

Chapter One: Introduction

To be a good social worker it takes knowledge, skill, courage and commitment. It also takes emotional labour. The aim of this thesis is to explore the dynamics involved in performing emotional labour in the context of social work practice with vulnerable children and their families in Australia. It is intended that such an exploration will lead to a greater understanding of what performing emotional labour means for individual social workers.

The concept of emotional labour was first developed in 1983 by sociologist Airlie Hochschild (2003). It refers to the way human feeling is organised and made instrumental in achieving the goals of organisations. When individuals engage in the act of managing their emotions in the context of their paid employment, they do so according to what is deemed appropriate within that specific context. This can mean hiding how one 'really' feels in order to present a certain appearance to others, or it can be mean invoking feeling in order to create a certain feeling in them. In a social work context, emotion management is instrumental in building helping relationships with clients.

The individual's ability to carefully read the emotional nuance and manage emotional response in such a way that others respond positively requires a great deal of skill. In social work, this skill is understood in terms of several skills, often referred to as interpersonal skills. These skills provide the foundation for professional social work practice, and without them social workers are unable to put their theories into practice. Knowledge translates into practice only through interpersonal skills and, thus, through the performance of emotional labour.

Performing emotional labour in a social work context requires more than just professional skill. It also requires individual effort – the effort involved in continually managing one's own emotional response in order to maintain a certain appearance to others, or the effort involved in invoking feeling in others (Hochschild, 2003). This endeavour is something one personally offers to professional practice and is a reflection of one's inner commitment to the aims and goals of the social work profession. Acknowledgment of this effort and commitment is, for the most part, assumed. Hence, the central question guiding this research, *what does it take to be a good social worker?*, refers specifically to finding out more about what the individual endeavour of social work practice means for the individual.

By seeking to learn more about how emotional labour is experienced by individuals, such an inquiry seeks to understand something about the social expectations that determine how individual endeavour in social work practice is experienced. According to Hochschild (1998), culture guides individuals towards presenting certain appearances in certain social situations and, in so doing, guides them to feel a certain way. She refers to these guides as emotional dictionaries or bibles that provide the vital clues individuals need in order to act appropriately within social situations. As she writes:

Each culture has its unique emotional dictionary, which defines what is and isn't said, and its emotional bible, which defines what one should and should not feel in a given social context. As aspects of a 'civilizing' culture they determine the predisposition with which we greet an emotional experience. They shape predispositions with which we *interact* with ourselves over time. Some feelings in the ongoing stream of emotional life we acknowledge, welcome, foster. Others we grudgingly acknowledge and still others the culture invites us to deny. (p. 7)

Interestingly, Hochschild (1998) begins by talking of singular emotional bibles and dictionaries unique to each culture, suggesting that cultural norms are guided by one set of rules. Yet she also refers to these dictionaries and bibles in the plural, suggesting that there are a number of different reference points guiding individuals in their day-to-day interactions.

That there are different reference points guiding individuals suggests that cultural bibles and dictionaries have the potential to conflict and contradict one another. For professionals working in the human services, being faced with contradictory social guides is a common occurrence. Lipsky's (2010) street level bureaucrats, for example, are positioned amongst such contradiction. "On the one hand, the[ir] work is often highly scripted to achieve policy objectives that have their origins in the political process. On the other hand, the work requires improvisation and responsiveness to the individual case" (Lipsky, 2010, p. xii).

The tension to which Lipsky (2010) refers is expressed differently by different people. Weigert and Franks (1989, as cited in Olsen & Bone, 1998), for example, refer to it as that between "empathic concern and rational universal detachment" (p. 314). Garrett (2003) borrows terms from Bauman (2000), who refers to the "original ethical impulse" and "procedural execution" (p. 9). The different language used refers to essentially the same thing. Understood in terms of emotional reality, highly scripted and proceduralised objectives are

often associated with emotional detachment. Improvisation and responsiveness is often associated with emotional engagement. On the one hand, professionals must maintain an appearance of being emotionally detached from the work they do, but on the other, they must appear, at least in part, to be emotionally engaged.

Emotional labour is central to holding this tension. Like the performance of emotional labour, the act of holding tension is a subjective experience that is sensed or felt, but often not named. If, for example, there is disagreement between individuals or groups, one may labour emotionally by putting one's own subjective response aside. Similarly, if one endeavours to provide care for a frightened patient who is resistant to medical intervention, one may need to labour emotionally to hide one's sense of frustration in order to show empathic concern so the patient feels more at ease. In each case, one needs to labour emotionally in order to create a certain feeling in others.

All professionals will, at some time or another, need to perform emotional labour in order to hold the tensions that arise in their practice (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008; Mastracci, Guy & Newman, 2012). Thus, it must be acknowledged that the tension between the "original ethical impulse and procedural execution" (Bauman, 2000 as cited by Garrett, 2003, p. 4) is not unique to the social work profession. Every profession, however, will have its own emotional bibles or dictionaries, and these will shape the way practice is experienced. For this reason, this thesis will focus on the idea of tension and its relationship to emotional labour in the context of the social work profession.

Social Work and the Tension between the Ethical Heart and Organisational Objectives

The act of holding tension, implied in the act of performing emotional labour, constitutes a major theme throughout this thesis. Inspired by the notion of "original ethical impulse and procedural execution" (Bauman, 2000 as cited in Garrett, 2003, p. 4), the main tension in social work practice has been constructed in terms of the ethical heart and organisational objectives. Like others (Garrett, 2003; Lipsky, 2010; Weigert & Franks, 1989, as cited in Olsen & Bone, 1998), it is meant to reflect the often contradictory forces that shape social work practice.

The ethical heart and organisational objectives represent different paradigms (D’Cruz, Gillingham & Melendez, 2009). The ethical heart refers to a social worker’s subjective desire to influence some kind of positive change in individuals or the systems that surround them; it refers to an individual’s desire for social justice or a fairer society. Such a desire seems to appear from deep within the human soul, as if from some primeval spring (Kierkegaard, 1995), yet it also manifests in collective values. “The belief in the equal worth of all human beings” (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010, p. 9), for example, is central to the construction of social work’s professional values, and thus the profession’s collective ethical heart.

Organisational objectives could also be understood in terms of an inner human desire – a desire for order and regulation. Here, however, organisational objectives refer to the external systems that seek to control and regulate the subjective desire within the ethical heart. Such objectives are reflected in legislation and public policy, as well as organisational policy and procedures. They represent a dominant value system that manifests in the political context in which the subjective experience of social work practice takes place.

The ethical heart and organisational objectives could be said to constitute opposite ends of the subjective/objective continuum. Organisational objectives are primarily concerned with valuing the ordinary and ‘normalising’ the extraordinary. The ethical heart is primarily concerned with valuing the extraordinary and disrupting the ordinary if necessary, in the name of ethics. These opposites can and do complement one another through a dialectical relationship (Tsang, 2000). When organisational objectives align with the desire within the ethical heart, for example, professional practice remains relatively unproblematic. When they do not align, however, this creates a tension.

Social workers are often positioned in the centre of this tension. Their role requires them to act as translator or mediator between their ethical hearts and organisational objectives and, in so doing, uphold ethical principles whilst meeting organisational objectives (Flaskas, 2013; Lipsky, 2010). Such a task sounds simple enough in theory. In practice, however, it can be highly problematic, because the full dimensions of emotional experience known to the ethical heart do not always translate into the rather narrow dimensions of organisational objectives (Hyslop, 2009; Staller, 2007, 2011). In the context of child welfare, for example, a child’s emotional experience of abuse or neglect often carries with it a profound emotional burden for

the individual child (Staller, 2011). The ethical issues attached to alleviating this burden are not always able to be encompassed by the organisation charged with the task of systemically protecting children.

Because the ethical heart aims towards understanding the full implications of experiencing an emotional burden, social workers often feel compelled, if not to share such burdens, then at least to ensure that systematic processes do not make the experience of carrying them worse. In straddling these differing concerns, social workers are expected to have a “bifurcated consciousness” (Scott, 1990, p. 19). On the one hand, they must improvise in order to respond to the immediacy of lived experience. On the other hand, they need to comply with transparent and standardised policy objectives. One of the issues involved in doing this is that emotional complexity is often not recognised by policy objectives. This issue is explored by Karen Staller (2007), where she examines communications between a social worker and a child. In the following extract, the child (She) has experienced sexual abuse and the social worker (He) has to somehow translate this very personal narrative into a formal framework to suit organisational objectives.

He equates ‘that story’ with ‘that child’s heart’. So what’s the significance of this progression? He has taken that child’s heart in His hand. It has been passed through the story. What was interior writing for the child – inscribed in Her heart – has become externalised and placed in His hands. However, He is too insightful a social worker not to realise that he is holding something far more precious and far more delicate than a mere tale. As He continues in His professional role, passing the story along in the various systems to which it must go, it seems certain He will remember He is holding a heart and handle it with appropriate care. (p. 782)

The social worker in this extract understands that because the child’s narrative represents Her heart, He must treat it with extreme care. At the same time, however, He must engage with ‘the system’ so Her narrative can be ‘processed’. It is His ethical heart that guides Him in doing this and His ethical heart that ensures the systematic processing of Her narrative does not cause Her any more harm.

Staller (2007) goes on to discuss the significance of the social worker *holding* the child’s story in His hands. If one holds something, it suggests one has a firm grip on it. This is not so much about the fact that the social worker holds the child’s story, but rather *how* He goes

about doing it. He needs to hold it firmly in order to protect it, yet if He holds it too firmly, He may destroy it. For this reason, the social worker's firm grasp must be carried out with extreme care and caution (Staller, 2007).

The idea of *holding* a child's story is analogous to the idea of *holding* tension. The verb *to hold* suggests that one engages in an activity as opposed to merely *experiencing* an aspect of reality. In terms of day-to-day social work practice, such an activity plays out in interpersonal communications or "micro engagements" (Garrett, 2003, p. 4). Thus, holding tension in social work practice will mean different things to different people at different times. The social worker who *holds* the child's heart in his/her hands, for example, will do so by interacting with the child as well as interacting with other professionals.

Tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives exists in these different kinds of interactions as well as in the movement between them. For the social worker in Staller's (2007) analysis, for example, He would first need to have gained the child's trust. He would do this by listening carefully, respecting what She had to say and making acceptance His "default presumption" (Staller, 2007, p. 785). Then He would need to relay Her story on to other professionals, to a colleague for example, or police, a lawyer or even a judge. In doing this, He would also have to ensure He does not fracture Her narrative, or indeed Her sense of self, by trying to shape it to suit His idea of what He thought He heard from Her (Staller, 2007).

These micro practices sound simple enough in theory, but actually carrying them out in practice is more complex. If, for example, the social worker accepts the details of the child's story, a lawyer or judge may need to question such acceptance. In such an instance, the social worker needs to be open to the process of being questioned, whilst at the same time maintaining a firm position of acceptance. For the social worker, such a process may be experienced as contradictory and has the potential to cause an emotional reaction. Thus, emotional labour is necessary in maintaining a professional countenance.

Staller's (2007) analysis of social worker and child exemplifies the disjuncture between the ethical heart in the context of organisational objectives within the human services. It must be acknowledged that organisational objectives function within a broader context of Neo-liberalism and New Public Management (NPM) regimes (McDonald, 2006; Webb, 2006). Broadly speaking, Neo-liberalism can be described as a political philosophy that favours de-

regulation over state regulation, the idea being that de-regulation increases competition and that this, in turn, increases the efficiency and effectiveness of service provision (Horton, 2007). Such a philosophy has influenced the welfare sector and NPM is a consequence of this (McDonald, 2006; Webb, 2006). According to a NPM perspective, welfare organisations can no longer be concerned only with providing assistance and/or support to disadvantaged people experiencing hardship. They have to do this whilst conforming to a business-like paradigm of fiscal constraint and economic efficiency. This has also meant increased accountability to funding bodies, the consequence of which is greater proceduralisation of practices and the erosion of professional discretion (Howe, 1992; McDonald, 2006; Webb, 2006).¹

Practice in this context can mean that social workers in the child welfare context may need to *hold* children's narratives (or the narratives of those who care for children), whilst feeling pressured by economic and administrative demands.

The concept of emotional labour provides the framework for comprehending this deeply personal experience in the context of political objectives. Such a perspective is valuable because it draws attention to the way culture can impact on human feeling and the way it is expressed (Bendelow & Williams, 1998; Harré, 1986; Hochschild, 1979, 1998, 2003). Given that emotions play such a central role in the work social workers do (Howe, 2008), it appears that relatively little attention has been paid to performing it and what this may mean for individuals.

The motivation to explore emotional labour, and what it takes to perform it in a social work context, was inspired by my own experience of emotional labour in social work practice.

¹ The emergence of Neo-liberalism in Australia parallels that of other OECD countries in the sense that it constituted a global movement in the 1970s. In the context of the welfare state, it has meant a gradual erosion of the principle that those most vulnerable in society have the right to a certain standard of living and increasing popularity of the idea that the welfare state is no longer economically viable. This is particularly pertinent in the Australian context because the development of the welfare state in Australia was characterised primarily by the regulation of the labour markets (Castles, 1985, as cited in Deeming, 2013). Thus, it always been a cultural norm in Australia that "work is seen as the best form of welfare" (Deeming, 2013, p. 676). This historical context means that, generally speaking, Australians receiving welfare benefits experience a relatively lower standard of living than those in other OECD countries (Deeming, 2013).

My Own Emotional Labour in the Face of Compromise

For me, holding the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives has meant making compromise, and I have laboured emotionally to conceal my emotional response to this reality. As a social worker committed to a value base of social justice, the issue of compromise has been one of the hardest realities to accept, because in social work practice, compromise is not just a simple question of finding middle ground and justifying this to oneself or one's supervisors. As has been identified by Staller (2007), it is also a question of considering how others, namely vulnerable children and families, may experience that middle ground.

Perhaps my own difficulty arose because my ideals were too high. At university, I was consumed with reading critical social work texts such as Bob Mulally's *Structural Social Work* (1997), Jim Ife's *Rethinking Social Work* (1997), Lena Dominelli's *Anti-Racist Social Work* (1997), and Jan Fook's *Radical Casework* (1993). When I graduated in 2001, I resolved that structural disadvantage could be challenged; all I needed to do was maintain my critical consciousness and enact this in my interactions with others. Thus, I set out with a commitment towards this end. This was reflected in my honours dissertation, where I wrote about a love of humanity and how such an idea, which was reflective of a critical framework, can be used to sustain social workers through the trials and tribulations of practice (Morley, 2000; Morley & Ife, 2002).

Once I began to experience the full brunt of practice reality with vulnerable children and their families, however, I felt compelled to re-evaluate this critical stance. With the benefit of hindsight, I now realise this said as much about the critical writers who influenced me more than anything else. Their expectations for critical practice and how it 'should' look came to be incongruent with my emic (Crawford, 1994) understanding of practice.

Such an evaluation resulted in a dramatic shift from being critical to 'just' being ethical. This shift was conceptual more than anything else, because the critical agenda holds within a strong ethical stance (Ferguson, I., 2008, 2013; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009). However, it was significant for me at the time, because it felt as if I was conceding defeat as a fighter for the critical cause – as if I was letting the critical community down, or that I would somehow lose respect within this community.

Lowering my critical bar, or at least my perception of it at the time, helped me, because the theoretical ideals inherent in ethical practice appeared less ambitious than those in critical practice. Yet even upholding ethical practice was problematic because, on some occasions, I found myself trying to collaborate with professionals who appeared unconcerned about ethics. As an inexperienced practitioner, this was extremely difficult for me to understand.

To give an example, I recall one of the first times I had to make a mandatory report. I was a member of a multi-disciplinary team employed by a non-government organisation. Our role was to offer a professional service to children with learning disabilities and their families. My colleagues and I had concerns for the wellbeing of two siblings, both under the age of five and both with high medical needs. The parents of these children were struggling and we tried very hard to help them meet their children's needs. Despite this, the problems persisted. As a team, we agreed that statutory intervention was necessary.

I remember talking on the telephone to the statutory worker who was assessing my assessment. I carefully tried to communicate all the intricacies of the family in a respectful way, so as to communicate their strengths in balance with their weaknesses. However, the statutory worker was dismissive of my respectful concern and asked in a curt tone, 'Are you reporting abuse or not?' I remember being thrown by this comment and stumbling verbally to maintain my composure. It did not make sense to me because the nature of non-wilful neglect is that it exists in that no-man's land between abuse and non-abuse; it is not black and white.

On that occasion, the worker with whom I spoke did not agree that the situation warranted statutory assessment or intervention. For me, this caused confusion and frustration. For the children and family concerned, however, it was much worse, because it resulted in a prolonged progression of a worsening situation. Eventually, after several more reports over a period of six months, the children were placed in the care of their grandparents.

This unwillingness to negotiate and enter into dialogue about children and families goes against the fundamental principles of best practice (Chui & Wilson, 2006; Tilbury, 2007). This was a difficult reality to accept, because at university I had learnt that it was my professional responsibility to uphold these best practice principles in my practice.

I cannot remember learning specifically about how to deal with this kind of uncompromising attitude. Certainly, I was aware of the injustices it could cause, but I had not actually

contemplated what this meant in terms of me and my practice. I had assumed that other professionals would be willing to negotiate and deliberate (with me) in order to get the best outcomes for children and their families.

I do not believe that this was an unreasonable assumption to make. It seems, however, that it may have been unrealistic. I felt compromised because I was forced to accept that I am unable to control other professional's decision-making and practices; all I can do is to endeavour to negotiate and problem solve to the best of my ability.

My experience could be influenced by the fact that the majority of my practice has been in rural or remote areas. In rural practice, the tension between the ethical ideals and practice reality seems to intensify (Green, 2003; Turbett, 2009). The general lack of services seems to exacerbate the unfathomable disadvantage of vulnerable families. For example, later in my career as a senior practitioner in the role of children's sexual assault counsellor, I was often left feeling as if I had to perform miracles in the absence of services and resources. The statutory investigation would come and go, the perpetrator 'removed' (or not), the 'drama' over and the case 'closed'. Yet so many other serious risk factors would be left unaddressed. I would endeavour to address some of them with the family, but the demands on my time often meant that this could not be done in a way that resulted in a long term and meaningful difference for families.

The idea that it may be acceptable to do the absolute minimum as a social work practitioner was often a point of discussion in supervision sessions. Well-meaning supervisors would frequently suggest that I was doing all I could in difficult circumstances and that I needed to develop a better trust in my own abilities. To some extent, this reassurance did provide me with relief from feeling that my knowledge skills did not measure up, and I would walk out of supervision sessions feeling vindicated. It did not, however, relieve me from the emotional discomfort caused by the knowledge that some vulnerable children and their families were not getting the services they needed. Consequently, I am still left with the question as to whether or not I was being invited to accept an ever-decreasing ethical standard.

I realise that 'good' social work with children and families is not about practice being ethically 'perfect' and that practice is often about doing the best one can in a challenging situation (Banks, 2012; Gray & Webb, 2010; Webb, 2006). But just how much compromise is too much? There is no definitive answer to this question. Rather, it constitutes a balancing act

between what we desire as “ethical agents” (Webb, 2006, p. 116) and what is practically feasible in a given situation.

Not all of my practice experiences were negative ones. In the course of my practice I have experienced positive working relationships with other professionals. I have also had the privilege of being able to facilitate processes that have led to positive changes in families. These kinds of experiences are what make holding the tensions of practice worthwhile. Thus, it must be stated that holding tension is not just about emotional exhaustion and disillusionment, but also about emotional fulfilment.

Practice reality is filled with a diverse range of experiences and this thesis is about the implications of such experiences, not only for the individuals who experience them, but also those they endeavour to assist. As social workers engage emotionally with the intimate corners of people’s lives, they rarely have average days, because the nature of the work is such that it can be inspiring and uplifting, deeply disturbing and depressing, all of the above and everything in between. These emotional experiences often take place within the context of systems that are highly dysfunctional, even irrational. Despite this, social workers are expected to carry on as ‘normal’ day in and day out – as if they are carrying out some bland administrative procedure. It is the contrast between this ‘carry on regardless’ attitude, often found in highly rationalised organisational cultures, and the emotional depths of working with vulnerable children, that this research aims to explore.

Having explained something about my own motivation for conducting this research, the key terms used in the conceptualisation of this will now be defined.

Definitions

In this section, the term ‘social work’ or ‘social worker’ will be discussed before going on to explain what is meant when using the term ‘good social work’. The terms ‘child welfare’ and ‘vulnerable children and their families’ will also be defined, as well as the different kinds of organisations that work with this group of people.

Social Work

The term social work is used to refer to a particular professional discipline. To become a social worker one must complete tertiary studies. The social work qualification, which is a

Bachelor or Masters degree, draws on different academic disciplines, including politics, sociology, psychology, law and counselling. This breadth of knowledge means social workers can be employed in a variety of different organisations, from statutory government authorities to non-government organisations, to political parties. Not only this, social workers would be suitably qualified to work in a number of different positions within these organisations, ranging from a manager to a caseworker, and from an advocate and a political activist to a therapist.

This broad scope explains the rather encompassing definition of social work as presented by The International Federation of Social Workers ([IFSW], 2014):

The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (para. 1)

From such a definition, it is clear that social workers are concerned with human social change. So much so, that they are often referred to as “change agents” (IFSW, 2014, para. 2), or “agents of change” (Ferguson, I., 2013, p. 195).

Promoting individual or social change can occur in many different ways; however, the most common form is by working with individuals on a case-by-case basis. In this kind of practice, practitioners will, for the most part, be concerned with the problems associated with human relationships (Hennessy, 2011; Ruch, 2012; Trevithick, 2003). Thus, social workers working with individuals conceptualise the individual in relation to the network of relationships that surround them; a healthy network of relationships means a healthy human being. Thus, if a person is socially isolated, a social worker may assist them by helping a person to re-activate his/her social support networks. Or, if a person is being harmed by another, a social worker will support that person to de-activate that relationship and gain independence from it. Social work is about the “development of equitable relationships and the development of individual’s power and control over their own lives” (O’Connor, Wilson & Setterlund, 2003, p. 5).

Good Social Work

The term ‘good social work’ consists of two fundamental aspects. First, good social work practice is ethical practice. Second, practice is good when it is informed by a sound theoretical rationale for interventions. These two aspects are one and the same thing, because an ethical consciousness is part of what informs a sound theoretical framework. As The Australian Association of Social Workers (2010) stipulate in their *Code of Ethics*:

The social work profession holds that every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth and that each person has a right to wellbeing, self-fulfilment and self-determination, consistent with the rights and culture of others and a sustainable environment. (p. 12)

From a social work perspective, theoretical frameworks do not work without an ethical consciousness accompanying them. Thus, part of social work’s evidence base is the centrality of valuing people and not judging them for the circumstances in which they may find themselves. Such a sentiment is reflected by Gray and Webb (2010) when they define ‘good’ practice as being “morally good when achieved within the relationship of social worker and client. Its worth lies in its capacity to benefit and enrich the lives of others” (p. 3).

Treating people as ends in themselves, respecting difference, being sensitive towards those who experience oppression, as well as being conscious of one’s role in perpetuating oppression, are all essential to good social work practice. This means that good practice requires the willingness to be self-reflective in order that one observe one’s own anxieties and understand how they may be impacting on others (Hennessey, 2011). Such a personal quality is about practitioners being able to come to terms with their own fallibility as an emotional being.

Good practice is also about working with other professionals to achieve the best possible outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. This involves being open to the knowledge and expertise of others and incorporating this into an ethical framework when working with families. It may also involve challenging the practices of others if those practices are deemed unethical.

Child Welfare

The term ‘child welfare’ refers to a broad range of practices aimed at ensuring the general wellbeing of children. The issue of child abuse or neglect is central to this field, and thus a central preoccupation in this thesis. Some child welfare practices will be aimed specifically at reducing the risk of child neglect and abuse. Others will be aimed at dealing with the issues that arise once abuse has occurred. Others may not be primarily aimed at working with cases of abuse or neglect, but are aimed at children generally, as would be the case in a hospital, for example. In these cases, practitioners may come across the occurrence of child abuse or neglect, and will be compelled to manage the issues that arise from this.

The term ‘child protection’ is often used to refer to practices that are aimed at minimising harm once abuse has occurred, and the term ‘child welfare’ is often used to refer to practices aimed at preventing abuse from occurring. In this thesis, the term ‘child welfare’ will be used consistently to refer to both practices. Such a choice proves problematic because of the paternalistic connotations associated with the forced removal of children from parents who are perceived to be ‘bad’ (Scott & Swain, 2002). However, the term ‘child protection’ is equally problematic, because it implies a narrow focus on the aftermath of child abuse once it has occurred (Healy & Meagher, 2007).

The term ‘child welfare’, as it is used in this thesis, refers to multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary, multi-organisational practices. This definition is meant to reflect the current policy trend towards a more holistic approach to child welfare practice that is emerging in Australia (see, for example, Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2009). The history and purpose driving these policy reforms will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Vulnerable Children and their Families

The term ‘vulnerable children and their families’ is used frequently throughout this thesis. It refers primarily to families who may experience difficulties in coping with the challenges that are presented to them. This idea is represented in the following definition of the term given by Arney and Scott (2009):

All families differ in their ability to manage difficult challenges and have different internal and external resources to draw upon. Internal resources such as good family

attachment, cohesion and communication, and external resources such as good social support and financial security have all been shown to help families manage difficult times. (p. 1)

The notion of internal and external resources applies to all families. There may be times, for example, when even the most well-resourced family will find it difficult to face life challenges, as may be the case if a natural disaster occurs, or if a financial crisis leads to unemployment and/or homelessness.

Families with poor internal and external resources, however, may find it more difficult to face life challenges. Also, these families often experience different kinds of structural disadvantage, such as poverty and discrimination. This is often associated with other factors, such as the experience of mental illness, drug addiction or intergenerational trauma. The term “complex needs” (Butler, McArthur, Thompson & Winkworth, 2012, p. 572) is often used to refer to families who experience multiple forms of disadvantage and who often have multiple needs.

Not all children from families with complex needs will experience abuse or neglect, yet multiple forms of disadvantage and the associated issues do increase the risk of this occurring (Butler et al., 2012). If a child has his/her own complex needs, then her/his level of vulnerability may also increase. Children with learning or physical disabilities, for example, are often considered more vulnerable because their medical or care needs are often greater than other children.

It must be acknowledged that by using ‘vulnerable children and their families’, vulnerability occurs in varying degrees. For this reason, individual professional assessment is essential for determining levels of vulnerability.

Clients/Vulnerable Children and Their Families

Where syntax allows, the children and families that social workers endeavour to assist will be referred to as ‘vulnerable children and their families’. The purpose of using this term is to make the point that children exist in the context of their families. Despite this, such a term can be cumbersome and in these instances ‘vulnerable children and their families’ will be referred to as ‘clients’.

The term client has been described as outdated because of the way it implies the unequal power relationship between the expert professional and the unknowing layperson (Hugman, 1991; McLaughlin, 2009). The alternatives prove equally problematic. The terms ‘service user’, ‘consumer’ or ‘customer’, for example, are designed to empower the individual by implying s/he has a choice in the services they use. In the context of vulnerable children and their families, they often do not have a choice, especially if their circumstances are being investigated by workers in a statutory agency. Indeed, one could speculate that if asked, many vulnerable children and their families would choose not to engage with child welfare services in the first place. Thus, the term ‘client’, although problematic, is meant to reflect this.

Kinds of Organisations – Statutory and Non-Statutory

The term ‘statutory child welfare organisation’ refers to organisations with the statutory authority to investigate concerns of abuse or neglect. The term ‘non-statutory child welfare organisation’ refers to organisations that provide services to vulnerable children and their families, but do not have the statutory power to investigate concerns. These kinds of services can be government or non-government organisations.

The Organisation of the Thesis

In order to address the research question, *what does it take to be a good social worker?*, the thesis is organised in the following way.

To begin, in Chapter Two the disparity between the theoretical ideals found in social work scholarship and organisational realities in the child welfare field is explored. First, the foundations of the social work profession are examined in order to establish the ground for further analysis. These foundations are then compared with the organisational reality shaping contemporary child welfare practices. Highly rationalised practices designed to scrutinise vulnerable families rather than support them are problematic for social workers because of the way such procedures contradict social work values (Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009). The social work profession has responded to these practice issues by encouraging social workers to look deep within their own ethical conscience for answers. This is evidenced by examining some of the contemporary social work literature on ethics. Having established the extent of disparity between social work values and organisational objectives, some of the research conducted into how social workers experience this disparity is then explored. In so

doing, it is suggested that whilst social work's strong moral discourse can be a motivating factor, inspiring individuals to resist the status quo and uphold ethical principles, organisational reality can also lead workers to experience disappointment and disillusionment. These contrasting experiences further illuminate the fundamental tension between ethical ideals and organisational reality, and this, in turn, strengthens the justification for this research project.

In Chapter Three, the idea of holding tension is explored theoretically. First, the foundations of the tension are examined. By drawing on the work of Max Weber (1922/1978), the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives is understood in terms of differing kinds of rationality that, over time, have emerged to conflict with one another. Then, by delving deeper into Airlie Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotional labour, a theoretical understanding of the actual act of holding tension is presented in more detail. What emerges from this discussion is the individual effort it takes to hold tension. In the final section of this chapter, the dynamics that shape this effort in a social work context are discussed and the possible cost to individuals is identified.

Having completed a theoretical exploration of tension, the tempo of the thesis changes when the philosophical grounding, methodological framework and the process for researching tension is explored in Chapter Four. Because of my own experience of social work practice, I was unable to consider myself as a distanced observer. Consequently, this inquiry is described as hermeneutic phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology allows a researcher to embrace his/her own experience of the world, whilst at the same time seeking understanding of related human experience.

In Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, the findings from the research are presented. Specifically, in Chapter Five, the ethical heart of social work practice is explored by looking at how participants perceive their own ethical practice and their personal commitment towards this. Here, practice with vulnerable children is not perceived as 'just a job', but rather is expressed in terms of a passion or vocation. Professional knowledge is merged with this deep personal desire for practices that lead to positive change. However, because the heart of social work exists within a context of bureaucratic rationality, it is vulnerable to the perceptions of others, as well as its own unmet desire for social justice.

In Chapter Six, participant perceptions and experiences of organisational constraints and how these contradict social work values are explored. The “ethical irrationality” (Weber, 1919/1958, p. 122) of many organisational objectives seems to defy all reason. Some participants described being compelled to make compromises in their practice with vulnerable children, whilst others described feeling compelled to walk away as a matter of principle. Both can be interpreted as individuals trying to make sense of the disparity between their professional ethics and organisational reality.

In Chapter Seven, the focus shifts towards identifying the emotional labour performed by participants in order to bring about positive change. Working with individual clients entails an incredible amount of emotional energy, because often (though not always), vulnerable children and families have not had the opportunity to develop effective communication skills. Thus, communicating with them takes a great deal of concentration. In addition to this, participants have to perform emotional labour in their interactions with work colleagues, managers, team leaders and professionals in other organisations. Whilst this sounds simple, their endeavours can be met with fierce resistance.

Chapter Eight begins with the premise that being able to share practice experiences with others is necessary for holding tension. In this chapter, the spaces in which participants can talk freely about the practice dilemmas that arise are identified. In theory, supervision is the officially designated space for this. In practice, however, this space proves difficult to establish. So much so, that some participants seem to go without any form of support at all. Family, friends and even spiritual beliefs also provide important supports for some participants, and these are explored towards the end of the chapter.

In Chapter Nine, the meaning gleaned from the participant narratives is considered in relation to social work discourse. Whilst there is no doubt that contemporary organisational cultures exacerbate the tension between technical rules and social work’s ethical heart, this chapter considers the actual role social work discourse itself plays in shaping the experience of emotional labour. Informed by the participant narratives, some key concepts in social work theory are explored. What becomes apparent is that devoid of the practitioner’s emotional reality, these concepts have the potential to create unrealistic expectations and, in so doing, intensify the experience of performing emotional labour. A more grounded social work theory

of practice is called for. The result is a grounded social work, in which practitioners' emotional reality becomes a central concern.

To conclude, in Chapter Ten the research question is revisited in relation to what has been achieved in this research. Not only has conducting it enriched my understanding of what it takes to hold the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives, but it has also contributed towards lessening the gap between theory and practice. In addition, the limitations of the study are also discussed and possibilities for further areas of research identified.

Chapter Two: Mapping the Tension

The aim of this chapter is to present a detailed picture of the disparity between the ethical heart within social work practice and the organisational objectives in the context of child welfare practice. To do this, the overall goals of the social work profession will be compared with the critiques aimed at the organisational context of the child welfare field. From such a comparison, the tension between the two becomes apparent. On the one hand, social work theory encourages social workers to realise their ethical ideals in practice. On the other hand, child welfare organisations, for the most part, do not have the infrastructure needed to put these ideals into practice. The result is an incongruity that results in conflicting demands.

The conflicting demands can be explained by the fact that although social work and child welfare share a similar history (Ferguson, H., 2004; Scott & Swain, 2002), the two have come to be understood in different terms. Social work is an academic discourse, influenced by various academic disciplines and intellectual movements. Child welfare is a field of practice in which organisational practices have been largely defined by the broader social and political context. Thus, whilst social work academics continue to influence child welfare practices, it is public perceptions about child abuse and neglect that have largely come to define them.

This has resulted in a “one size fits all” (Lonne et al., 2009, p. 150) approach to child welfare, where families can be subject to highly rationalised investigative procedures, whether this approach is appropriate or not. Ironically, this does not always ensure the wellbeing of children, because “parents and children who are already vulnerable are often further damaged by overtly intrusive investigative procedures” (Lonne et al., 2009, p. 9).

The injustice of the “one size fits all” practice is a major concern for the social work profession. Generally speaking, its position is that organisations should incorporate the basic principles of good practice into their policies. In theory, most organisations do (Payne, 2011). In practice, however, this is not always the case. In highly rationalised contexts, where accountability towards the organisation is the primary concern, accountability towards vulnerable children and their families is often considered secondary. This means that the responsibility for ensuring that individual children and their families receive the services they need often falls on individual social workers. In other words, the onus is on individual social

workers to actually put the ethical principle of individualised service into practice. This is evident in the literature on ethics in social work, to be explored later in the chapter.

The idea that social work makes a moral stand on the issue of injustice is one of its defining qualities (Payne, 2007, 2011; Webb, 2006) and is probably the main reason why individuals choose to join the profession. I suggest that this moral makes way for a certain kind of emotional intensity in the way practice is experienced. This is demonstrated in the second half of the chapter when some of the research into practitioners' experiences is explored. Two categories are identified. The first is where the social worker is seen as a moral agent faced with adversity, yet triumphant in his/her endeavour. The second is where the social worker is seen as susceptible to organisational pressures and, thus, subject to disillusionment and disappointment. Both views are accurate, because both reflect something about the emotional experience of social work practice.

To begin the discussion, the fundamental principles underlying the social work profession's main goals and objectives, and the tensions inherent within it, will be explored. The literature used in the discussion is primarily from the United States and the United Kingdom, because Australian social work has emerged from these foundations.

Social Work and its Humanist Visions

Social work has always been a contradictory and perplexing profession, having to balance the competing demands of a society that wants both to help and control the disadvantaged, usually at the same time. Social workers are expected to fill both roles, supplying some form of 'caring control' or 'controlling care'. (Ife, 1997, p. x)

In the above quote, Ife (1997) draws attention to the ambiguity inherent within the social work profession. At the heart of this ambiguity is the claim for a humanist vision. Depending on one's point of view, humanism can be interpreted as both a conservative and/or a radical movement. Conservative, because the idea of being human can foster fixed, essentialist ideas about what it means to be human; radical, because the very idea of celebrating the full dimensions of the human spirit can threaten this essentialism and its limitations (Ife, 1997).

Social work incorporates both of these possibilities because it emerged from within the modern state in the late-nineteenth century. Whilst the modern state was concerned with fostering ideas of individual freedom, it was also concerned with creating social mechanisms that ensure social control (Ife, 1997, 2008). Many social work practices are concerned with social control because they seek to encourage individuals to adjust and conform to certain societal norms. At the same time, however, these practices can also be concerned with individual freedom, because the ethical principles underpinning social work practices are designed to ensure that individuals are 'free' to make their own adjustments in a way that suits them at a particular point in time. Thus, whilst a social work perspective may imply that individuals need to conform to societal norms, it also implies that individuals must be given the dignity of having some kind of choice over the process of conformity. This complexity is captured in the following quote by Kathleen Woodruffe (1962):

Social work has inherited the inadequacies as well as the achievements of the particular period in which it was born. How to overcome one and use the other has been a problem which has engaged the attention of social workers almost since the inception of their craft. (p. 55)

The inadequacies within social work must be acknowledged. The controlling nature of its character has been instrumental in government implementing policies that seek to deny individuals and groups, and even cultures, any kind of dignity or respect. Examples that spring to mind are the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) and the movement of English child migrants (Dow & Phillips, 2009). Although the impact of these practices differs, both are reflective of a broader political agenda of "cleansing" society from a perceived threat (Ferguson, H., 2004).

The following discussion is concerned with elucidating the achievement of the profession from the perspective of good practice. These achievements are informed by two historical strands. The first is the Charitable Society Organisation (CSO) movement. The second is the settlement movement. Both emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in response to the problem of poverty, and both offered a very different solution. The aim is to show how these two seemingly opposing ideas inform what is considered to be good social work practice.

The Foundations of Social Work Practice: A Conservative Social Work Vision

The conservative vision in social work is best exemplified in the work of Mary Richmond (1861–1928), who is best known for her seminal contribution to transforming the CSO practice of ‘friendly visiting’ into a professional practice (Franklin, 1986; Haynes & White, 1999; Woodruffe, 1962). Friendly visiting was the work of the middle class altruists who offered their kindness and time to the poor. Their charitable concern, it was thought, would motivate disgruntled poverty-stricken individuals to bring about some kind of positive change in their lives.

Friendly visiting begins with the relationship between charity worker and charity recipient. Establishing this relationship does not necessarily take professional skill, because relationships are fundamental to what it means to be human (Richmond, 1922/2012). However, friendly visiting, according to Richmond, was not about building relationships for the purpose of being friendly, but about doing so for the specific purpose of influencing positive change within the lives of individuals. This is the “basis of purposeful action” (Richmond, 1922/2012, p. 159) for social workers and is summed up in Richmond’s (1922/2012) definition of social casework:

Social case work consists of those processes which develop personality through adjustments consciously effected, individual by individual, between men [sic] and their social environment. (Italics in original, pp. 98–99)

This definition characterises Richmond’s mission to develop a professional practice, which, like the practice of a doctor, is perceived as being able to diagnose and treat impoverished individuals so that they are able to live happier and healthier lives (Richmond, 1917/2014).

In today’s terms, the idea of developing a personality through adjustments sounds somewhat disrespectful. Regardless of the language used, however, this is a fundamental principle of social work that has continued to stand the test of time. Social workers working in the field of child welfare, for example, draw on their training of psychology and social relations in order to influence change within the individual. They apply their skills in order to gently and respectfully pressure individuals to make changes so that they can ‘fit in’ with a particular set of social expectations in relation to what is perceived to be good enough parenting (Ferguson, H., 2004; Garrett, 2003).

Such an approach is exemplified in the following extract from one of Richmond's (1922/2012) case studies:

Clara Vanska kept a filthy, vermin-infested home, supported partly by begging, partly by the earnings of a drinking husband. When the family welfare society first made her acquaintance ten years ago, she was sending the older of her two children, a girl of eight, to the city dump to collect iron and scraps. These she sold for drink. (pp. 59–60)

Richmond (1922/2012) offers a detailed description of the process, whereby the caseworker was able to call on her skill and insight in assisting Mrs Vanska to make positive change. Over a period of ten years, she was able leave her husband and cut back on her drinking so that she could maintain employment and provide a safe environment for her children. The changes she made did not result in a perfect happy ending, because Mrs Vanska continued to have a tendency to drink, but she did make positive changes that made life more bearable for her and her children.

In contemporary times, social workers are equipped with a broader theoretical repertoire to describe this kind of approach. Psychology, sociology and systems theory all fit into Richmond's theory of social casework (1922/2012). In relation to ethical considerations, people are still treated, but they are also treated with dignity and respect because this is part of the prescription for change.

The skill required by social workers to motivate and inspire, according to Richmond (1922/2012), is more than just a sound knowledge of psychology and relationships. Mediating this knowledge through interpersonal interactions is a craft that blends different social scientific discourses through intuitive skill.

