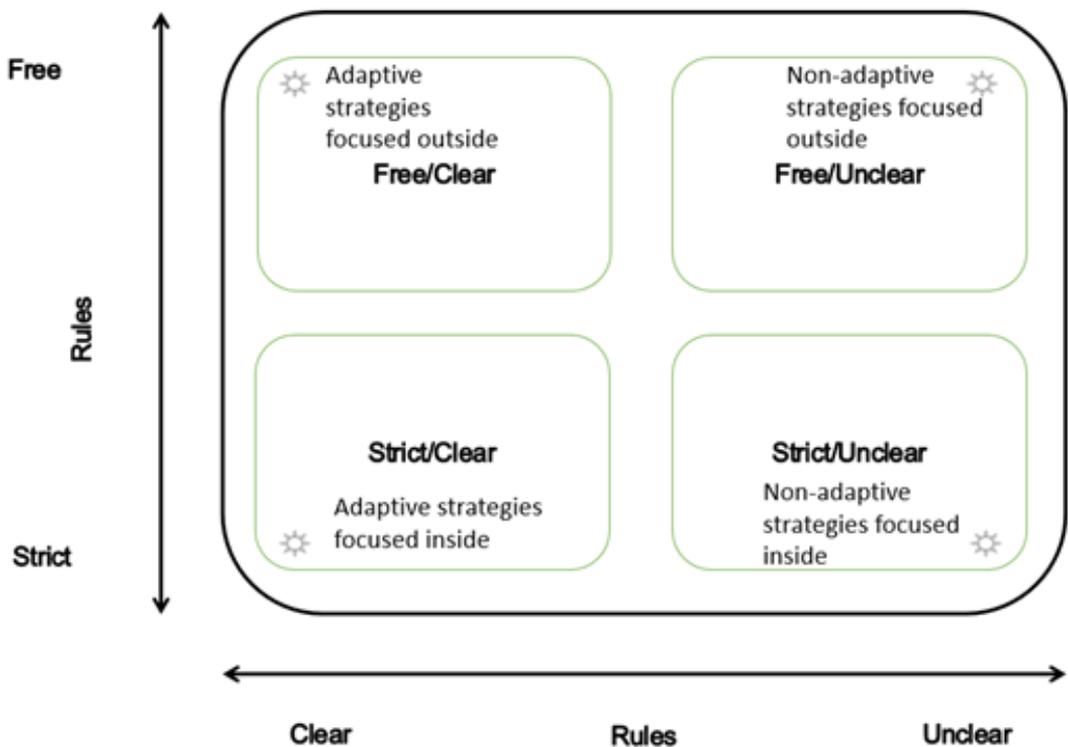
The focus of the strategies to handle emotions inside or outside divided the strategies into those when a worker keeps his/her **emotions inside** and deals with them repeatedly or denies them directly. “*If you want or not, you’ve got to think about it all the time. Just see, when I brush my teeth... it just goes over in my head what happened what didn’t, what might be done, so I think it’s not possible not to think about it.*” (CP11) **Strategies** to handle emotions **focused outside** were often a result of a long-term frustration with a subsequent need of catharsis or the need of current ventilation of emotions. The manifestation of such strategies was bursting into tears or verbal

aggression. Expression of these emotions was mainly done outside interaction with a client although sometimes directly in it, which social workers described that (“it just slipped out”). “One tries to be professional, but sometimes the emotion is so strong that one says it impolitely or just raises voice more than necessary.” (CP8).

The above-mentioned characteristics of an organization’s rules and strategies to handle emotions led to the creation of a positional map of using strategies to handle emotions in relation with an organization’s setting of rules.

istence of mutual respect. **Strict and clear rules** lead to the use of adaptive strategies focused inside, where social workers have clearly defined place and time to express emotions, e.g. in a form of supervision. The social workers, according to their narratives, have safe space for the creation of strategies to handle emotions and possible ventilation of emotions, but they often accumulate emotions and think about the possibilities to solve the situation in order to be able to ventilate them just at these occasions. **Free and unclear rules** lead to the use of non-adaptive strategies focused

**Fig. 1:** Use of strategies to handle emotions in relation with the organization's setting of rules



**Source:** Own construction.

**Free and clear rules** lead to the use of adaptive strategies focused outside. It primarily concerns informal sharing and providing of mutual support between colleagues, when the workers perceive the ex-

outside, i.e. to the state when social workers do not know how and when expressing emotions is acceptable. Strategies to handle emotions are then quite diversified. Most frequently, there is uncertain (by place,

time, and intensity) ventilation of emotions and bringing emotions home. **Strict and unclear rules**, however, led to the use of non-adaptive strategies to handle emotion, which were focused inside, when a worker still reflects on emotions or, on the contrary, totally suppresses them and keeps distance from any relationship with a client.

## Conclusions and discussion over results

The positional map presents certain ideal models to handle emotions, which social workers variously combine in the practice of social work in accordance with the dynamism of the profession practice (legislative context of social work, particular target group, client's situation, time, etc.). Nevertheless, it can be said that setting of organization's rules to use the strategies to handle emotion is pre-featured in a certain way. The research results also showed that the most problematic, in relation to the setting of an organization's rules to handle emotions, is a certain lack of clarity of these rules, which results from tabooing of social workers' emotions when emotions are perceived as something "unprofessional" and social workers are expected to suppress or not to show emotions at their workplace at all (similarly see, e.g., Lewis, 2005; Grant, Kinman, Alexander, 2014).

Communication partners' narratives also revealed that emotions are immanently present in social work and social workers need certain leadership from the organization as well as space for their expression in order to prevent burn-out syndrome as well as compassion fatigue (which are common in the practice of social work) (similarly see, e.g., Dore, 2008 or Vannini, Franzese, 2008). Organizations should therefore use a combination of various tools to support adaptive strategies to handle emotions of social workers, such as supervision, education,

mentoring, team meetings, or other tools of creating (informal) space for sharing emotions with colleagues (see, e.g., Diefendorff, Richard, Yang, 2008).

The objective of this paper was met. Nevertheless, emotions of social workers in field social work with vulnerable children and their families are a highly complex and dynamic issue which deserves more attention from the researchers' side.

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