

What Does It Take To Be A Good Social Worker?

A Study Exploring the Dynamics Involved in Performing Emotional Labour in the Practice Context of Vulnerable Children and Their Families

by

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To the memory of

Barrie Thomas Vaughan-Johnson

Who remained calm “amid the noise and the haste” (Ehrmann, 1927)

Abstract

This thesis is based on the idea that a good social work practitioner needs to be able to negotiate the tension between the social worker's ethical heart and the organisation's managerial objectives. On the one hand, s/he must adhere to scripted rules and procedures, and on the other, s/he must be responsive to the emotional needs of vulnerable people. The act of holding this tension means meeting the differing expectations that play out in everyday interactions. This takes, what Arlie Hochschild (2003) termed, "emotional labour" (p. 7). Emotional labour refers to the way individuals manage their emotions so they maintain a particular outward appearance to others. The aim of this thesis is to explore what performing emotional labour means for social workers, and, in so doing, gain further understanding of the emotional dynamics of social work practice. Insights gleaned from in-depth interviews with social workers in the field of child welfare in Australia revealed that dealing with these dynamics on a day-to-day basis is hard work. Not only were participants faced with maintaining their inner equilibrium when challenged by emotionally complex situations with vulnerable children and their families, but in order to uphold the ideals of good social work practice, they also had to deal with systemic dysfunction by winning the hearts and minds of uncompromising managers and touchy employees. These findings have prompted the author to question whether too much is expected from social workers, not just by organisations, but also by the social work profession itself. When, for example, social workers are expected to be agents of change by drawing on a conscious use of self, is the performance of emotional labour a taken for granted expectation? In light of such a question, the idea of grounding social work with a greater acknowledgement of emotional reality is explored.

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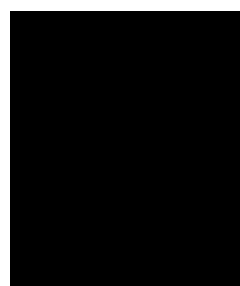
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Statement of Originality

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.



Louise Katherine Morley

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