Like the idea of casework, this blending of art and science has stood the test of time (see, for example, Biestek, 1956; England, 1986; Harms & Connelly, 2009; Stratton, 2007). It finds expression in varying ways. The idea of a helping relationship (Brammer & MacDonald, 1996; Egan, 2013; Hennessey, 2011), for example, is a relationship in which the social worker applies his/her scientific knowledge in a way that also maintains the dignity of the individual. It requires that social workers not only develop competency in scientific knowledge, but also give something of themselves to the relationships they purposefully build. This act of giving

to one's practice is exemplified by Felix Biestek's seminal work *The Casework Relationship* (1956), where he talks about a "controlled emotional involvement", which he describes as "the caseworker's sensitivity to the client's feelings, [and] an understanding of their meaning and a purposeful, appropriate response to the client's feelings" (p. 50).

The emotional investment expected on behalf of the social worker is not a random act of kindness. It is a highly controlled and calculated act that is instrumental to building meaningful relationships (Reimer, 2013). In contemporary contexts, this investment is expressed in different ways, such as the "use of self" (Green, Gregory & Mason, 2006; Harms & Connelly, 2009; O'Hara, 2011) and in the way Goleman's (1996) notion of "emotional intelligence" has been used to inform social work (Howe, 2009; Ingram, 2012; Morrison, 2007). These ideas are concerned with social workers investing emotionally in order to build trust with their clients; it is trust that allows the social worker to influence, and trust that encourages clients to take courageous steps towards positive change.

The qualities inherent in interpersonal communications lie at the heart of Richmond's (1922/2012) social casework technique. If any change is to occur, it is from human interaction in the immediacy of experience. The social worker, as artisan, is not external to this process but part of it. His/her craft is about creating the conditions for change. To do this, s/he keeps a watchful eye for subtle cues so that s/he can make the right moves at the right time, ask the right questions at the right time, make the right suggestions at the right time and even offer the right amount of charity at the right time (Richmond, 1922/2012).

For Richmond (1922/2012), change that does not begin from this point of interpersonal dynamics is misguided. Abstract intellectualising about families in society may certainly play a role by informing policy directions, but it cannot glean the same rich understanding of family life as social casework can. Indeed, she was highly critical of bureaucratic administration for its blanket approach to social policy. As she writes:

If we are agreed that the state exists for the highest good of its members, we must also agree that there is no lesson that democracy needs to take more to heart today

than this lesson in sound administration; namely, *Treat unequal things unequally*. (Richmond, 1922/2012, p. 151, italics in original)²

In order to treat unequal things unequally, Richmond (1922/2012) acknowledged that differences such as class and culture need to be respected, but only in so far as it informs the crafting of the casework relationship. Beyond this, analysis of the broader political area is unnecessary. Meaningful change begins within the intricacies of interpersonal relationships. This is the heart of Richmond's humanist vision.

Even though such a vision continues to dominate most approaches to social work practice, the very idea of diagnosing and treating individuals is contentious (Franklin, 1986; Haynes & White, 1999; Woodruffe, 1962). The main point of contention is the unequal power relationship between specialist and client. Such a power differential presents a risk that the client becomes victim to the controlling intent of the caseworker, whose aim is to reproduce a particular moral standard (Allen, Pease & Briskman, 2003; Dominelli, 1997, 2002a, 2002b; Fook, 1993; Ife, 1997, 2008; Mulally, 2007, 2010).

What is missing from Richmond's humanist vision of social change is a broader historical, cultural and social analysis of the individual in context (Fook, 2003). Placing the individual within her/his broader social context makes way for a more comprehensive analysis, which shifts the focus away from individual deficit to critiquing broader structures of power that position individuals in untenable situations to which they are expected to adjust. This critique also contributes to social work's humanist vision. This will now be evidenced by exploring its historical roots and how it has come to inform contemporary ideals of good social work.

Developing a Critical Consciousness: The Radical Social Work Vision

The critical consciousness within social work discourse burgeoned in the 1960s and 1970s (Allen et al., 2003; Dominelli, 1997; 2002a, 2002b; Fook, 1993; Ife, 1997, 2008; Mulally, 2007, 2010). However, it can be attributed to the contribution made by Jane Addams (1869–1935). Addams was a dominant figure within the settlement movement in the late-nineteenth century. The settlement movement exemplified “enlightened socialism” (Ife, 1997, p. 4),

² In a footnote she attributes the phrase ‘treat unequal things unequally’ to the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato (p. 151).

where it was believed that the misery endured by individuals experiencing poverty could only be redressed by changing society itself.

What is significant about Addams' work is that whilst she developed a broad social vision for a better society, she maintained a strong focus on the immediacy of individual experience. According to Bethke Elshtain (2002), Addams had a knack for being able to understand the "individual from inside his/her despair" (p. xxxi). This ability meant that her writings hold a kind of disdain for a society that had rendered individual subjects powerless over their own destinies. This is exemplified in the following extract from her memoirs, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910/2013):

I was detained late one evening in an office building by a prolonged committee meeting of the board of education. As I came out at eleven o'clock, I met in the corridor of the fourteenth floor a woman whom I knew, on her knees scrubbing the marble tiling. As she straightened up to greet me, she seemed so wet from her feet up to her chin, that I hastily inquired the cause. Her reply was that she left home at five o'clock every night and had no opportunity for six hours to nurse her baby. Her mother's milk mingled with the very water with which she scrubbed the floors until she should return at midnight, heated and exhausted, to feed her screaming child with what remained within her breasts. (p. 175)

This emotional account of a moment in time is a reminder of the injustices that capitalism can impose. Society has failed this individual because it had left her to face an impossible dilemma between staying home to feed her hungry child, or leaving her/him in order to earn a living.

From Addams' point of view, assisting this individual was not about influencing her to make adjustments. Rather, it was about changing the conditions that gave rise to her dilemma to begin with. The establishment of Hull House in Chicago in 1889 was her attempt to do this. It provided a variety of neighbourhood services for poor migrant families, including care for mothers, children and families. It also offered a multitude of activities, including "Girls and Boys clubs, cooperative boarding house, theatre, music school, multiple reading groups, a Labour Museum for immigrant crafts, courses in cooking, sewing, a butcher shop, and a bakery" (Bethke Elshtain, 2002, p. xxv).

Hull House was an example of “applied sociology” (Deegan, 1981, p. 22).³ Yet, it was applied with the political purpose of exemplifying the possibilities of a civil society. It did this by providing an “outlet for that sentiment of universal brotherhood [sic]” (Addams, 1893/2002, p. 14), and was intended to be understood as an active demonstration of how, under the right circumstances, individuals can come together and strengthen their communities.

In today’s terms, such an approach to social change is exemplified in the idea of community development. This approach to dealing with the effects of poverty constitutes an important intellectual strand within social work discourse (see, for example, Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). The idea of community development is highly radical and, for the most part, dwells within the margins of the mainstream of social work discourse. However, it also has come to have a significant influence on contemporary understandings of the individual within the broader social and cultural context.

This ‘big picture’ radical critique of capitalism is one aspect of Addams’ challenge to the CSO movement. This is what Gray and Webb (2009) refer to now as “Critical social work (with an uppercase ‘C’)” (p. 77). Such a critique has been influenced by various intellectual movements that identified the issues inherent in the bureaucratic domination of modern society, the subjugation of groups on the basis of class, gender or race, and the homogenisation of individual subjectivity (Gray & Webb, 2009).

Addams, however, provided another kind of critique, which has perhaps been more influential in influencing social work generally. This is what Gray and Webb (2009) refer to as “critical (with a lower case ‘c’)” (p. 77) and is concerned with the ethics of casework practices.

Addams’ critique of casework was levelled at the professionalisation of social work, where the charity worker, through specialised training, was transformed into an expert in her/his field. For Addams, this meant that the altruistic act of lending a hand to one’s brother or sister in need had lost its emotional integrity. As she writes:

³ Deegan (1981) describes how, although Addams was highly influential amongst the male sociologists in the American Sociological Society, female sociologists were, for the most part, excluded from the mainstream discourse. Social workers’ “applied sociology” was enacted mostly by women and their practices came under the “separate women’s network” of the association, which were considered to be inferior by their male counterparts.

Doubtless we all find something distasteful in the juxtaposition of the words ‘organised’ and ‘charity’. The idea of organizing an emotion is in itself repelling, even to those of us who feel most sorely the need of more order in altruistic effort and see the end to be desired. (Addams, 1899/2002 p. 63)

Addams was not against the idea of better training for those working with poor families. However, for her, professionalisation came at the expense of sincerity. ‘True’ acts of kindness do not have an ulterior motive, or any kind of end in sight. Rather, they are kind precisely because they come from a place in the heart that gives for the sake of giving. The failure to acknowledge this meant that charity workers, locked in their own cultural situatedness, did “not realise the cruel advantage the person who distributes charity has, when she gives her advice” (Addams, 1899/2002, p. 69).⁴

The inadvertent abuse of power was an ethical consideration for Addams. Similar concerns were expressed by radical social workers in the 1970s and continue to be a central pre-occupation for many critical scholars (Allen et al., 2003; Dominelli, 1997; 2002a, 2002b; Fook, 1993; Ife, 1997, 2008; Mulally, 2007, 2010). The notion of anti-oppressive practice, for example, the terminology of which spread widely from the 1990s onwards (Healy, 2005), advocates for a greater recognition of the power social workers have and asks that they find ways to work towards establishing a more egalitarian relationship with their clients. As Lena Dominelli (2002a) writes:

Working in anti-oppressive ways encompasses working within values that espouse interdependence, reciprocity, equality, democracy, and a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of the social relations that shape an intervention and the dialogical interactions which in turn (re)shape these. (p. 183)

The idea of “anti-oppressive” practice sounds radical when compared with Richmond’s (1922/2012) idea of social casework. However, the practice of paying attention to “micro engagements” (Garrett, 2003, p. 4) between worker and client is essentially no different to Biestek’s (1956) sensitivity towards how a client may be feeling. Both are concerned with

⁴ This ethical stand against the professionalisation of social work meant that Addams was marginalised from those within the social work profession (Franklin, 1986).

reading the subtle intricacies of human relations. To enact this kind of practice, the social worker needs to move away from her/his own universalist assumptions and be open and responsive to questioning his/her own attitude towards their client's identity. Such a process requires an ongoing process that can never be fully attained, because one's attitudes, and the assumptions within them, are continually evolving.

This desire for continual self-reflection has established itself as a norm within the social work profession. Indeed, it has come to be understood in terms of ethical practice and has been incorporated into mainstream discourse (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Ferguson, I., 2008, 2013; Webb, 2006). This is the case whether practice is primarily concerned with social casework or community development. The result is that social work as a whole could be characterised in terms of a heightened ethical consciousness and a search for high ethical standards. This heightened sensitivity towards ethics appears extreme when compared with many Neo-liberalist ideals (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Ferguson, I., 2008, 2013; Webb, 2006) because "in a society in which the narrow pursuit of material self-interest is the norm, adherence to an ethical stance is more radical than many people realise" (Webb, 2006, p. 200).

Even the more conservative strands of social work have a radical tone in contemporary contexts. But this is not new. Even though Richmond attempted to organise and professionalise charity work so that it represents a form of social control, the process of doing this (i.e. the helping relationship) has always meant that social work methods can never be fully pinned down by scientific rationality (Parton, 2000). Consequently, the social work craft has always attracted controversy in a discourse that values objective facts, so much so that throughout its brief history, the question has been consistently raised as to whether or not social work actually warrants professional status (Flexner, 1915/2014).

Such logic was influenced by the fact the profession crosses many different disciplinary boundaries and, in so doing, reaches out to embrace and incorporate disparate ideas (Parton, 2000). This is why it is both "a perplexing and contradictory profession" (Ife, 1997, p. 3), and this is both a strength and a weakness, depending on one's point of view. On the one hand, the crossing of disciplinary boundaries equips social workers with valuable insight into the complex nature of human problems. On the other hand, its ambiguous qualities mean it cannot be understood in purely scientific terms.

How these ambiguous qualities may be interpreted by other professionals is an important consideration. For Parton (2000), it has meant that other professions, grounded by a more clearly defined scientific basis, see social work as being “subservient or dependent on them” (Parton, 2000, p. 450). This constitutes part of what it means to experience one’s practice context as a social worker. The child welfare field, for example, has, since the 60s and 70s, been governed by a search for scientific solutions to complex human problems (Lonne et al., 2009; Scott & Swain, 2002). In this process, social work knowledge and skills have, to a certain extent, been devalued, making way for an incongruity between social work theory and practice within organisational systems. In order to demonstrate this point, the discussion will now turn to the contemporary child welfare systems in Australia, in which the contemporary disparity between theory and practice is highlighted.

Child Welfare and the Search for Justice

Like the history of social work, the history of child welfare is a history that consists of a search for justice, characterised by an ambiguous mix of both care and control (Ife, 1997). Emerging in the mid to late-nineteenth century, the child rescue movement is representative of a contradictory humanist vision in which there exists conflicting images of children (Scott & Swain, 2002). As Scott and Swain (2002) state:

Child as victim/child as threat, child as savage/child as waif, are examples of the binary oppositions deployed in support of the heroic story of child rescue. To recognise children as both victim and threat, savage and waif suggests a more complex context for historical research. (p. 10)

These opposing images, as well as the shades of grey on the continuum between them, represent the complex myriad of perspectives that have informed both policy and practice in child welfare. Whilst some practices have imposed immeasurable cruelty on children and families, others have been more helpful. The case of Clara Vanska (Richmond, 1922/2012), discussed in the previous section, is an example of how practices can help vulnerable children and their families. Such an approach necessarily means seeing the child and her mother as victims, yet at the same time, urging the mother to take responsibility for engaging in a process of change.

Not only does the case of Clara Vanska exemplify the value of a social work perspective in the context of child welfare, but it also demonstrates the influence such a perspective had in shaping child welfare practices in general. For example, the Societies of the Protection of Cruelty to Children (SPCCs) have always upheld the philosophy to work with families to help *prevent* “cruel treatment and wrongful neglect” (Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 14) before considering the removal of children – removal considered only as a last resort if all other options were exhausted (Ferguson, H., 2004; Scott & Swain, 2002).

This approach has endured the test of time. In the contemporary context it is often referred to as relationship-based practice (Reimer, 2013, 2014; Trevithick, 2003). Relationship-based practice “seeks to reach a deep understanding of the complexity of human beings, the uniqueness of the person, the problems at hand and what is happening in this case/encounter” (Ferguson, H., 2011, p. 8). A reverence for human complexity is considered the gold star of social work practice because it is essential for encouraging families to meet the social expectations that define the meaning of ‘good enough’ parenting in a way that is meaningful for them (Arney & Scott, 2009; Munro, 2008; Tilbury, Osmond, Wilson & Clark, 2007; Trotter, 2006).

It must be acknowledged that whilst the social work profession has always been a key player in the development of child welfare practices, social workers have always worked as part of the “penal welfare community” (Ferguson, H., 2004, p. 42), involving different disciplines working together, including psychologists, the police, judges and medical doctors. In other words, child welfare is a multidisciplinary field of practice that has been shaped by different, and often competing, professional perspectives.

Whilst there is nothing wrong with competing ideas *per se* in the context of child welfare, it has meant that practices have come to be dominated by rational scientific objectives, which, for the most part, devalue the idea of relationship-based practice (Reimer, 2014). The consequence has been a system that is essentially dysfunctional. This dysfunction will now be explored before going on to discuss the reforms that are currently taking place.

The Contemporary Dysfunction in Australia

The narrative for contemporary systematic dysfunction in the Australian child welfare context is not unique to Australia. It is part of a much broader phenomenon within Anglophone

Western countries. It begins with what is commonly understood as the second wave of the child protection movement (Ferguson, H., 2004; Lamont & Bromfield, 2010; Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006; Scott & Swain, 2002). This emerged in the 1960s along with new understandings of child abuse. These include the ‘discovery’ of physical abuse in the 1960s (Kempe, Silverman, Steele Droegemuller & Silver, 1962; Pfohl, 1977) and a greater awareness of child sexual abuse in the 1980s (Ferguson, H., 2004). These new ‘discoveries’ were also accompanied by research that looked at the long-term psychological effects of child abuse (Herman, 1997). Analysing the UK experience of child welfare practices, Parton (1985) argues that the occurrence of child deaths in the 70s⁵, accompanied by new scientific understandings of child abuse, resulted in a moral panic (Cohen, 2002). In a moral panic, particular individuals or groups come to be seen as a threat to society’s values. At this point, the neglected or abused child came to be seen primarily in terms of “innocent victim” at the mercy of “evil parents” (Cohen, 2002, p. xv).

Such a perspective made way for the dominance of a legalistic framework in which the child’s rights are upheld through legal procedure. In practice, this has resulted in a “child- centric” focus (Hall, Parton, Peckover & White, 2010, p. 393), where the primary focus is on the safety of the child and not on the needs of the family.

With these changes, the idea of the helping relationship came to be seen with suspicion. Indeed, social workers themselves came to be seen as “middle class folk devils” (Cohen, 2002, p. xv). Their holistic practices were highly criticised for being too unscientific and they were blamed for the occurrence of child deaths (Lonne et al., 2009; Parton, 1985). Such a negative attitude towards the idea of the helping relationship in child welfare resulted in increased bureaucratic controls on all child protection workers, including social workers. This meant that social work practices came to be determined not by responsive professional judgement and discretion, but by standardised bureaucratic procedure (Howe, 1992; Munro, 2005, 2011). For many social workers, this meant the loss of their professional credibility. As Howe (1992) suggests:

⁵ Parton (1985) argues that in the UK, the death of Maria Colwell in 1973 marks the turning point for fundamental changes in child welfare practices. Maria died at the age of six when she was beaten to death by her stepfather. She was known to child welfare authorities because she had been in foster care for five years, but was returned to her biological mother under a supervision order. This tragic event drew unprecedented media attention around the world (Parton, 1985).

Twenty years ago, the prediction might have been that social workers, particularly in the field of child care practice, would continue to strengthen their professional and therapeutic credentials. That the opposite has happened bears examination. The suggestion is not that social workers are less skilled, but that many of their skills are no longer under their exclusive control. (p. 492)

From an organisational perspective, controlling professional discretion creates the impression of accountability in the tragic event a child dies. From a practice perspective, however, such measures are counterproductive (Munro, 2011). To cite a specific example, risk assessment tools have been developed to assess levels of risk within a family situation. If used to guide professional judgement, such tools can be helpful (Parada, Barnoff & Coleman, 2007). If used instead of professional judgement, such tools are ineffective (Gillingham, 2006; Gillingham & Humphries, 2009). With so much emphasis on using these and other tools correctly, workers can become fearful of using their own professional judgement in the event that a child dies and they are blamed (Littlechild, 2008; Munro, 2005, 2011).

An unintended consequence of a child-centric focus is that it can encourage narrow, judgemental perceptions about families who come into contact with statutory child welfare organisations (Gillingham & Bromfield, 2008; Houston, 2010; Sinclair, 2005a, 2005b). The focus on assessing risk instead of assessing need, for example, means that mothers who come into contact with statutory child protection organisations are often assumed to be 'bad mothers' before an investigation begins (Brown, 2006; Davies, 2010; D'Cruz, 2002; Swift, 1995), or parents with a disability are automatically framed as incapable parents (McConnell & Llewellyn, 2002). Being on the receiving end of these perceptions can be devastating. As Pamela Davies (2010), a mother of a child with a disability who was the subject of a forensic child welfare investigation, writes:

The social worker's intervention might have been more courageously autonomous and a less bureaucratic approach to the investigation was surely possible. The heavy-handed approach to surveillance and the pointlessly rigid, regulatory response generally was out of proportion to the pain it caused. I felt the crushing force of being suspected of being a bad mother. The system seemed indifferent to my pain. (p. 8)

For many families already feeling alienated from society, this kind of experience can create a further sense of alienation (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). This means that vulnerable families who may be struggling to cope may not get the help they need (Butler et al., 2012; Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson & Wilson, 2010).

The impact of the bureaucratisation of practices within the statutory child welfare organisations ripples out over the whole human service sector. For example, mandatory reporting laws were introduced in most child protection systems in Anglophone countries from the 1970s and 80s (Lamont & Bromfield, 2010; Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006; Scott & Swain, 2002). These laws compelled professionals in other fields of practice, such as health, education and housing, to make reports about suspected cases of child abuse.⁶ One of the consequences of these laws is the possibility that professionals over report in order to appear to be accountable. This has resulted in an overloaded child protection system, which is unable to respond appropriately to the number of reports it receives (Higgins & Katz, 2006; Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006).

The consequence of this has meant that staff in statutory child welfare organisations are so busy investigating the cases that are deemed to be ‘more serious’, such as physical or sexual abuse, that cases of child neglect or emotional/psychological abuse are “virtually ignored” (Scott, 2006, p. 10). Thus, whilst a professional may report his/her concerns about neglect or emotional/psychological abuse, often this is not investigated. This is an extremely important issue, because by intervening in what is perceived to be ‘less serious’ kinds of abuse, the ‘more serious’ kinds can often be prevented (Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006, 2009). Further, failure to respond to case of chronic neglect can have serious consequences for the children involved (Lawrence & Irvine, 2004).

The other consequence of mandatory reporting is that it has resulted in an increased number of children in care (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2012). Yet, whilst the number of children in care continues to increase, resources needed to care for them tend to

⁶ In some jurisdictions, failure to report was a punishable offence. Up until 2009 in New South Wales, a professional could be fined \$22,000 for not reporting the suspected cases of child abuse (Wood, 2008).

decrease. Thus, there are simply not enough foster carers to provide care to children (Higgins & Katz, 2008; Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006).

In addition, children in care tend to have much greater needs than those children not in care. Because of the trauma of being neglected or abused and being removed from their families, for example, they may have complex behavioural problems or high medical needs. Those who care for these children, however, often do not have the appropriate knowledge and skills to manage such behaviours. Thus, foster carers, and the children they care for, are often left in very difficult situations, with little or no support from child welfare agencies (Higgins & Katz, 2008; Lonne et al., 2009; Scott, 2006).

The whole notion of relationship-based practice (Reimer, 2013, 2014; Trevithick, 2003) with vulnerable children and their families has been undermined by the dominance of a legalistic framework. Indeed, in Australia, the cultural norm is that caseworkers in statutory child welfare agencies do not spend any time with the families working towards positive change, but rather act as a broker for other services (Trotter, 2006). So, for example, if a family is deemed to need a support service, a different support service will be funded to provide the support needed. Whilst combining different services for families can be helpful, it also has the potential to make way for a fragmented system, where vulnerable families can fall through the cracks (Carter, 1998; Higgins & Katz, 2008).

As they have evolved in most Anglophone countries, the systems that are meant to ensure the wellbeing of vulnerable children and their families have been ineffective. In referring specifically to the Victorian experience in Australia, Scott and Swain (2002) state:

If the history of child protection has any lessons, it is that there are no simple solutions to the extraordinarily complex human problem. The solutions of the past are no longer seen as viable, yet the societal angst about child abuse continues to express itself in a search for simple solutions. (p. 187)

Whilst the field of child welfare is still very much dominated by “the search for simple solutions” (Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 187), the need for reform has been acknowledged in Australia since the early 1990s (Bromfield, Holzer & Lamont, 2011; Lonne et al., 2009). Change is progressing at different rates in different jurisdictions. Generally speaking, the call is for a more holistic approach that is better able to respond to the needs of vulnerable

children and their families generally (Humphries et al., 2009; Munro, 2011). In order to provide a fuller picture of the context of child welfare practice, some of the changes taking place and how these relate to social workers will now be discussed.

Child Welfare Reform: A Work In Progress

A public health model of child welfare in Australia is proposed (Bromfield & Holzer, 2008; Scott, 2006). It involves three basic levels of intervention. The first level includes raising awareness of the issues in relation to the wellbeing of children generally within the whole population. This level would also include a whole of population approach, where all those working in the human services are better versed in the issues surrounding child abuse and neglect and thus better prepared to offer families the support they may need if they find themselves without the necessary internal and external resources (Arney & Scott, 2009). The second level includes better funded services specifically designed to work to prevent abuse from occurring in families where the risk may be higher. The third level comprises the statutory investigations needed where abuse has already been alleged to have occurred.

This proposal was endorsed by the Australian Federal Government in *The National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children 2009–2020* (Council of Australian Governments, 2009), thus representing the political will aimed towards supporting such change.

Acknowledgement for the need for change can also be detected in the recommendations to emerge from the various inquiries and commissions into child welfare services (Parton, 2007). In New South Wales, for example, *The Special Commission into Child Protection Services in NSW* (Wood, 2008), resulted in changes that facilitate a more holistic approach to child welfare (Wood, 2008).

Broadly speaking, these changes included a broader distribution of funding across government and non-government sectors, and legislative changes that better facilitate collaboration amongst professionals in statutory and non-statutory child welfare organisations in government and non-government organisations. Most of these recommendations were accepted and implemented by the NSW State Government in 2009/10 (Dept of Premier and Cabinet, 2010).

Regardless of the positive changes emerging in the sector, change is never without challenges, and in the complex area of child welfare, it has the potential to create new problems. At the heart of this possibility is the issue of the general skills shortage in the field. Indeed, a public health model can only work with a workforce that is adequately trained (Healy, 2004; Lonne, Harries & Lantz, 2012). For example, if non-statutory services are expected to work with families to prevent abuse, then these workers will need to be skilled in recognising abuse or neglect and engage with families in order to bring about change.

In addition to this, a holistic and preventative model of child welfare relies on inter-professional collaboration (D’Cruz, Jacobs & Schoo, 2009). This provides a good solution in theory, yet in practice such an ideal may be more difficult to achieve. Although there is research suggesting that collaboration can work well in practice (see, for example, Scott, 2010), there is also research that draws attention to the problems (D’Cruz, 2004, 2009; Garrett, 2003; Sousa & Costa, 2010; Winkworth & White, 2010). In his research into collaborative practices in statutory child welfare investigations in the UK, for example, Garrett (2003) found that police perceived social workers as indecisive, thus seeing themselves as the primary decision makers in investigations. Similarly, D’Cruz (2004) showed how doctors in Australia construct the occurrence of child abuse differently to social workers, and research conducted by Reiner (2014) looks at how a relationship-based approach to working with families can be viewed negatively by some professionals.

What this research demonstrates is the way power relations between professional groups have the potential to impede collaborative processes. Inter-professional collaboration requires a major cultural shift in the way professionalism is understood. According to Sousa and Costa (2010), this means professionals will need to step outside the comfort zone of their field of expertise and embrace different points of view. As they state:

The multi-professional approach is a challenge to traditional professional values and may generate some confusion: although they are accustomed and trained to work with clients from the specialist’s point of view, professionals have to share power and decision-making with other professionals. This challenge is important because the current models of intervention point to the sharing of power with other professionals, clients and informal networks. (Sousa & Costa, 2010, p. 453)

Inter-disciplinary education can certainly play a role in facilitating this cultural shift. However, this is still a relatively new initiative, which, for the most part, is not yet fully established within educational institutions (Pockett, 2010). This means change, or at least the cultural change needed to put policy changes into practice, continues to be a work in progress.

As well as its strong historical connection with the child welfare field, the holistic nature of social work education means that social workers are well placed to be leaders in this work in progress. Their strong focus on relationships, for example, means that they possess the interpersonal skills needed, not only to work with children, but also to encourage those in other professions to adopt a similar approach. Indeed, social work qualifications and skills are considered by the AASW as “part of the solution” (AASW, 2009) to the problems within the child welfare field.

The idea that social work knowledge and skills are seen as part of the solution presents an opportunity for the social work profession to demonstrate the effectiveness of its skill base in this field (Healy & Meagher, 2010; Munro, 2011). But what does this mean for individual social workers? This question will guide the discussions in the rest of this chapter. In the following section, it is suggested that being “part of the solution” (AASW, 2010) means social work discourse is informed by a strengthened moral imperative. In order to illustrate this point, the literature on ethics in social work will now be explored.

Social Work and its Moral Imperative

Since the 1990s, the influence of postmodern theories on social work discourse has meant a greater focus on the social worker’s subjectivity as located in a context of competing power relations, and the social worker’s power as a professional is central to this analysis (Gray, 2010a). In ethical discourse this has meant ethics is no longer confined to deontological ethical principles to be applied to practice. Ethical discourse, too, has expanded its repertoire to include postmodern perspectives that appeal to individuals to invest personally in their practice. In so doing, it constitutes a kind of embodied ethics in which the social worker’s very being becomes part of the ethical endeavour (Banks, 2010; Harries, Lonne & Thompson, 2006; Hugman, 2003, 2005).

The fundamental message to emerge is that if social workers are to hold on to their value claims of social justice, it is no longer viable for them, as individuals, to uphold the idea of

professionalism by adhering to rules. Social workers have a professional responsibility to question rules and challenge oppressive practices (Ferguson, I., 2013). This plea encouraging social workers to embrace the challenge of ethical practice is exemplified in the following statement by Harries et al. (2006):

We must face the challenge to develop a strong value base in which a duty to protect children is balanced with the principle of respect for all people involved and where the principle of justice is permitted to find a place back at the decision making table. (p. 46)

Such a statement contains obvious common sense. Good practice means workers need to actively reflect on and question the narrow forensic approach of assessing risk and apportioning blame. They need to consider the principle of social justice for all individuals concerned in the decisions made about vulnerable children and their families.

What is most significant about the above quote for the purpose of this discussion, however, is its rhetorical quality. The authors present the idea of protecting children, not as a professional practice, but as a moral duty – a duty towards a particular understanding of how children *and* their families ‘should’ be valued. The use of the collective pronoun, ‘we’, at the beginning of the extract is suggestive of the authors’ sense of moral urgency, and they are urging others to feel passionate about social justice in the context of families.

The academic journal in which this article was published is entitled *Communities, Children and Families Australia*. It is aimed at a generalised audience of child welfare practitioners and academics, so it is not necessarily aimed towards the social work profession itself. However, the strong value position calling for individuals to stop and look towards what ‘we’ value is significant in social work discourse in general. For example, in *Social Work in a Risk Society: Social and Political Perspectives*, Stephen Webb (2006) explores the changing shape of social work practice in the context of risk adverse society. In exploring the possibilities for developing a new ethical theory of practice, he strikes right to the core of social work values by reminding us that “one of the defining strengths of social work [...is that] it holds on to values of compassion, justice and caring” (Webb, 2006, p. 200).

In his theory of ethical practice, there is little talk of rules, codes or frameworks. He reminds us that it is the blind adherence to rules that can make practices unethical. Instead, Webb

(2006) chooses to focus on human values that originate deep within the ethical heart – those values that are expressed through relations with others. In a world dominated by the “narrow pursuit of material self interest” (Webb, 2006, p. 200), our values have come to be valuable again (Gray & Webb, 2010). The “pressing and ethical challenges in child welfare” (Houston, 2010a, p. 287) are not something that can be solved with rational analysis and prescription alone (Houston, 2010b). Rational analysis needs to be accompanied by the individual’s inner moral commitment to best practice principles (Harries et al., 2006).

This approach to ethics pays attention to the moral character of the decision maker (Banks, 2012; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Webb, 2010) and her/his willingness to put others first (Featherstone, 2010; Gray, M., 2010a, 2010b; Meagher & Parton, 2004; Parton, 2003), as well as his/her willingness to take responsibility for doing this (Tascón, 2010).

The message to emerge from these discussions is that ethics is not just about making the right decision when faced with an ethical dilemma, but more about the moral subject who makes the decisions (Banks, 2012). This is exemplified in the following statement by Webb (2010):

If we want to find ethical constants in a dynamic context, then perhaps we have to look to the reflected-upon character of the ethical agent in terms of his [sic] dispositions, not the actions he [sic] actually does or what he [sic] will always do in similar cases. (p. 116)

For Webb (2006), the ethical agent offers the possibility of emulating existential warmth to his/her clients. This can and does make a difference in a world that can feel cold and hard. This is not about promising and delivering desired outcomes or changing social structure, but more about offering a kind of steady reference point for people in times of need. It is a reference point of kindness, and a willingness to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to make a difference. This is not about attaining perfection, but rather about bothering to make an effort in the first place. The idea of the virtuous social worker (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Webb, 2010), for example, is that one is virtuous because one is prepared to do their best in a world of continual flux (Webb, 2010).

Such an approach to ethics is about a commitment to others and is exemplified in what Tascón (2010) refers to as an ethics of responsibility. By calling on the work of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Tascón (2010) suggests that such a responsibility means

looking deep within oneself to reach that “first philosophy” through which we can touch the “primordial relationship of responsibility that arises from being in the world with others” (Tascón, 2010, p. 85). This, she says,

allows responsibility to be imagined within a radical gesture of welcoming, particularly of strangers, such as those who are distinctly different to the ‘ideal’ human – the disabled, the poor, the uneducated, non-whites, the migrant and the refugee (Tascón, 2002), in other words those disenfranchised and marginalised by sociocultural forces. This vision of responsibility, therefore, compels in a way that all of us are compelled, by virtue of being human in a world of other beings. (Tascón, 2010, pp. 91–92)

Tascón’s vision begins by understanding ourselves as relational beings. She invites us to pay attention to that which we share with others as opposed to focusing on what we do not. Our responsibility towards others is something that needs to move beyond our “self-contained borders of identity” (Tascón, 2010, p. 86), including professional identity. This means stepping outside one’s comfort zone and being open to the experiences that may arise.

By being asked to look beyond their personal and professional borders (Tascón, 2010), social workers are in effect being asked to re-evaluate what it means to be a professional in practice. Such a position seems to ask practitioners to remain open and listen to what their ethical hearts have to say and follow this through with actions.

For the individual social worker, this means maintaining a deep connection with one’s own convictions, even when such convictions may be challenged. S/he must become a reflexive agent who is comfortable with practice that is “open-ended, relational and context specific” (Gray & Lovat, 2006, p. 201). S/he must be prepared to continually deliberate, not only on what s/he is doing, but also on *why* and *how* s/he is doing it (Taylor & White, 2000; White, 1997, 2009). S/he also needs to take notice of what others are doing and, if the need arises, find the moral courage to challenge others, regardless of the consequences (Banks, 2012).

Thus far in this chapter, the fundamental theory informing the social work profession has been explored and compared with the contemporary child welfare context. Social workers have always played a major role in child welfare practices, yet in a contemporary context, their knowledge of relationships combined with their social conscience seems to stand in contrast

to the dominant philosophies that have been driving child welfare systems over the last forty years. Such an analysis has drawn attention to the disparity between social work's ethical heart and the organisational cultures in which their practices take place. This disparity makes way for a particular kind of subjective experience, and in the sections that follow, the research aimed at understanding this experience will be explored.

The discussion begins by looking at just how resilient the ethical heart can be.

The Wounded Soldier

The image of the wounded soldier was inspired by several researchers who used battle metaphors to communicate the experience of front-line practice in the child welfare field. When talking specifically about workers in the statutory child welfare context in the UK, H. Ferguson (2004), for example, talks about the way "practitioners' language illustrates the 'explosive' nature of the work" in the context of statutory practice (p. 117). Every referral, he says, "is a 'potential minefield', cases 'blow up' 'explode', workers 'burn out'" (p. 117). These provocative metaphors offer valuable insight into how practitioners can experience their practice in these highly stressful environments.

The war metaphor applies in different ways. In a study conducted by Wastell, White, Broadhurst, Peckover, and Pithouse (2010), "the tales from the trenches" (p. 314) reveal the different ways "social workers continue to exercise their professional discretion" (p. 317) by cheating the bureaucratic categorisations in technology systems that are designed to remove professional discretion. These are covert operations and the result is that they are able to offer vulnerable children and families the service they need. What Wastall et al. (2010) demonstrate is the sheer courage and determination of social workers to hold on to their ethical principles. As they state, "the Iron Cage may work well in the zoo, but social work is not a zoo" (p. 318). In other words, imposing strict bureaucratic rules on people's lives is contrary to social work ethics.

Despite all the times social workers are able to uphold their ethical standards without issue, every now and then, ethical dilemmas arise that cannot be dealt with by stealth. This is the case, for example, when practitioners are commanded to publically demonstrate their loyalty to the organisation that employs them. According to McAuliffe (2005), this command is the most common cause of ethical dilemmas for social workers, and, according to her

participants, it has the potential to result in full-scale war. These dilemmas are highly stressful and can impact on practitioners both physically and emotionally (McAuliffe, 2005). But practitioners can also come through these stressful experiences with a renewed sense of purpose. This is demonstrated in the following extract:

I have found new strengths from within and new levels of reality to measure the world by. No one is in control, there are only masses of people trying to control each other. This knowledge brings a strange sense of freedom and an understanding that each of us walks daily through our own minefield – some are luckier than others. I've had an arm and a leg blown off – but I'm warm and still standing. (McAuliffe, 2005, p. 13)

The defiance expressed by this individual is extremely inspiring, so much so that her actions could be interpreted as heroic. Her injuries may have changed her life forever, but through bravery and courage she has been able to transform her pain into a stronger resolve so that she can continue to be a warm, compassionate human being. What is most significant for this discussion, however, is how the violent metaphor conveys the enormity of her emotional experience. The fact that she expresses this at all suggests that her ethical heart cannot be separated from her emotional reality.

It is this strong combination of ethical desire and emotions that motivates individuals to keep going in the face of adversity. This is suggested by Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey and Wright (2007) in a study that was designed to examine stress and burnout amongst workers in the child welfare field. What they found was that in the child welfare field, high rates of job satisfaction accompanied high rates of emotional exhaustion. What contributed to this sense of satisfaction was a sense of “reward in helping others, having a commitment to the mandate of child welfare and believing that one’s labour is ‘making a difference’” (Stalker et al., 2007, p. 182).

These studies offer a perspective on practitioner experience that is akin to the image of the wounded soldier. Culturally wounded soldiers evoke pathos and empathy because of what war has cost them personally. At the same time, however, wounded soldiers also evoke admiration for their bravery and courage. The general emotional response to wounded soldiers is coloured by the success of their endeavours. Not only did they face adversity, but they triumphed in the face of adversity and this gives them heroine or hero status.

But what happens when our heroes or heroines are not successful in their endeavours, or when they are overcome in the face of adversity? It must be acknowledged that war does not always result in triumphant heroism. Sometimes, the human cost of fighting for the greater good is not worth it, precisely because of the pain and suffering it causes. War can inspire individuals to act courageously, yet it can also cause feelings of fear and terror.

H. Ferguson's (2011) ethnographic research as to why child welfare practitioners do not always do what they 'should' offers insight into this issue for social workers. The reality is that despite ideals of what is deemed to be good practice, social workers can and do become paralysed by fear, emotional exhaustion and disillusionment with organisational realities (Ferguson, H., 2005, 2011). This aspect of social work is important because it reminds us that the narrative of the self-sacrificing hero/ine only constitutes part of the picture of practitioners' experiences.

In the following discussion, the possibility that some practitioners can and do become overwhelmed by emotions and organisational demands is explored. In this interpretation of the practitioners' lived experience, researchers also honour their participants, but they do so in a different way.

The Human Cost of Functional Stupidity

According to Alvesson and Spicer (2012), "functional stupidity refers to an absence of reflexivity, a refusal to use intellectual capacities in other than myopic ways, and avoidance of justifications" (p. 1194). Such qualities are reflective of many statutory child welfare organisations where, as has already been suggested, "procedural execution" (Garrett, 2003, p. 4) is valued over professional discretion.

Individuals working in such contexts may feel pressure to perform emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003) in order to make up for this narrow mindedness, yet may also feel unsupported and undervalued by colleagues and those in senior positions (Myerson, 2000). The issue of emotional burnout is often attributed, at least in part, to this (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Gibbs, 2009; Leeson, 2010; Shim, 2010; Smith & Clark, 2011; Stalker et al., 2007). As workers labour to compensate for functional stupidity, they risk burning out. This is expressed in the following statement by Hyslop (2009), a practitioner with over twenty years experience in the field:

From my own personal observation, the phenomenon of burnout for practitioners is often accompanied by an inarticulate state of muddled perceptions. It is as if gravity has failed and left the worker adrift in a no man's land – an intermediate space where, to recall Habermas, the life world of the other and the demands of the system cannot be adequately reconciled. (p. 65)

By drawing on Habermas' system/life world dualism, Hyslop (2009) draws attention to the unforgiving and persistent nature of the disparity between what workers had expected their practice to be and the organisational reality that dictates how practice is. Such a reality leaves practitioners confused and speechless and unable to gain any kind of control over their situation.

A similar experience of disempowerment is echoed in a study conducted by Leeson (2010), who looked at the emotional labour of social workers who work with children in care. For many participants, the system that employs them does not factor in the time it takes to build helping relationships with children, and this means that their practice is compromised ethically. In this study, organisational pressures meant that "even though they all wanted to give good, ethical and caring service, [they] often felt they were doing this against all odds" (Leeson, 2010, p. 487).

The idea of going against all odds suggests one is fighting a losing battle. The consequence appears to be a sense of bitter disappointment at not being able to uphold one's professional responsibilities – the kind of disappointment one feels when one's dreams are broken by the weight of compromise.

Although the research into workers' experiences appears to be less prevalent in the NGO sector, a similar sense of frustration and disappointment is apparent. Donna Baines (2011), for example, looked at workers' experiences in the non-profit social services sector in Australia and Canada. Similar to those participants in the study conducted by Westall et al. (2010), workers were able to exercise some degree of resistance to organisational controls. This meant working longer hours, exercising disobedience to organisational policy and generally generating a more activist attitude towards their work. Despite this culture of resistance, however, workers still experienced that nagging feeling that comes with not being able to uphold the kind of practice one desires. As one child and family worker in Australia stated:

I would say non-profit work has a unique sort of stress about it. When you deal with other people's emotional health and dreams all day, it's a very intimate thing you carry round with you, a very intimate bunch of information and expectations. Not being able to meet these expectations, let alone your own, is probably one of the most stressful things around. It gets you at an intimate level. (Baines, 2011, p. 149)

Working to try to help people deal with their problems is stressful in itself, but when one's ability to help is impeded, this constitutes an added layer of stress. As suggested previously, NGOs are often contracted to offer the care and support to families (see, for example, Gray, B., 2002). Not being able to fulfill the terms of this contract in a way that is meaningful for workers and the children and families they serve takes its toll on them.

One could speculate that this 'boulevard of broken dreams' is exacerbated by the misguided cultural assumption that because social workers are professionals, it follows that they are emotionally robust and so 'should' be able to overcome this issue of organisational constraint. Such a speculation buys into the common perception that emotional burnout can be attributed to some kind of deficit within the individual's disposition.

Instead of helping to deal with the issue of emotional burnout, such a perception can make it much worse. If emotional burnout is seen as something to be avoided at all costs, a worker may try to deny their experience of it for fear that acknowledging it will reflect on them negatively as individuals (Gibbs, 2009). This 'business as usual' attitude can be extremely detrimental for workers and their clients, because emotional stress poses a threat to one's better judgement. In the tragic case of Victoria Climbié⁷, for example, H. Ferguson (2005) and Cooper (2005) both suggest that more acknowledgement of workers' emotional needs within organisations could have resulted in better practices.

Whilst better emotional support for workers is desirable, organisations, for the most part, do not support their workers to the extent they 'should' (Lonne et al., 2009). In statutory child

⁷ Victoria Climbié was an eight year old child in the UK. In 2000 she died after "suffering months of torture and abuse" (Ferguson, H., 2005, p. 782) inflicted by her aunt and uncle. Prior to her death, she was known to statutory child welfare agencies, health services and other agencies (Laming, 2003). According to H. Ferguson (2005), the social worker involved missed vital signs of abuse in her investigation. This, he argues, can be attributed to unreflective organisational cultures and a lack of emotional support for caseworkers.

welfare organisations, for example, this can be explained by the need to be able to demonstrate organisational accountability in the event of a child death (Munro, 2005). Consequently, the supervision that is provided is often intended to ensure accountability towards the organisation, not ethical practice to workers or clients (Beddoe, 2012).

There is now a growing trend for supportive supervisory activities, designed to ensure ethical accountability, to be contracted out to freelance workers who are both qualified and willing to take on the responsibility (Adamson, 2012; Maidment & Beddoe, 2012). However, the split between ethical accountability on the one hand and organisational accountability on the other is problematic, because it leaves little or no space for the resolution of conflicts that may arise between these different types of accountability. Indeed, even external supervisors themselves can often feel conflicted between being accountable to the organisations that pay them and the workers they support (Beddoe, 2012).

Supervision needs to be understood as an organisational activity where workers can feel comfortable exploring the emotional complexity of their practice (Adamson, 2012; Beddoe, 2012; Maidment & Beddoe, 2012). It is argued that such a space would allow workers to explore ways in which their intuitive insights can contribute in a meaningful way (Ferguson, H., 2005; Ingram, 2012; McKee, 2009; Ruch, 2007). Until such time, workers are, for the most part, left in an emotional limbo. On the one hand, they need to uphold a moral responsibility to work towards realising the ideals of best practice. On the other hand, they are compelled to pursue this end against the odds.

This issue could be remedied by creating the conditions for building a more resilient workforce. Russ, Lonne and Darlington (2010), for example, suggest that “support can be promoted at an organisational level as well as developed individually” (p. 332). In other words, individuals need to be encouraged to establish their own supports, and senior individuals within organisations need to support this process by promoting a culture of support. This is an important consideration. Yet it needs to be understood in terms of a continuum of possibility within organisations. Within a Neo-liberal context, child welfare agencies are not funded to cover the costs associated with supporting their workforce (Lonne, Harries & Lantz, 2012), and so the idea of promoting a more supportive culture can be met with resistance amongst individuals. In relation to those in management positions, it is not enough to suggest that these individuals ‘should’ be responsible for promoting supportive

cultures, because leaders within organisations are also sensitive to the external forces that shape organisational milieus. They are also torn between ethical and organisational accountability, and, in this sense, face similar difficulties to the front-line workers (Newman, Guy, & Mastracci, 2009).

From the discussion above, it has become apparent that whilst organisational practices may aim to promote human wellbeing, their very survival depends on being economically competitive and accountable in the event they are investigated by some higher authority (Power, 1997). For individuals, or more specifically, social workers who work with vulnerable children, this means their endeavour to demonstrate emotional sensitivity to vulnerable people can be sabotaged by the very organisations that employ them to pursue this endeavour.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the disparity between social work theory and social work practice in contemporary child welfare organisations has been explored. The ethical heart of social work constitutes a fundamental aspect of the profession's theory for practice, so much so that ethical discourse in social work seeks to prime the ethical heart to demonstrate a heightened sensitivity towards lived experience. Whilst the theoretical intention of many child welfare organisations may align with social work's ethical heart to some extent, the process through which this objective is achieved can often be heavy handed and insensitive to people's needs. Policy is progressing to better reflect the ideals of good social work; yet, if these changes are to mean anything, they need to be realised in practice.

Seen as part of the solution (AASW, 2009), social workers are charged with the responsibility of bridging this gap between theory and practice. This responsibility is not just about realising theory in practice, because this constitutes a proven method, but because, morally, this is the 'right' thing to do.

This ethical responsibility is inextricably linked to the professional identity of "ethical agent" (Webb, 2010, p. 116). For this reason, the endeavour of replicating theory into practice is not just a question of gaining expert knowledge and skill in one's field, but is also about being a good person. This means that good social work practice requires something quite personal from the individual, which is difficult to define.

The disparity between the rather ambiguous social work objectives that call for human intuition and imagination, and organisational objectives that call for uniformity and regulation, pave the way for a diverse range of experiences. This was demonstrated in this chapter by exploring some of the research that examines the way social workers experience their practice in the child welfare field. This body of research is indicative of the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives, because at the centre of each example offered, social work's aims and goals are met with some kind of resistance.

Whilst this research reveals something about the individuals who experience the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives, it also reveals something about the social expectations that surround the individual. Comprehending these expectations is necessary, because not only does it offer a clearer picture of the tension itself in a social work context, it can also offer further insight into what it means for individual social workers who are charged with the responsibility of holding this tension.

Having mapped the tension between the ethical heart of the social work profession and the organisational objectives in the child welfare field, the following chapter is concerned with further developing a theoretical understanding of this tension. In so doing, the enactment of holding this tension through interactions with others, and the emotional labour involved in doing this, is explored further.

Chapter Three: Holding Tension

It is not easy moving from one interpretive paradigm or space to another; politics, emotions, identities, egos, biographies, reputations, and hard work are involved. New literatures have to be mastered. Old habits have to be let go of, new ways of thinking have to be learned. It can be risky business moving from one paradigm to another. This movement from one paradigm commitment to another cannot be accomplished overnight. (Denzin, 2014, p. 1126)

In the above quote, Norman Denzin (2014) offers insight into what holding the tension between differing paradigms such as that between the ethical heart and organisational objectives may entail. The aim of this chapter is to establish a theoretical understanding of what it takes to hold this tension. It begins with the premise that it takes emotional labour, because it involves managing one's emotions in order to engage in different kinds of interpersonal communication, each with different feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979, 2003).

Feeling rules are social rules that determine the general feel of interactions amongst individuals. They constitute part of the external reality that surrounds individual subjects, yet they are not overtly imposed on them. Rather, they silently request compliance and individuals willingly respond by meeting the request. This desire to engage with the social world is expressed by Hochschild (1979), when she writes:

We feel. We try to feel. We want to try to feel. The social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel may be describable as a set of socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at), rules. (p. 563)

In this chapter it is suggested that the ethical heart and organisational objectives constitute different feeling rules that have come into conflict with one another. The individual will need to be versed in both sets of rules in order to straddle and mediate the differences in his/her responses.

In order to comprehend the emotional labour involved in meeting these conflicting expectations, this chapter begins by exploring the conflict itself. To do so, a sociological perspective is adopted. According to social theorist, Max Weber (1864–1920), these conflicting expectations can be explained by different types of rational action, which, over

time, have evolved as cultural qualities that form a structural tension (Weber, 1922/1978). In the context of the modern economy, this tension plays out between formal rationality and substantive rationality. Formal rationality refers to “quantitative calculation or accounting, which is technically possible and which is actually applied” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 85). In contrast, substantive rationality is a qualitative concept that is “full of ambiguities” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 85). Put simply, it refers to whether or not the application of formal rationality actually meets the needs of individuals (Brubaker, 1984).

It needs to be acknowledged that Max Weber is not the only social theorist to have identified and explored the qualities inherent within this structural tension. Habermas’s (1984, 1987, as cited in Sinclair, 2005b) examination of the system/life world dichotomy, for example, provides a compelling account of incompatible opposites that create the conditions of modern life. Equally, a feminist critique of Western dualism (Plumwood, 1993) could have provided a good starting point for analysing the structural tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. Weber’s notion of disenchantment, however, spoke to me because human emotions and subjectivity provide the beginning point for his analysis. In a disenchanted world, formal rationality seeks distance from subjectivity, whereas substantive rationality seeks inclusion of it (Brubaker, 1984). The predominance of formal rationality has resulted in the disappearance of all subjectivity from public life. As he writes:

The fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above, all, by the ‘disenchantment of the world’. Precisely the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or in to the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations.
(Weber, 1919/1958b, p. 155)

The idea of disenchantment refers to the specific cultural condition of modern capitalism. However, it is more complex than this, because disenchantment begins and ends with individual actions. For Weber, disenchantment seems to permeate the souls of individuals, and in so doing, creates the general feel within the modern institutions that regulate our lives. This is exemplified when he says that “the bureaucratisation of all forms of domination very strongly furthers the development of ‘rational matter of factness’ and the personality type of the rational expert” (Weber, 1922/1958. p. 240). The rational expert embodies the feeling

rules of the bureaucracy, which is governed by the rules of formal rationality, so much so that these rules come to be reflected in his/her *personality*.

Also central to the notion of disenchantment is the paradox that whilst the personal quality of impartial objectivity is essential for the functioning of a democratic society, when taken to the extreme, it can appear irrational. This refers to what Weber called “ethical irrationality” (1919/1958a, p. 122) and this is explained in more detail later in the chapter.

Professional action plays out in the context of this ethical irrationality. Social workers, for example, need to work with the rules of formal rationality because this defines the parameters of their practice. At the same time, however, they need to work against these rules in order to work towards attending to the substantive needs of their clients. These differing expectations surrounding emotional conduct are expressed quite explicitly in the social work literature. When Harms and Connelly (2009) talk about the need to “integrate understandings of the *professional self* and *personal self*” (p. 4), for example, they are referring to the different feeling rules inherent in formal and substantive rationality. The personal self is concerned with engaging *with* the finer details of subjectivity in order to understand it. The professional self is about removing oneself *from* these finer details in order to gain an objective understanding.

These different selves are performed in the social exchanges between individuals. In the second half of this chapter, a sociological perspective is maintained in order to explore the actual mechanics of this process. Through considering Arlie Hochschild’s (1979, 2003) theory of emotions, a more detailed explanation of the effort these require is presented.

Social context dictates how emotions are managed and in the final section of this chapter, the dynamics of emotional labour in the specific context of social workers practising in the child welfare field are explored. This context, it is argued, makes for complex dynamics which can, in some cases, pose a threat to an individual’s sense of wellbeing.

The Tale of Two Rationalities

The tension between formal and substantive can be attributed to the historical process of disenchantment and rationalisation.⁸ Rationalisation refers to values and interests that are justified through logical reasoning and enacted through social processes (Brubaker, 1984). These social processes are multiple and complex. As Brubaker (1984) writes:

Rationalization, for Weber, is not a single process, but a multiplicity of distinct though interrelated processes arising through different historical sources, proceeding at different rates and furthering different interests and values. (p. 9)

This complex historical process begins with rational actions. According to Weber, rational actions are actions that are “meaningfully orientated” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 24) – that is to say, they hold subjective meaning for the actors. Weber identified four different types of rational action and they can be distinguished by the meanings and motives of the actors. They offer a foundation for comprehending the ascendance of formal rationality and the subordination of substantive rationality.

From Instrumental Rational Actions to the Rationalisation of Formal Rationality

Weber’s typology of social action appears in Volume 1 of *Economy and Society* (1922/ 1978). The different types of social action are as follows:

Instrumentally rational (*zwekrational*), that is, determined by expectations as to the behaviour of objects in the environment and other human beings; these expectations are used as “conditions” or “means” for the attainment of the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends;

value rational (*wertrational*), that is, determined by conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behaviour, independently of its prospects of success;

⁸ Whether or not rationalisation and disenchantment can be described as Max Weber’s central theme is debatable, because his body of work is so broad in its dimensions (Hennis, 2002). It is, however, a major preoccupation in his work and thus, could be considered as central (Brubaker, 1987; Gane, 2004; Whimster & Lash, 1897).

affectual (especially emotional) that is, determined by the actors specific affects and feeling states;

traditional, that is, determined by ingrained habituation. (pp. 24–25)

These definitions are what Weber termed “ideal types” which, he says, “serve the sociologist as a type (ideal type) which has the merit of clear understandability and lack of ambiguity” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 6). In the context of lived experience, these types of social action coexist simultaneously. Whilst ideal types may be derived from observation, they are essentially theoretical constructs, which are designed to facilitate critical analysis, dialogue and debate.

Motivation is central to comprehending the meaning of rational action. Action motivated by emotional affect, for example, can be rational in so far as human beings are often motivated to act meaningfully on the basis of their feelings. Traditional action, or action that takes place because of habit, can be rational in so far as human beings often find meaning in actions habituated over time. Action orientated towards the realisation of values is also rational because it is informed by a self-conscious motivation towards a purpose. Weber (1922/1978) gives examples of this purpose as:

persons who, regardless of possible cost to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some ‘cause’ no matter in what it consists. (p. 25)

In this ideal type representation, value rationality is analogous to the strengthened ethical imperative in social work literature, which was discussed in the previous chapter. It is suggested that the meaning and purpose of such actions is to realise “what Nietzsche called the value of value” (Gray & Webb, 2010, p. 3) in social work practice.

In contrast, instrumentally rational actions are rational because the purpose and the means used to achieve the purpose can be clearly defined and adapted to suit different social contexts. This kind of rationality is useful in solving a practical problem such as building a house or finding a job. Achieving these goals requires one to plan for appropriate action through reasoning and methodical planning. Feelings or emotions may play a part in the

outcomes of such a process, but, fundamentally, this kind of reasoning suggests that life's problems are comprehended and solved through logical deduction. If one comes across a problem, for example, one explores the problem in order to identify the end to be reached and then identifies the means that will be used to achieve this end.

When compared to instrumentally rational actions, value rational actions can take on the appearance of being non-rational or even irrational. This is because the purpose of value rationality appears less clearly defined. For example, if an aesthete collects beautiful works of art for the purpose of wanting to experience a sense of fulfilment, this purpose appears less clearly definable and comprehensible than collecting beautiful works of art for the purpose of economic gain. The latter purpose is instrumental to a practical need, whereas the former is instrumental to heightening subjective pleasure.

Whilst instrumentally rational actions may appear to be motivated by logical conclusion, there is always a subjective element to this motivation. The motivation to survive, for example, can be understood as an objective necessity. Yet it still demands the precondition of a subjective desire to live. Thus, even though actions instrumental to one's survival may imply objective qualities, the motivation driving these actions has a subjective element. As Brubaker (1984) puts it:

Zweckrational action, too, is defined subjectively, by the actor's expectations about the consequences of alternative ways of acting, and by his [sic] conscious efforts to bring about some of these expected consequences. (p. 53)

Despite the subjective element of instrumental rationality, the objective calculation of appropriate means directed towards a preconceived end has been a central idea in the emergence of Western capitalism, so much so that the primacy of instrumental rationality has come to be seen as a moral requirement in the contemporary West. The corollary of this elevation of 'the rational' has been the devaluation of the 'emotional'.⁹

⁹ Such privileging is deeply ingrained within Western philosophical thought and thus appears as a 'natural' aspect of reality. This stems from an ontological belief that is often attributed to Plato's dualistic philosophy (Bendelow & Williams, 1983; Lloyd, 1993; Plumwood, 1993;). According to Plumwood's (1993) feminist critique, Plato's dualism resulted in a kind of "denied dependency on the subordinated other" (p. 42). From this
Footnote continued on next page

One of Weber's preoccupations was to examine how such a devaluation had been formalised within modern state institutions; hence the term formal rationality. This Brubecker (1984) describes as "the objective property of the social structure within modern society" (p. 37). The process of bureaucratisation was a central feature of this removal of subjectivity. As Weber (1922/1958) writes:

Its specific nature, which is welcomed by capitalism, develops the more perfectly the bureaucracy is 'dehumanized', the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements which escape calculation. (p. 216)

In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905/1958), Weber traced the ascendance of this specific quality back to the religious beliefs and values of the early Protestant sects, especially those endorsing Calvinism. His argument was that this cannot just be attributed to the "development of an economic ethic" (Weber, 1905/1958, p. 137), but that such an ethic resulted in the active "elimination of magic from the world" (Weber, 1905/1958, p. 105).

This elimination of "sublime values" (Weber, 1919/1958b, p. 155) was influenced by the doctrine of predestination. In the Calvinist version of this doctrine, God's transcendental power was absolute, leaving the individual with no choice but to adhere to the "system of life regulation" (Weber, 1913/1958, p. 267), which was preordained by Him. Such a system was not concerned with offering space for individuals to attain spiritual enlightenment via ceremony or ritual, but rather focused the attention towards the material world and the practicalities of survival. According to Weber, all actions within this system were instrumental to survival, so much so that practical necessity was, in itself, a form of worship (Weber 1905/1958).

This being the case, it meant that rational actions aimed towards evoking sensual or mystical experience came to be viewed with suspicion and mistrust. Thus, not only was the "sentiment of universal brotherhood" (Addams, 1893, p. 14) devalued, but it also resulted in the

perspective, emotions (and associated 'feminine' qualities) are assumed to be inferior to their binary opposites, such as man and reason (Plumwood, 1993).

prevalence of a particular attitude towards emotions and sensuality in general. As Weber (1905/1958) writes:

There was not only no magical means of attaining the grace of God for those to whom God had decided to deny it, but no means what so ever. Combined with the harsh doctrines of the absolute transcendentality of God and the corruption of everything pertaining to the flesh, this inner isolation of the individual contains, [...] the reason for the entirely negative attitude of Puritanism towards all sensuous and emotional elements in culture and religion because they are of no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions. Thus it provides a basis for a fundamental antagonism to sensuous culture of all kinds. (p. 105)

That Weber describes this attitude towards sensuality as “antagonism” is significant in that this constitutes the essence of the tension between formal and substantive rationality. Such a tension is caused not only by favouring instrumental rationality for certain purposes, but also by being actively opposed towards value rationality. From a purely instrumental perspective, such a quality is highly desirable because it is an indication that one is in possession of the qualities needed to reach one’s “pursued and calculated ends” (Weber, 1922/1978, p. 24). In other words, this is about the capacity of an individual to remain unswayed by emotions and other incalculable forces.

Formal rationality requires complete consistency between means and ends in order to “maximise the values of calculability [and] efficiency” (Brubaker, 1984, p. 42). Both must conform to the rules of logical deduction and stay clear of being influenced by emotional affect.

Such consistency is valuable precisely because it gives the overall impression of objectivity. By rejecting the unpredictable qualities inherent in emotions and sensuality, it also implies that certainty can be attained. If governments, for example, can convince individuals that the means they use to administer the state are always objective, this gives the appearance that the motivations for their actions are informed by dispassionate calculation in the interest of the nation.

Unlike substantive rationality, formal rationality is not concerned with individual needs, but rather is based on the premise that all individual needs are the same. Indeed, formal rationality seeks to subordinate individual needs to a predetermined means/end relationship, in which the means used to reach any end are unable to be negotiated.

When taken to the extreme, the consequence of this kind of means/ends relationship exudes an inflexible and, thus, uncompromising quality. This is what makes way for the tension between formal and substantive rationality. Tensions can always be eased through negotiation and compromise. Yet, when ideology dictates that there can be no compromise, tension persists. As Brubaker (1984) writes:

Characterised by a high degree of formal rationality, the modern capitalist economic order maximises the values of calculability, efficiency and impersonality but is deeply inhospitable to egalitarian, fraternal and caritative values. (p. 42)

This extremist position is a central concern for social workers because, for the most part, they are specifically employed to meet the substantive needs of individuals (Payne, 2007, 2011). Meeting these needs is not just a question of holding tension between two equal forces. Rather, it is about endeavouring to fulfil this professional responsibility in the face of active resistance against it. This can impact on one's capacity to make ethical decisions, so it is essentially irrational from an ethical perspective. The "ethical irrationality of the world" (Weber, 1919/1958b, p. 122) refers to the way formal rationality, and its requirement for uncompromising rational consistency, limits and constrains individual freedom and choice (Brubaker, 1984; Gane, 2004; Löwith, 1993). This idea will now be explored in more detail.

Ethical Irrationality

Unlike the qualities inherent in formal rationality, ethical conduct involves uncertainty, compromise and a certain degree of risk (Gane, 2004). As Weber (1919/1958a) writes:

No ethics in the world can dodge the fact that in numerous instances the attainment of 'good' ends is bound to the fact that one must be willing to pay the price of using morally dubious means or at least dangerous ones – and facing the possibility or even the probability of evil ramifications. From no ethics in the

world can it be concluded that when and to what extent the ethically good purpose ‘justifies’ the ethically dangerous means and ramifications. (p. 121)

In a highly formalised context, ethical decision-making is even more risky because the decisive means available are formalised, or as Weber describes them, “violent” means (1919/1958a, p. 121).

As in the case of formal rationality, ethical conduct has also come to be defined as two “fundamentally differing and irreconcilably opposed maxims”: an “ethic of ultimate ends” and “an ethic of responsibility” (Weber, 1919/1958a, p. 120). Karl Löwith (1993) compares these ideal types of ethical conduct to Weber’s ideal types of rational action (Löwith, 1993). An ethic of ultimate ends can be compared to instrumental rationality because it is primarily orientated towards the attainment of calculated ends. An ethic of responsibility can be compared to value rationality because it is primarily orientated towards the value and, thus, consequences of actions (Löwith, 1993).¹⁰

The co-existence of both kinds of action is necessary for ethical action. More importantly, however, ethical actions require an “ethical agent” (Webb, 2010, p. 116) who is willing to defy the rule of rational consistency so that the means and ends can be evaluated. In other words, ethical agents need to weigh up the possible consequences of actions in order to ensure “the least internal and external damage for all concerned” (Weber, as cited in Gerth & Mills, 1958, p. 9). This decision-making process requires a certain amount of individual freedom (Hennis, 2000; Löwith, 1993). As Karl Löwith (1993) writes:

The freer a person is in his or her consideration and calculation of what is required (the means) for something (a particular purpose), the more his or her action assumes a purposive rational character and thus, becomes proportionally more understandable. (p. 67)

¹⁰ Whilst there are similarities between these types of ethical conduct and the corresponding types of rational action, they are not, according to Brubaker (1984), identical (Gane, 2004). An ethic of ultimate ends constitutes a value orientation, which is “at once cognitive and conative” and involves “the integration of meanings, values and dispositions” (Brubaker, 1984, p. 63). Value orientations say something about the individual, his/her world view and about the kinds of motivations that drive her/his actions.

The consequence of this is a new ethical standard or norm, which, generally speaking, can be characterised as “subservience and abnegation of individual responsibility” (Sayer, 1991, p. 137).

In his essay, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919/1958a), Weber focuses on this issue in relation to politicians. He demonstrates how ethical conduct has become confused with the requirement for formality, consistency and efficiency. The ethic of ultimate ends suits this requirement because it “does not *ask* for consequences” (Weber, 1919/1958a, p. 120), but rather looks only towards attaining its desired ends free from subjective influence. The active demonstration of this apparent value freedom has created the impression that this somehow equates to ethical accountability.

Weber (1919/1958a) was highly critical of this equation, because it means ethics becomes embroiled with the pursuit of self-interest, or “the greatest moral and material gain” (p. 118). To explain exactly how this plays out between individuals, he gives a surprising example:

Rarely will you find that a man whose love turns from one woman to another feels no need to legitimate this before himself by saying: she was not worthy of my love, or, she has disappointed me, or whatever other like ‘reasons’ exist. This is an attitude that, with a profound lack of chivalry, adds a fancied ‘legitimacy’ to the plain fact that he no longer loves her and that the woman has to bear it. By virtue of this ‘legitimation’, the man claims a right for himself and besides causing the misfortune, seeks to put her in the wrong. (p. 117)

This kind of self legitimisation via the vilification of ‘other’ is *unethical*. In politics, however, it is often adopted as a *legitimate* means in order to attain one’s ethic of ultimate ends.

In the process of attaining one’s ethic of ultimate ends, one needs to establish and maintain power if one is to survive. According to Weber (1919/1958a), one has little choice but to adopt these means. This reality has the capacity to produce a particular kind of person. This is exemplified in the following description of a political strategist hired by political parties to assist in winning elections:

The boss has no firm political ‘principles’; he is completely unprincipled in attitude and asks merely: What will capture votes? Frequently he is a rather poorly

educated man. But as a rule he leads an inoffensive and correct private life. In his political morals, however, he naturally adjusts to the average ethical standards of political conduct. (Weber, 1919/1958a, p. 110)

The boss personifies Weber's notion of ethical irrationality; his very being is simply a reflection of the social context surrounding him. From an ethical perspective, his actions are irrational because he does not appear concerned with the consequences of his attitude. Yet, at the same time, he is rational in the sense that he is in pursuit of an ethic of ultimate ends. The fact that he appears indifferent to the consequences of his actions is part of what makes his services so valuable from the perspective of the political party he serves.

The boss's poor education draws our attention because, in such a position of power, his unknowingness appears morally reprehensible. At the same time, however, he is an expert in his field. There is a parallel evident here between the boss and Weber's notion of the rational expert. Like the boss, rational experts need to appear to be removed from any kind of subjective influence; their air of "rational matter of factness" (Weber, 1922/1958, p. 240) communicates this. By adopting this way of being, experts are able to communicate a sense of confidence and competence.

This idea of the educated rational expert is an archetypal figure in Western society (Macdonald, 1995). His/her qualities are reified through their symbolic predictability, certainty and security, and this is further reflected by repeated reference to technical rationality. As Nigel Parton (2000) writes:

The epistemology of professional practice which has dominated most thinking and writing about the professions treats rigorous professional practice as an exercise of technical rationality that is an application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice. Rigorous professional practice is conceived as deriving its rigour from the use of describable, testable, replicable techniques, derived from scientific research and which is based on knowledge that is objectives, consensual, cumulative and convergent. On this view social work becomes the application of rigorous social science. (p. 453)

The legitimisation of professional knowledge through scientific and or formal processes means professionals enjoy high social status (Macdonald, 1995), thus contributing to the

assumption that because their judgement is impartial and value free, professionals can be trusted. In the elevation of this dispassionate quality, however, there is a danger that ethical conduct can become lost in internal power struggles (Macdonald, 1995). By embracing such qualities whole heartedly without any kind of critical reflection, for example, one may run the risk of losing one's ability to empathise.

At the same time, however, in being seen to be too empathic, one may run the risk of losing one's professional standing. This issue lies at the core of the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives and plays out in a context of ethical irrationality – where it is the norm for individuals to pursue their ethic of ultimate ends without balancing this with an ethics of responsibility. For Weber, this norm constitutes a “diabolical force” (1919/1958a, p. 126), which poses a particular kind of challenge for those who seek to uphold ethical conduct. As Weber (1919/1958a) writes:

Whoever wants to engage in politics at all, and especially in politics as a vocation, has to realise these ethical paradoxes. He [sic] must know that he is responsible for what may become of himself [sic] under the impact of these paradoxes. [...]. He lets himself in for the diabolical forces lurking in all violence. (pp. 125–126)

Professionals who are compelled to make decisions in the context of Weber's diabolical forces cannot avoid the dangers of ethical irrationality. This inevitability is what Pasqualoni and Scott (2006) refer to as “professional fate” (p. 147) and recognising this is essential if one is to operate effectively. This does not automatically resolve the tensions and dilemmas presented, but the severity of them can be ameliorated by subjective recognition.

Thus far in this chapter, the tension between formal and substantive rationality and how this contributes to ethical irrationality has been explored. Such intense focus on formalisation fails to make sense either in terms of motivation or outcome of the social action that is the topic of this thesis. This is despite the fact that child welfare practice has, for the most part, been governed by the rules of formal rationality since the 1960s and 70s.

The paradox of ethical irrationality is relevant to all those working in the caring professions. In the context of nursing, for example, formalised processes without any kind of individualised compassion towards the consequences of actions would be deemed by any observer as irrational. Yet, because social work knowledge is *primarily* aimed at

understanding and attending to the substantive needs of individuals, there is a particular relevance. Not only must they hold the tension between substantive and formal rationality, but they must also actively challenge it if they are to uphold their professional responsibilities.

In the following sections of this chapter, the focus shifts towards exploring what it actually takes to meet this expectation. Weber (1919/1958a) suggested that it takes “inner strength” (p. 117), yet he did not explicate more than this. The aim in the following discussion is to do that. In so doing, Hochschild’s (2003) concept of emotional labour and the actual mechanics of meeting the silent expectations inherent in the different feeling rules of formal and substantive rationality is further explored.

Emotions and the Work of Keeping up Appearances

Upholding professional responsibilities means acting professionally or conducting oneself in a manner congruent with the idea of professionalism (MacDonald, 1995). In the context of the caring professions, of which social work is one, this means maintaining the appearance of an impartial, rational expert as well as being able to impart an empathic concern for others. Meeting both these expectations is a complex undertaking. The aim of this section is to explore how and why individuals willingly labour in order to meet these expectations.

According to Hochschild (2003), meeting social expectations means performing emotion work. Emotion work refers to the way individuals manage their emotions in order to maintain an outward appearance in different social contexts. As well as *censoring* one’s expression of emotions in a given social context, it also involves *inducing* emotion in order to actually feel a certain way. Whilst this is a social process, it is also a private one. As Hochschild (2003) writes:

All of us try to feel, and pretend to feel, but we seldom do so alone. Most often we do it when we exchange gestures or signs of feeling with others. Taken together, emotion work, feeling rules, and interpersonal exchange make up our private emotional system. We bow to each other not only from the waist, but from the heart. Feeling rules set out what is owed in gestures of exchange between people.
(p. 76)

The idea that we bow to each other from the heart suggests that emotion work constitutes the aspect of social interaction which is *authentic*. By honouring feeling rules, individuals offer something of themselves to one another. In the context of a group of professionals, for example, individuals will pay their respects to the rules of professionalism by honouring the silent code that demands that one exercise emotional constraint.

Understood from such a perspective, emotions constitute a private experience that is informed by a public process and vice versa. In this sense, they provide the point of connection between the deeply personal and highly political (Bendelow & Williams, 1998). In order to get to the bottom of this idea, it is necessary to establish an appropriate theory of emotions to underpin it. Thus, Hochschild's (2003) theory of emotions will be outlined before going on to explain how this enriches one's understanding of social interaction.

Theorising Emotions

Hochschild (2003) defines emotions as “our experience of the body ready for an imaginary action” (p. 230). This definition brings together two quite different theoretical strands. The organismic model focuses on emotions as a biological response to external stimuli, and the interactionist model focuses on emotions as a social process (Hochschild, 2003).

These differing models of emotion derive from different starting points. The organismic model begins with the bodily experience of emotions, whilst the interactionist model begins with emotions in the process of social interaction. The consequence is a different focus on the same subject. For Hochschild (2003), the problem with these different focal points is that each falls short of fully incorporating the other. Thus, the vital connection between “‘personal troubles’ and broader ‘public issues’ of social structure” (Mills, 1959, as cited in Bendelow & Williams, 1998, p. xvii) remains in the periphery of analysis. When this point of connection becomes central, however, a vivid picture of emotion work and what this means for the individual emerges (Hochschild, 2003).

In the organismic model, emotions constitute an embodied experience. From such a perspective, emotions emerge from instinctual reflexes within the body. Hochschild (2003) cites Charles Darwin to exemplify such a perspective. For Darwin (1872/1965) “certain states of mind, are the direct result of the nervous system” and are “independent of the will, and, to a

large extent, of habit” (p. 66). In other words, emotions constitute a physiological response to external stimuli necessary for survival.¹¹

Emotional expression, motivated by nervous response, communicates a ‘truth’ that resides within our embodied experience of the world. We can try to pretend we feel differently, yet how we really feel is not always able to be concealed. Sadness, for example, may be evident in one’s body language and general demeanour, even though one may be saying the contrary. From this perspective, the ‘truth’ revealed by the bodily experience of emotions is ‘genuine’. This kind of emotional expression is not concerned with how one is *supposed* to feel in social situations, but rather concerned with how one is *actually* feeling, regardless of social context (Hochschild, 2003).

By seeing emotions as an expression of human instinct, the organismic perspective reminds us that to a certain extent, our feelings manifest within the physical realm of the objective reality of our bodies. In so doing, it draws our attention to the physical immediacy through which feelings are experienced and this is indicative of the intimate nature of emotional experience (Hochschild, 2003).

In isolation, however, such a model of emotions is insufficient. By focusing primarily on the organism through which emotional affect is expressed, it draws attention away from the social nature of emotions. The interactionist model of emotions remedies this. Instead of focusing on emotions as a primeval or instinctive energy, it draws our attention to the way social context colours and shapes individual feeling (Hochschild, 2003). Such a perspective is demonstrated in the work of Charles Cooley. In *Human Nature and the Social Order* (1902/1964), Cooley draws attention to the role that the individual imagination plays in forming our sense of self. Such a perspective is beautifully expressed in his notion of the looking glass self, a conceptualisation of self that is constituted primarily from how we imagine others to perceive and judge us. As Cooley (1902/1964) writes:

¹¹ This understanding of emotions as undefinable, mysterious and incalculable has made way for the popular perception in Western societies that emotions constitute forces that need to be controlled (Bendelow & Williams, 1998; Hochschild, 2003; Plumwood, 1993).

A self idea of this sort seems to have three principle elements: the imagination of our appearance to the other person; the imagination of his [sic] judgement of that appearance; and some sort of self feeling, such as pride or mortification. (p. 184)

For Cooley, emotions accompany our imaginings. Not only does feeling shape and texture how we see ourselves, but also how we interact with others. How we imagine others to feel about us, for example, affects how we feel about ourselves, which in turn affects how we respond to others. Cooley (1902/1964) goes on:

The thing that moves us to pride or shame is not the mere mechanical reflection of ourselves, but an imputed sentiment, the imagined effect of this reflection upon another's mind. This is evident from the fact that the character and weight of that other, in whose mind we see ourselves, makes all the difference with our feeling. We are ashamed to seem evasive in the presence of a straightforward man, cowardly in the presence of a brave one, gross in the eyes of a refined one, and so on. (p. 184)

Emotions not only shape and colour social interaction between individuals, social interaction also shapes and colours individual emotions. Thus, the experience of feeling is inseparable from the social context in which that experience takes place. Emotions form part of the perpetual movement between the individual, social interaction and social structure, as well as the counter movement from social structure to social interaction and back to the individual. As Cooley (1902/1964) suggests:

A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals. The real thing is Human Life, which may be considered either in an individual aspect or in a social, that is to say a general, aspect; but always, as a matter of fact, both individual and general. In other words, 'society' and 'individuals' do not denote separable phenomena. (pp. 36–37)

Such a perspective is essential for comprehending the way feeling rules emerge, how they are maintained, and how they change over time. An individual expression of empathy, for example, may well emerge from an individual's willingness to imagine oneself walking in the shoes of another. However, such an imagining cannot be fully understood devoid of the social

context in which it occurs. By considering social context in the analysis, the appropriateness of that expression is also being considered.

Cooley's notion of the looking glass self provided the foundations for later interactionist theorists. For example, George Herbert Mead's (1982) premise that "the individual mind can exist only in relation to other minds with shared meanings" (Mead, 1982, p. 5) is indicative of such a perspective. The looking glass self is the product of a shared meaning system, through which individuals come to construct the meaning of their lives in relation to the social context which surrounds them.

Irving Goffman's (1959/1997) work is also reflective of this perspective. "Goffman shows the self coming alive" (Hochschild, 2003 p. 226); the social actor staging different performances in order to fit in with the social situations. Here, the looking glass self is not only responsive to how s/he imagines others to perceive him/her, but also responsive to the stage set, costumes and props that create the emotional tone for interaction. "An[...] example can be found in the recent development of the medical profession where we find that it is increasingly important for a doctor to have access to the elaborate scientific stage provided by large hospitals" (Goffman, 1959/1997, p. 98).

When social interaction is considered in the context of architectural space, costumes and props, the sheer malleability of the self becomes apparent. Combined, these elements create the powerful feeling rules, which determine the feel of interaction. In this sense, the social actor is literally a "poor player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more" (Shakespeare, 1988, p. 998).

Such adaptability suggests that as born performers, human beings naturally move from one performance to another and that this transition is unproblematic because adaptability is an innate quality. This may be the case; yet this does not necessarily mean that the process of adapting is always effortless. It is this precise point where Hochschild (2003) departs from Goffman (1959/1997).

For Hochschild (2003), an individual's performance is anything but effortless. Individuals make a concerted effort to respond in such a way that the emotional expression communicated to others is fitting for the occasion. What is central to this perspective is the very real possibility that there is often incongruence between how individuals feel on the inside and the

emotions they are expected to display on the outside. Here the organismic model of emotions comes into play. It accounts for that aspect of human subjectivity that does not always 'fit in' with social context. Rather, deep emotions seem to have a life of their own and have the capacity to prevail whether a social context calls for them or not. Hochschild (1998) gives the example of a bride on her wedding day, who feels fearful and apprehensive inside when those around her expect her to express calm, glowing joy. In such a situation, the bride needs to work in order to create an emotional display appropriate for the occasion (Hochschild, 1998).

Yet, if the bride's display is to be believed, the expression she offers needs to be experienced by others as authentic. Thus, she must look within to find her 'real' feelings of joy so that she can display them. This active reaching inside to retrieve different 'truths' is a central characteristic of Hochschild's (2003) work. Yes, social interaction takes place within a social context, yet at the same time there is a private process playing out inside the individual. As one interacts with another on the outside, bodily sensations reveal themselves inside. Acknowledging these sensations and what it may take to manage them, or even induce them, as the case may be, adds a different dimension to one's analysis.

In the discussion that follows, this inner and outer process of social interaction (Schmidt, 2011) will be explored in more detail. To do this, Hochschild (2003) distinguishes between different kinds of acting and, in so doing, draws a more focused attention to the effort involved in crafting genuine emotional expression in any given context.

Deep Acting and Surface Acting

The distinction between deep acting and surface acting is pivotal in comprehending the full implications of Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotional labour. It refers to the emotional depth and integrity that shape utterances. Without this qualitative consideration, the personal effort that goes into social interaction can only be understood superficially. Hochschild's (2003) notion of deep acting draws attention to the inner processes that take place in social exchanges.

Deep acting is different from surface acting. When individuals engage in surface acting, they partake in niceties that are polite and fitting for an occasion. In surface acting, one simply pretends to feel a certain way. One is not concerned with establishing 'genuine' connection with another, but rather concerned with polite utterance designed to give the impression one

may be open to such a connection, but the connection is not actually made. In surface acting, the ‘truth’ held in bodily sensations is masked by a polite smile, a business-like handshake or some other gesture that is acceptable within a given context.

When one engages in deep acting, one does not *pretend* to feel a certain way, but rather engages in a process that can *actually* “transform our mood and our thoughts to match what others would like to see” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 83). In so doing, individuals are able to establish a connection at a deeper level than if they engaged in surface acting. In order to explain her notion of deep acting, Hochschild (2003) draws on the work of the Russian theatre practitioner, Konstantin Stanislavski (1937/1980). Stanislavski’s development of method acting relies on the premise that in order for an actor’s performance to be believable, the actor must do more than *pretend* to become a character, but must actually *become* the character s/he is playing. To do this, the actor is trained to delve into her/his “emotion memory” (Stanislavski, 1937/1980, p. 163) in order to “bring back feelings you have already experienced” (1924/1963, p. 55).

To see an actor actually feel a character’s emotional presence on stage means that an artistic truth is created and this is precisely what makes a performance worth seeing. In method acting, one uses one’s imagination in order to walk in the shoes of another person, and in this sense it relies on Cooley’s notion of the looking glass self. For Cooley (1902/1964), one can empathise with another person by remembering one’s own experiencing and imagining how another person must be experiencing the world. Emotional experience, thus, offers a prompt for the expression of genuine empathic concern.

For Stanislavski (1936/1980), however, “method acting” goes beyond this. The actor must leave him/herself open to reliving the whole experience of the emotion and then be open to sharing that experience with his/her audience. This involves a leap of faith, a courageous statement in which a deeply intimate and private aspect of oneself is shared in a very public space.

Although Hochschild’s (2003) work is not concerned with training actors to offer believable performances, she is concerned with the effort that goes into the expression of feeling in social exchange. For her, the voluntary act of retrieving, reliving and sharing one’s private emotional world with others is precisely what makes social exchanges authentic. All individuals perform in order to please others, yet some performances are better than others.

Good performances appear real because they appear effortless. Bad performances are not unreal, but appear contrived because the effort that goes into them is revealed. As Hochschild (2003) writes:

To feign a feeling is to offer another person behavioural evidence of what we want him [sic] to believe we are thinking and feeling. In bad acting what the other sees is the effort of acting itself – which remains a gesture of homage, though perhaps one of the slightest. (p. 83)

This is not to say that a proficient actor does not put effort into her/his performance, it just means the performance is allowed to flow freely from an inner realm. The actor's effort lies in the fact that s/he has to actively create the space for the performance to prevail.

By concealing the effort involved in performing, it appears as the 'real' thing. An individual playing the part of a social worker, for example, is good at his/her job if s/he can allow 'authentic' empathy to flow as well as expert confidence. If such a performance is to be believed, it is not enough to merely pretend to be these things. One must find the actual feelings of these states of being within oneself and live them.

Individuals engage in deep acting because of the innate human desire to be experienced as an authentic individual by others. To do this, they willingly offer something of themselves as a gift through the process of deep acting. This is the means through which individuals "bow from the heart" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 73). Without deep acting, they are simply pretending.

When considering social structure, the willingness or even compulsion to engage in deep acting has many implications. Hochschild (2003) relates the deep acting involved in emotion work with the traditional gender role of caring for others within the private sphere of the home. It is women who "in general are thought to *manage* expression not only better, but more often than men do" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 164), and women who are said to be more willing to work in order to align their own feelings to suit the feelings of others. This is not to say that men do not engage in deep acting, but rather to say that the traditional idea of the autonomous male implies the predominance of surface acting in this gender role (Hochschild, 2003).

What comes under the microscope here is the effort one is expected to put into one's performances and how this relates to the expectations surrounding the different gender roles. If a female nurse, for example, chooses to only engage in surface acting with a sick patient, she may be judged as being uncaring, yet if a male nurse chooses to do the same, he may be excused because he is a man (Gray, B., 2010; Hochschild, 2003).

In this sense, surface acting and the male gender role can be related to the qualities inherent in formal rationality, especially that of impartiality (Hochschild, 1998). Because surface acting involves the individual endeavour to keep inner experiences concealed from public view, this also fits with the notion of the rational expert. Traditionally, the male rational expert's inner world is of little concern, because inner experience does not tend to be considered as an essential part of this construction.

In addition to gender, Hochschild (2003) also relates the distinction between deep and surface acting to class. She is particularly interested in middle class women who tend towards occupations in which deep acting is a requirement. Airline hostesses, sales people, nurses and social workers, are all occupations that demand that one give something of themselves to one's work in order to invoke a certain kind of feeling in another person. In the context of the service industry, this expectation is 'designed' to maximise customer satisfaction and thus profits. In the context of the caring professions, it is part of the ethical ethos of caring for others.

Recognising the qualitative aspects of emotion work in social interaction is significant because it draws attention to the relationship between external expectations and inner effort and social structure. Without the understanding that there are different kinds of acting and that these differences can purvey significantly different meanings, it is easy to assume that all acting in social interaction is surface acting (Hochschild, 2003). Indeed, this is the basis of Hochschild's critique of Goffman. What is missing from Goffman, according to Hochschild, is the idea of a self in possession of an inner life – an emotional inner life that exists in a context of external feeling rules. As Hochschild (2003) writes:

Goffman's theory of rules and his theory of self do not correspond. He posits a relation between rule and feeling. Yet the actor he proposes has little inner voice, no active capacity for emotion management that might enable him or her to respond to such rules. Even as rules and micro acts come alive in Goffman's work,

the self *that might perform such acts*, the self that might acknowledge, obey or struggle against such rules, is correspondingly unreal. (2003, p. 227 italics in original)

For Hochschild (2003), “institutional rules run deep but so does the self that struggles with and against them” (p. 229). In order to make the connection between the self and institutional rules more complete, she referred to Sigmund Freud and his idea of a “self that could feel and manage feeling” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 227).¹² This psychological and/or emotional aspect of the self complements the social aspects and, in turn, offers a more complete picture of what it means to manage emotions in the context of feeling rules. The result is a theory of emotion that acknowledges the individual “effort it takes to pay our ‘emotional dues’ to an occasion” and, in so doing, acknowledges that “these emotional dues can be costly to the self” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 229). This issue of cost to the self is central to this thesis because it is part of what it takes to be a good social worker.

This section of the chapter has explored the individual effort involved in social interaction. In so doing, Hochschild’s theory of emotions and emotion management has been elucidated. Her distinction of deep and surface acting provides a point from which to comprehend the individual effort involved when individuals endeavour to make meaningful connections with one another – connections that are experienced as authentic and genuine. For Hochschild (2003), this cannot be passed off as something that just happens naturally. Certainly, it is natural that individuals desire ‘authentic’ connection with others, but fulfilling such a desire takes emotional energy from the individual.

In the context of paid employment this emotional energy is liable to be exploited because it cannot be defined or measured accurately. Because it cannot be counted it does not count. Thus, for the most part, individuals are not remunerated for their emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003). At the same time, however, it is a valuable commodity and thus a silent expectation in many occupations.

¹² Hochschild (2003) refers to Sigmund Freud’s (1923/1961) notion of the ego, id and superego. Here, the ego acts as a kind of mediator between the id’s unconscious energy and the super ego, which seeks to regulate and control the id in order to conform to social norms.

Emotional labour is central to the work social workers do. Indeed, it could be argued that because of the way the social work role has come to be defined with its strong ethical stance, social workers are paid specifically for the emotional energy they invest in their work. Yet within the context of professional practice, which is governed by the rules of formal rationality, it would appear their efforts go against the cultural grain of the qualities associated with formal rationality: efficiency, technical perfection and proceduralisation. The general resistance to acknowledging the substantive and, thus, emotional needs of people, means that performing emotional labour can be hard work (Meyerson, 2000; Olsen & Bone, 1998).

In the following and final section of this chapter, this possibility will be explored by identifying some of the complex dynamics involved in performing emotional labour in formalised work contexts.

Formal Rationality and the Dilemma between Engagement and Detachment

Deep acting in a formalised context means working between what appear to be opposing feeling rules in order to minimise the tension between them. If, for example, a social worker is to be taken seriously by clients, s/he will need to demonstrate 'genuine' empathic concern for them. At the same time, if s/he is to be taken seriously by other professionals, managers and the like, s/he will need to demonstrate 'genuine' impartiality. For this reason, deep acting performances are essential.

Yet, whilst deep acting may be associated with authenticity, this does mean surface acting is inauthentic. As Goffman (1959/1997) rightly suggests, "performances may be sincere – or be insincere but sincerely convinced of their own sincerity" (p. 105). Neither is surface acting necessarily 'bad' or inferior. It is an unavoidable aspect of social interaction. Most of us, for example, will recall times when we have been unable to muster the emotional energy needed for deep acting and, as a consequence, have found ourselves resorting to surface acting.

An individual's recourse to surface acting could impact negatively. If, for example, a social worker inadvertently slips into surface acting when interacting with a client who is expecting a deep acting performance, this has the potential to further alienate an individual who may already be feeling alienated from society (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004).

Thus, whilst it must be acknowledged that deep acting may not be possible all the time, it is nevertheless desirable. Without any reference to one's 'real' feeling, one may come across as distant or guarded to others and this can inhibit the process of building helping relationships. In the discussion that follows, this desirability and what it may mean for individuals, is explored in more detail.

Emotional Labour: Emotional Exhaustion or Emotional Detachment?

Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotional labour emerged from the research she conducted into the way airline hostesses were required by the airline to manage their emotions in order to bring "the atmosphere of a private living room" (p. 161) into the aircraft cabin. The desirability for a genuine smile, as opposed to a "phony" (p. 134) one, referred to the expectation that employees perform deep acting in order to calm nerves of anxious airline passengers. For example, in her observations of the training sessions for airline stewards, she found that "there were many direct appeals to smile" (p. 104) and these were communicated with statements like "really work on your smiles", "your smile is your biggest asset – use it" (0p. 104–105).

Pleas such as these are hardly silent. They represent an unambiguous request that individuals offer something that goes beyond what can be written in a job description. Yet, fulfilling these expectations relies on one's willingness to do so. In this sense, emotional labour is something of a gift that individuals readily offer (Hochschild, 2003). A 'genuine' smile, or the expression of empathic concern, relies on the good will of the individual.

This plea for individuals to offer themselves to their practice is essentially the same in a social work context. The expectations surrounding social workers, however, are different. In the context of child welfare, for example, there is more riding on the 'genuine' smile than just boosting profits; the safety and wellbeing of a child may be at stake (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008; Mastracci, Guy & Newman, 2012). Because the stakes are higher, this means there may be more competing expectations being demanded simultaneously from individual social workers. First, there are the demands from vulnerable children and their families who ask for genuine empathy. Then, there are the demands from within the social work profession that ask for this in addition to professional expertise and integrity. There are the demands from managers within organisations themselves who ask for adherence to

procedure and impartiality, as well as the demands from other professionals who may ask for all of the above.

These demands are not mutually exclusive. They are ideal types, which in reality are intertwined in a multitude of different social exchanges. Although each exchange may be guided by the feeling rules associated with professional practice, each exchange will also consist of different power dynamics. By virtue of what it means to have professional status, for example, social workers usually have power over their clients (although this is a broad generalisation). In the context of interacting with other professionals, however, the power dynamics are generally different. Writing about this in the context of nursing, Theodosious (2008) referred to “collegial labour” (p. 178). In collegial labour, she writes, “personal differences [...] are more significant [...] because issues of status and place are more fluid” (p. 178).

This fluidity that characterises interprofessional interactions runs contrary to the idea that interactions amongst professionals are governed by the rules of formal rationality alone. Formal rationality is one aspect that defines the broader context of practice; yet, in these interactions, there is also an element of unpredictability.

Such unpredictability can be explained theoretically by what Margaret Archer (2007) describes as “contextual continuity” (pp. 84–85). When there is contextual continuity between individuals, there is a shared common language that eases the flow of conversation. In other words, it is easier to assume the position of the listener. When there is low contextual continuity, or “contextual discontinuity” (Archer, 2007, pp. 85–86), however, this means that a common language is fundamentally missing. In such an instance, it is not possible to assume the position of the listener, and this means one needs to work harder if one is to facilitate meaningful interaction (Archer, 2007).¹³

¹³ Archer’s (2007) notion of contextual continuity is analogous to the idea of Hochschild’s (2003) feeling rules. Both say something about the way social interaction may be experienced. The difference is that feeling rules refer to the way one is expected to manage one’s emotions, while contextual continuity refers to the language shared between individuals.

In addition to this variability of practice dynamics in general, the issues often associated with vulnerable children have the capacity to touch on emotional chords and trigger profound emotional responses (Cooper, 2004; Ferguson, 2004). Acknowledging these responses and how they can impact on practice is essential, and part of what it means to maintain professionalism. In the context of organisations where there is little or no contextual continuity amongst colleagues, however, and where there is a strict adherence to the rules of formal rationality, it may be necessary to conceal the impact of these emotional responses in order to avoid being judged as ‘over emotional’ or ‘out of control’ (Cooper, 2004; Ferguson, 2004). In such instances, social workers may need to perform an added layer of emotional labour in order to maintain the impression of a rational expert who is in control.

Amongst this emotional complexity, social workers need to make rational decisions. This involves more than managing ‘troublesome’ emotions. It may mean resolving inner tensions that arise between intense emotional turmoil and expert knowledge. These tensions are resolved through the internal conversations that take place within the privacy of one’s own thoughts before being presented to others in the surrounding social context (Archer, 2007).

Being able to create the space so that one can hear one’s internal dialogue is essential for rational decision-making. Thus, when social workers need to make decisions, they need to be able to remove themselves from the continual hum of interactions in order to think clearly about the dilemmas that may arise in their practice. Such a task sounds simple enough in theory, yet may prove to be more difficult in practice. This is perhaps where Weber’s notion of “inner strength” (1919/1958a, p. 117) comes into play. It is about finding the emotional strength to engage with different people in a genuine and meaningful way. Yet, at the same time, it is also about being able to remove oneself from that same emotional experience, so that the content and meaning of it can be thought through thoroughly.

The contemporary expectation that one must do more with less in human service organisations (McDonald, 2006; Webb, 2006) makes engaging with the content of one’s inner deliberations more difficult. Time is the essential ingredient here; time to cognitively process the form and content of emotionally complex exchanges; and time to recover from one emotional exchange before moving on to the next. A lack of time can result in emotional exhaustion, which can result in poor decision-making, poor acting performances and, thus, poor practice generally.

Emotional exhaustion is an issue in human service organisations because for many of those performing emotional labour “there is no satisfactory ending to their work” and “a lack of closure and feedback exacerbates an already stressful job” (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008, p. 100). An individual may respond to this problem by detaching her/himself emotionally from his/her work in order to preserve her/his precious emotional resources. This response was identified by Hochschild’s (2003) airline stewards:

Before the speed-up, most workers sustained the cheerful good will that good service requires. They did so for the most part proudly; they supported the transmutation. After the speed-up, when asked to make personal human contact at an inhuman speed, they cut back on their emotion work and grew detached. (p. 126)

Too many expectations and too little time to fulfil them caused many workers to cut down on their deep acting and resort to surface acting. The consequence of this continual default to surface acting was that workers became alienated from their work. Employees “are said to go into robot” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 129), which is fundamentally the same as saying ‘I have resorted to merely playing a role during my working hours and I do not feel connected with this role in any way. I just go through the motions of pretending I am connected and this is how I maintain my income’.

For the individual, emotional detachment can be just as problematic as emotional engagement. For Karl Marx (1844/1972), it was the deep and meaningful engagement with the things individuals produce for their survival, as well as the people with whom they produce them, that offers them some sense of spiritual fulfilment. Without these major ingredients, said Marx, the individual “loses reality to the point of starving to death” (1844/1972, p. 58). His critique of modern capitalism was that this kind of alienation impacts on the individual by depriving them of meaning. This loss of meaning can impact on one’s sense of identity, because by continually pretending to be something or somebody one is not, one runs the risk of losing oneself in the pretence (Hochschild, 2003; Lang, 1967).

Detachment in this sense can be highly problematic. On the other side of the coin, however, engagement without detachment can be equally problematic. The problem here is not that an empathic person may find the need to withdraw from the world from time to time, but when one finds oneself on the extreme ends of the continuum between detachment and engagement.

And because a disenchanted world is essentially a world defined by extremes, it can be difficult for individuals to strike a balance between extremes. If, for example, an individual willingly offers the gift of emotional connection in the course of fulfilling his/her professional responsibilities, s/he may face the accusation of being too emotionally involved. Yet if s/he refrains from offering this gift, they may be considered as not involved enough.

In the context of social work practice in child welfare, the emotional labour involved in striking this balance is a task in itself. It consists of responding to conflicting external ideas about practice as well as internal tensions about what actions to take. This complexity needs to be processed somehow within the heart and mind of each individual and, for the most part, this process, which plays out in one's internal dialogue (Archer, 2007), also needs to be concealed from full view, so that one is able to exude an external appearance of calm confidence.

For the individual social worker, this means continually being faced with conscious or unconscious questions about how one should adjust oneself to suit the needs of others – is deep acting needed in this situation, or will surface acting suffice? How are my actions being interpreted; are they helpful or are they making things worse? The cost of being faced with these questions equals the emotional expenditure involved in continually re-evaluating how one is coming across in different interactions.

This emotional complexity establishes the theoretical basis for understanding the emotional reality of social work practice. Such a reality is informed by individual disposition, yet it is also informed by common expectations about the social work profession and professionalism in general. What of these expectations in the future and the demands they make on individuals? In a world where technical knowledge of the market is seen as the key to providing solutions to people's problems, are these expectations on social workers likely to abate?

In short, the answer to this question is no. The demand for emotional labour is set to intensify and this is captured in the following quote by Guy, Newman and Mastracchi (2008):

Occupations with great emotional labour demands are among the fastest growing, whilst jobs susceptible to automaton are on the decline. This fact points to the

importance of relational work to the economy in general and to government. (p. 164)

This can be explained, at least in part, by Weber's notion of disenchantment. When he said that "the fate our times" (Weber, 1919/1965, p. 155) is characterised by disenchantment, he meant that disenchantment cannot be undone. In other words, disenchantment cannot be remedied through technical solutions. Paradoxically, however, technical rationality is seen as the only means available to remedy the problems associated with a disenchanted world.

In the current context of laissez faire capitalism, it would appear that this continues to be the case. The fixation with technical rationality, for example, continues to exaggerate the tension between formal and substantive rationality and the contradictions inherent in this tension. In late or reflexive modernity, for example, (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1994) there are now more surveillance and control mechanisms in place than ever before. At the same time, however, post traditionalism has meant that individuals are free to assert their substantive needs through their own unique brand of self expression (Giddens, 1994; Giddens, 1994, as cited in Ferguson, H., 2001).

Whilst the idea of individual freedom is something to be celebrated, it can also be anxiety provoking (Bauman, 1997) and, according to Wilkinson and Pickett (2009), increased anxiety means an increase in social problems. As they state:

It is a remarkable paradox that, at the pinnacle of human material and technical achievement, we find ourselves anxiety ridden, prone to depression, worried about how others see us, unsure of our friendships, driven to consume and with little or no community life. Lacking the relaxed social contact and emotional satisfaction we all need, we seek comfort in over-eating, obsessive shopping and spending, or become prey to excessive alcohol, psychoactive medicines and illegal drugs. (p. 3)

Increased material wealth and a higher standard of living may very well equate to an increased sense of individual freedom and better opportunities for self-actualisation. Yet, this does not automatically equate to increased happiness. In a consumer society, individuals can buy anything they need. Even emotions can be packaged and sold because, according to Hochschild (2012), their disappearance from public life means they have become something

of a novelty. The search for authentic human experience, for example, is what drives the multi-million dollar industry of self-help and spiritual fulfilment (Hochschild, 2003, 2012).

Yet not everything can be bought, because complex problems continue to evolve. Such problems are defined in different ways and technical solutions are developed. Social workers are hired by governments (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008; Mastracci, Guy & Newman, 2012) because their knowledge of human relationships, informed by rational, technical expertise, is also informed by intuitive expertise. Social workers have the job of being authentic in their interactions because, in a disenchanted world, this is exactly what is missing. Authenticity constitutes the ray of light that shines through “the polar night of icy darkness and hardness” (Weber, 1919/1958b, p. 128). From such a perspective, it appears that social workers are charged with the task of labouring emotionally to remedy disenchantment and, as was suggested in the previous chapter, social work embraces and adopts this as its purpose.

Given the powerful structures driving disenchantment further and further along its irreversible trajectory, however, one is left to question the rationale driving this purpose, not because social justice is an unworthy cause, but what this may mean for the individuals who have to labour emotionally under the weight of the unrealistic expectations it implies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the concept of tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives was explored. First, Weber’s notion of formal and substantive rationality was presented as a way of comprehending the different qualities that create this tension. In a disenchanted world, where formal rationality is given authority over substantive rationality, an imbalance persists and this can impact on the individual’s capacity for rational decision-making. En masse, the consequence of this is “ethical irrationality” (Weber, 1919/1958a, p. 122).

The actual act of holding the tension was also explored. Emotions provide a good starting point for comprehending this, because they constitute one of the points of connection between the individual and society. Not only does this perspective remind us that emotional experience is unique, it also reminds us that it is shared with others. As born performers, individuals manage their emotions in order to be accepted by others, and this provides the beginning point

for understanding the effort involved in emotion work and emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003).

Emotional labour involves the expenditure of emotional energy and this is determined by the feeling rules that govern a given social context. In a context where these rules conflict, the expenditure increases. This was exemplified by exploring the case for social workers in child welfare organisations, where multiple expectations surround the individual. This analysis adds complexity to the act of performing emotional labour, because it means one may be labouring to meet different expectations at the same time.

Having explored the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives theoretically, the focus will now turn towards what it takes to actually research this tension. In the following chapter, the methodology, design and research process developed for this research project is detailed.

Chapter Four: Methodology and Research Processes

Every research project is conducted on the basis of assumptions about knowledge, its production and how it is validated, or at least achieves a degree of verisimilitude. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the philosophical assumptions that are inherent in this research project. The chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, the ontological and epistemological grounding for this research is discussed. In the second, the research design and methods used for data collection and analysis are discussed.

Part One: Finding Philosophical and Methodological Grounding

The aim of this research is to gain understanding as to how social workers labour emotionally to hold the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives in the context of working with vulnerable children and their families. The methods used to do this were in-depth interviews with social workers, as well as these participants keeping a diary following the interview. Comprehending the experience of tension involves learning something about the nature of the external phenomenon that gives rise to a subjective experience. In essence, this research can be described as phenomenological in that it “seeks to convey the meanings people attach to their experience” and, in doing so gives rise to understanding the “dimensions of day to day existence” (Browne, 2004, p. 632).

Understanding the meaning people attach to their experience means gaining an interpretative grasp of reality (or at least an aspect of it) as opposed to claiming to know it. Such an approach suggests that the researcher plays an active role in the process of interpretation – that one’s subjective experience of the world has drawn one to the research topic to begin with, and thus will shape and colour one’s interpretation of it.

The value of such an approach is that the findings are not definitive, but rather act as a primer for further debates and discussions on the topic in question. Thus, the insights gleaned and ideas developed tend to be open-ended, inviting further interpretation and elaboration from others.

The position that “knowledge cannot be removed from the knower” is characteristic of all interpretive methodologies (Alvesson & Skölberg, 2000, p. 1). In many feminist or post colonial methodologies, however, this has meaning in terms of the ethical conduct of the researcher (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). From such a perspective, researchers need to be mindful of how they use their interpretive power because of how easily such power can be abused. This is an important consideration in this research because, as already discussed, the experience of tension is deeply personal. Thus, it has been necessary to reflect on how my own interpretation may impact on the feelings of others.

Hans Georg Gadamer’s (1960/ 2004) hermeneutic phenomenology provides a theoretical framework for accommodating these ethical considerations. His strong “linguistic ontology” (Kögler, 1999, p.36) is humbling in that he asks researchers to comprehend their limitations as interpreters. Whilst such a philosophical position may encourage modesty, one also needs to consider whether or not such modesty is too limiting (Habermas, 1987; Kögler, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981). Later in the discussion, this question will be addressed by reconsidering the assumptions underpinning Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

Hans Georg Gadamer’s Hermeneutic Phenomenology¹⁴

Gadamer’s (1960/2004) philosophical hermeneutics draws on Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927/2010). In this work, Heidegger expounds on the existential structure of being human (*Dasein*). Central to human existence, is the ability and desire to interpret and understand the world. For Heidegger, hermeneutics is not just a theory of understanding (although he does elaborate on the structure of understanding), rather, it is part of the human condition – human beings are hermeneutic beings, forever attempting to grasp an understanding of the whole of life (Malpas, 2009).¹⁵

For Gadamer (1960/2004), human understanding is limited by history and tradition because the language of the tradition into which we are born limits our understanding, by forming the

¹⁴ The structure of section was inspired by Yung (2011) and her analysis of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

¹⁵ Translated from the Greek, hermeneutics literally means ‘to interpret’ (Bauman, 1978; Mueller-Vollmer, 1985).

horizon of our consciousness. When we interpret the world around us, we can only do so within the confines of the language of our particular historical epoch. Thus, we cannot transcend language because language defines us. Even our individual self-reflection occurs within the confines of language because “language is not just one of man’s [sic] possessions in the world; rather on it depends the fact that man [sic] has a world at all” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 440). From such a perspective, the structures into which we are born shape us, leaving us little autonomy through which we can shape ourselves. However, as hermeneutic beings, we continually seek understanding because this is part of what it means to be human.

In Gadamer’s seminal work, *Truth and Method* (1960/2004), the process through which human beings interpret the world and reach an understanding of it is explained. In the following discussion, some of the key ideas from this text will be explored.

The Hermeneutic Circle

The structure of hermeneutic understanding is a circular one. It does not begin with the interpreter knowing nothing and reaching a point of knowing everything, as is often implied in a linear structure of gaining knowledge. The hermeneutic circle begins with our pre-understanding or, what Gadamer (1960/2004) termed, our prejudice, which is informed by our historical and cultural situatedness (Yung, 2011). From the point of pre-understanding, we can anticipate the meaning to be gleaned from a process of understanding. We then engage with the particular object of interpretation and, with what we have gleaned from this process, return to our pre-understanding. We then embark on the next round of the hermeneutic circle, to begin the process again with a slightly adjusted version of our pre-understanding. On each return to our pre-understanding there is change.

This circular process continues until we reach a point of finitude, which is a point at which we feel satisfied with the understanding we have gained. This is the point where the interpreter is able to say ‘yes, I understand!’ Saying this comes with a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment – perhaps even relief. But such a feeling is only short lived, because this circular process can never be fully complete. So, whilst one may feel as if one understands something, understanding is an ever-evolving process of comprehending (Gadamer, 1960/2004; Heidegger, 1953/2010).

Prejudice

That understanding is an ever-evolving process that can never be fully attained can be explained further by Gadamer's idea of prejudice. According to Gadamer (1960/2004), prejudice is our intuitive guide that leads us towards a point and invites us to engage in a process of understanding the world more fully. It is our projection on the world (Heidegger, 1956); our unconscious knowing; our pre-understanding. When we can test our prejudices through some kind of process of verification, then they transform into understanding. But there can be no understanding without prejudice, because prejudice keeps arising out of understanding. For Gadamer (1960/2004) "this gives the hermeneutic problem its real thrust" (p. 272).

This forward moving thrust towards understanding undermines the Enlightenment notion of being able to attain certainty through knowledge. Enlightenment thinking, with its focus on establishing certainty, discredited the idea of prejudice by suggesting it is something that can and should be fully eliminated from scientific inquiry. This "prejudice against prejudice" (Gadamer, 1960/2004 p. 273) has resulted in a myth that it is possible to free ourselves of prejudice. For Gadamer, however, this is not possible. A person may claim authority by making judgements, but judgements cannot exist without prejudice. "*That is why the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgements, constitute the historical reality of his being*" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 278, emphasis in original).

Our prejudices are more a part of our humanity than our ability to make judgements. As human beings we are limited. We are fated to remain on the hermeneutic circle in the vastness of historical reality. Even our enlightened "self awareness [...] is only a flickering in the closed circuits of historical life" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 279).

Within these limitations, however, there are an infinite number of ways we can gain understanding; every conversation and every moment of dialogue with others holds this potential.

The Art of Dialogue

Dialogue or conversation in person or through written text is central to Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, because these forms of communication form part of the

“linguistic medium” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 546) through which we interpret the world (Gadamer, 1960/2004, 1977/2007; Rissler, 1997; Yung, 2011). Such a philosophy places the Other (Tascón, 2010) at the centre of the process of dialogue. In doing so, it constitutes a philosophical statement about the importance of ethical integrity of the hermeneutic process.

When we listen to another person speak or read a text, we actively interpret it for ourselves. The text gains life through our active interpretation of it. What is important for Gadamer (1960/2004, 1977/2007), however, is that in order for dialogue or conversation to facilitate a process of understanding, it has to be genuine. This means that in the actual act of dialogue or conversation, our intent is not to win or undermine ‘the other’, but to understand him/her (Rissler, 1997). To do this, one must refrain from jumping in on the basis of one’s pre-understanding to correct the other. Rather, one must sit back and “recognise in advance that your partner may be right” or “recognise the possible superiority of your partner” (Gadamer, 1977/2007, p. 34).

Gadamer (1960/2004; 1977/2007) calls on us to forgo our own need to be recognised and to give centre stage to the other. The idea of standing back ensures we do not make an over hasty interpretation and that we give the other the chance to be fully heard before we begin to draw conclusions. This means that, in the process of a conversation, we need to keep a watchful eye on ourselves so that we do not respond in a way that distorts the other’s meaning.

In order that our hermeneutic processes are genuine, we need to be reflective, not only in relation to what others say, but also in relation to our own thoughts. We need to engage in a process of constant self-reflection and question “what one really means when one thinks or says this or that” (Gadamer, 1977/2007, p. 31). Thus, understanding can only occur through a continual process of reflecting back and double checking on ourselves and our interpretations.

Fusion of Horizons

By referring to one’s horizon, Gadamer (1960/2004) means “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (p. 301). A horizon represents the limitations of one’s thinking and the possible expansion or “the opening up of new horizons” (Gadmer, 1960/2004, p. 301). Extending one’s horizon means looking beyond an object of inquiry that is “close at hand” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 304), so that the object can be viewed within the context of the larger whole (Yung, 2011).

The idea of a fusion of horizons suggests a reciprocal process between individuals in which their limited horizons merge. In so doing, each individual is enriched with a broader horizon (Yung, 2011). This process cannot happen until the interpreter acknowledges the limitations of her/his own understanding, as well as accepting the limited horizon of the other.

Understanding is, thus, not a process of gaining ground, but more of letting go. The more lightly one is able to hold one's own prejudices, the broader one's horizon can become.

Horizons do not belong to individuals alone. The historical horizon into which individuals are born forms the outer reaches of our own individual horizons. Thus, the broadening of our own horizons takes place within the context of a particular time in history and, in so doing, constitutes a part of the whole of history. Consequently, every interpretation is an historical event because "history does not belong to us, we belong to history" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 278).

As interpretive beings, we cannot escape the grip of historical consciousness on our own process of understanding, yet we also cannot ignore new understanding that comes to light in the present because "as the historical horizon is projected, it is simultaneously superseded" (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 306). For this reason, our fate as interpreters is to hold the tension between the tradition of the past (our prejudices) and the endless possibility that is held within the present. Such a tension is unavoidable and inevitable, so, according to Gadamer (1960/2004), instead of denying this, we would do better to accept it and embrace it. In other words, we must allow ourselves to be driven by our prejudices, yet at the same time we must also remain open to letting them go.

The idea that interpreters reach out for new understanding, whilst at the same time forming new prejudice, suggests a tension between wanting to claim to have an objective vantage point on the one hand, yet needing to remain grounded by one's hermeneutic limitations on the other. Like all other tensions, it is inevitable and unavoidable and, in the context of research, the best one can do is try to find some way of finding a balance between these seemingly opposing forces.

What has become apparent in the discussion so far is that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is not a method that one follows in order to reach understanding. It is an explanation of the hermeneutic process, as well as a philosophy that advocates a certain kind of behaviour that facilitates understanding. As Gadamer (1977/2007) writes:

Hermeneutic philosophy, as I envision it, does not understand itself as an “absolute” position, but as a path of experiencing. Its modesty consists in the fact that there is no higher principle than this: holding oneself open to conversation. (p. 34)

By proposing that understanding requires humility, Gadamer (1977/2007) brings the ethical dimensions of his philosophical hermeneutics to the fore. For him, there is no fixed method through which we can ‘know’ the world. The kind of attitude that insists there is, omits the personal qualities inherent in human experience. Such an omission “deform[s] the concept of experience” (Gadamer, 1977/2007, p. 34) by institutionalising it for knowledge production in the empirical sciences.

Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1960/2004) undermines the authority so often attributed to scientific rationality and the idea that we can get to ‘know’ the world using specific procedures. He provides a perspective that draws our attention to our limitations as hermeneutic beings – that as much as we would like to ‘know’ ourselves and the world in which we live, we can only ever see ourselves from within our own dialogue, which is limited by our horizon and the historical consciousness in which it exists. Thus, we can only be blessed with tiny glimpses of reality in passing moments of insight. The thrill that accompanies these fleeting moments is short lived and always leaves us searching for more.

As suggested previously, such a philosophy invites modesty (Ricoeur, 1981). At the same time, embracing any philosophy uncritically goes against the very reflective qualities that Gadamer (1960/2004) thought necessary for a ‘true’ process of understanding. In the remainder of this discussion, Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics will be re-evaluated in order to further define the philosophical position from which this research was conducted.

Reflecting Critically on Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

One of the criticisms aimed at Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is that perhaps it is too humbling (Habermas, 1985; Kinsella, 2006; Kögler, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981; Roberge, 2011). His notion of an historical consciousness relies on the premise that language defines us as individuals and, consequently, we are unable to escape from the grip it has upon us. From this strong structuralist perspective, it appears that the individual is deprived of the capacity for self-determination (Kögler, 1999).

Relating this deprivation to the context of social research, Gadamer's linguistic ontology confines the researcher to a continual process of subjective self-reflection, which weakens her/his interpretive power needed for critique (Habermas, 1981). Gadamer's (1985) response to this critique was that hermeneutics is not about providing a way out for researchers who want to gain power and authority within the research community, but is about providing an understanding of "the inner life of hermeneutics" (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 90). As Gadamer (1985) writes:

It is the task of hermeneutics to reveal the full scope of the hermeneutical dimension of human experience and to bring to light its fundamental significance for the entirety of understanding of the world, in all the forms which that understanding takes: from interpersonal communication to social manipulation, from the experience of the individual as a member of society to his experience of that society itself, from the tradition comprised by religion and law, art and philosophy, to the liberating, reflective energy of the revolutionary. (p. 274)

From Gadamer's perspective, mapping the inner life of hermeneutics is valuable because it embraces the full dimensions of human subjectivity. This in itself is radical. Like Weber's notion of "sublime values" (1919/1958, p. 155), the reflective energy of the revolutionary constitutes its own kind of power, which cannot be fully rationalised into an objective system of understanding.

Gadamer is arguably correct. His philosophy is not something that 'should' be rationalised and adjusted to suit a particular 'critical' perspective. The criticisms aimed at Gadamer, however, are worthy of consideration, if only to draw attention to Gadamer's own assumptions about language. By presenting our relationship with language differently, a different feel to Gadamer's philosophy begins to emerge (Kögler, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981).

According to Jerome Bruner (1990), there is no doubt that meaning is shaped by language, but this does not mean that language completely defines individuals. "We come initially equipped, if not with a 'theory' of mind, then surely with a set of predispositions to construe the social world in a particular way and to act on our construals" (Bruner, 1990, p. 73).

Certainly, language can and does have power over us. At the same time, however, we are also empowered with the ability to construct our experience of the world in the ways that suit us.

In other words, we are able to command language because there is something of ourselves, as human subjects that lies beyond language.

That we are able to both shape and be shaped by the world around us relies on the conceptualisation of inner and outer worlds (Bruner, 1990). These worlds, although inextricably linked, have different qualities (Archer, 2007). The ethical heart, for example, consists of an individual's inner private spaces with that remain 'free' from the grip of language. In these inner reaches of our internal structure, meaning exists that has yet to be articulated (Bruner, 1990). These inner realms consist of undefined territory – the extraordinary (Bruner, 1990). Like organisational objectives, the external world is comprehended via the rules of language and thus a shared meaning system – the ordinary.

From Bruner's perspective, "narratives forge a link between the exceptional and the ordinary" (Bruner, 1990, p. 47). Whilst these narratives are an expression of our inner subjectivity and exist in the form of our internal conversations, they are also shaped by our social narrative. Thus, whilst narratives are unique to the individual, they are an expression of particular traditional norms.

From such a perspective, subjectivity and objectivity occur in degrees; narratives reflect the shades of grey between these two ideal type conceptualisations of human conduct. In relation to social research, narrative cannot offer researchers the licence to claim objectivity, but it can empower the individual researcher with a command of language (Bruner, 1990; Kinsella, 2006; Kögler, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981; Roberge, 2011). Admittedly, this power takes place within the broader horizon of an historical consciousness, yet it accounts for one's interpretive power and agency within this horizon.

This claim for increased interpretive power does not mean ignoring ethical considerations (Kögler, 1999). As Gadamer's notion of "historically affected consciousness" (1969/2004, p. 301) suggests, self-reflection in the process of knowing is essential if a researcher is to maintain her/his ethical integrity. In feminist research, which is highly influenced by the idea that all knowledge is situational, the practice of self-reflection is expressed in the idea of reflexivity (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Reflexive practice "requires the researcher to be cognizant and critically reflective about the different ways her positionality can serve as both a hindrance and a resource toward achieving knowledge throughout the research process" (Brooks & Hesse-Biber, 2007, p. 18).

In the spirit of this feminist requirement, Part Two of this chapter will explore the research design and the processes involved in conducting it.

Part Two: The Research Design Process and Analysis

In this section of the chapter, the research design and methods used for collecting data and its subsequent analysis will be discussed with reference to my own reflections on the process. In order to reflect my own positioning in the research, some parts are written in the first person. Such a decision is in-keeping with the notion of hermeneutic phenomenology, where it is accepted that research processes are influenced by prejudices and researchers need to be transparent about this fact (Harding, 1993). The actual process of carrying out the research took place alongside my own hermeneutic process of understanding what it means to conduct research. Consequently, my experience of making key decisions was accompanied by my own inner dialogue (Archer, 2007) and, at times, inner turmoil. What now appears to be a quite linear, smooth research process does not fully reflect my own circular process of understanding. Nevertheless, it is presented in a linear form so it can be made comprehensible for the reader.

In order to keep a record of the research process and reflect on my own “prejudices as an individual” (Gadamer, 1960/2004, p. 278), a research diary was maintained throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). Writing in a research diary assisted in different ways. Not only did it help me to record and identify how my own subjectivity had influenced the decisions made, it also assisted me in externalising some of the inner turmoil experienced when listening to participant’s stories. In the coming pages of this chapter, several quotes from the diary are presented in order to exemplify some of my personal musings during this research process and how it impacted on the research itself.

An Overview of the Design and Process

The selection criteria for participants in this research was that they be qualified social workers, eligible for membership to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), who have at least one year experience of practice in a statutory or non-statutory child welfare context.

Assistance was sought from the (AASW) to recruit participants. Once approval for the study was granted by the association's research committee, brief information about the study was disseminated to AASW members via an e-bulletin, which was distributed to members nationally. Interested participants then contacted me via e-mail. Participant Information Sheets (see Appendix A) were then e-mailed to interested participants. Those still interested then contacted me to arrange an interview time. In-depth interviews were conducted either on the phone or in person (depending on geographical location). Following the interviews, participant diaries were also used as a secondary form of data collection (Alaszewski, 2006; Bartlett, 2011; Day, 2011). The diaries were given to participants at the time of their interview, along with a return envelope, so that when they had finished using them they could send them back.

Ethics Approval was obtained to conduct this research through the University of New England Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No. HE10/165, valid 1/12/12). Prior to their participation, participants signed consent forms, which indicated they agreed to participate in the study and have their interviews audio recorded (see Appendix B). For participants whose interviews were conducted on the telephone, their consent was e-mailed to me prior to the interview. Telephone interview protocol was also followed to ensure participants were aware that their interview was being audio recorded before the interview began. Prior to the interview, participants were also reminded that their identity would not be disclosed and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The study was advertised on 28/2/2011 via the AASW National e-Bulletin. Initially, twenty-two responses were received and the Participant Information Sheet was sent to them. From this, eight people agreed to participate in the study. For the other fourteen, seven responded to say they were unable to participate because of time constraints. In the coming months, a follow up e-mail was sent to check they had received the information. From this, another four people agreed to participate in the study. A total of twelve people participated. It was not necessary to re-advertise the study, as a point of saturation had been reached.

A flexible approach was taken in relation to the times and places in which the actual interviews took place. There were seven face-to-face and five telephone interviews. For the face-to-face interviews, all took place during office hours. Four took place in the workplace and three at the homes of participants. The reason two participants choose to be interviewed at

home was that this was their place of work; one invited me to her home because she said had taken sick leave that day. The primary reason for interviews taking place on the telephone was because the study was advertised Australia wide and the resources needed to travel for all of them were not available. The times for these interviews varied. Three took place during office hours, and two took place after hours.

All of the twelve participants were women. This could be explained by the popular perception that showing genuine empathic concern is “women’s work” (Khunou, Pillay & Nethononda, 2012, p. 120) and the fact that the majority of social workers are women (Healy & Lonne, 2010). It must be acknowledged that there are male social workers and men also perform emotional labour (Guy, Newman & Mastracci, 2008). Yet it must be noted that the concept of emotional labour was developed to capture the essence of the labour involved in those service industry roles mostly occupied by middle class women (Hochschild, 2003). Thus, an invitation to talk about emotion management could appeal more to women than it does men, because women are often perceived to perform more emotion work than men (Hochschild, 2003). In addition to the gender imbalance in the sample, all participants identified as being from an Anglo-Australian or Australian Celtic background. This could be reflective of the mainstream in Australian social work (Walter, Taylor & Habibis, 2011). Similar to the issue of gender, the invitation to discuss the dynamics of emotional labour could have appealed more to this group.

Introducing the Participants

The participants who participated in the study worked in a variety of different organisational contexts. These contexts and how they will be abbreviated in the chapters that follow are:

Non-government organisation	(NGO)
Statutory child welfare organisation	(SCWO)
Non-statutory government organisation	(NSGO)
Private practitioner	(PP)

Below is a table that presents each participant’s pseudonym, whether the interview was conducted on the telephone or face-to-face, the kind of organisation in which they were employed at the time of their interview, whether they practised in a regional, metropolitan or rural area and the number of years of experience in the field.

Pseudonym	Means of Interview and time of day	Kind of Organisation or Practice	Metropolitan or Regional	Years of Experience
Fiona	Telephone b/h	NGO	Rural	10-15
Anna	Telephone b/h	SCWO	Rural	10-15
Nikki	Face-to-face b/h	SCWO	Metropolitan	5-10
Mia	Telephone a/h	PP	Metropolitan	15-20
Mary	Telephone a/h	NGO	Metropolitan	15-20
Susan	Face-to-face b/h	NGO	Metropolitan	20+
Karen	Face-to-face b/h	NSGO	Metropolitan	20+
Penny	Face-to-face b/h	PP	Metropolitan	20+
Jane	Face-to-face b/h	NSGO	Regional	20+
Sarah	Face-to-face b/h	PP	Metropolitan	20+
Emma	Face-to-face b/h	NSGO	Regional	10-15
Sophie	Telephone b/h	NSGO	Regional	5-10

The ‘years of experience’ for each participant is approximate. This can be explained by the way these questions were framed when this basic demographic information was gathered (see Appendix C) and how participants responded when asked this question. With the benefit of hindsight, asking the specific question as to years of experience would have been beneficial. In the context of maintaining the anonymity of participants, however, the approximation of years of experience ensures participants cannot be identified.

In order to offer a fuller picture about each participant's practice background, a brief description of each participant's practice experience prior to their participating in the study will be presented.

Fiona: Fiona's practice experience (10-15 years) had all taken place in a regional area. For most of this time, she had been employed by a NGO to offer family support to vulnerable families. This was her first place of employment after graduating. At the time of her interview, however, she had recently changed positions and was working for a program funded to support young people.

Anna: Anna's practice experience (10-15 years) was primarily in SCWOs, where she had worked in child protection as well as working with children in care. During this time, she had been located in various offices, in both metropolitan and rural areas. At the time of her interview, she was a team leader in a SCWO in a rural town and was also responsible for supervising staff in another office. At the time of her interview, she was due to leave this position in two weeks.

Nikki: Nikki had worked for a SCWO since graduating from university, nearly ten years previously. She had been a member of a close-knit team in a metropolitan area. A couple of years prior to her interview she had taken on a senior position within a different SCWO office, also within a metropolitan area.

Mia: Mia's practice experience (15-20 years) consisted of working for SCWOs overseas, as well as working for NGOs in Australia, mostly in metropolitan areas. At the time of her interview, she was working as a private practitioner, where most of her private work was concerned with conducting assessments for a SCWO.

Mary: At the time of her interview, Mary was working in a metropolitan area for an NGO that funded to provide services for vulnerable children and their families. Her practice experience (15-20 years) took place in several practice contexts, including several years employed by a SCWO. Most of her practice experience, however, was in NGOs.

Susan: Susan trained as a social worker overseas. Her practice experience (20+ years) had consisted of working for SCWOs and NGOs. At the time of her interview, she was working

for a NGO in a metropolitan area offering a family support service to vulnerable families. She was due to leave her position in two weeks and move into a different area of practice.

Karen: Karen's practice experience (20+ years) consisted of being employed by NSGOs. At the time of her interview, she worked within a multi-disciplinary team in a metropolitan area. Whilst working with vulnerable children and their families was not her core client group, she considered it a central aspect of her work.

Penny: Penny's practice experience (20+ years) included working for SCWOs in various roles, as well as NGOs. She had practised as a PP for many years, providing a therapeutic service to families. At the time of her interview, she was working as a PP and most of her work was conducting assessments for a SCWO in a metropolitan area.

Jane: Jane's practice experience (20+ years) included working in various organisational settings, including SCWOs, NGOs and private practice, but always working in the context of vulnerable children and their families. At the time of her interview, she was working for a NSGO in a regional area delivering a service to various vulnerable groups of people, many of these families with children and young people.

Emma: Emma's practice experience (10-15 years) consisted of working for NSGOs offering therapeutic services to vulnerable children and their families. At the time of her interview, she was employed by a NSGO in a regional area and part of her role involved travelling to remote areas in order to provide her service.

Sarah: Like Penny, Sarah had worked in various practice contexts, including SCWOs and NGOs, as well as being a private practitioner. At the time of her interview, she was in private practice and most of her work involved providing a therapeutic service to vulnerable children and their families in a metropolitan area.

Sophie: Most of Sophie's practice experience (5-10 years) took place in a NGO in a remote area, providing a service to vulnerable children and their families. In the two years prior to her interview, Sophie had relocated to a regional town, where she held a position in a NSGO. Her role was to provide a service to young people and their families.

From these brief descriptions, it is apparent that participants were practising in a broad range of practice contexts. In terms of analysis, this has posed a challenge, because it has meant

acknowledging how different experiences are shaped by vastly different practice contexts. However, it has also been advantageous. One of the aims of this study was to establish some kind of commonality across different practice contexts. Admittedly, the nature of experience will be shaped by different organisational mandates and this is identified in the findings. However, experiences are not determined solely by these mandates; they are also determined by the individual ethical heart and its desire for good social practice as well as professional expectations. Thus, the rationale for wanting to explore the commonalities within different ethical hearts was to identify aspects of practice that can be identified across different organisational boundaries.

In order to make it easier for the reader to keep track of these different organisational contexts and the years of experience for each participant, a convention has been established in the coming chapters where extracts from the interviews, diaries or other contact will be presented with the participant's pseudonym, years of experience, the kind of organisation and the means of communication. For example, if an extract were to be presented from Mary's telephone interview, the extract will be followed by (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*).

Recruiting the Participants

One of the challenges in this research project was to get to speak with professionals about their personal experiences. To do this, I needed to be able to communicate something about the study in a way that was both personal and professional. In the very beginning, this was achieved by the information given in the Participant Information Sheets (see Appendix A), which contained a brief explanation about Arlie Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotional labour.

By drawing attention to Hochschild's (2003) work, I was able to gain credibility as an academic and as a practitioner. At the same time, however, I was also able to make reference to something extremely personal. This allowed me to be explicit about the nature of the dialogue I was expecting to have with participants.

As well as Hochschild's (2003) concept of emotional labour, a brief reference to my own training and experience was made. This reference indicated that, as participants, they would be communicating their experiences to a social worker who had personal experience in working with vulnerable children. In terms of social research, this means I was an 'insider'

(Corbin Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), because I have experienced being a social worker in this field of practice, as opposed to never having had any experience of this kind. The benefit of my insider status was that because I knew something about the language used within the field, participants did not have to explain every detail to me as I had knowledge of the context about which they were talking.

Interviewing the Participants

In-depth interviews were chosen because the informal style offers participants an invitation to recall experience of a personal or intellectual nature (Minichiello, Madison, Hays & Parmenter, 2004). The interview process itself requires one to connect personally with participants and, according to Holstein and Gubrium (2003), it constitutes an “interpersonal drama, of which the developing plot is part of a broader vision of reality as an ongoing interpretive accomplishment” (p. 73). There are three aspects of this interpersonal drama that will now be considered.

Before the Interview

My interpersonal drama with participants began when the study was advertised and they responded by requesting further information. Then, following their agreement to participate, there was usually dialogue of some kind, either via e-mail or the telephone, to arrange the time and place for the interview. This involved answering any questions participants had about the study, arranging the time and place of the interviews, or having a brief discussion about their experience of practice.

Having this initial dialogue is part of the process of building rapport with participants (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Minichiello et al., 2004; Minichiello et al., 2000). In these initial conversations, I learnt various things about the participants. For example, when one participant called me on the telephone to discuss the study, she sought verbal reassurance that her identity would remain confidential because she said if she participated she would want to be critical of the SCWO. From this discussion, I had already begun to engage in the process of learning about her world view and experience. The challenge I then faced, was putting this comment aside so I did not make assumptions during the interview.

During the Interview

The idea of conducting an interview implies that one person controls the direction of the dialogue. These kind of power dynamics were of concern to me, because not only did I want people to talk ‘freely’ about their personal experiences, but I also wanted to ensure my own ethical conduct. Having read several feminist texts about the importance of paying attention to the power dynamics in social research (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Oakly, 2003; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002), I was concerned with creating the conditions for a non-hierarchical relationship. For example, Anne Oakley (2003) suggests:

It becomes clear that in most cases the goal of finding out about people through interviewing is best achieved when the relationships of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship. (p. 252)

I had assumed that creating a non-hierarchical relationship in a research process would be relatively easy, because I was interviewing people I considered my peers. But this was only an assumption. In some of the interviews, I was struck by the amount of control that was given to me to steer and guide the conversation. This was exemplified by a participant asking me if she had answered one of my questions ‘correctly’. Naturally, the dynamics were different with each participant, but in the first few interviews, I felt anxious about this power and the role I was playing in the co-construction of the narratives. To offer an example of my own inner questioning, I asked myself the following questions: “Am I leading people? Am I being too suggestive? I am feeling anxious about my own role in the research process (Research Diary).

However, the extent of my anxiety was perhaps unwarranted. Through reflection, I realised that I was trying to live up to an ideal dialogue situation, which is reflected by Gadamer’s (2004) idea of how conversation ‘should’ be. To some extent, I was also trying to emulate the ethical imperative generally outlined in feminist research principles (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Oakley, 1995; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002).

If one is to conduct oneself ethically in research, it is imperative that one be sensitive to power dynamics as a researcher (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007; Oakley, 1995; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). This mantra was foremost on my mind and, being a first time researcher, I wanted to get it ‘right’. The consequence of this heightened, almost disabling, sensitivity, however, was that I found myself paying so much attention to the power dynamics in the

interviews, that I was missing out on what was actually being communicated. I was failing to pick up on vital cues, which could have led to more in-depth discussion.

I reflected on this issue in my diary, by asking myself 'am I ethical?' Once I shared this kind of self-questioning with one of my supervisors, it seemed utterly ridiculous. I realised that whilst there are things one can do to help level the power relationship, the idea of creating a non-hierarchical relationship is too simplistic, because it is not possible to simply hand power over to another person (Dominelli, 2002b). I began to accept my power as a researcher. This did not mean ignoring it completely, but rather being more open to the situations in which I found myself with the different interviews. Through this, I found that I was able to move with the participants through their narratives in a much more fluid way. In so doing, I was able to actively listen to what was being said (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003) and invite participants to express themselves at a deeper level if they wished.

Ending the Interview

The length of interviews varied, lasting from forty-five minutes to two and a half hours. In different ways, all of the interviews affected me emotionally. Following most of them, I felt emotionally exhausted owing to the intensity of the discussion. Interestingly, this intensity was not created by the way participants had expressed their actual emotions, but more because of the way they talked about their experiences in a calm and composed way. I was struck by the way they had laboured emotionally to present a calm exterior to me, the researcher.

I maintained the position that my own experience of the intensity was a reflection of how the participants themselves may be feeling. Consequently, I devised a protocol to 'check in' with participants towards the end of the interview in order to ask them how they were feeling, having talked about their experiences. This brief discussion about the discussion gave them an opportunity to debrief, withdraw from the intensity and to voice any concerns they had. This strategy was effective. One participant expressed the concern that she had told me of an experience that could be identifying. Through this discussion, it was agreed that any reference

to this would be deleted from the interview. To reassure her that I had done this, I sent her the transcript of the interview once it has been transcribed.¹⁶

The Means of Communication

Another important aspect that may have influenced the feel of the interpersonal drama between researcher and participant was whether the interviews took place face-to-face or on the telephone. Both means of communicating appeared to be as good as each other, yet the telephone interviews perhaps allowed for more informality, even familiarity, than the face-to-face interviews. On the two occasions, for example, when the telephone interviews took place after hours, they began around 7.30 or 8.00 pm, when participants had fulfilled their professional and personal responsibilities for the day and were 'free' to talk about the topic being discussed. This also meant that the participant's family life played a minor role in the drama. On one occasion, for example, the discussion was interrupted by small children needing attention, and on another, the participant had to go and check that her small child was asleep.

It is difficult to say exactly how telephone or face-to-face interviews shaped the quality of the data because, even though most of the face-to-face interviews took place during business hours, the content touched on similar themes and issues.

Diaries

Because the interview process consists of intense interpersonal dynamics, I wanted to offer participants some space to think about the research subject away from my researcher's gaze. The rationale for this was that if I could give them reflective space to themselves, it might take me closer to their inner worlds.

Diaries were used in this research as a secondary tool of data collection. Alaszewski (2006) talks about the benefits of using diaries in social research:

¹⁶ This raised questions about the initial design of the study. Should it be practice that participants read and edit their own transcripts? This is a difficult question, to which there is no clear cut answer (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). I deliberated as to whether or not I should contact other participants and ask them if they also wanted to see their transcripts. I decided against this for two reasons: a) they had already agreed to the terms of the study and in my follow up dialogue with them they had not indicated any concerns about their interviews, and b) I was concerned about how such a dramatic change in design would be interpreted now that participants had already participated in the study.

Diaries can be used to access those facets of social life which members of social groups take for granted and are therefore not easily articulated or accessed through research methods such as interview. (p. 37)

The idea of accessing a facet of social life that is often taken for granted is highly relevant. Often, it is not possible to find the words to describe or interpret the meaning of experience in the immediacy of a conversation (Alaszewski, 2006; Bartlett, 2011; Day, 2011). It is often in the time that follows a conversation, however, that one experiences clarity of thought.

The diaries, in the form of hard copy note books, were handed to participants at the time of their interview. If the interview took place on the telephone, they were posted to the participants a couple of days before, so that they could begin to use them following the interview.

The advantages of electronic diaries were considered because they are easy to use, cost effective and secure (Schofield, 2002). However, the decision to use hard copy diaries came from my own personal experience of feeling discontent with computer technology. Whilst I accept that computers are a useful and necessary part of professional life and bring many positives, they have also come to assume a dominant part of our lives. In the field of child welfare practice, for example, information technology systems demand a lot of time from workers (Parton, 2009). I wanted the diary to offer the participants some space away from their computers. One of the advantages of a hard copy was that it could be used anywhere at any time – on a train, in bed, eating breakfast – it could accompany them to every corner of their lives if they chose.

A guide for how to use the diary appeared inside the front cover of the diary (see Appendix D). How a researcher guides a participant to use the diary is significant because it determines the content and qualities of the diary entries (Alaszewski, 2006; Day, 2011). The guide pointed participants towards an “empty space” (Brook, 1968)¹⁷ (in this case an empty book) in which to explore their reality. Participants were to decide when and where they would use the diary and how they used it. They could draw, scribble, stick notes in it or write whatever they

¹⁷ Peter Brook was an English theatre director. In his seminal work *The Empty Space* (1968) he talks about the theatre as an empty space that is designed for the exploration of practical, spiritual or emotional reality.

liked, as long as it related to their experience of practice. Permission was also given not to use the diary. Offering participants this choice was in-keeping with the flexible approach I had taken to conducting the in-depth interviews.

Another important aspect of the diary was the embellishment on the front cover (see Appendix E). The title of the study, in a child-like font, pointed participants towards the core of their emotional experience of practice – vulnerable children. This font was also representative of my own subjectivity, which was communicated to all the participants in the same way. In this sense, the act of giving the diary to participants constituted an integral aspect of the conversation (Morley, 2012).

Not all participants chose to keep their diary and there were different reasons for this: several participants said they would have liked to but did not have the time, others were quite candid, telling me they did not like writing in diaries. For those who did not keep a diary, follow-up contact took place in the form of e-mail contact or telephone conversations. Overall, four diaries were returned. The data they contained varied and added a different dimension to the interviews. For example, in her interview, one participant spoke in depth about her personal connection to her work. In her diary, however, she had written about this personal connection with reference to her spiritual beliefs.

Thus far, in the second section of this chapter, an account of data collection for this research process has been presented. Such a process involved engaging with participants to begin with and building rapport with them, coming to terms with my power as a researcher, ending the interviews and following up with participants after the interview. Data analysis of the interviews and diaries will now be discussed. This discussion begins with outlining the approach taken for the analysis.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysts interrogate intention and language – *how* and *why* incidents are stored, not simply the content to which language refers. For whom was *this* story constructed, and for what purpose? Why is the succession of events configured that way? What cultural resources does the story draw on, or take for granted? What storehouse of plots does it call up? What does the story accomplish? Are

there gaps and inconsistencies that might suggest preferred, alternative, or counter narratives? (Riessman, 2008, p. 11)

The above quote encapsulates the broad scope of narrative, which is reflective of inner and outer worlds. Narrative analysis is fundamentally about the analysis of language. Unlike other forms of language analysis, however, narrative analysis does not break language into constituent parts, but is concerned with interpreting “extended accounts” (Wells, 2011, p. 7) of reality. These extended accounts of reality consist of the way people experience the reality surrounding them as well as the meaning they construct in order to make sense of it (Bruner, 1990). Such constructions, whilst influenced by inner experience, rely on the shared cultural meanings inherent in language. Thus, language is central to the successful communication and interpretation narrative.

Narrative analysis begins with the premise that the fullness of human experience cannot be understood separately from who people are, what they have been through, their social context, or even the conditions in which their narratives are communicated. All these parts constitute the narrative as a whole. It is a holistic approach, incorporating elements of poststructuralism and the deconstruction of language, as well as humanism (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2008). Such a perspective is consistent with the theme of tension in this thesis, and thus provides me with legitimate grounding where I am able to incorporate different intellectual traditions that are often constructed as opposites.

Because the idea of narrative covers vast intellectual territory, this means that there is a multiplicity of different approaches to narrative analysis. Thus, how one approaches analysis depends on how one views the narrative to begin with (Andrews et al., 2008; Riessman, 2008; Wells, 2011). Some researchers focus on how narratives are co-constructed. Others focus on how actors structure their narratives, and others focus on the actual content that emerges from the narrative (Andrews et al., 2006; Wells, 2011). There is, however, an approach that includes all of the above. Squire (2008) refers to this approach as “experience centred and culturally orientated” (p. 41). Such an approach is concerned with the structure and content of the narratives, as well as the researcher’s role in shaping the participant narratives. Here, whilst the focus of the inquiry is on personal experience, it is also concerned with learning about the cultural conditions which inform and shape that experience and the interpretation of

it. In this research, a similar approach to analysis has been adopted. By viewing the narrative as a whole, its co-construction as well as its content and structure has been considered.

Such a broad approach has also meant that the participant narratives are to be approached from the “top down’ as well as the ‘bottom up’” (Squire, 2008, p.50). A top down approach offers the researcher interpretive strength and, in so doing, shapes the interpretation of the narratives. For example, the theoretical framework informing this study has been highly influential as to how I have interpreted the interviews and diaries. A bottom up approach refers to the themes that have been allowed to emerge from the narratives themselves. Such an approach is reflective of “grounded theory” (Corbin & Strass, 2008). Whilst my analysis is very much driven by my theoretical perspective, at times I have found it necessary to suspend this frame of reference and ‘hold back’ in order to focus solely on the text and what it tells me.

Because only four participants returned their diaries, I needed to find a way of incorporating the data collected in the diaries into the findings. According to Aleszewski (2006), the analysis of written diaries can be approached in different ways. One can either treat the text as a form of social reality itself, or one can interpret the text and understand the contents to be an expression of one’s experience of social reality. Because a narrative approach was adopted, the latter approach was used.

Understanding the diaries in this way assisted me to get round the problem of having twelve transcripts and only four diaries for analysis. Because they were understood as an extension of an individual narrative, they were, in effect, a research tool used for enriching and texturing the narratives offered in the interview. This was a similar case to the follow up e-mail contact and phone conversations that were had with some of the participants. Any inconsistencies between the content of the interviews and the diaries/e-mails were considered to be part of the narrative as a whole and, thus, part of how that person was coming to terms with the reality of her experience.

Layers of Interpretation

Hermeneutic approaches to social research require different levels of analysis. In such an approach, the initial interpretations become the subject of interpretations themselves.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) describe this interpretation of interpretation as a “double hermeneutic” and it is to be distinguished from simple hermeneutics:

Simple, hermeneutics – in social contexts – concerns individual’s interpretations of themselves and their own subjectivity or intersubjective (cultural) reality, and the meaning they assign to this. Double hermeneutics is what interpretative social scientists are engaged in when they attempt to understand and develop knowledge about this reality. (p. 144)

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) also suggest that critical or political interpretations of the research can be “described as a *triple hermeneutics*” (p. 144). Excluding the initial interview, which constitutes a preliminary interpretation, I have identified three levels of interpretation.

The first level of interpretation included the actual process of transcribing interviews and subsequent editing. Such a process involved listening to the recordings several times over to ensure the transcripts reflected the actual conversations as accurately as possible. From this level of analysis, broad preliminary themes were able to be determined. Moving on from these preliminary themes was a painful process for me, because I had become attached to my interpretation. This sense of attachment was brought about by the assumptions I had made about the participants’ resilience and, thus, agency.

The second level of analysis involved a process of coding the emergent themes (Boyatzis, 1998). In this process, the themes I had identified in my first level analysis changed and a different set of themes began to emerge. Part of the change in themes was due to my change in focus. For example, in my preliminary analysis I focused on the actual language participants used to refer to the organisational constraints they experienced. I came to realise that although the use of language is significant, the themes were connected in other, more interesting ways, such as the narrative’s structure, or through the emotional tone of the telling of an experience.

In this second level of analysis I realised that my different interpretations were informed by the further development and refinement of my theoretical framework. For example, as I began to develop my understanding of the relationship between structure and agency, I began to interpret the participants with an increased sense of agency. This seemed to add a different texture to their experiences.

In the third level of analysis, I began to read into the narratives more deeply. For example, I began to examine the connection between the interviews and diaries and what this told me about the participants. This allowed me to explore their emotional worlds further and consider how these worlds inform their practice. Interestingly, in this third level of analysis, I realised that in the previous levels of analysis I had become quite emotionally withdrawn from my experience of actually interviewing the participants. For example, by coding the transcripts, I had decontextualised the themes and in doing so depersonalised them. When I began to bring the narratives back together, I began to experience their meaning in a very different way. I was beginning to comprehend the full implications of their personal experiences of practice – what these experiences mean for them as people and also what this means politically – for policy makers, educators and those responsible for managing services. This sense of ‘coming back’ to the emotional immediacy of the interviews and diaries with a different understanding is suggestive of a hermeneutic circle.

There is another level of analysis which is important to mention because, according to Smith (1999), it creates the ultimate distance. Any piece of social research conducted within the academy relies on one’s ability to be able to write about her/his research in order to present it to others in a coherent way (Smith, 1999). By writing this thesis, for example, I have, for the most part, adopted a certain kind of “speech genre” (Bakhtin, 1986, as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 120) that enables me to establish authority within the academic community. The process of writing in this way is in itself part of one’s interpretive process, because the act of translating lived experience into a coherent form necessarily entails understanding it a certain way (Richardson, 2000).

From this it could be concluded that writing about research constitutes a quadruple hermeneutic (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000). In this added hermeneutic layer of the written word, I have been able to communicate a certain degree of distance from my attachment to the research subject as well as from the experience of carrying out the research process. This is expressed by the use of the particular kind of language, often used by researchers to write about their findings, which is designed to enhance the appearance of distance and, thus, authority (Smith, 1999).

Not only have the participant narratives been subject to my own interpretive power through the written work, they have also undergone minor editing in order to increase flow and

readability. This includes removing ‘um’ or ‘you know’ or false starts where these are not relevant to the point being made. In some instances, more significant amounts of dialogue have been removed. This is the case, for example, when a participant makes an aside, or has a sudden change in thought before coming back to the primary point. When these deviations are not relevant to the point being made, the removed text is replaced by the symbol [...].

Conclusion

In this chapter, the methodological grounding for this research and the methods used have been explicated. In the subsequent four chapters in this thesis, the findings that have emerged from my interpretation and analysis will be presented. To begin, the following chapter is concerned with the participants’ ethical hearts.

Chapter Five: The Ethical Heart of Social Work

In order to comprehend what it takes to be a good social worker, it is necessary to gain insight about what social work means to individual practitioners. The aim of this chapter is to convey something about who the participants are as people and as professionals: their hopes and dreams for their practice, their desire for good practice, their worldviews and their strengths and vulnerabilities. In so doing, insight will be gained about the ethical heart of social work. What becomes apparent in this discussion is the way the personal and professional become one. This is exemplified in the first section of this chapter by exploring the sense of genuine concern about the children and families that was communicated in the participant narratives.

Caring About Children and Families

If someone cares about another person, they experience a deep concern for them. Such an experience is usually associated with the love one feels for those closest, like family members or close friends. However, participants in this study talked of a similar experience in relation to the children and families with whom they work, including those they have not even met. This appeared to be a fundamental driving force that informs decision-making and, in so doing, shapes practice in a particular way. Emma, for example, was very explicit about what it means to care about her clients:

They know if you are just here to fill out your paper work and go back to your office and write your risk assessment, or if you genuinely care about them. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

At the centre of Emma's concern is how her clients experience her efforts. Thus, it is imperative that she labour emotionally to offer a "genuine smile" (Hochschild, 2003, p. 104). If she cannot offer this, her interactions will be experienced as phony, because whilst clients may not be able to *articulate* the difference between deep acting and surface acting, they can certainly *feel* it. For Emma, this means there are no emotional short cuts for her to apply in her practice, no strategies she can develop, no procedure that can make her practice easier on her emotionally. Her genuine concern is essential and there is no getting around this fact; this is not negotiable. Karen drew a similar line in the sand in relation to this issue:

You need to use yourself (pause) so much in working with kids, you need to care [...] I think if there came a time when I thought ‘here comes another one’, then I think it’s time to go and do something else. You don’t have to sit and cry about it all day, but you do have to... you have to care because otherwise I’d think you are too cut off.

(Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

The day Karen is not able to muster up the emotional energy needed for deep acting will be the day she considers herself unfit for the work she does. Interestingly, Karen further qualifies what this deep concern means for her practice. It does not mean falling in an emotional heap, but rather means that she needs to be able to express her genuine concern appropriately when it is called for.

All participants acknowledged the importance of being able to demonstrate their genuine concern, but this was not necessarily in relation to the actual emotional display presented in the interactions with children and families. For some, it was expressed in terms of how they feel about the cause of working with vulnerable children and their families. This is exemplified by the way participants referred to their passion for the work they do. Sarah, Mary and Sophie, for example, all talked about their passion for social work. Nikki also talked about this, but went into more detail about what it means for her. Indeed, she began her interview by reflecting on the first job after graduating as a social worker and how her manager had inspired her to feel passionate about her work:

My manager, she used to say child protection gets into your blood. It’s something that you... you know, if you’re not passionate about it you shouldn’t stay in the statutory side of things because you hear awful stuff about what happens to kids and it takes its toll on you. So if you’re not passionate about it, you could end up...you’d find yourself maybe not doing a service to families because you don’t really care, that sort of thing.

(Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

The idea of child protection getting in one’s blood suggests a kind of involuntary process where one succumbs to a cause because one has no choice to do otherwise. According to Nikki’s manager, if you do not succumb to this cause, there is little point in continuing because of the challenging nature of the work. The terrible things that happen to children are challenging emotionally, so you need to be able to have some kind of inner commitment to keep going.

Along a similar vein, Karen also talked about tragic things happening to children and how accepting this is part and parcel of the work. Just because she accepts it, however, does not mean it does not impact on her emotionally. She told me that sometimes, when reading a referral, she gets “this sort of physical, emotional reaction at hearing about a tragedy or a sad story” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). She does not have to meet the child involved, but just hearing about it is enough.

Other participants also talked about similar visceral reactions in the course of their work. Mia told me she gets a “sick feeling in the stomach” ([15-20 years], PP, *telephone interview*), which is caused by not being able to resolve the difficult issues that arise from the complexity of some cases. Nikki said she often experiences a “sickness in the belly” ([5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*) at times. Nikki’s visceral experience was not so much in relation to the terrible things that happen before children are referred to services, but more about hearing about how services can and do fail to ensure children are kept safe:

I think for me it means that (pause) that, you know, children who get abused and neglected are society’s most vulnerable people. They are children for a start, they often don’t have a voice and if I think about why I came into social work in the first place, it was to help vulnerable people in society....what I think I get more passionate about is that people, children in particular, get poor outcomes when there is not good service delivery. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

I did not ask Nikki what she meant when she said “not good service delivery”, but in later chapters, it becomes evident that she was perhaps referring to the general lack of resources within the child welfare field and the lack of training for staff in SCWOs, which results in poor decision-making. For Nikki, it is bad enough that children experience abuse and neglect to begin with, but when this problem is exacerbated by poor service delivery, this is what worries her the most. Nikki takes her responsibility towards upholding her social work values very seriously, so much so that she felt the need to qualify what she meant by her passion at several points throughout her interview, explaining:

I’m not passionate to the point that I’m over involved emotionally and wanting to take children home with me, but it’s that balance [...]. It’s something that’s easy to get passionate about and passionate, not in a sense that you get a placard and take children home. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

Although Nikki feels passionate about the work she does, it does not result in her losing her professional decorum. Thus, her deep concern holds within it a kind of reasoned common sense, which needs to be expressed through the appropriate processes within her organisation and through her power and influence as a professional.

Sophie also said she felt passionate about social justice. In addition, she admitted that expressing it in a way that is socially acceptable for a professional was something she had to learn to do:

I do push outside the boundaries and I will push if I think that it's of benefit to my client, or the organisation. I will push as much as I can [...] I get so passionate about it and I just keep going sometimes, but I've learnt that sometimes you do have to back off and just let lie. (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*)

The feeling rules surrounding Sophie tell her when she needs to “back off and just let lie” – that the expression of her passion is not always appreciated. For Karen, these organisational norms meant that she felt obliged to break the rules occasionally. This is not something she likes doing but rather something that she is compelled to do because it is part of good social work practice:

I was always a goodie goodie when I was at school, I don't like getting into trouble, but as a social worker occasionally I am prepared to get into trouble and be told off, if I think it's the right thing. (Karen [20+ years] NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Although she did not use the word passion, Karen's commitment to doing the “right thing” is reflective of her passion. It appears to come from within and acts as a driving force in her practice. Experience has taught her to listen to what her intuition has to say and act on it regardless of the consequences for her as an individual. Like Nikki and Sophie, Karen's passion is harnessed so that it does not result in action caused by an ‘irrational’ reaction. Rather, it constitutes a reasoned response in which the consequences are weighed up and considered on a case-by-case basis.

This deep concern expressed by participants is highly radical because it defies the ideal type of the professional as distanced and impartial. These participants remind me of what Myerson (2001) termed “tempered radicals” (p. xi). Tempered radicals are people who want to comply

with the rules in organisations, yet also want to remain loyal to their own values and sense of inner integrity. This theme of maintaining one's inner integrity continues in the following section where the ways in which participants talked about their professional knowledge are explored.

Hermeneutic Professionals

Like the deep concern expressed by participants in relation to children and families, the idea of the hermeneutic professional also defies the notion of rational expert. Instead, it offers an image of a professional who is more modest and willing to reflect on his/her professional expertise and re-evaluate it when necessary.

This was expressed by several participants who demonstrated a willingness to extend their knowledge base to incorporate both theoretical and experiential knowledge together. This meant they needed to be open to observing how their own personal experiences impact on them, and how such experiences can enrich their professional knowledge. Mia's reflection on her early experience of practice nearly twenty years prior clearly exemplifies this:

When I came out of university I worked for child protection. I was 'gung ho'. I didn't have a family (sigh). How you change when you have children, how you change and how you view the world and you view what these parents are up against when you become a parent...like and have practice wisdom and your own (pause sigh) um (small pause) life experiences are just, just...when you come out of university and you're twenty or twenty three, I look back on myself and think I knew nothing. (Mia [15-20 years], PP, *telephone interview*)

As a new graduate, Mia remembers herself in terms of her youthful enthusiasm. At the time, such exuberance meant she did not think about how vulnerable families may experience her practice. Rather she carried out her work according to the rules set out by her organisation; "I just used to do everything my manager said" (Mia [15-20 years], PP, *telephone interview*). Her own experience of becoming a parent, however, caused her to think more deeply about the families with whom she works. Only through this experience was she better able to comprehend what it might feel like to be a vulnerable parent when a social worker is conducting a child protection investigation.

Without her experiential knowledge, Mia perceives herself to have known nothing. Such a strong statement draws attention to the role this kind of knowledge plays in social work practice and how it contributes towards a practitioner's sense of confidence in her practice. She told me that this sense of 'knowing' had become so much a part of her that it has become "blended with [her] own personality" (Mia [15-20 years], PP, *telephone interview*). Thus, for Mia, practice knowledge becomes part of who she is as opposed to expertise, which is applied to different practice situations.

Penny offered a slightly different perspective on the evolution of her practice knowledge. She experienced a gradual emergence of insight when she came to comprehend the connection between the interpersonal skills she had learnt at university and her own interpretation of what it means for her to actually use these skills in practice:

I think I can remember learning that after a couple of years...that dawning upon me (pause)...yeah, well a few years anyway. But definitely it's...that's what it's about. It's just one human being relating to another....but it's the sort of questions you ask...you've got to have the skills...it's the whole set of questions for various things that will be helpful...and ways of wording things and... seeing how systems work, how families work...[...]. You can't just get a nice person off the street and get them to do it. It's a combination of both. (Penny [20 + years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Penny's reflection of what it meant for her to develop her knowledge and skill exemplifies how hermeneutic insight sharpens over time. With over twenty years practice experience, the actual process of when and how this professional knowledge developed appears quite hazy. However, she is extremely clear about what it has come to mean for her and can eloquently summarise this meaning by suggesting "it's just one human being relating to another" (Penny [20 + years], PP, *face-to-face interview*).

The idea of embodying practice knowledge was a common theme amongst participants. The unique way they had come to comprehend and use it became part of how they express themselves as individuals. One participant in particular was able to extend her knowledge in a novel way. For Jane, bonding and attachment theory has not only assisted her to comprehend what her clients may be experiencing, but also what she experiences when interacting with them. The human need for warmth and love is more than just a psychological theory, but

rather constitutes a primeval human necessity. Social workers can tap into this necessity in order to connect with others:

We talk about attachment theory or bonding (pause) it's that sense of...what is it that lets us walk with people, what lets us be tender, what lets us be real, what helps us open the doors to people's pain? (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

By phrasing this statement in a series of rhetorical questions, Jane is referring to something that is not easily defined. It could be explained in reference to a psychological theory and she begins from this point in order to place her expression within a professional context. However, it is much more than this. She went on to extend this idea of attachment and bonding outwards in offering a cultural critique.

We have consumer goods....[but] you know we've now got half of Australians living on their own and the increasing phenomena of loneliness, it's one of our biggest social problems, loneliness...The fragmentation of families that's going on with the impact of work place reform...we've now got a third of men in their late teens and early forties who don't have the financial or emotional resources to marry or form families because they're employed casually or in seasonal work. They can't get loans, they can't commit to mortgages and can't commit to families. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Jane is referring to a disenchanting world in which the individual is faced with conflict and a world in which human loneliness is commonplace. Being able to extend theories of attachment and bonding out this far is part of Jane's hermeneutic process. This process has allowed her to comprehend the work she does in the context of the culture in which it is situated. Understanding this context informs her of the approach she must take to "open the doors to people's pain" (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

Hermeneutic knowledge of this kind takes time to develop and requires commitment, dedication and self discipline. It is a labour of love in addition to being a professional activity – a personal journey of understanding and not just an incentive for career advancement.

Such knowledge is also reflective of a particular kind of person – a person who is prepared to glean meaning from the subtle and understated. The idea of observing and valuing the

subtleties of life was an important theme for participants because, in many cases, it is only by doing this that they are able to gauge the effectiveness of their practices. In the following discussion, this theme will be explored in more detail by looking at how participants have come to think about the idea of change and what it means for them.

The Precious Reward

All participants talked of their deep desire for positive change, either in the context of the individuals with whom they work, or in terms of the improvement of service provision. Sometimes they are rewarded for their efforts; however, most agreed that change is not a given, but rather a precious reward. It is the holy grail of social work practice and appeared to be quite elusive. Thus, for most participants, the desire for change is accompanied by the wise acceptance that it is not always possible.

Even if positive change is not always possible, however, it is always desirable. This was communicated by the sense of reward participants communicated when they witness positive changes taking place in their clients. This offers hope and is exemplified in Emma's very poetic description of her experience with some clients:

You see them [clients] blossom sometimes and I...think it's an incredibly enriching experience for me personally to feel that I have been part of that process with them, (pause) part of the process of them discovering that they are OK and that they are valuable. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

By using the metaphor of a blossom, Emma communicates the sense of the elation she experiences when clients learn and grow in positive ways. It is enriching for her because she is not just observing a process of change unfold in front of her, but she feels part of that process; it is her skill and personality that enables her to connect with people in such a way that is meaningful. Jane talks about her experience of this phenomenon in a similar way:

It's so rich to watch people warm and soften and relax with you and trust you and accept (pause) your ideas. It does refocus and move and change and I just find such (pause) satisfaction. So the bureaucracy gone mad [...] can melt with just the pleasure of watching people embrace new ideas or practices or thinking or um, and be released

from the shackles of pain or upset or misunderstanding. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Jane expresses how it makes her feel when people feel comfortable enough to relax and be honest with her. The pleasure for her is that people trust her – that they experience her as a warm, kind and non-threatening person. Like Emma’s blossom bursting forth, Jane’s clients are “released” from some kind of constraint and it is this sense of release that facilitates the process of becoming more confident and less afraid. What is also significant about Jane’s experience is that all her other practice problems seem to “melt away”, suggesting that this experience is as meaningful for her as it is her client.

Jane and Emma’s experiences suggest that being witness to positive change is necessary for one’s own self esteem and wellbeing as a worker. However, for many participants, positive change was not always as obvious. Sarah, for example, acknowledged the deep sense of reward that positive change offers but also acknowledged the times when she is unable to see the fruits of her labour. Her practice context is primarily with young people and she explained that “often with adolescents you don’t get a lot of feedback so it’s hard to know how much you are really achieving” (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). In these times, she experiences a degree of self-doubt, until she is able to receive some kind of reassurance:

Those moments of positive feedback from your clients make a huge difference in terms of your capacity to keep going and believing in what you do. (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

For Sarah, a moment of positive feedback from one client can help her to keep going with another, because knowing that she is doing something right makes her feel “validated as a social worker” (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*) and this “keeps [her] going” (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*). This raises an important question. If social workers need to feel validated in the work they do, what happens in practice contexts where such validation is not easily obtained?

Several other participants, Fiona, Anna and Karen, also talked about the sense of uncertainty they experience when, for whatever reason, they do not receive the validation they desire or need. Such discussions were primarily concerned with how they had come to terms with this.

For example, when Fiona was asked how she gauges the effectiveness of her intervention in her work with complex families, she answered in the following way:

I find through people's actions just in terms of their, you know, the simple thing of turning up for an appointment, if they're not able to attend an appointment, they actually cancel rather than just not being there. (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

Just the fact that clients are turning up for appointments, or even ringing to cancel if they are unable to keep them, is an indication that something positive may be emerging from the relationship Fiona has with her clients. Anna told of a similar experience:

I guess even if parents actually start doing what they should be doing [it makes you think] 'well I must be having an impact, for them to be doing that'. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

Learning to appreciate the little things makes a difference for Fiona, because these things indicate that her efforts are not in vain; "it makes me feel good, it makes me feel hopeful" (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*).

Change is how most professionals measure the success of their interventions, but in a practice context where "terrible things happen to kids" (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*) and changes are not always monumental and obvious, measuring 'success' can be extremely difficult. Karen talked about this and, like Fiona, had adopted the strategy of noticing small things:

I am frequently saying, during my working day, to a range of people, that if there is a small thing that I have done or I've achieved, I tell people and I say 'I'm telling you this has happened because it may be the only good thing I do today, or the only thing that's gone well. So I'm going to name it, and own it, and celebrate it'...I hope that doesn't sound too nauseous to you, but I do that because sometimes I kind of finish my day and I'm walking to the car and I think 'what did I do today?' (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Karen seems less reliant on those subtle hints given to her by clients. Rather, she engages in her own active celebration of the small things that went well for her; her determination to

maintain her optimism and refrain from becoming too down-hearted is crystal clear. Interestingly, she feels the need to apologise for telling me about her strategy, as if she was worried I would have judged her for saying this. Perhaps her trepidation about telling me is reflective of a broader social expectation that professionals should be thick skinned, and thus untouched and unaffected by the external reality that surrounds them.

Karen is accepting of the sad reality that “terrible things happen to kids” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*) and often the best one can do is make the best of a bad situation. Yet her decision to accept this does not mean she is a hopeless pessimist; rather she is a realist who remains open to possibility. Other participants also expressed a similar acceptance and this is demonstrated by Penny when referring to the occurrence of intergenerational abuse:

...it’s like a father’s sins are visited on the children, and by that I mean the bad decisions and the parenting that they offer...the disaster that they live in...and it all gets passed on to the next generation. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Penny went on to further qualify the above statement by saying “there are survivors who break cycles, but you can’t depend on that” (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). Her qualification could be interpreted as an indication that although she is realistic about what she can achieve in her practice, she still feels the need to comply with the ‘official’ social work narrative, which presents change as a central preoccupation in that social workers are “agents of change” (Ferguson, I., 2013, pp. 195–208). Penny draws our attention to a major contradiction between theory and practice. In theory, the defining purpose of social work is to bring about change. In practice, however, change appears to be less tangible and more difficult to achieve.

What does this mean for social workers in practice contexts where positive change is not the norm? For several participants, Susan, Karen, Mia and Sarah, this meant accepting that change is not always possible. For two participants, however, this meant reconfiguring the idea of change, which resulted in a different beginning point for their practice. In the following discussion this will be explained further.

The Value of People

Penny and Emma used the term “personhood” to refer to the reconfiguration of change, and this had become fundamental to them in their practice. The notion of personhood seems to undermine the idea of change in a deep and profound way. Yet, at the same time, it also provides a vehicle through which it can occur. One can only give another a sense of personhood if they begin from a position of complete acceptance; beginning from this point necessarily means one must put the idea of change aside. Indeed, Emma went so far as to say that despite her positive experiences of witnessing inner transformation, she no longer sees her role in terms of promoting change. Instead she sees her role as being able to “stand beside [people] when horrible things are happening, rather than necessarily being able to help avoid them” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

The idea of “standing beside people” seems to obliterate the whole notion of pursuing social justice by consciously facilitating processes of change. Its purpose, rather, is to offer people a sense that they are valued. When I asked Emma what the term personhood meant for her she replied:

valuable perhaps, you know that there is that sense of themselves as being as valuable as anyone else, that everybody is valuable [...]. It's that idea that they see themselves as not being a thing or an object or not belonging to someone else, or the target of something. They just are what they are and so is everyone else. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

For Emma, there is value in just accepting people for who they are, as opposed to seeing them in terms of the changes they could make in order to improve their lives. In a disenchanted world, such simplicity is hard to come by because, for the most part, people are judged in terms of what they have or have not managed to achieve in their lives. For many people, especially those who have experienced abusive relationships, being valued for who they are is often a new experience.

Understood in this way, personhood reflects the notion of “the value of value” (Gray & Webb, 2010, p. 3), in which people are valued for their intrinsic worth. Penny's understanding of personhood is fundamentally the same as Emma's, but has a slightly different slant. For

Penny, personhood is not so much about how she actively values people, but more about how she comes across to them – it is important that she comes across as being open and warm:

It's about relationships, about who I am. People can take on board what I am saying if they feel accepted and valued by me. A positive relationship with their worker is good for people's self esteem and wellbeing. They need to be able to trust me and enjoy their relationship with me then change can happen as we work together on the issue. I have to be real and genuine and affirming with them. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*)

Similar to Jane's description of being open and warm, Penny's description of personhood is about cutting through the social roles of professional and client to get to the person beneath; it is about peeling back the layers of social convention in order that the ethical heart can work its magic.

Personhood is not about change, yet at the same time it is the fundamental ingredient that leads to change and, thus, is reflective of the notion of “unconditional positive regard” (Rogers, 1989, p. 47). It is radical because it defies the traditional idea that a social worker actively works towards change. What is apparent in both Penny and Emma's description of personhood, is that it requires that one begin with a kind of inner stillness.

In the busy world of organisations striving to reach their objectives, finding and holding onto this inner stillness is not easy. To make this point, Emma made reference to Rudyard Kipling's poem, *If*, when she said “to keep your head when all about others are losing theirs”¹⁸ (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

Here, Emma is referring directly to the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. Maintaining the integrity of the ethical heart means one must maintain one's inner equilibrium. This, in itself, requires one to make a dedicated commitment to this cause, because as human beings we are all vulnerable to losing our balance “within the chaos of the system” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). This commitment means having the courage to be open and honest about one's own vulnerabilities. This was revealed

¹⁸ In Kipling's words, the first two lines read: “If you can keep your head, when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you” (Kipling, 1910/2014, para. 1).

in the participant narratives, which will be explored in the following section. Through such an exploration, it emerges that what makes us compassionate and empathic can also make us vulnerable. Thus, if one is to genuinely convey these qualities in professional life, then one also needs to acknowledge the inner dilemmas that such qualities can cause.

The Full Dimensions of Being Genuine

As professionals, the idea of human vulnerability is often seen in terms of individual deficits that need to be addressed or changed in some way – as problems that need to be solved (Brown, 2010). Most participants in this study appeared to disagree with this convention. Vulnerabilities were understood as inevitable and unavoidable aspects of life that must be embraced because they are inseparable from the valuable qualities that are essential for good practice. As the saying goes, ‘you can’t have your cake and eat it too’. If one is to genuinely care about someone and treat them with the dignity and worth they deserve, then the down side of this is that it may not be possible to mechanically turn that concern off. Or, if one is the kind of practitioner who finds it easy to engage in inner reflexive questioning about one’s practice, then the down side of this may mean that one sometimes suffers from excessive self-doubt. This kind of fallibility is what it means to be genuine. The very qualities that are so valued in social work practice can also cause grief.

The full dimensions of genuine concern are not often appreciated in professional circles because of the popular assumption that it is possible to manufacture feeling and then somehow turn it off. Several participants communicated a sense of frustration with this assumption. When talking about how she had been reproached for her emotional response to a certain practice situation, for example, Sophie stated “showing emotions is sometimes considered as a weakness – it’s not actually – its showing that you are human” (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*).

Whether positive or negative, emotions remind us that we are human. Despite this, there appears to be a cultural norm that authentic emotional expression is undesirable. Karen alluded to this norm when she talked of how others perceive how she ‘should’ deal with her own emotions in the context of professional practice:

It's that classic thing...people outside they say 'oh I suppose you must really work hard to cut off', or 'not get emotional' or 'not get involved'. (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

This “classic” assumption goes against everything Karen believes in. As discussed previously, if there comes a day when she cannot feel her own genuine emotional response to another's experience of pain and suffering, then she should not practise. For Karen, this means that not only is she is faced with having to deal with the constant misunderstanding about what it means to practise with vulnerable children and their families, but that she also has to labour emotionally to conceal her emotional response to this misunderstanding.

For Emma, the assumption that she can put her emotions aside as if they can be contained as a separate entity from her experience is absurd. In the following extract she refers to this in relation to social work supervision, but also extends the meaning of her point to refer to clients as well:

There is this sort of insane psychodynamic approach that says 'you sit on the couch and the supervisor absorbs the (pause) traumatic material of the client and the client walks out'. Somehow you're supposed to be able to go [and say] 'well that's how it is' and leave it at work....and I think that...that's insane. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

As insane as it may sound for social workers and clients alike, this popular assumption is, nevertheless, extremely powerful and impacts on Emma in a profound way. For example, she told me of an incident where she was extremely worried about one of her clients, so much so, that she found herself calling this person's name out in the middle of the night. The experience of this deep concern was so intense that she began to privately question herself and her suitability as a practitioner. Such self-scrutiny continued for a period of weeks until she was able to share her private deliberations with her clinical supervisor and relieve herself from her own “swamping of self-doubt” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). In supervision, her attention was drawn to the positive aspects of her experience – that “it was an indication of [her] empathy for the client, rather than an indication something that was wrong with [her]” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

Emma confessed that she sometimes suffered from the debilitating effects of harsh self-evaluation and, in this sense, was acknowledging the tendencies within her own disposition:

I probably have had, on occasions, a tendency to pathologise myself. So where I would probably give other people the benefit of the doubt, I'm not that kind to myself on most occasions. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Emma was not alone. As already discussed, Sarah experiences self-doubt when she has no way of gauging if her interventions are having a positive impact on her clients. Mary also raised a similar concern, yet her experience extended beyond her professional life to include her own capabilities as a parent. For Mary, it is the intensely emotional nature of the work that throws her off balance sometimes. This is exemplified in the following extract from her diary:

I think I am overwhelmed with life and what I see at work in terms of abuse to children [...] and am unreasonably hard on myself [...]. How can I get a good balance though? Am I so lost in the maze of working with vulnerable children and families that I cannot function appropriately with my own children? (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *diary entry*)

Caring about vulnerable children can be so overwhelming that it can cause Mary to question her direction and this has implications for her own family. By acknowledging this, she communicates how it feels to lose one's direction, as well as her need to find the right balance between questioning herself and feeling confident within herself.

The image of professionals struggling with this personal complexity defies the popular image of the professional in control. Yet, this is exactly what it means to be a reflexive or reflective practitioner (D'Cruz, 2007). Indeed, reflexive or reflective deliberation in social work practice demands a certain degree of self-doubt, because someone who feels too confident in their own practice abilities may not see the need to engage in deliberations about how they could be improved.

The message is that if good social work practice requires the expression of genuine compassion and empathy, there also needs to be an acceptance that this necessarily means practitioners may be vulnerable to worrying about clients in the middle of the night and/or experiencing the ill effects of self-doubt at times.

Jane explained that she cannot be good at her job and not leave herself open to being vulnerable. She even related this issue to gender politics:

They talk about the sharp tongues, you know the people that are really good at defending themselves? I'm not very good at that. I think boys (in terms of gender stuff), boys have traditionally been better at it than girls (not necessarily, because there are flaws in that argument). But it has a sense of.... if you're going to be open and available and empathic and interested...(pause) I don't know how you switch on and off in respect of that. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Jane struggles to find the words. What she is suggesting, however, is that the idea of simply turning empathy on and off is a male construction of the professional self – a self who holds the 'perfect' emotional disposition. Such a construction assumes that vulnerability is something that needs to be confined to a particular corner of one's private life, not as an aspect of humanity that forms part of who we are as people. What is significant about Jane's statement is the honest acknowledgement of her own vulnerability in a context where vulnerability is, for the most part, seen in terms of a deficit.

Participants in this study were eager to celebrate the full dimensions of genuine human qualities. As Karen stated, "I am a sensitive person and I'm a bit, you know, I can get emotional" (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). Such an acknowledgement is part of what it means to be a good social worker, because without being able to say this about herself, she cannot reflect on how her perceived over-sensitivity can impact on her practice.

In a disenchanted world, however, Karen's statement is bold and brave because of how it could be interpreted by one who advocates for impartiality. Thus, whilst it is an aspect of good professional practice, it is also an expression of her strength and defiance, which offers us, interpreters, something about how we are to understand her as a person.

All the participants in this study revealed something about their vulnerabilities – about the way they worry about children late at night, the way they question their own practices, or about how they struggle with holding tension between their own ethical heart and the social norms that govern the way in which professionals 'should' conduct themselves. These dilemmas remain, for the most part, a hidden aspect of practice, and in the following chapters some of these dilemmas will be explored further.

Conclusion

In this chapter, themes that best exemplify the characteristics to emerge from the heart of good social work practice have been presented. What has been represented, in general, is a social work practitioner who possesses a deep sense of genuine care and concern for others, is open to theoretical and practice knowledge, values people and has a realistic desire for change. Such qualities, expressed in terms of a deep human desire to project oneself in a way that may help others, came across as gentle and modest, yet at the same time strong and resilient. In so doing, they communicate hope and optimism, which remains grounded by the reality from which it emerges.

Such an interpretation sounds almost too good to be true, as if the interpreter has been blinded by her own positive regard for her participants. However, what gives this ethical heart of practice its magical quality is the acknowledgement of vulnerability. The ethical heart of participants is not a rationalisation 'designed' to present politically correct ideas to a researcher, because to genuinely care about a child and his/her family is not just a professional expectation. It is also an emotional experience.

The recognition and acceptance of this emotional aspect of practice is refreshing. Not only does it say something about the wisdom that resides within the hearts of participants, but it also communicates something about the emotional complexity, which is not often accounted for in practice theories.

What has also been revealed in this chapter is that participants are not ideal types who glide through practice unproblematically. They are real human beings who struggle with the tensions created between their own good hearts and the external realities that surround them. Some are prone to self-doubt and judging themselves too harshly; others to over-extending themselves emotionally; others to becoming emotionally thrown, thus leaving them to work hard to find their equilibrium again.

For the most part, this emotional activity goes on behind the scenes and remains hidden from the 'official' drama of practice. Despite this, it contributes to the tensions of practice because participants have to labour emotionally so that they maintain their professional countenance to the external world. This is a reality that defines practice and, in so doing, provides a beginning

point from which to comprehend the tensions of practice, how these tensions impact on individuals and what it takes to deal with them.

Chapter Six: Coming Face to Face with Ethical Irrationality

Having established something about the participants' personal and professional values, the aim of this chapter is to explore what it can mean to put these values into practice. To begin, the narratives of those who work in bureaucratic or government organisations are explored before going on to look at those in different organisational contexts. What becomes apparent in the discussion is that the personal experience of ethical irrationality is something that cannot be attributed to one organisational context alone.

Emotions in 'the Bureaucracy Gone Mad'

For the most part, the bureaucratic organisations were perceived by participants in terms of a focus on deficit and negativity. Not only does this refer to the way vulnerable families are perceived, but also on the "implicit mistrust" (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*) that appears to be directed towards workers. Rather than being able to get out of the office and visit families and do the job they are paid to do, several participants conveyed discontent at being confronted with too many administrative demands. In order to communicate the irrationality of this overbearing focus on administration, Jane coined the term "the bureaucracy gone mad" (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*); hence the title of this section.

For Anna, too many administrative demands evoke a sense of confinement and this makes her feel sad, because it means she is unable to actually spend time with children and families; this goes against why she wanted to be a social worker to begin with:

Obviously people who want to be social workers are attracted to helping people [...] so I guess from my point of view, over time I've been taken away from that [...] because we are sitting at a computer. For me it's quite sad I think because as a statutory child welfare organisation there is a lot of work that we could be doing, that preventative stuff before it gets where it does, when we're taking kids into care and things like that. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

As a statutory worker, Anna is always responding to abuse after it has occurred, as opposed to working with families to prevent it happening to begin with. Her sadness has an internal logic; prevention is better than cure when it comes to child abuse or neglect; it is better for children, their families, workers and for society in general. Yet, regardless of this obvious truth, she is compelled to do the opposite.

Other participants communicated a similar point. Emma, for example refers to the organisational constraints she experiences as “a cage” and she communicates what this feels like with a sharp sense of the absurd:

I mean, when I talk to my colleagues it often feels like we’re drowning in paperwork. It’s, it’s the...it’s a (slight pause) constant juggle to prioritise. Do you, do you do the fullest risk assessment on the same client every week that you’ve been seeing, so that you can justify the fact that you know they are currently a vulnerable client and therefore you are, you know, assessing them regularly to demonstrate that you assist them regularly, um instead of actually going out to assist them? You know (weak laugh) there (pause) it sometimes feels like...it feels like it would be time better spent, um, actually with people, than with the computer.....

...at the same time I can understand that if, you know, I get that putting in the amount of time you spend on a provision of service, may then facilitate funding for a particular...you know, for a particular vulnerable group, which means that, you know, you can demonstrate need and I see the benefit of doing those things, but the balance seems wrong. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Emma fully understands the rationale for being able to represent the work she does in numerical terms, but when there is such an overbearing emphasis on this it is, she says, “exhausting”.

Jane also expresses a similar sense of the absurd. But she also draws our attention to a different aspect of this reality:

Like I sort of don’t mind it, but it’s this um [...] I’m getting referrals from my colleagues and I have to fill in the...because I’m trying not to duplicate stuff so the

information is already in the system but I've got to extract it, so it's actually what...it's institutional abuse isn't it, it's systems...for me it is. I'm being invited to see vulnerable people, but before I can see them I've got to ring them and talk with them about [whether they] are safe to... 'are you safe to visit, do you smoke, do you have animals, what's your date of birth' um, ughhh (sigh) yeah...I just go ughhh...I cringe....(Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Not only is the system perceived to be abusive, but it is also embarrassing for workers because of how the adherence to risk management procedures may be interpreted by vulnerable families. For the most part, this irrationality remains unquestioned and thus accepted by others. This acceptance makes Jane feel "incensed". But Jane's sense of frustration is not acknowledged by others and this is exemplified when she states "when I get exasperated they say (mimicking another voice) 'oh no it's for safety, and it's'oh!..." (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

Jane demonstrates a clear distaste when her expression of frustration is met with the rather patronising rationalisation that risk management is "for your for own safety". Such a response suggests that not only do those around Jane fail to understand her as a person, it also implies that they are uncritically supportive of organisational procedures.

Jane perceives this faith in 'the system' as irrational. This interpretation was reinforced when she stated "you're not allowed to be intuitive...that gets beaten out of us" (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). The powerful imagery of intuition being "beaten out of us" can be equated to Weber's notion of disenchantment, in which the "sublime values" (Weber, 1919/1958, p. 155) retreated from public life. The consequence is that intuition, emotional intelligence, understanding and compassion are not valued.

This creates a dilemma for Jane. In order to survive, she must maintain her integrity by holding on to her values. Yet, she also has to engage with the 'irrational system' and those who espouse it. However, this is highly problematic for her because, at a personal level, such engagement makes her feel as if she is turning her back on her professional values. She says this makes her feel "deceptive", because taking such activities seriously seems to go against her inner logic.

Interestingly, Jane related this issue to the work she does with clients. How can she ask her clients to maintain their values when she feels as if she is not maintaining hers? This is an important question because Jane wants to practise what she preaches:

I would like to be able to maintain (pause) my integrity because that's the message I have with my clients - what maintains your integrity, who are you, what's important to you? I let people reflect on who they are and their values? (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Jane would like to maintain her integrity because this is what she encourages her clients to do. Engaging with what she perceives to be senseless activities causes her to question herself. Does such engagement mean that she is a hypocrite who is merely preaching about integrity and yet at the same time perpetuating deceit? Similar kinds of questions seem to surface for other participants. They are not specific to those working in bureaucratic organisations but, as will be demonstrated in the remainder of this chapter and beyond, they appear to be a central aspect of the ethical consciousness and a world of ethical irrationality. In the following section, the idea of ethical irrationality will be continue to be explored, but from a different perspective.

Emotional Labour between the Gaps of Rural Practice

The paucity of services in rural areas was an issue raised by Fiona, Anna, Emma and Sophie, all of whom practised in rural or regional areas. This is because being able to offer a good service or recommend alternative services to families is an essential part of social work practice in both statutory and non-statutory settings. Fiona, for example, began her interview by talking about how frustrated she feels about “gaps in services” (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*). Anna’s experience also demonstrates a similar sense of frustration, yet she highlights the issue in a more profound way. In her narrative, it is apparent that she is constantly confronted with a contradiction between how things *should* be done in theory and how they *are* done in practice. It was as if the idea of good practice weighed heavily on her mind and, instead of informing the decisions she made, seemed to place an added burden on her. Anna’s experience of working for a SCWO will now be explored.

Anna was so perplexed by the reality of rural practice that she began her interview by talking about her experience of coming from a metropolitan area to practise in a rural area:

It was quite a shock. I think primarily because it's a lot smaller office. I think I came from about 70 people in the office in the city to four here and it's a [small building] and there are no services and yeah....so it's quite challenging...I think that until you've done it you can't imagine what it would be like. And I think even coming from a statutory child welfare organisation, you'd think it's all the same, but it's not. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

To begin, Anna communicates the shock she experienced of when, having worked in an office of seventy people, she found herself working with only four people. The architectural space in which she carries out her work is indicative of the sense that she feels forgotten and left to struggle on her own. The statutory power she held in the big city office is diminished in the country. This has huge implications for her and her practice; there are only a few services to which she can refer clients for support in making necessary changes and very little, if any, support for her. Despite this, it is still an expectation that she respond to the reports made by concerned individuals about child abuse and neglect. She reminds us that until we have walked a mile in her shoes, we cannot even imagine what it is like for her. Later in her interview, Anna talks about this issue further, which again indicates her sense of isolation:

And I think when you've got people in management that you know may have been social workers, but it was a few years ago and things have changed. Um, and they are sitting out there thinking 'this will be a good way of doing things' without really thinking about the practicalities of what it's like in the field. And probably I've noticed that more being in a rural area because (clear throat) like I said being here people have no idea what it's like to be in a rural office. Um, and it impacts on you day to day. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

From Anna's perspective, the people in management who, she perceives, were once social workers, are "sitting out there" far away from the reality she experiences. The distance makes her feel as if they do not care because, from her perspective, they do not take the time to consider her experience of practice.

Not only is Anna faced with an intense sense of isolation but, as a team leader, she is responsible for managing and supporting other staff, not only in the office where she is based, but also in another town as well. This is in addition to responding to emergency reports and

carrying a caseload for staff whilst they are on leave. On top of that, other professionals complain when she is unable to respond to calls within an appropriate timeframe:

I mean I just had a call from a principal the other day saying that, you know, 'I'm not'...oh well, she's not getting the response that she wants from the other office. And I did explain to her, I said 'well there are only two people there' and there's not a lot that we can often do because that's not in our role and there are no services to refer to. But then you don't want to be saying 'oh we're just really overworked' and that kind of thing, because you still have to provide a service whether...you know the statutory child welfare organisation still has to stay open whether we've got one person there or many people there. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

On the one hand, there is simply not enough time in the day for Anna to do her work in the way she would like it done; on the other hand, she does not want to be seen to be making excuses to other professionals for the lack of service.

When asked how she thinks families may interpret her inability to respond to their individual needs, she said, "[they think] that you don't care, or that you don't want contact with them" (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*). From Anna's perspective, this is pivotal, because she does care. This is exemplified in the following extract when she makes specific reference to a case in which a couple are trying to make the necessary changes so they can get their children back:

I had this Aboriginal couple [and] we've got one of their kids in care and he's also on a justice order so he had counselling through that, and there's the expectation that he will travel to another town which is probably three or four hours on the bus, and then come back the same day, and you think, 'well that's a huge expectation', but that's all we've got. And then, when we were asking him to do something, he says 'oh you're making me jump through all these hoops and do this and that' and we were trying to explain, that, you know, if it was in the city then obviously it would be a lot easier, but we don't have that option. (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

Anna is unable to improve the situation for the Aboriginal couple because the expectation that they travel such a long way is coming from elsewhere within a fragmented system, where several different government departments are making different demands on the one family.

Given the history of institutional abuse towards Aboriginal people, it is understandable that they would interpret Anna's request as making them "jump through all these hoops".

However, all Anna is able to do is explain the reality of the situation. At the same time, however, she realises that her explanation about the lack of resources "does not help them at all" (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*), and so, from their perspective, her explanation is quite meaningless.

Despite the pressures upon her, Anna was still able to demonstrate her ability to put her own experiences aside so she is able to see the situation from another's point of view. This is a clear example of upholding the principles of good social work practice and a central aspect of what it takes to do so.

Several times throughout her interview, Anna reminded me she was leaving her place of employment in two weeks. She told me how she could visualise the relief she was going to feel when she left: "only two weeks to go, yay!!! (laugh)" (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*). She did not want any follow-up contact from me following the interview and did not return her diary. I would imagine that once she had left the situation she described in her interview, she did not want to be reminded of how it felt to be in it. For Anna, the interview was an opportunity to tell 'it how it is'. She told me she participated in the study because she had become proactive in raising the issue of the way "workers are treated" – "I guess you just hope that other people do the same things so that eventually someone will listen and things will change" (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*).

In this section Anna's situation has highlighted the issue of practising in rural areas where there is a lack of services. This is emotionally draining not just because it means one is busy, but also because, for a professional committed to getting good outcomes for children, it means one may experience a sense of helplessness. This idea of helplessness is further explored in the next section, although in a different context of a NGO in a metropolitan area.

Voices from Non-statutory Practice: Ethical Responsibility, No Power

All participants communicated a sense of discontent with the systematic constraints surrounding their practice. However, the three participants employed by NGOs, Fiona, Mary and Susan, all expressed a sense of wondering what more they could do for vulnerable children where there are concerns of abuse or neglect, despite having fulfilled their mandated

responsibilities. In this section, the issue of workers who endeavour to uphold their ethical responsibility towards vulnerable children, yet are unable to do so because they do not have the statutory power necessary, will be explored.

Susan's story provides fertile ground for exploring this issue. In the following extract, her major concern was about the issue of statutory intervention in relation to concerns about emotional and psychological abuse:

[The] dilemma is that I can identify and assess risk in terms of child protection. I can see what needs to be done ideally to manage that risk and address that and (pause)... but in an NGO organisation, I have no remit. There isn't the infrastructure for me to actually do the work that needs to be done (pause). The parents that I'm thinking of (where the system fails) are parents who would be voluntary clients really so they can choose not to engage with this service. So because I don't have that statutory remit here and parents have that choice, I'm having to straddle all the time working to keep them engaged, having to be directive and transparent, educate them about what the concerns are and (pause) I don't know if I've articulated all...trying to juggle all those variables is impossible and because of the um, I suppose the underlying cultural mind set in this state of punishment rather than prevention and support.... 'look you're getting there, your working on that'...but it's, it's, it's...I don't think that's the mind set of many workers yet. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Susan struggles at the end of this extract to articulate the problem of trying to address issues about children whose parents are voluntary clients. As a worker in a NGO, she tries to build a meaningful relationship, whilst at the same time educating them about the concerns.

What is crystal clear about Susan's diagnosis is that she understands that this experience of practice has systemic and cultural causes. She tells of her experience from the understanding that where there are concerns for children, a statutory mandate empowers workers to be directive because this mandate compels clients to engage with a service. This frees a worker up to engage with compassion and understanding on the basis that such a relationship is involuntary to begin with. Without a statutory mandate, Susan finds herself in a position where she has to "juggle" these two very different kinds of relationships. On the one hand, she needs to be therapeutic in order to engage families. On the other hand, she needs to be directive in order to address the concerns she has about the children.

With the idea of a “unified approach” to child welfare (Council of Australian Governments, 2009, p. 6), this kind of difficulty can ideally be overcome by statutory and non-statutory services working together. In theory, this means that workers with statutory powers need to back up those who do not possess these powers. In practice, however, this kind of partnership is not always allowed to develop (the reasons for this will be explained in the next chapter).

This places enormous pressure on non-statutory workers to build ‘successful’ helping relationships with their clients. Yet, without an appropriate statutory mandate, this can be extremely difficult in instances where clients do not want to engage with services. Later in her interview, Susan exemplified this problem by referring to a particular case:

The damage that is being done to that child is all psychological and emotional and, (pause) you know, you can write the script for how things are going to turn out for this child if there isn’t intervention, um and it’s unlikely that there isn’t going to be intervention, but because this mother can present well and this child is cared for physically, um, and not being physically abused or sexually abused that child is not going to be protected. And yet, it’s like I’m standing there watching the damage happening before my very eyes because of the emotional abuse that is happening between this child and this mother...because she only had to engage with us at a voluntary level (deep breath) and she never wanted to engage with us in the first place, she has a lot to hide um, doesn’t...because of her own childhood trauma doesn’t trust people and because I couldn’t find a way to engage with her and because I had...because I was coming with, in the back of my head, child protection issues, that were unfolding in front of me, um, which she was picking up on, it’s like I lost her and she has shut the doors down and it’s probably less likely than ever before to engage with services. So (pause) and because my hands were tied and I couldn’t make her engage, even though I did a mandatory report and nothing happened....(Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

From a purely rational point of view, Susan is well aware that her dilemma has systemic causes and she shows a clear understanding as to the reasons why the mother did not engage with her. Emotionally, however, there is a sense that Susan still feels responsible for the mother disengaging with her. This is communicated by her continued use of personal pronouns – “I couldn’t find a way to engage”, “I was coming with...”, “it’s like I lost her” and

because of this “she has shut the doors down and is probably less likely than ever before to engage with services”. Susan feels responsible, but at the same time powerless – her “hands tied”. All she can do is watch the damage happen before her eyes. It is not her role to protect this child beyond her responsibility to make a mandatory report, but when she makes a mandatory report, there is no response.

Also, heavy on Susan’s mind is the question as to whether or not her efforts have made the situation worse for the child, because the mother is less likely to engage with services “than ever before” (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*). Susan’s comprehensive knowledge about the consequences of insecure attachments and how this relates to emotional abuse seems to exacerbate the intensity of her experience. In a strange way it disempowers her, because all she can do is picture a tragic and doomed future for this child and mother. Her knowledge and skills in this scenario count for little because they cannot result in a safe environment for the child.

In her interview, she explained that she had taken this issue to her manager and also discussed it in clinical supervision. Both discussions had resulted in dialogue aimed at reiterating the limitations of her responsibilities with the mandate of her organisation. Understanding these limitations of her role, however, is one thing, accepting it is quite another. In her diary, Susan wrote:

Children are left vulnerable and at high risk. I have been unable to reconcile this and have chosen to move to an area of practice where these values are not challenged. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *diary entry*)

Here, Susan is alluding to a conflict between professional values and the organisational reality. From her perspective, adjusting to organisational reality is too much of a compromise. Thus, she felt compelled to make a moral stand and walk away from working with vulnerable children altogether. Participating in this study was for her an opportunity to tell of how she was left powerless without a statutory mandate. Without power she was unable to hold the tension between her ethical responsibility and systemic procedure.

Susan was not alone. Fiona and Mary, both of whom were employed by NGOs, also felt a similar sense of powerlessness around this issue. Mary for example, wrote the following in her diary:

Today was a difficult day. [I had] a mother presenting substance affected and expecting nothing to be said. That poor child, going home with a mother who bluffs the system. Statutory child welfare organisation why don't you listen? This child will grow up to be an abusive, aggressive person like his parents because the system has failed him. Am I also part of the system failing him? I feel I am because he is still with his mother and I am here at 10.40 pm thinking about him and hoping his mother was telling the truth about her substance use. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *diary entry*)

Like Susan, Mary can do little but to envisage a doomed future for a child who may be at risk of being harmed by a parent who appears unable to take full responsibility for her action; not having the power to intervene goes against the very core of her ethical consciousness, as she is left to question her own role within a failing system.

In her interview, Mary told me that, in situations like the one just described, she often asks herself “what more can I do?” Fiona described a similar experience:

I just, you know, you go home thinking about, you know, what other things you could try or what other things that you could do to sort of you know, um help to assist a family I suppose....did I make the right decision in doing this? (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

Fiona does not question the wider system, but rather turns her questions onto herself by asking if she has done enough – has she made the right decisions and fulfilled her ethical responsibilities as a social worker? Fiona did not talk about how these inner deliberations impact on her and whether or not they cause her to doubt her role in the system, or indeed to doubt herself. However, her questioning is indicative of her sense of ethical responsibility to her clients, which extends well beyond her working day.

Working with vulnerable children in order to optimise their wellbeing is a big responsibility – one that Susan, Mary and Fiona take very seriously. All three participants are equipped with the experience, knowledge and skills needed to do their job, yet their efforts are sometimes undermined by factors that are beyond their control.

This theme of issues being beyond one's control is continued in the following discussion, when the issue of mandatory reporting is further examined from a slightly different perspective.

Reporting into the Void

According to Karen ([20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*), mandatory reporting is a “vexed issue” because of the tension between maintaining one's relationship with a family and fulfilling one's mandatory responsibilities. Although such a tension cannot be avoided, it can be eased by practices that are sensitive, understanding and collaborative on both sides of the statutory divide. Without these qualities, however, reporting concerns can be accompanied by a sense of anxiety. This discussion has been entitled ‘reporting into the void’ because it expresses the sense of uncertainty that can contribute to this. Karen offers a glimpse of this unknown element and what it means for her:

[When you make a report...] you never know what they are going to do with it if it's on the neglect side of things, which it often is. But then if you start talking about physical or sexual abuse then of course they need to act. (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

If the report is concerned with physical or sexual abuse it is certain that those with statutory authority will respond. However, if the report is around issues of neglect, which is more often the case, “you never know what they are going to do”. It may result in a response or it may not; practitioners just have to wait and see what happens. This uncertainty is highly problematic. Not only does it create uncertainty for children and families, but also for those workers who need to maintain their relationship with the family.

In the following extract, Fiona ([10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*) offers insight into the experience of this issue. Having worked with a family for some time to address concerns about child neglect without statutory authority, she was eventually compelled to make a mandatory report about her concerns. Like Susan's experience in the previous discussion, her concerns were not investigated:

You sort of thought, well as a professional and as an agency that have a close relat...working relationship with....we sort of thought that really, we don't take, we

didn't used to take, um making a report to child protection lightly and that really if we make a report we sort of felt that it would be, I guess, um actioned. (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

As a professional with a close working relationship with the family, it was not unreasonable for Fiona to assume that her assessment would be taken seriously by those who hold statutory power. However, such an assumption is incorrect and puts her in a difficult situation. So much so, that she struggles to coherently communicate the problems it raises for her practice. The non-response from the SCWO not only undermines her authority as a professional and her assessment that a report needed to be made to begin with, but also makes it less likely the family will work with Fiona in the future to address concerns. Similar to the situation experienced by Susan, this could mean that children could be worse off than if the report had not been made to begin with.

Most participants in this study referred to the general attitude inherent within many SCWOs. This was exemplified by the way several participants made reference to SCWOs as “the system” (Mary, Susan, Jane, Anna, Emma, Sarah) or by the way staff who work at SCWOs were referred to as “child protection” (Fiona). This is indicative of the depersonalised qualities that create ‘the system’ and communicates a sense of unwillingness to negotiate or dialogue on the part of those working for SCWOs.

This refusal to dialogue plays out at an interpersonal level and can have a profound impact on individuals. In her interview, Karen offered an example of this. She told of a young person receiving a service from her organisation. The child made allegations against a family member. Staff at the SCWO responded to these allegations and “went in boots and all” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). The team members with whom Karen worked all agreed that it would be useful to offer the SCWO some contextual information about this young person's circumstances. What sounds like a well reasoned course of action contributed towards an ugly misunderstanding. As Karen explains:

We wanted to explain something of this young person's context. We weren't saying don't investigate it, we weren't saying it was true or wasn't true, um, but we had a lot of concerns about them taking (pause)...it's a really vexed issue. I mean as a social worker you, you know, you... you learn that you always believe someone that says they've been hurt or assaulted. It's not your job to investigate it

and try and work out the circumstances around it, you know, that is the statutory child welfare organisation's job. But then when you're trying to explain something of the context around a particular situation and then you realise that they think that you are actually supporting a possible perpetrator and they just put you in the box of 'these people... this service can't be trusted', 'they are not trying to protect the child'. That's a very challenging issue and that whole case had a lot of emotional impact on us. (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

This extract offers a clear example of the complexity of interactions surrounding allegations of abuse. What is most alarming is the suspicion with which Karen's attempt to communicate is met – that she was made to feel as if she was supporting a possible perpetrator. So delicate and sensitive is the issue of child abuse that one can so easily be made to feel as if they are saying the 'wrong' thing, or seeing a situation from the 'wrong' angle.

The idea that there is a 'right' and 'wrong' way to dialogue about allegations of child abuse has resulted from the cultural norms that have emerged from the dominance of the forensic model of investigation. Such a model offers workers a degree of emotional safety from the disturbing nature of child abuse by giving them the 'right' lens through which to assess cases. This lens may be necessary at times, but exploring beyond it is also necessary. Karen's attempt to offer something beyond the forensic lens was rejected – her attempt to dialogue dismissed and demeaned.

Fiona also spoke of her attempts to offer workers within a SCWO some contextual information about a family, saying "you really felt that you didn't have a voice (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*). To feel as if one does not have a voice communicates something of the interpersonal dynamics that can surround interactions between professionals in child welfare practice. These dynamics present a major challenge for professionals when their very principles of good practice call for open and honest dialogue about complex problems.

The mindset that rationalises complex human problems as easily 'fixable' was a common theme in this study. This is continued in the following discussion when the narratives identifying what has been termed a 'fix it' culture are explored.

Just Fix It!

One of the defining qualities of rationalisation in Western society is the belief that there are definitive solutions to all complex problems and that once a solution is found it can be applied quickly and efficiently. Owing to the powerful influence of scientific rationality on child welfare practice, the idea of working with vulnerable children and families has come to be understood in terms of a problem that can be solved with “simple solutions” (Scott & Swain, 2002, p. 187). And because of how we have come to value children, this intensifies the drive to ‘fix it’ when things go wrong. At one level, this idea that complex problems can be solved is necessary for fostering hope and optimism amongst families, but at another level, however, it can be misleading.

As was suggested in the previous chapter, the way several participants had come to reconfigure the idea of change suggests finding the right balance between fostering optimism and being realistic, and this takes a great deal of practice wisdom and skill. Despite this, several talked of times when they felt pressured to solve unsolvable problems. Fiona, for example, talked of an unspoken pressure to produce concrete outcomes for her manager. Karen explained how the idea of “fixing it” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*) was a running joke amongst members of her team, suggesting that whilst team members alluded to the issue, it was not explicitly discussed.

In this section, extracts from Sarah and Susan’s interview are presented in order to demonstrate, firstly, how such a culture can work against one’s endeavours to build meaningful relationships with clients, and, secondly, how such a culture can further add to one’s sense of responsibility. In both cases a ‘fix it’ culture creates ethical dilemmas.

Not Enough Time

Sarah used to be contracted by a NGO to provide therapeutic support to vulnerable children and their families. The funding was such that it enabled her to work with families within a “systems framework” (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). Such an approach to practice was meaningful for Sarah because it meant that whilst she was able to provide therapeutic support for young people in out of home care, she was also able to spend time supporting those adults who care for that young person. As she explains:

I've been able to liaise with the care providers, or the other external people in that young person's life. So the richness of the one hour session is enhanced because I've been able to work systemically and allow that therapy to be sort of carried on between sessions. (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

The rationale for this approach is that Sarah's therapeutic efforts would be strengthened and reinforced by a young person's carers, which is ultimately more beneficial for the young person. Sarah said she liked working this way because, by beginning with the young person in his/her social context, it reflected her holistic social work perspective.

Only months before her interview, the funding for this work had ceased and Sarah began receiving referrals from a SCWO, where the policy was not to fund any more than six sessions for any one young person. This change raised a dilemma for Sarah, because building rapport with vulnerable young people takes time. Often these young people do not have good communication skills and so, in many cases, it would take at least six sessions just to get to establish a relationship, let alone begin to do any therapeutic work. In the following extract Sarah clarifies this point:

I would argue that kids who have got fifteen years of trauma, they are not going to be healed in six or eight sessions. They are probably going to need at least another fifteen years of therapeutic support of some sort to resolve that trauma, or at least heal that trauma to a point where they can function more completely and fully. They don't get it resolved *per se*, but it allows them to function in a way that is useful and meaningful. (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

From Sarah's perspective, the very idea that the issues raised by one's experience of trauma can be 'solved' in six therapeutic sessions is ludicrous. At the same time, arguing for a more holistic approach to therapeutic intervention is equally problematic. First, because of the funding reality of "a tightening of resources around external therapy" (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*), it is more difficult to justify extra funding. Second, if Sarah did advocate for additional sessions for young people, this could be interpreted as a conflict of interest. As she states, "as a private practitioner it is a little bit tricky because I'm selling that world view that will ultimately give me more money" (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*).

If Sarah wants to continue receiving referrals from the SCWO, she is compelled to work within their timeframe. Yet this raises an ethical question for her. For some young people, six sessions may be all that's needed, but for others such an approach could constitute an invasive process, which is of little benefit. This possibility, she says, makes her feel "a bit yuk" (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*) because of how this might be interpreted by a young person:

Saying that we might only have six [sessions] doesn't help to build a relationship, because for young people, they've had people come and go in their lives all the time. So what's another therapist who might be around six weeks and then might be gone? (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Because of her practice experience, Sarah is able to imagine how a young person in care may perceive her offer of six sessions – that s/he may not be able to see any point in engaging in a therapeutic process if such a process is to be short lived. At the same time, Sarah tells herself that something may be better than nothing:

I guess I have to believe, I have to trust that somewhere within that, that I might make a difference, that even though it seems a bit invasive and intrusive, I'd like to hope that within their experience of being in a relationship with me that they will have a sense of being accepted and non-judged and you know, approved of in a way that will not cause harm from the short nature of it.....So even in that short period of time they can experience a relationship that is not destructive or abusive or judgemental or harming. They've had a glimpse, even if it's only a glimpse, which is not the ideal, but it may be better than nothing. (Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Sarah struggles with a tension between her own ethical questioning and her justification that although her interaction with young people could appear brief and fleeting, it could also make a difference. Something, after all, is better than nothing and holds the possibility of fostering hope where there has been none. Yet, for Sarah, the blanket rule of six sessions appears to impose a constraint around her practice and this worries her.

The pressure to solve deeply complex problems quickly and efficiently leaves Sarah with a sense of doubt in relation to the value of her practice. Ethics when working with vulnerable

children is complex anyway, but such unrealistic time constraints around practices and expected outcomes make it more so. The ‘fix it’ culture, ironically intended towards making our lives easier, actually makes it more complicated.

We Are Evidence Based!!

The other example of how the drive to ‘fix it’ can impact on participants was raised by Susan, when talking about her personal survival strategies in the context of working with vulnerable families. As discussed previously, Susan could identify situations where intervention was necessary and possessed the skills to help bring about change. The impact of not having the power to use these skills was a deeply profound experience for her. However, as indicated in the previous chapter, she had also come to accept that in some family situations, change is not possible; “I feel I have accepted that there are situations that aren’t treatable” (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*).

In the context of child welfare, acceptance does not mean intervention is not required, but rather means targeting intervention in a certain way – perhaps to manage a situation to minimise harm or just make the most of a bad situation. This delicate balance between the endeavour to bring about change and acceptance of the *status quo* is part of good social work practice. Despite having developed this wisdom, Susan told of a previous experience, working for a different NGO, where she felt pressured to abandon her ideals of good practice.

Her place of employment was funded to work with parents on parenting issues and she was the only social worker in a team of other professionals. She described the manager of the organisation as “extremely confident and very professional” (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*). Unlike Susan, her manager “did not have the belief that there was such a thing as untreatable” (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*). Thus, her manager held the belief that change was always possible and she expected this idea to share the same belief. From Susan’s perspective, this made for an impossible situation:

I suppose because her values and my values were different and the expectations as to what was achievable. I felt as if we were being put into a work situation that was impossible. [...]. There was a very high expectation...because it was such an intensive service that [...] and because of the centre manager’s expectation that everyone was treatable, it’s like everyone is fixable, so it felt like there was a

personal responsibility then to fix. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Susan left the job after a couple of years because she recognised she was burning out emotionally. The pressure to ‘fix’ was too great; “the work overload component...the intensity of the work and the hopelessness of it” (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*). From her perspective, the pressure to ‘fix’ families, which in her opinion could not be ‘fixed’, went against the ideals of good practice.

There is another concerning element of the ‘fix it’ culture that merits consideration. It is closely linked with ideas about evidence-based practice (EBP), which has come to be understood as practice that is ‘proven’ to work in certain contexts (Webb, 2006). Whilst good social work requires that practices are grounded with some kind of an evidence base, when evidence is incorrectly rationalised in terms of its worth, this can result in practitioners justifying their practices too prematurely. This concern was on Susan’s mind:

Um, and the tools we were using, the evidence based practice that we were using to work with these families, I just was becoming increasingly frustrated, because I knew that these parents (pause) are physically present in these parenting groups, but it’s just a complete waste of time because cognitively and emotionally these...most of those parents did not have the capacity to take on board (pause) what was being offered. And if they could take it on board it didn’t necessarily mean they could actually implement it. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Susan’s extensive practice experience had equipped her with the intuitive insight to know if and when parents are actually engaging with new ideas and committed to putting them into practice with their children. Yet, what is clear from her description, is how this essential detail can be overlooked. Thus, EBP, whilst essential, can also be dangerous when it leads to the false sense of security that if practices are ‘proven’ in one practice setting, they will necessarily result in positive change in all circumstances (Webb, 2006).

Susan, Sarah and other participants in this study were aware of how such a culture impacts on their practice, because it presents them with a dilemma. On the one hand, they need to conform to the idea that what they do can make a positive difference; yet, at the same time,

their own ethical conscience causes them to question the ‘true’ meaning of the practices in which they engage.

The ‘just fix it’ culture is a very powerful force that works silently. Its silent nature is exemplified in the following extract when Susan tells us that her manager’s belief that all family problems can be ‘fixed’ was never communicated in words:

[It] was never spoken out loud and in fact I was only able to articulate [what I had experienced] a couple of years after having left...that I could put it into words...It was one of the reasons actually that I chose to leave that job, because I thought I am going to go insane here. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

It was not until after she left the job and reflected on her experience that Susan was able to realise what was happening to her. Her experience of burnout told her that something was not right, but it was only on reflection that she was able to recognise what was actually going on. This kind of ‘knowing but not knowing in practice’ is often talked about in relation to contact with children and families (see, for example, Cooper, 2005; Ferguson, 2005), but what Susan’s account demonstrates is that that these silent dynamics play out in relation to interactions with other professionals too.

This silent cultural norm plays on one’s desire to be a ‘successful’ practitioner; practitioners want to be good at their jobs and want to be able to solve problems for families. As Karen states, “I mean, professionally, for the child and the family, you want to be able to help, but also you want to show that you are good at your job” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

It is not often that social workers get recognition for the work they do. Indeed they are more often blamed for problems that exist beyond their control (Banks, 2010). So, the idea that problems can be ‘fixed’ is appealing because it may lead to one being able to gain recognition for one’s hard work. Despite this appeal, participants demonstrated the dilemmas this can create.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how some of the participants experience ethical irrationality. From the narratives presented, it appears that ethical irrationality has the potential to leave

individuals with haunting questions about their practice. What goes on in 'the system' is beyond their control. At the same time, however, it is a system of which they are part. Consciously or unconsciously, they were aware of this. Mary, for example, described this in terms of "sitting with the unjust" ([15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*), and Mia talked about it in terms of being able to "be satisfied with [her] own presence" ([15-20 years], PP, *telephone interview*). These are both expressions of individuals coming to terms with their limitations within a wider system.

This expression of discontent within a context of ethical irrationality did not emerge from specific organisational contexts. Rather, it emerged from a more basic, rudimentary space within participants' ethical hearts. Anna's experience of statutory practice, for example, is every bit as touching as Susan or Karen's experience of trying to communicate with statutory practitioners, or Sarah's experience of coming to terms with the constraints on her practice with young people. Each experience was vastly different, yet, at the same time, profoundly similar.

Systemic dysfunction means that vulnerable children can be left to fend for themselves and their parents' needs remain unaddressed. This goes against everything that social workers stand for and makes way for an extremely difficult dilemma. On the one hand, participants are invited to accept the reality of ethical irrationality and rationalise it as an unalterable fact; yet, at the same time, they feel pressured to try to change it.

In the stress and strain involved in this tension between acceptance and non-acceptance, it is easy to see how one can lose one's sense of grounding. This issue was especially the case for two participants in particular. Susan and Anna were both faced with the emotional effects of ethical irrationality and both forced to consider the threat it posed to their own sense of wellbeing. Both were due to leave their place of employment two weeks following their interview.

The idea that one needs to accept injustice and resolve to be satisfied with one's own presence acts as a powerful reminder of just how demanding social work practice can be. This tension is not just about finding a balance between different paradigms, but rather, it is about the compromises that one makes in relation to the values one holds dear. This is a deeply personal and complex issue.

Everybody is forced to make compromises at some point in their lives. In most areas of life, however, there is a balance between the compromises that go against one's better judgement and those that are agreeable to it. This is not to suggest that social workers in the child welfare field cannot find a similar balance. However, what the narratives in this chapter have demonstrated is how 'the system' can, in some instances, narrow the odds of striking it.

This is part of the emotional reality of social work practice in the child welfare field. On the one hand, ethical practice is fostered by hope; yet, at the same time, it can lead to despair and frustration. Both these experiences are part of practice and, in a strange way, both constitute a driving force influencing practitioners to keep going in their pursuit of social justice. That social workers do manage to push through the ethical irrationality in order to hold on to their values is the subject of the next chapter, when the actual emotional labour (Hochschild, 2003) involved in bringing about change is explored.

Chapter Seven: Winning Hearts and Minds¹⁹

In this chapter, the participants' practice experiences continue to be explored, but from a different perspective. Here, the focus is primarily on the interpersonal dynamics between participants and other individuals, including colleagues and managers, as well as vulnerable families.

These dynamics are central to comprehending the tensions of practice, because not only do they provide the starting point for working towards positive change, but they are also the point where change can often be resisted. First, the participants' accounts of the emotional labour involved when interacting with vulnerable children and their families will be explored, before going on to see how they labour emotionally in their interactions with other professionals.

Building Relationships with Vulnerable Children and Their Families

Building relationships with clients can be an extremely rewarding experience. This is an important consideration because it is part of what motivates people to become social workers. If one just focuses on this aspect of building relationships, however, it would be very easy to romanticise social work practice, and, in so doing, skim over the reality that building relationships with clients can be extremely challenging and exhausting. In this section, a different perspective of the social work relationship with clients is presented.

As participants reflected on their practice and what it means for them emotionally, there were various descriptions presented in the narratives of families. Many of the families described could be described as having "complex needs" (Butler et al., 2012, p. 572). As discussed previously, the term "complex needs" refers to individuals or families who experience multiple issues and, in some cases (not all), this can mean that the children may be experiencing abuse or neglect. Whilst such a definition may be technically correct, it does not capture the reality of what it may mean to come face-to-face with a family who has complex

¹⁹ The title for this chapter was inspired by Helen Gorman's (2000) paper about the emotional labour involved in care work with people who have a mental illness.

needs. This is perhaps why most participants felt the need to offer descriptions of the families with whom they work. Sophie gives an example of this:

I can think of one family in particular and the three boys [...] the little one was very hyper so he had like Attention Deficit Disorder and they had...I think they were all touched with foetal alcohol syndrome. So, you know, there was quite a lot of intensity within the kids as well as within the family itself. He (the father) was from a different cultural background to the mother so you know there were a lot of cultural issues there as well, and there was domestic violence, and she was...a lot of alcohol and he was smoking weed, so, you know, there was a lot of incredibly intense issues within this one family. (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*)

Mental health issues, substance abuse and domestic violence are common issues (Arney & Scott, 2010). These can often be accompanied by poor hygiene, poor social skills and a general sense of melancholy. Experiencing these dynamics in a family where there are small children can be emotionally, spiritually and physically confronting (Ferguson, H., 2005, 2011).

Because the social work mantra is not to judge others, some participants struggled to talk about how they experienced the dynamics involved when interacting with some vulnerable families. It was as if they wanted to communicate their 'true feelings' on the one hand, but did not want to come across as judgemental on the other. For example, when making reference to working with parents with a learning impairment, Mia was quick to qualify the meaning of her statement about her experience of working with parents who have a disability before she says it:

Well emotionally and psychologically they are a lot of time um...(this sounds horrible)...but as a worker, you often spend time talking to them as if they are children. You're starting from the beginning, you're explaining everything as you would a child and so they are emotionally and psychologically sometimes definitely not where they are chronologically, um, because of whatever else is going on we are treating them with their chronological age and they are just not there. (Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*)

Communicating with adults as if they are children would generally be considered disrespectful. Yet, in the context of some vulnerable families it may be necessary. This kind of cross cultural²⁰ communication will thus need to be balanced with one's positive regard. Intellectually, finding such a balance sounds unproblematic; emotionally, however, it is fraught with complexity.

Part of what makes it so complex is that, in many instances, vulnerable families or children do not have the skills needed to communicate in a way that naturally fosters positive regard. Emotional outbursts or threatening behaviour, whilst not the general norm, are a common aspect of practice. This brings an element of unpredictability to practice, which from an emotional perspective, can be extremely demanding. This is exemplified by Sarah in the following extract about her work with young people:

It's hard work, particularly with adolescents, with vulnerable adolescents, because I reckon there are a lot of sessions that I go into with the young and I am on egg shells, wondering what mood they will be in today, what approach I should take today? You know, I'm not sure if I'm going to trigger them and set them off, do I go slowly, slowly? Do I push a bit harder? I think it is incredibly challenging, having relationships, particularly with adolescents because they are so vulnerable. They have got such strong defence mechanisms [and] more often than not, they have got very poor relationship skills on the whole and it's very difficult to connect with them and maintain a connection and to actually endeavour to do some therapeutic change...very hard work...without reservation it's hard work.
(Sarah [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Sarah draws our attention to the actual nuts and bolts of interacting with people who (for whatever reason) may not have had the opportunity to develop the skills needed to build meaningful relationships. She communicates the element of the unknown – perhaps the young person will reciprocate with a hostile emotional outburst or perhaps not? Needless to say, these kinds of interactions require intense concentration, because one needs to read the

²⁰ Here I use the term culture in the broadest possible sense to include different social norms, such as those that often occur between different socioeconomic groups.

emotional subtleties of the situation to secure one's own safety; one wrong move and it could trigger an emotional outburst, which could be threatening.

This element of unpredictability was also expressed by Penny, when she described how she feels when she goes out to work some days:

When I go out to work some days I feel I'm going out alone. I feel small and vulnerable. I'm not sure what is ahead but it could be violent and threatening: emotionally and verbally....angry clients, easily threatened departmental workers. Usually the threat isn't physical, but it feels like it could be sometimes if someone gets angry enough.

I am going out to a hostile physical environment too, whether that just be a grotty or depressing place or a place where people are disgruntled. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*)

Before she goes out to work, Penny prepares herself for the possibility she may have to face upset clients or unsettling surroundings. This is all part of her emotional experience of engaging with clients.

Penny explained that she often feels vulnerable in her work with clients because, in order to respect their personhood, she has to be open and real with them. However, if her openness is met with hostility, there is a risk it could be at a cost to herself. She describes this feeling as a "lamb to the slaughter" (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*), which is suggestive of her sense of vulnerability. In the following extract, she offers insight as to what this is like:

Just this morning I was the lamb going out. I actually wasn't at all apprehensive until I arrived and the person said 'you're late'. I had just driven about 90kms and navigated through areas I was unsure of and I was 8 minutes late. Just had to 'suck it up' apologise, explain, but by the time I got through the door the client was doing better. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*)

Penny refrained from defending herself when she was told she was late. Instead, she apologised so that she could begin to build a relationship with the client. Her experience tells us something of the way she manages her own emotions when she is working. As a person

she experiences apprehension and a fear of the unknown. Yet she labours emotionally to conceal these feelings so she can be open to her client.

Like the hermeneutic knowledge discussed previously, the actual point at which these dynamics impact is not easily identifiable. They tend to be unconscious to begin with and then slowly enter into consciousness. This is one of the reasons why working with vulnerable children is so complex.

This kind of emotional complexity makes communicating concerns about child abuse or neglect to others extremely challenging. Karen alluded to this issue when talking about her role in supporting other staff within the organisation where she works:

I have basically what I call the time management theorist's nightmare of 'my door is open'. If it's open, the people, you know [...] if they have had really rough interaction with a parent or someone on the phone um, anything that happens and you kind of, you know, you don't want to go into the tea room because you're feeling really emotional about it, or you feel you've kind of stuffed up or that you...you should have done something better and you need to process it at a more personal level, I'm always happy to do that [...]. And, specifically, when we have challenges around child protection issues, then I'm always happy for people to come and think...work though what the issues might be...think it through, how they are feeling about it, what the concerns are, how to put it [a report] together. (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Even with her extensive experience of practice, Karen finds it difficult to articulate exactly why she has an "open door" policy. She stops and starts with her reasoning: "a rough interaction with a parent or someone"; "anything happens and you kind of...."; "feeling emotional" "kind of stuffed up"; "should have done something better"; "need to process at a personal level". Perhaps such concerns are not always to do with abuse or neglect, but Karen's fragmented narrative points towards something inexplicable, disturbing and troubling. Karen clearly understands that these kinds of issues are often not fully apparent to begin with but seem to creep up on individuals. She offers a supportive space to others, because she knows that it will be needed if individuals are to make sense of these kinds of interactions with clients.

In this section, some of the challenging aspects of interpersonal dynamics with vulnerable families have been presented. What was surprising about these accounts was that even with years of practice experience behind them, many participants talked about vulnerable families and the issues involved as if for the first time. I had assumed that as one gains experience, the need to discuss the details of these dynamics would diminish. However, for these participants, this did not appear to be the case.

Harmonising Discord and Resolving Conflict

From their differing perspectives, all participants identified the importance of good working relationships with other professionals, not only within one's organisation, but also with other organisations. Consequently, many told of their attempts to improve working relationships between professionals. Anna, for example, talked about the networking lunch she organised for agencies in the local area, so that staff could learn about each other's roles. Mia talked of how she attended meetings with the management at the local SCWO, so that she and her team could begin to build bridges between her staff and those in the SCWO following a disagreement in relation to a particular family situation. These efforts to resolve conflict and smooth relations are part and parcel of good social work practice and this section draws attention to the emotional labour involved in such endeavours.

Given the cultural abhorrence that surrounds the occurrence of child abuse or neglect, emotionally charged environments are inevitable. In the following extract from her diary, Mary offers insight into this:

Staff are traumatised from working with vulnerable families and children. The distress that is transferred to staff is extensive and they need a lot of support, supervision and understanding in order to process the trauma and continue with a positive working relationship. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *diary entry*)

By its very nature, working with vulnerable children necessarily means that staff will experience emotional turmoil and/or vicarious trauma from time to time. From Mary's description here, however, this experience appears to be continual. If this is the case, then it makes way for strong emotional undercurrents within the organisational dynamics. These undercurrents are exemplified in the following extract from Nikki's interview, where she

describes the conflict that often arises between the staff employed by the SCWO and those employed by the NGO contracted to offer support to families with vulnerable children:

The agency that goes into the home to do the ‘in-house’ work that we fund, they [the staff at the NGO] can sometimes tend to have very different perceptions on a case. So they might say ‘oh the risk is far too high, we won’t go into the home’, um, or ‘we want to close’. And we [the staff at the statutory organisation] are saying ‘well we want to close’ and they’re [the staff in the NGO] saying ‘we think you should remove the child’. What happens then is that they tend to have a ‘standoff’. So at the front line level, you’ve got people going into the home and doing the work and then you’ve got our staff [the staff at the SCWO] who tend to have this [attitude]. You can hear them when they get off the phone, they slam the phone down and they call out ‘I can’t believe that bloody child welfare agency is at it again’ or ‘that worker!’ and ‘she has ‘no idea!’ (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

This description can be summed up not only in terms of confusion and misunderstanding, but also in terms of a kind of obstinacy on each side of the statutory divide. It is as if the emotions invested in families culminate in the idea that “they are bad and we are good” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*), and this results in an organisational culture of blame shifting.

Blaming another organisation or professional for not responding appropriately may be necessary in some situations. However, when such an attitude comes to be ingrained in organisational cultures, it can be harmful and unproductive, and can have serious implications for children and their families. To give an example, Nikki told of a particular case in which the statutory workers had begun legal proceedings in relation to a particular family around issues of child neglect, and the staff at the NGO had taken on the role of advocate for the children’s mother. In child protection cases, advocacy for parents and carers is important and it must be acknowledged that staff at the NGO may have had valid reasons for taking such a stance. The issue here, however, is that instead of these differing positions being communicated through constructive dialogue, they result in a kind of stalemate, which does little to actually help the children and family concerned.

For those committed to upholding good practice, this is a serious problem that needs to be addressed. Nikki goes on to diagnose this problem:

It comes down to the fact that they [the staff in each organisation] are not hearing each other and they've lost credibility with each other, their assessments are going off on different tangents and that's where the problem starts, that they both think that they are right [...]. They don't have high level communication skills [because] they have not been developed yet. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

Such an assessment is analogous to one a relationship counsellor might make when couples drift apart – “they've lost credibility with each other”, they go off on “different tangents”, “they both think they are right” and often, they do not have the communication skills needed to come together and hear each other's point of view.

In order to help the couple, a relationship counsellor may bring the two parties together and facilitate a process where the lines of communication could be opened up. In doing this, the feelings of each person involved would need to be heard and validated. This involves carefully reading the emotional subtleties and responding appropriately, which takes skill and concentration. Emma has framed her diagnosis of organisational dynamics in a similar way by suggesting “it's about extending therapeutic thinking to other people within the system other than just to the individual who is in front of you all the time” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

For Emma, therapeutic thinking does not stop with her clients, but rather extends out to be inclusive of those other professionals with whom she works. Indeed, she sees each moment as an opportunity to build bridges and connect with others. This is exemplified in the following extract:

I guess when I interact with them [other professionals] now in stakeholder meetings or, you know, when I'm talking about a client or a child or a family, I try and talk to them about what that's like for them as well. So part of the conversation isn't just ‘what are you doing for this child?’ It's ‘gosh, how are you coping with all of that?’ and bothering to find out. [...]. People often will talk to you then about what it's really like and then the next time you have a conversation

with them they feel more safe to tell you some other thing and you often get much further than what you would otherwise, because you've built the trust by being interested in them and seeing them as a person verses the system. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

By offering other staff an invitation to talk about how they may be feeling, Emma puts her own agenda aside in order to ease tensions within the workplace. Like any good counsellor, she volunteers her own being in order to show genuine interest in the lives of others. The result is the development of trust, which ultimately leads to better working relationships with other professionals.

It takes a lot to be able to do what Emma does. Not only does she have to work hard emotionally to remain open with her clients, but she also feels the need to do this with her peers. She admits this has not always been the case, and told of a time when she used to express her own frustrations by mocking workers in SCWOs:

I think I was very much of the mindset that they [staff at the SCWO] are like this and they're bad and 'we're good and we know what it's like and they don't really care'. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

The realisation that such an attitude is unhelpful constitutes part of Emma's continual hermeneutic process. But if her learning is to have meaning, it needs to be put into practice. Thus, for her, it is about actively demonstrating the basic principle of compassion and understanding for others who may be experiencing hardship, including other staff:

I try very hard and I guess I hope I can continue to learn lessons around saying you know (pause) those people are just people, I mean they are often very burnt out themselves and very tired seeing other people trying to influence and [...] not being liked for what they do. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Emma tries to comprehend what it must be like to be a statutory worker. Not only is the effectiveness of their practices limited by poor resourcing and an overbearing focus on organisational accountability, but they are judged harshly for this by others. She bothers to take the time to wonder what it might feel like to be criticised for that which is beyond one's control. Thus, she labours emotionally within the organisational context surrounding her in

order to bring about some kind of positive change, by subtly promoting more compassionate work environments for staff.

This element of her emotional labour is not part of Emma's job description. Rather, it is something she willingly offers as a token of her commitment to good practice. If she is to uphold the principles of good practice, it is a requirement. At the same time, however, such a requirement is not explicitly stated. It is part of what she must offer silently, and thus free of charge, if she is to be a good social worker.

In this section, it has been suggested that, like working with clients, empathic concern provides a key to soothing and easing the emotional tensions that arise amongst staff in organisations. Easing these tensions, however, is not quite that simple. Being able to bring harmony to disharmonious organisational contexts depends on the amount of respect one is able to gain from other professionals. And, like resolving conflict, gaining respect is a task within itself, which takes emotional labour. In the following section, this added dynamic of emotional labour is explored.

Earning Respect

Being respected as a professional is essential if one is going to influence positive change within organisational cultures. If one is going to enjoy respect, however, it must first be earned. In order to do this, one must demonstrate empathic concern, whilst at the same time demonstrating an air of professional confidence.

Attaining this delicate balance of kindness and competence involves crafting a particular way of being, which can only be attained through a process of trial and error. For most participants in this study, however, there appeared to be the added pressure to get this balance 'right' every time. This was attributed to the fact that in many organisational environments, social workers are perceived to have a relatively low status amongst other professions. Emma, for example, talked about social work as not having "that level of influence with other professions and other groups we are working with" ([10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*), and Mary suggested that "as social workers, we are on the bottom rung of other professionals [like] psychologists and psychiatrists" ([15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*).

For the most part, participants talked about this general lack of status with a degree of light heartedness, as if to downplay the seriousness of the issue. Karen, for example, was reminded of a group of doctors who devalued the psychosocial aspects of patient care as “totally up themselves, it wasn’t funny” ([20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). Whilst rolling her eyes to heaven, Penny remembered a doctor who once claimed that he “did his own social work” ([20+ years], PP, *face to face interview*), and, in a similar tone, Susan talked about a psychologist who was “bordering on rude” to her when she tried to engage with dialogue him about a client ([20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*).

Susan went on to explain that the psychologist’s initial attitude towards her was “water off a duck’s back” and that she “forged ahead” and built a working relationship with him anyway. Similarly, Karen and Penny’s mocking comments can be interpreted as a way of undermining the perceived authority of those who showed them disrespect. Yet, what is interesting, is that these throw away comments were made to begin with. In Karen and Penny’s case, they refer to events that took place over twenty years ago. Thus, one could conclude that whilst these experiences of negative perceptions towards social workers are recalled with a humorous overtone, the issue itself is more serious.

The experience of feeling disrespected is not funny. This was exemplified by Sophie’s interview when she offered a long detailed description of the way one of her colleagues (a nurse) had underestimated her level of knowledge and skill within the practice context of mental health. Such comments were extremely hurtful – “it was like someone saying to me ‘oh you’re just a social worker, you wouldn’t have any understanding of what mental health is’” (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*).

Sophie went on to explain how she was able to defend herself against these comments in a way that was assertive and non-threatening at the same time. Yet, the emotional reality for her was that the nurse’s narrow understanding of social work left her “feeling really incompetent for a while” (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*). The fact that such a comment caused Sophie to feel this way is reflective of her vulnerability as a practitioner. It also suggests that whilst working collaboratively is fundamental to good practice, the mutual professional respect needed for successful collaboration cannot be assumed. This is one of the practice realities that polarises theory and practice so markedly.

To overcome this disparity, Sophie went on to describe the strategy she had devised for eliminating this incongruity. For her it meant that she constantly has to explain what she does to others. As she stated, “I’m finding that in this team here (and in my previous employment) I am constantly having to explain what social work[ers do]” (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*). If Sophie is to be respected by other professionals, she must engage in a continual process of justifying her own professional perspective, and such an explanation must be communicated in such a way that she does not come across as over or under confident in her own knowledge.

It is worth considering what it takes to find this balance. It can be a lonely and thankless task that requires a considerable amount of self-discipline and tremendous patience. This is exemplified by Mary in the following extract from her interview:

It’s just a slow process and it’s about actually building relationships with professionals as well, so building relationships with them and, yeah, that takes time. It’s [about] getting to understand each other and (pause), you know, it takes a lot of energy and it’s a lot of um.... my boss [called it something] inappropriate [like] ‘sucking up’. I wouldn’t use that term, I would just say [it’s] talking through cases with them and hearing what they have to say and offering what you have to say and, yeah, it can take a lot for that to happen. And I think that over the years I’ve learned that if you do that people will come back to you and look to you for an opinion, because they know you’ll respect them. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

What is striking about Mary’s dialogue is how she talks about her boss’s perception of her approach – that it is perceived as “sucking up”. This demeaning language exemplifies the general disapproval Mary is up against as a social worker. One would assume that one’s manager would be supportive of one’s efforts to uphold good practice principles, yet this is not always the case. Mary goes on to talk about how she needs to respond in order to maintain a relationship with her boss:

It’s time...look it’s engagement, it’s like engaging with families, it’s time in engaging with them it’s being respectful, you know, um (pause) listening to what the other person has to say...I....I don’t go in tap dancing my feet saying this is what I think (unless of course it is an urgent situation), I know everything.

Sometimes you just (drawn out) slowly get to know people and (drawn out) share your knowledge and put out (pause), your opinion. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

It appears that Mary has little or no reprieve from maintaining an outward countenance that demonstrates her commitment to good practice. She cannot relax and say what she thinks to her boss or her colleagues. She must be constantly attentive to how they may react to what she has to offer. Thus, any challenges must be carefully crafted and thought out in order to maximise the effect. Without this kind of sensitivity, there is a possibility she could undermine her own agenda by failing to uphold the very qualities she is trying to model.

Not only does this take emotional energy, it also takes time. Mary must move slowly and gradually so as not to alienate others from her agenda. In organisational cultures where professional practices are judged on one's ability to be able to demonstrate achieved outcomes, this means a vast amount of Mary's work will go unnoticed or indeed unpaid. This is exemplified in the following extract from Mary's diary:

After completing the phone interview I realised how little administrative work I do [at work] [...]. I looked at the huge pile of work sitting on my kitchen table and thought 'hang on, I am overwhelmed with the amount of work I take home on a regular basis – most of it because I have no time during work hours'. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *diary entry*)

Mary does not have time to do her paper work during working hours because she is busy trying to communicate sensitively with other professionals in order to build meaningful relationships with them. As she writes:

One of the heaviest days today, clients, staff, family all pulling at my heart strings, all needing my best game and being on top of things. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *diary entry*)

The way Mary equates the emotion work involved with "clients, staff [and] family" is demonstrative of personal commitment to upholding her professional responsibilities. If she is going to gain respect from her colleagues, she needs to be sensitive to their needs. Although

such sensitivity will have different meanings in different social contexts, the actual process of enacting it is essentially the same.

In this section, it has been suggested that gaining respect from other professionals is an essential aspect of practice, which is, for the most part, not acknowledged. Not all participants felt the need to work quite as hard as Mary and it must be acknowledged that doing this will be easier for some than others. Yet, what Mary's experience highlights is the possibility that the endeavour to uphold good practice principles can be met with resistance and this increases the demand for emotional labour.

In the following sections of this chapter, the theme of dealing with resistant peers is continued. First, Penny's experience of treading carefully around those who are easily threatened, will be explored, before going on to look at Nikki's experience when a peer turns against her.

Treading Carefully

All participants told of their experiences of peace keeping with colleagues and managers within their practice context. Several talked more specifically of their experience of challenging other practices whilst at the same time keeping the peace. Susan, for example, told me of a situation where she was compelled to take matters further with a volunteer who, because of a lack of training, was inadvertently undermining her intervention. Mia told of an incidence where she and her colleagues once "completely disagreed" (Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*) with a decision made by a SCWO and challenged it because, from her perspective, it was unjust.

Challenging the practices of others means doing so in a way that good working relationships can be maintained. The reasons for this are varied: to uphold the principles of collaboration amongst professionals, to make sure such a challenge does not make things worse for children and families, and, in some cases, to maintain one's own income. The latter reason will be explored in this section.

Mounting a challenge is not just a question of standing up for social justice and telling it how it is. Rather, it needs to be carefully planned and executed with diplomacy and tact so as not to cause offence or insult. This need to tread carefully seems to be exacerbated by the general

lack of training and skills held by those in positions of authority in the child welfare field, which is a major issue identified by all participants. Without appropriate training, practitioners may not comprehend the complexity of practice and thus may not feel confident discussing these issues openly and honestly with someone who may have more experience.

Penny's narrative offers insight into this issue. Her major concern was drawing attention to undesirable practices, whilst at the same time maintaining good working relationships in order to secure a steady referral base as a private practitioner. In her interview she explained:

I must say, the vast majority of people that I work with, it's good to work with them. But every now and then you do think this person is not really suited to the position they are in, or you read about things that have been done and you can't...you just can't believe the decisions that have been made or the way things have been done sometimes. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

The majority of professionals in the field are good to work with. However, from time to time she comes across undesirable practice decisions that, from her perspective, need to be redressed. Unless she draws attention to these issues, they will not be resolved. Not only will vulnerable children and their families suffer, but practitioners will remain unaware of the implications. Thus, Penny feels an ethical obligation to expose 'bad' decision-making so that 'bad' situations can be made better. As she stated:

I've been doing it for a long time, so that in a way my....really to be honest I think I'm probably fairly selfish. I want to make it better and I can usually find ways to make it better and improve it. [...] I think OK what can we now do to make this better? And there is normally things you can do, but it's presenting it in such a way that others are going to be able to do that. So you have to convince them of that. And (pause) because they are implicitly involved in the mistake, it's threatening, it's scary for me (pause) I'm nervous about it because I...I want to keep on doing the work. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

Interestingly, Penny perceives her desire to "make it better" for families as being selfish. I did not ask her why this was the case. However, it could be surmised that she feels this way because doing so may mean undermining another practitioner's authority by putting her/his practice decisions under the microscope. Yet, she also finds this scary because of what it

could mean for her livelihood. Thus, the dilemma she faces is that whilst she is easily able to identify practice issues and work towards solving them, actually doing this is not that easy.

Penny explained how, in these situations, she has to draw attention to the issues in an “oblique sort of way, so that [she] sustain[s] good working relationships with everybody” (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). Thus, she spends time carefully crafting pleasant ways of raising difficult issues in the reports she writes or in the dialogue she has.

She described this dynamic as an “added layer” of practice, which she clarified in an e-mail exchange following her interview:

I guess the extra layer is like a filter that I put in place on occasion so as to not cause offence, reframing things, not making it obvious when mistakes have been made or not handled ideally. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*)

This idea of an added layer is indicative of the tacit feeling rules within child welfare organisations and how this creates the need for emotional labour. On the one hand, Penny has a professional responsibility to bring practice issues to the attention of relevant people. On the other hand, she must labour emotionally in order to maintain a particular feeling in other professionals so they are not upset or offended by her assessment. She needs to be honest about practice issues, yet her honesty must be presented in such a way that it preserves a particular kind of feeling.

The emotional labour in this context appears more stressful than engaging with clients, which is a view shared by Mary in her comment, “the energy expended is very similar if not more with professionals” (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*). Yet, because Penny’s livelihood is dependent on her ability to maintain these relationships, there is an added intensity to this issue. As she explains:

With clients, the benefit of being careful not to offend is for the client....I believe all work is done through the vehicle of the relationship.

With other professionals, the benefit is for me really, i.e. I need to be easy to work with if I want to keep getting referrals. I like to be easy to work with anyway but I think the main difference is about ‘power’. I have more power in the client/worker

relationship and less power in this particular worker/worker relationship. (Penny [20+ years] PP, *e-mail contact*)

Penny's analysis of these different power relations offers insight into the actual meaning of emotional labour in different contexts. In the context where she holds power, emotional labour is less stressful than in those situations where she feels a certain degree of powerlessness.

Penny's perspective as a private practitioner is interesting. It is a common assumption that those in private practice are somehow free from the interpersonal dynamics involved in organisations. Yet, along with Sarah's experience of grappling with funding constraints imposed on her practice (discussed in the previous chapter), this cannot be assumed. Private practitioners may enjoy a certain degree of freedom from the dynamics on a day-to-day basis; however, the emotional labour they perform in order to win hearts and minds within organisations appears every bit as intense, if not more.

In her interview, Penny suggested that if one is able to enjoy job security one is able to be "more direct" (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*) when addressing practice mistakes. Certainly, this may be the case. Yet, even if one is employed by an organisation, one still needs to tread very carefully in order to maintain good working relationships with peers and those in senior positions. There are situations when doing so is simply not possible and this can be extremely stressful, as will be demonstrated in the following discussion.

When All Hell Breaks Loose

So far in this chapter, the experiences of participants in maintaining peace and harmony within organisations have been explored. This means challenging people in very gentle ways so as not to come across as threatening, and working hard emotionally in order to build up trust and credibility amongst other staff. There are times, however, when, despite all efforts made to build collaborative relationships, 'all hell breaks loose'.

Nikki's efforts to challenge in a respectful way were met with complete defensiveness and lack of willingness to dialogue or problem solve. The situation she describes is extreme, and, when compared to other participants' accounts of organisational dynamics, appears to be a

‘one off’, or a worst-case scenario. Her narrative is important, however, because it demonstrates just how difficult influencing positive change can be in some situations.

With nearly ten years experience of working for a SCWO, which were described as “extremely positive” (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*), she went on to take up the position of senior practitioner, still employed by the SCWO, but located in a different area. Prior to starting in her new role, she had resolved to approach her new work colleagues by treading very carefully. This is how she described how she envisaged her approach:

I’m going in a [senior] role. They don’t know me, I don’t know them. I need to take it slowly, build relationships with people, have them get a sense of [...] me and [establish] my own credibility as a practitioner and if I’m supposed to be an expert, then they need to have a sense that I’m a credible person. So ‘I’ll just take it slowly, slowly and we’ll just go along and they’ll get a sense of my style’.

(Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

The rationale behind Nikki’s approach was that she needs to come across as non-threatening so that staff in the organisation would feel a sense that they are bringing about positive change. However, when Nikki began working in this office, she quickly realised that being gentle with people is not always as easy as it sounds:

I couldn’t do that, I just needed to hit the ground running, so the way that I wanted to do things kind of went out the window [...] because I think [...] within my first fortnight of being there, there were just in my face practice issues. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

By using the phrase “in my face” to describe practice issues, Nikki modifies an Australian colloquialism. If someone is ‘in your face’ they are making themselves so obvious that they are not able to be ignored. Nikki goes on to be more specific about the issues that were ‘in her face’.

[There was] I guess (pause) dodgy stuff was happening around practice decisions being made, children in really high risk situations where there didn’t seem to be much of a framework around how we had come to [a decision]. Um (pause), sh... leave children in, um (pause) situations or, um (pause) putting children back at home, you

know, something...we'd be reacting to something that would precipitate a child returning home rather than a really good piece of practice where we had all these, you know, checks and balances along the way that said, 'this is a really good outcome for this child (pause) and this is why we should put this child back in the home'. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

Nikki's hesitation in describing what she means by "dodgy stuff" could be suggestive of her emotional response to this practice issue. What is clear from her fragmented sentences is that the decision-making she is describing was not based on good practice rationale, but was reactionary. For example, a child who is placed in the care of a grandparent because of abusive parents may have been sent back to live with those parents if the grandparent became ill. For Nikki, this reactive kind of practice meant that children were often being left in "high risk situations".

These practice issues must have played on Nikki's mind, because even though she was very new to the office and was not implicated in the "dodgy" decision-making, she still uses the collective pronoun "we", indicating the level of responsibility she felt to address what was happening.

Nikki goes on to talk about her own level of discomfort in trying to address these issues with the senior staff person responsible:

It was probably a time of high anxiety for me, [because] no matter how, gently, gently I thought I was managing it, it was met with absolute defence. So straight away (pause) we kind of got off to a pretty rocky start. So I would approach her and she would say 'no'.... it was just sort of like 'no can't talk to you about this'. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

By acknowledging her own emotional response to the situation, Nikki is open to the possibility that she could have been sending a different message to what was intended. Yet she endeavoured and her efforts were met with continual resistance.

Because of an absolute unwillingness to collaborate or talk issues through, Nikki felt compelled to take these practice issues to a more senior staff member within the organisation. This made matters worse for her. What had begun as an issue with one staff member ended up

spreading throughout the whole organisation. Staff began to use bullying tactics in order to show their discontent with Nikki's questioning. In the following extract Nikki describes how this affected her:

[Going to the manager] just made it worse because I was basically then just seen as the 'dobber' in the office (weak laugh) so I couldn't win. I was having probably monthly professional external supervision during that process, because I started to doubt my own practice when I was continuously met with this resistance, with this defence, with this 'you don't know what you're talking about, you're always talking theories, don't you have any practice wisdom'. That was the kind of stuff I was being met with all the time. Now that I'm at the other end, I can see what was happening, what they were doing, but it did, for a period of time there, it really rocked my confidence (clear throat). (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

The constant resistance towards Nikki and her desire for good practice "rocked her confidence". This highlights how, given the right circumstances, it is easy to fall into a spiral of self-doubt. This is further strengthened by the way she described the organisational culture in general:

'We stick together, we close ranks, you stay out don't question our practice, I'll protect my staff, if you need to get them you need to get through me'...that sort of mentality. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

Such a culture sounds incredibly harsh. Nikki's senior position draws attention to the fact that it is often people in such positions who are charged with the task of influencing positive changes in organisations. She paints a picture of a lonely reality in which it was not appropriate for her to talk with anybody else and express exactly how she was feeling:

It's extremely hard and at times it was very debilitating, um (clear throat). It does have an impact on you physically because that sense of needing to...when you're at work you need to just get through the day, you need to, (pause) um, um (pause) kind of put on the professional face and not [...] talk to anybody about it. There were so many times I was tempted to say 'what is wrong with her...what's her problem'...you know, other people would say things to me about it and I would say, you know, I would acknowledge what they were saying, but I wouldn't enter

into it because I thought...it was a very unsafe time. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

Nikki wanted to de-brief with others. However, the idea that it felt “unsafe” to do this suggests that this was not possible. She goes on to say that not being able to seek support from others within the organisation and tell them how she is feeling was “an enormous burden, because you’re not presenting the face of how you’re actually feeling” (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*).

The idea of a burden also suggests that there was something much more at stake than just her ability to uphold her need to keep her own professional face. For Nikki, doing this was not just about making a point to others, but, like Penny, it was about upholding her ethical responsibility towards good practice principles. Later in her interview, she talked about her passion again in relation to her practice and suggests that this is what kept her going:

That’s what I think drove me through that whole crazy period [the thought that] this needs to change, if I walk away now, (pause) and go...it would be easy for me to go and get another job somewhere and just (pause) I don’t know, stick my head in the sand and go, ‘oh well what was that all for, you know they are all crazy out there’. But if I feel like I want to make a difference, sometimes it is about riding it out so that we can get a better...a better culture, a better practice, a better way of delivering services to those children. (Nikki [5-10 years], SCWO, *face-to-face interview*)

What drove Nikki to keep going through all of this was her inner commitment towards the rights of vulnerable children to have access to good quality services that ensure they grow up feeling safe. This is a key point because it provides the reason why practitioners want to be social workers to begin with. It also explains why practitioners keep practising and why they are willing to continue to expose themselves to stressful situations. Nikki acknowledges that it would have been easy for her to walk away, because doing this would have brought her some kind of relief from the stress she was experiencing. Yet, at the same time, walking away would also mean she would be turning her back on something much more important – the needs of vulnerable children. For her, “riding it out” meant that at least something was being done to improve things.

What Nikki's experience illustrates is that in some organisational contexts, the development of a collaborative team involves more than individuals gently encouraging change. Despite the efforts of individuals, change can involve conflict and stress.

At the time of her interview, Nikki explained that the person who was so resistant to her attempts to dialogue was no longer working in the office. As a result, Nikki had managed to gain the confidence and respect of other staff members within the office and was, thus, in a position to influence practices in a positive way.

It is worth briefly considering the above scenario from the perspective of the person who had so strongly resisted Nikki's endeavour. Perhaps one of the reasons why this person was unable to provide a clear rationale for her decision-making was because she lacked the knowledge and skill needed to do this. Thinking about it this way, perhaps Nikki's questioning had caused her to experience inner turmoil and discomfort. This possibility may say something about the way staff in SCWOs (and in other organisations) are often expected to undertake the enormous responsibility of protecting children without the necessary support or resources.

Conclusion

In this chapter, some of the interpersonal dynamics involved in social work practice with vulnerable children and families have been explored. Two fundamental points were established. First, the emotional complexity of these dynamics was established. Not only do participants need to deal with their experience of unfamiliar, or at times hostile, interactions with vulnerable children and their families, but they also have to navigate the unpredictable dynamics that transpire with colleagues in organisations. These dynamics, it appears, are every bit as demanding as those with clients.

These different aspects of practice mean that social workers' emotional labour is not just about meeting the substantive needs of clients whilst adhering to organisational demands. It is also about soothing tensions amongst other professionals. The perceived lack of status of social work as a profession, however, means another layer of complexity. Not only do social workers have to sooth organisational tensions, but, in order to do this, they need to first earn the respect from others.

What is significant about this kind of emotional labour is that it is offered as an in-kind donation towards the social work cause of social justice. In each of the scenarios given in this chapter, the absence of this extra effort would not necessarily be perceived as problematic by employers. If Penny did not “suck it up” when she was confronted by her client’s petulance for being late, for example, if Emma did not consider the feelings of her colleagues, or if Nikki relieved her own sense of loneliness by siding with people in her office, this would not mean they are failing at their work. It would just mean there is that extra *je ne sais quoi* missing from their practice.

Yet, their practice is good practice, precisely because it has this extra something that cannot be easily defined. Regardless, it is offered as a gift and this offering is motivated by the desire to make the world a better place. The giving of this gift can be deeply rewarding or it can result in disappointment and hardship. Either way the endeavour of giving in professional practice involves emotional labour.

Performing emotional labour successfully in the context of child welfare practice is hard work. It means continually being faced with a dilemma between self-care and self-sacrifice. On the one hand, good practice requires one to give of oneself emotionally to others. On the other hand, it requires one to withdraw in order to replenish one’s own emotional resources.

Holding the tension between self-care and sacrifice is a personal affair, requiring an intimate knowledge of one’s personal strengths and limitations. Whilst this knowledge is deeply personal and private, the ethical heart desires that it be shared with others. The spaces available for this sharing are explored in the following chapter.

Chapter Eight: Sharing Internal Conversations

In this chapter, the supervisory space takes centre stage. Such a space is essential for good social work practice, because, in supervision, workers are able to share their personal experience of practice and, in so doing, process the emotional complexity involved in practice. In Nikki's stressful situation, for example, it was her use of supervision that helped her through her ordeal. Dialogue with a trusted other assisted her to maintain her sense of confidence at a time when she felt this was being eroded in the workplace. Similarly, throughout Susan's experience of wondering what more she could do, supervision assisted her to reiterate the limitations of her roles and responsibilities to her organisation and to herself. For Emma, the continuation of good supervision helps her maintain a reality check on her tendency to be too harsh on herself.

Participants were asked about supervision in their interviews because this is an important dynamic that shapes the experience of performing emotional labour. De-briefing with colleagues, for example, or sharing internal conversations in a more private space can help ease the emotional intensity of one's labour; as the adage goes, 'a problem shared is a problem halved'. Surprisingly, what became apparent in the narratives was the elusive nature of this supervisory space. In theory, it is regarded as essential; in practice however, it appears to be a holy grail, often just out of reach.

Supportive spaces other than supervision were also identified in several of the participant narratives and these are explored towards the end of the chapter. To begin, the issues related to establishing good supervision are explored. All participants were able to recognise what 'good' supervision means. However, the process through which they learnt to recognise it differed. For some participants, bad experiences of supervision informed and shaped their knowledge of how it could and 'should' look.

Recognising a 'Good' Supervisory Space

The issue of being able to recognise 'good' supervision was raised directly by Emma when she suggested that if one only experiences supervision as "average" or "just OK" (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*), then one may not be able to identify what is wrong with it or how it could be improved:

I think that benefit of having had what you need once is that when you find it again, you know what it looks like. And I think one of the difficulties for social workers coming in as new clinicians or new graduates in any field is that unless you have had good social work supervision, or any supervision, you can get something that is not so good and is pretty average and not really know how to identify what it is wrong with it. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*)

Emma raises an important question about social work education and the way the notion of supervision is imparted to students. It is often assumed that students will experience their field educators as ‘good’ supervisors and, thus, learn about the ‘true’ value of supervision from this experience. Yet, according to Emma’s observation, this does not appear to be the case. This is supported by Sophie’s experience of having only experienced “average” supervision and accepting that as a norm for nearly eight years, until she came to recognise ‘good’ supervision after attending training on the subject. Prior to this, as Sophie had no reason to question the kind of supervision she had received.

Sophie’s supervision had consisted of monthly sessions with her team leader in a NGO in a rural area. Her supervisor was not a social worker, so she was not able to discuss specific professional issues. After moving to a regional centre and gaining employment in a NSGO, she attended training to become a supervisor. The following is how she described her experience of learning about what ‘good’ supervision ‘should’ look like:

I was just amazed! I was actually gobsmacked [about what] supervision is and how it should be there to support you [...]. So, supervision, to me now, is somewhere that you can actually get good feedback on some of (pause) some of (thinking) your client/professional interactions – how you dealt with something that was happening and how you dealt with it professionally and if there is anything that the supervisor can kind of suggest for you to use in the future if you’re stumped. It’s also an opportunity for you to be able to express frustrations or inequalities or whatever it might be, and [those discussions] not going to go any further if you don’t want [them] to. (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*)

Sophie’s new found-knowledge is expressed with an air of enthusiasm and excitement. It is as if she is experiencing a new lease of life in relation to her practice, because, in her years of

practice, her supervision had not provided her with the supportive dialogue needed to navigate the ethical complexity of the work. Also expressed is her sense of relief to learn that social workers 'should' not be left to struggle with complex practice issues on her own.

Despite Sophie's enlightened understanding about supervision, at the time of her interview she had still not been able to establish a secure, regular supervisory space in her place of employment. She talked about group supervision, which was in the process of being established within her collegial network, but this was an evolving process that was still in the early stages of development.

Sophie's experience raises many questions. How many other social workers are grappling with the complexities of practice without the space in which to deliberate over them with others? How has Sophie's lack of 'good' supervision impacted on her as a person? How has it impeded the further development of her knowledge and skills? How has this impacted on her decision-making? Such questions cannot be fully explored here. However, by raising this issue, Emma and Sophie have drawn attention to the issue of practitioners being able to recognise a 'good' supervisory space when they see one.

From Sophie's experience, it could be surmised that 'average' experiences of supervision can be more detrimental in the long term than extremely 'bad' ones. If something is experienced as 'average', it tends to remain unquestioned and thus accepted as a norm. If something is experienced as 'bad', however, then perhaps this motivates one to question and bring about some kind of change. In the following section, this possibility is explored further by looking at some of the participants' negative supervisory experiences. In so doing, it is suggested that whilst such experiences are undesirable, they can provide valuable learning opportunities.

Tick-Box Supervision

One of the problems with supervision is that its effectiveness is largely dependent on how it is understood by the supervisor. In many organisations, there appears to be a cultural belief that it is a waste of time – something to be endured and ticked off alongside a list of other things to do. Such an attitude is expressed by Mia in the following quote:

I think (pause) supervision can often be taken as a hindrance, because (in a mocking voice) ‘there is so much work and now I’ve just got to sit and talk about all the work that I’ve got to do!’(Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*)

Mia alludes to an important problem. In highly rationalised environments where workers can feel pressured by time constraints, developing an appreciation for the value of supervision goes against a purely instrumental point of view. From such a perspective, the idea of reflecting on one’s practice does not make sense. What exactly is the point of talking about what you have done and how you feel about it when there is still so much more to do?

From a social work perspective, the point of supervision is not so much about getting things done (although this may be part of it) but, rather, it is about reflecting on *how* things are done and exploring ways to improve this. It is a qualitative measure that contributes towards workers finding the best possible outcomes for children, their families and workers. All of the participants recognised this and several demonstrated it by reflecting on their experience of undesirable supervision practices that did not meet their needs as practitioners. When referring back to her early years as a new graduate working for a SCWO, for example, Mia states:

My supervision was more practical, it was not emotional. Um, it was a bit of a checklist, ‘have you done...’, you know, ‘have you done this report’, ‘have you done this’, ‘when was the last time you visited the parents’. (Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*)

Mia’s experience of supervision in this instance was not about exploring the complexity of practice, but rather about simplifying practice by going through a check list. Susan referred to a similar experience when she was also employed as a new graduate in a SCWO. For Susan, it was not about going through a check list, but rather about trying to seek some kind of reassurance for her decision-making:

I would go into the supervision with my manager with suggestions about planning and what I thought could be done. There was no questioning of what I was saying and I was told I could go ahead. I was a bit sort of, I suppose, afraid about that because I thought ‘well I don’t know, I’ve never done this before, I’ve just got my training and....’. There wasn’t a dialogue or a process that was gone through, so it

was a bit sort of (pause), a bit scary. (Susan [20+ years], NGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Learning to carry the burden of her responsibility without being able to explore what this means for her as a professional social worker was ‘scary’. What she was seeking was some kind of critical dialogue through which she could scrutinise her own ideas and plans. This would have made her feel more reassured by her own decision-making capabilities. What is so telling about Susan’s reflection is the way her supervisor appears as a passive agent, who was unable, or perhaps even unwilling, to contribute towards the dialogue that Susan desired.

This kind of attitude is indicative of the way practitioners themselves are often not valued in many organisational contexts. By consciously or unconsciously failing to acknowledge Susan’s deep desire for meaningful dialogue, her supervisor was, in effect, ignoring her, because, as a hermeneutic professional, she embodies her practice. A similar experience is also exemplified by Mia when she talks about getting to the end of her supervision sessions and realising “Oh wow, I didn’t actually get to my stuff...the stuff that’s eating away at me!” (Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*).

Mia explained that the questions eating away at her would be questions similar to those discussed in previous chapters, such as ‘what more could I do for this client?’ (Mary, Fiona, Susan) or ‘what is my role in the wider system?’ (Mary, Susan, Fiona, Sarah). As has already been suggested, such concerns are deeply personal and are exemplary of the kinds of issues that can arise in social work practice.

Sharing these kinds of concerns with others is part of what it means to be ethical. Being ethical requires the acknowledgement that human beings are fallible. Thus, supervision ‘should’ be about providing a safe space in which one can admit mistakes without fear of retribution (Cooper, 2005; Ferguson, H., 2005).

Whilst one may make the decision to discuss practice difficulties openly and honestly, actually doing so depends on the openness of the supervisor. Without mutual openness, the desire to share ethical concerns tends to retreat inwards. This was exemplified by Fiona when she talked of her earlier experiences of supervisors. She told of supervision sessions being cancelled at the last minute “so many times it’s not funny” (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*) and a general demeanour by supervisors that communicated a general

lack of interest in the supervisory process. That “through their body language they seem...that they’re not interested in what [you are] saying. Um, yeah, mm through, you know, yawning or that stuff...(weak laugh) ([Fiona 10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*).

Attending a supervision session with the expectation that one will be able to discuss the issues that are “eating away”, and finding that the supervisor is too tired to listen is concerning. This is how Fiona interpreted and responded to this anomie:

I [took] that as a sign of ‘oh OK they’re are not interested, so, therefore, I won’t talk about whatever else I wanted to talk about, because I’m going to get out of here. So I’ll just finish it up as quickly as possible and...we’re done’. (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

Fiona walked away from her failed attempt at dialogue, not only with unanswered questions about her practice, but also with a sense of feeling “devalued”. The only thing for her to do in such a situation was to shut down in order to protect herself from experiencing further offence. This demonstrates the very fragile nature of the personal questions that ‘should’ be able to inform professional practice.

It is worth considering the perspective of the supervisors in the above examples. Perhaps these supervisors had good reasons for their expressions of indifference. Perhaps they, too, have their own inner questions that remain unresolved, and being confronted by another’s willingness to raise such questions so openly caused them a degree of discomfort. Like the issues discussed in previous chapters, a lack of dialogue could be attributed to the general lack of training and skills in the child welfare field.

It would appear that the idea of ‘tick box’ supervision offers organisations a mechanism for accountability. For workers, however, being unable to engage in dialogue about the ‘real’ issues means supervision can be quite meaningless for both supervisor and supervisee, and in this sense, can be a waste of time and energy.

Fiona, Susan and Mia had developed the insight to be able to recognise that they had encountered a serious issue. They all talked about learning from these negative experiences and transforming this learning into something positive. Mia, for example, said that when she became a supervisor, she intuitively knew what ‘good’ supervision would look like:

When I started supervising it was a huge step for me and I never got any education on how to supervise. All I knew was how I'd been supervised on the past. (Mia [10-15 years], PP, *telephone interview*)

The main ingredient that makes supervision 'good' is trust. This was identified by all participants. Mary, for example states:

They've got to trust that when they come into supervision with me that they are going to be able to share something that's not going to be used outside the room inappropriately. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

How this trusted space looks and feels will be explored in the following section in more detail.

Good Supervision = Trust

What's the point of supervision if you can't trust your supervisor? There's going to have to be an awful lot of trust before people are going to be able to open up to a supervisor. (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*)

Sophie's rhetorical question and follow-up statement reiterates the point made in the previous section – that without meaningful dialogue through which the 'real' issues of practice can be explored openly and honestly, there is little point to supervision. Without trust, supervision becomes just another process in which workers suffer the tedium of being seen to fulfil an organisational requirement. Trust provides the conditions that allow reflexive dialogue (Taylor & White, 2000) to play out and this is no different to working with clients. As Emma states:

I think it's a mirror process to what we have to be able to give to our clients.

Whilst it's not therapy, there is a level at which it has to be a safe space. It has to be about trust. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

The interpersonal communication that constitutes formal supervision is not therapy, but it is deeply personal because it is about exploring the tenuous separation which is said to exist between the personal and the professional.

For several participants, this meant reconstructing supervision to suit them as opposed to conforming to a formal supervisory process defined by organisational discourses. For example, when talking about supervision, Karen perceived trust as the defining factor determining how and with whom supervision takes place, when she says “with the people where I do seek [supervision], there is a high level of trust” (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*).

There are several people Karen trusts, suggesting she has established a network of trusted colleagues, as opposed to a formalised space. This raises the important question as to whether or not trusted spaces can be formalised within organisations. Perhaps it is something that needs to be allowed to develop organically and cultivated in organisations, as opposed to being manufactured in formalised spaces? Such a question offers food for thought and is reflective of a resilience approach to supporting staff (Russ et al., 2009).

Trust comes down to interactions between individuals. When Penny was asked what it is that fosters trust between individuals in a supervisory context, she suggested that trustworthy people are not concerned with “self promotion” or “getting ahead” (Penny [20 + years], PP, *face-to-face interview*), and they do not get too carried away with professional jargon. They are willing to let go of the air of impartial rational expert so that their personalities are experienced as “warm”, “affirming” and “encouraging” (Penny [20 + years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). “The people you can trust, they’re not always politically correct, they share their own weaknesses [and] they’ve got a sense of humour” (Penny [20 + years], PP, *face-to-face interview*).

Establishing trust is not about convincing others of one’s competency as a professional, but rather about being honest with oneself and with others. This is about allowing oneself to be wrong, to not know, to be confused, to let one’s professional guard down from time to time.

A supportive supervisory space is primarily concerned with ethical accountability and this has the potential to conflict with organisational accountability (Beddoe, 2012). As discussed in Chapter Two, negotiating this problem of divided accountability has meant that in many organisational contexts, supervision is often divided into two different kinds of supervision; one that is concerned with organisational accountability, another that is concerned with ethical and personal accountabilities (Beddoe, 2012).

The separation of accountabilities was discussed by three of the participants, Emma, Sophie and Jane. For Emma and Sophie, this split was perceived to be an agreeable solution to finding the space needed to be able to ask themselves “am I OK?” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*), or ‘did I make the right decision?’ and so on. For them, the idea of such a space remained safe precisely because it was only concerned with ethical accountability.

For Jane, such a separation was experienced differently. When making reference to her two different kinds of supervision she stated:

I almost feel like I have to be...deceptive is the wrong word. I’m one person with my line manager and another with my clinical supervisor. One’s interested in stats and the other one is interested in how it really is (laugh) and it’s like I feel double minded almost on occasions. I don’t...I really don’t like it. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

Although deceptive was not the right word for Jane, she implies that the constructed divide between the two different forms of accountability makes her feel as if she is becoming two different people. For Jane, being accountable is not about adopting different roles in order to meet organisational objectives. It is about being able to be honest with herself and others, every step of the way.

Jane appears to be searching for coherency in her professional life. She wants to be accountable to her line-manager and colleagues and her clients in the same way. Without this coherency, she feels she is simply playing a game in which nothing meaningful can be achieved. Her “search for authenticity” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 185), or good practice, is confined to a small corner of the “bureaucracy gone mad” (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). Admittedly, this small corner may be better than nothing, but it does not help her practice overall, because it does not resolve the dilemmas that arise when ethical and organisational accountabilities conflict.

Jane’s concern is reflective of the fragmented and haphazard nature of organisational objectives, which, for the most part, fail to meet the substantive needs of individuals. Such a theme is further strengthened in the next section, when Mary and Anna’s experiences of supervision are explored.

Supervising the Supervisor

The question of who supervises the supervisor emerged from Anna and Mary's accounts of being responsible for supervising staff within their organisation. Both have to manage staff and deal with difficult practice problems without any trusted support space for themselves. This section is concerned with exploring why this is the case and what it means for them.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the more practice experience one gains the less support one will need. As one gains experience in dealing with the complexity of practice, one does become more proficient in being able to identify issues and problem solve independently of others. Yet, even for the most experienced practitioners, the emotional dynamics of practice do not necessarily get any easier (Cooper, 2005). So, team leaders and managers still need a safe reflective space to share their reflexive deliberations.

In addition to these practice needs, there appears to be an added expectation that senior staff will pay more attention to organisational direction and strategy. This is suggested in the extract from Mary's interview:

I think the higher up you go I think it's hard because you've really...you know you've got to put a lot aside because you're working for the greater good of the actual agency, whereas when you're a caseworker or a counsellor, you can probably do your own thing for a bit. Once you get senior you can't....well you can try, but I don't think it works. You've really got to strive towards the direction of the agency and the program that you're with. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

Naturally, Mary feels the added responsibility that comes with holding a senior position. Similar to Nikki in the previous chapter, she does not feel it appropriate for her to make use of the informal support strategies she did when she was a caseworker. Part of the reason for this is that in a senior position, she feels more obliged to demonstrate her allegiance to the organisation.

In addition to this, she feels more pressure to demonstrate her competence to others. This is exemplified when talking about the peer supervision she attends regularly with her colleague:

It's as if we need to prove ourselves to each other in some ways. [This] makes establishing trust very difficult. (Mary [15-20 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

For Mary, the perceived need to “prove” or convince others about her own competence is part of what it means to manage and lead a team. This expectation works against her desire for supervision and support for her own practice. The experience of this, coupled with increased organisational responsibilities, appears to make way for an increased sense of isolation.

In Chapter Six, Anna's sense of isolation as a team leader in a SCWO in a rural area was made clear. Yet, by exploring her endeavour to find relief from this sense of isolation, one gains further insight into her experience of practice.

At the heart of Anna's experience was her inability to communicate her needs assertively. Yet, how exactly should one communicate one's needs, when such needs are not easily communicated? At several points throughout her interview, Anna told me of her repeated attempts to seek support from her manager, who was based in a regional centre about a four-hour drive away. He did make regular visits to her office, yet she described these visits as “short and rushed” (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*). From her perspective, there was little opportunity for her to make any kind of meaningful connection with him. In the following extract, Anna expresses her sense of frustration at this lack of connection:

They say e-mail me, so you do, but then they don't read it. Or you ring and they're not available. They always say 'I'm on the end of the telephone', but they're not, so all that culminates where you just think 'I'll just get on with it because it's too hard'.
(Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

The lack of response to e-mails and/or telephone calls results in a kind of giving up on the issue, like Fiona had done when her supervisor's body language communicated a strong sense of disinterest. At the same time, however, Anna's decision to put her own emotional needs aside does not provide a solution to her problem. Thus, she finds herself caught in a situation where she is trying to do it alone and maintain a sense of independence, whilst at the same time trying to work out subtle ways to communicate her emotional needs:

But then you do get to the point when you go 'oh enough's enough', which is why I think you don't...well I think you do go to them, but they don't remember or take it as

seriously as when you get to the point where you have broken down and it's...and they're saying 'oh, why didn't you come to me earlier?' You say, 'well I did!' (Anna [10-15 years], SCWO, *telephone interview*)

At one level, Anna makes a conscious decision not to ask for help. At another level, however, she is asking for help. Her dilemma is that if she is too explicit about her emotional needs, she will be perceived as incompetent. Yet, in the midst of her emotional turmoil, the subtle signs she offers are not explicit enough. Thus, her understated efforts to communicate her distress go unnoticed and this makes her feel as if she is being forgotten.

One can only imagine Anna's sense of frustration at being asked 'why didn't you come to me earlier?' because, from her perspective, she was asking for help sooner. Such an experience is suggestive of gendered power relations. Her male manager denies her emotional reality and, in so doing, turns the issue around so that Anna is seen to be the one in the wrong (Moffatt, 2004).

Anna does not see this issue in terms of gender. For her, the problem can be attributed to a collective "they" who, being removed from the immediacy of her lived experience, were not able to respond in the way she needed. The message from Anna's experience is that emotional subtlety is everything; e-mails in which nothing in particular is said, or telephone messages saying 'hi can you ring me back', are never benign; they always say something.

Practitioners would benefit if these kinds of subtle cues could be taken more seriously. Until such time, practitioners need to find ways to assert their emotional needs, whilst at the same time maintaining their power and authority as 'competent' and impartial professionals. This tension between being honest with the expression of emotion, and managing the visible signs of them, is an indication of the complexity involved in the performance of emotional labour in this practice context. It is a serious issue for practitioners as they labour emotionally in organisational contexts where emotions are not honoured (Myerson, 2000).

What Anna's and Mary's experiences both demonstrate is the general assumption that competence naturally equates to a particular kind of emotional disposition, or that seniority within an organisation is an expression of emotional detachment from the world. As was apparent in Anna's narrative, this issue is what made it so difficult for her to seek and establish a supportive supervisory space within an organisation.

Because support from within the organisation is difficult to come by, several participants talked about supportive spaces outside the organisational context. These more informal spaces are the subject of the following sections in this chapter.

Sharing Experience with Loved Ones

The use of informal support networks outside the organisational context were discussed by most participants. These discussions offer insight into the interface between the professional and private lives of participants.

From a purely technical point of view, the idea that social workers talk about their work experiences with others outside the organisational context is tantamount to a breach of confidentiality agreements. From an emotional perspective, however, such a phenomenon is unavoidable and inevitable. If one is to be genuine around one's loved ones, then one needs to be able to express how one is feeling. Thus, for several participants, partners, family and trusted friends played a major role in helping maintain their sanity.

For two participants, Sarah and Karen, this did not appear to be the case. For them, a strict separation between work and home was important. Sarah for example, told me that keeping separation was a helpful strategy in “maintaining care of [her]self” (Sarah, [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). For Karen, it was similar, although she said that client confidentiality was a factor. But even saying this, she also lamented the fact that her partner was not able to offer the emotional support she would like. In the following extract, it is almost as if the confidentiality of clients acts as a justification for her partner's inability to listen to her at the end of the working day:

My partner doesn't have a lot of capacity to hear more than 'I've had a really full...really big day', so I need to use my colleagues and my social work supervision and those sorts of things properly to deal with that kind of stuff. I mean apart from the fact that all the confidentiality that has to come [...] with this job, so he understands that fully. So even sometimes when I say I want to just talk about things to do generally with the team, he says 'oh it's about work' and I say 'oh this is just a general thing', but I know that often he doesn't even want to hear that anyway, so I have to go elsewhere. (Karen [20+ years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

This extract raises the question as to whether Karen refrains from talking with her partner about work primarily because of the confidentiality of her clients, “which he understands fully”, or because of the fact that he is not able to engage with her about work. What is crystal clear, however, is her desire that her partner acknowledge the emotional complexity involved in her practice.

This desire was also communicated by Fiona and Emma. Like Karen, their partners were not able to offer the kind of support they desired. This has the potential to lead to conflict. Fiona, for example, explained that when she goes home at the end of the day she often needs to share her experiences with her partner:

Well it can be difficult emotionally because [...] generally for me, when I go home, what I would do would be to offload and just tell my partner about my day and then I sort of...you know once I've told someone about what had happened during the day and then it (particularly if it was a stressful or busy day) [...] I'd be able to move on. (Fiona [10-15 years], NGO, *telephone interview*)

Some days Fiona feels emotionally full, and, understandably, needs to be able to “offload” when she gets home. She went on to tell me that there are times when her partner finds it difficult to just listen because “he will sometimes try to offer suggestions” (Fiona [10-15 years] NGO, *telephone interview*). Yet, for her, the purpose of sharing is not to get answers to questions or to solve practice problems. The reason she needs to talk about work is to simply tell her partner how she is feeling.

Emma communicated something similar, explaining that her partner found it difficult to know how to support her because he has a “factual head” (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*). Her need for support and his need to problem solve meant that she had to learn to avoid seeking emotional support from him in order to avoid conflict:

I think probably, over time, it has actually been about deciding to have that need met elsewhere rather than expecting that he is capable of understanding. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

The realisation that her partner is not able to understand the emotional complexity of her work was something that emerged over time through her supervision processes. Even though she

lamented this reality and wished he was able to provide the kind of support she desired from him, she also realised that she needed to accept that he was unable to provide this for her. Thus, supervision was her main source of support in relation to issues that arose within the context of her work.

Penny's experience of sharing with her partner is different. When asked about the people with whom she is able to be completely honest with about her work, she immediately replied "oh definitely my husband" (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*). In the following extract she shares something about what that support means to her:

When I come home he'll ask how it went, like sometimes I'm going off like a you know a lamb to the slaughter or something (laugh) and he'll ask how it went and I do that for him too. So yeah [...], I mean how horrendous would it be otherwise [...], if I didn't have that. (Penny [20+ years], PP, *face-to-face interview*)

When Penny comes home at the end of the day her husband asks how her day went and she reciprocates the gesture. Such reciprocity is warm and comforting and makes her feel extremely grateful to have his support in this way.

Penny was very clear that whilst her husband's support was important to her, client confidentiality was always foremost on her mind. Thus, whilst she shared something about her experience of practice, she did not betray confidences. From this it appears that if one is to share with loved ones, one still needs to continue to work in order to protect clients. This is why supervision is so essential; because it exists within organisational boundaries where peers share the same legal obligations, it is a space where, theoretically, one can explore issues and not worry about revealing finer details.

What is interesting about Penny and Emma's narratives is that both had access to good supervision within their practice context. Thus, their desire to share with loved ones cannot be attributed to organisational failure. As was the case for Fiona, such a desire is not about solving practice issues, but rather about having one's experience heard and validated in a more intimate way.

Yet, even if one does not have supervision or a partner at home, such a need still exists. This was communicated by Sophie, who told of how she sought support from other family

members or close friends when she needs it. She acknowledged that such a situation was not ideal because she would have preferred a supervisory space where she could resolve the practice issues that arise for her. However, at the time of her interview, this was the practice reality she was forced to come to terms with. She explained that because friends are not always available, she often finds herself going home after work “to watch a movie” or “get on the computer and play a game” (Sophie [5-10 years], NSGO, *telephone interview*), in order to try to forget any problems she had encountered during the day; the television or computer games act as a distraction through which she can find some space to relax.

Sophie was also clear that her sharing with family or friends did not equate to revealing client identities. But the tenuous nature of her situation does raise questions about practitioners who may not be as conscientious about confidentiality, or who may not possess the skills needed to be able to distinguish between what can or cannot be shared with others outside the work setting. Being able to make this distinction is part of the emotional complexity that needs to be navigated if one is to uphold good practice.

Navigating this complexity is not just a question of not talking about work, but rather a question of talking about it in a particular way. This is no different to discussing cases in educational forums where identifying information is removed in order that practitioners can learn from each other’s practice experience. In this context, clients’ identities always remain concealed, yet their experiences of life and how they impact on different individuals do not. Such experiences belong to “a common humanity” (Gaita, 1999) – they yearn to be shared because doing so somehow eases the burden of carrying them alone.

This desire to share human experience is part of what it means to be ethical. Ethical selves are social selves and, thus, being ethical is necessarily a social activity: sharing in order to gain better understanding’ sharing in order to self-reflect, and sharing in order to make the ‘right’ decision. This desire is one of the emotional realities inherent within the ethical heart of practice.

Acknowledgement of this reality is expressed in the idea of supervision, which is the formal space in which this very intimate side of practice ‘should’ be met. Yet, what these narratives reveal is that perhaps such experiences are sometimes too profound to be fully contained (Ruch, 2007) within one small designated space.

This possibility problematises the assumption that confidentiality is only a question of legislation, which is either honoured or breached; this is a rational perspective. From an emotional perspective, maintaining confidentiality is as much about sharing with others as it is about keeping quiet. This reality will mean different things in different practice contexts²¹, yet acknowledging it is essential regardless of context.

There was one other space identified for sharing deliberations in which confidentiality is guaranteed. In the final section of this chapter, this space will be explored, not because it was a broad theme shared by all participants, but because of the way such a space was able to offer comfort and solace for three participants, Emma, Jane and Penny.

The Sacred Space

The sacred or sublime space in which one communes with a higher power is essential for Emma, Jane and Penny in maintaining a realistic perspective on their practice. Whilst their accounts were quite different from one another's, fundamentally, their spiritual beliefs helped them comprehend and come to terms with injustice in the world and their limitations as individual practitioners. This kind of support helped these participants to hold the tension between their ethical heart and organisational objectives.

What seems to help ease this tension is their 'in the grand scheme of things' spiritual perspective that helps them make sense of their roles as social workers. As Penny explains:

I have hope and comfort in the difficult times. I have something to look forward to. I believe in spending my life doing something purposeful and that is why I am a social worker. I can't sit idly by while injustice runs riot. (Penny [20+ years] PP, *e-mail contact*)

Penny's faith means she experiences a clear sense of purpose for her practice, as well as solace when times get tough. Her faith helps her to understand that injustice exists, but it also helps her to remain realistic about what she can expect to achieve in her work:

²¹ In rural practice, for example, it will mean one needs to think more carefully about sharing certain experiences because of the way individuals can be more easily identified (Galambos, Watt, Anderson & Danis, 2005).

I can't save the world but I can do what is within my power to make a difference. However, God is ultimately the one in control and responsible for everything and everyone, not me; just as well! (Penny [20+ years], PP, *e-mail contact*)

It is almost as if Penny breathes a sigh of relief at the end of this statement, as if God being in control relieves her of the burden of responsibility. This is not about negating her responsibility to uphold ethical practice, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter when she felt compelled to draw attention to practice mistakes and do what she can to redress them. However, it does mean she is not burdened with a sense of responsibility for resolving issues that are beyond her control.

Although it was framed quite differently, Emma expressed a similar spiritual perspective:

I can only do what is given to me and do that well, um and (pause) that doesn't mean not trying to do things better, or necessarily accepting the status quo when things are bad, um but it does mean, forgiving myself and being able to go home at the end of the day for not being at exactly the right place at the right time with the right thing to say. (Emma [10-15 years], NSGO, *face-to-face interview*)

For Emma, the knowledge that not all things are within her control means she is able to be kinder and more forgiving to herself. This is important for her because, as was discussed in Chapter Five, she has a tendency to be harsh and judgemental of herself. Knowing that events will occur that are beyond her control does offer some relief from the torment that harsh self-criticism can cause. For Jane, knowing her limitations in a world of injustices comes in the form of an authoritative commandment:

Have we made an idol out of exhaustion?....God puts boundaries around our lives – we must observe the Sabbath day. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *diary entry*)

As one would expect from Jane, her statement holds within it a critique of modern society and how it impacts on human wellbeing. The pace in the modern world, or the “speed up” (Hochschild, 2003, p. 126), is such that she questions whether or not individual exhaustion is a state we have come to accept as an unavoidable aspect of modern life. This critical questioning goes hand in hand with the idea that stepping back from the furious pace of modern life is necessary if one is to maintain one's sense of self.

That such wisdom comes in the form of a commandment is interesting, because in Chapter Five, it was revealed that Jane has a tendency to overstretch herself in her concern for others. Like Penny, the directive from a higher power relieves her of the decision to put herself first and rest: “there are times God calls us to step up and be obedient” (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *diary entry*).

For Penny, Emma and Jane, a spiritual belief or ‘in the grand scheme of things’ perspective helps them by offering an explanation of their limitations. It helps them hold the tension between self-care and self-sacrifice. Holding this tension is an ongoing process that involves constant attention. Penny, for example, acknowledged that she sometimes experiences doubt, but that her relationship with God helps her to ground herself again. Emma also has the tendency to lose her grounding when she is thrown emotionally by the profound experiences of practice, but that she is able to come back to a point where she is reminded that she can only do what is within her power. For Jane, obeying God’s commandments help her to maintain boundaries.

One must have boundaries, and spiritual or philosophical understanding can help comprehend, establish and maintain them. But boundaries themselves, if rationalised too much, can become the prisons that confine us. In so doing, they have the capacity to stifle one’s capacity to show compassion and understanding to others. Good social work practice necessarily means one must have boundaries, but, at the same time, one must “not be stuck by boundary keeping” (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *diary entry*).

This idea of not being stuck by boundary keeping applies to the boundaries that exist within the external social world of feeling rules, as well as those we create within our own inner private worlds. The two are, of course, connected and this comes back to the importance of sharing inner deliberations with others. Without sharing deliberations honestly with others, individuals run the risk of unknowingly accepting norms without any critical reflection.

For Jane, sharing with others is a way of expressing her spirituality, because this is what it means to be authentic. This is exemplified in the following extract from her diary:

I reached out to other colleagues and spent time deliberately with them. Not much, but enough to share in a real way with others. I don’t want to live a sham or be double minded. (Jane [20+ years], NSGO, *diary entry*)

Jane needs to spend time with people and connect with them in order to feel authentic herself. Without this connection she feels as if she is living a “sham”. Maintaining such a connection, it appears, is a way of maintaining her grounding as a spiritual individual.

In this section, attention has been brought back to the spiritual and philosophical meaning of practice, which was discussed in Chapter Five, where all participants shared aspects of their desire for social justice. Emma, Jane and Penny’s spiritual perspective on practice helps them navigate the complexities of practice and maintain their equilibrium. Not only does such a perspective help maintain purpose and meaning in practice, but also encourages practitioners to accept their limitations as individuals. Such a perspective is important, because it provides a starting point for easing the tensions of practice – a theme that will be continued into the next chapter.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the issue of participants sharing their concerns about practice with others has been explored. Two things have become apparent from the discussion. The first is that the participants’ desire to share their experiences constitutes an aspect of upholding good practice. The second is that finding a supportive space in which it is ‘safe’ to share experiences, seems to be few and far between. This draws attention to the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. The ethical heart acknowledges the need for supportive dialogue and seeks it out. Yet, for the most part, this need is only acknowledged superficially in many organisations.

The formal space where practitioners ‘should’ share their concerns about practice is problematic in many organisational contexts. Not only does one need to be able to know what this space looks like in order to be able to request it, but one may also need to convince others of its value and, depending on the circumstances, this may mean asserting oneself in a particular way in order to establish it. The success of doing this depends on the interpersonal dynamics surrounding an individual practitioner.

The tentative quality that surrounds the issue of supervision is reflective of the ethical irrationality that results from disenchantment. By removing subjectivity from official business, individuals are compelled to search and establish a supportive space for themselves.

Whilst these spaces are valuable for some, they do not go towards resolving the issue of divided accountabilities and the dilemmas that may arise from this.

The informal spaces in which practitioners shared their experiences with trusted others outside the organisational context were also explored. The experience of sharing practice experiences with loved ones or friends differed from one individual to another, so it cannot be assumed that friends or loved ones are able to provide the space needed to fully process the emotional complexity of the work.

Perhaps the most reliable space for participants is the sacred space, which was explicitly discussed by three participants. Such a space seemed to offer the ‘perfect’ supervisor who is able to motivate one to take action and support one to come to terms with one’s limitations. Whilst such a space was essential for these participants, it may not be for everybody. This possibility was demonstrated by the fact that only three participants talked openly about this form of support for their practice.

The general lack of support communicated by the participants was surprising. Prior to conducting the interviews, it had been assumed that if ‘good’ supervision was unable to be established, then trusted colleagues would take its place. Whilst this was certainly the case for some, it did not appear to be the case for all participants. For those participants without supervision or supportive colleagues, the act of performing emotional labour is essentially an isolating experience.

This chapter concludes the presentation of the participant narratives in this thesis. In the chapter that follows, the implications of the meaning gleaned will be discussed in more depth before going on to explore ways in which this meaning can contribute towards easing the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives.

Chapter Nine: Easing the Tension

The aim of this chapter is to examine the significance of the narratives presented in the previous chapters and discuss the implications of this in relation to social work, its purpose and goals. In so doing, the possibility of easing the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives will be explored. Such an exploration relies on critiquing the expectations in social work discourse and the way these have the potential to increase, or even intensify, the demand for emotional labour.

As participants told of their practice experiences, it became clear that their ethic of ultimate ends was to give the ethical heart a stronger voice in professional life because, ultimately, this is what can and does make a difference to the plight of vulnerable children and their families. For these social workers, this meant they willingly offered their emotional labour, not only to hold the tension between their ethical hearts and organisational objectives, but also to ease the tensions that existed for others within their immediate surroundings. What became apparent in the narratives, was that this endeavour towards reaching this ultimate end is not for the faint-hearted, because the uncompromising practice reality can, at times, be experienced as intolerable.

That uncompromising practice realities can be experienced as intolerable was no surprise. Indeed, in designing this research, it was imagined that this discussion chapter would consist of a critique of organisational cultures shaped by the ills of economic rationalism. It was envisaged that the recommendations to emerge would be concerned with urging policy makers and those in senior management to provide better supports for their staff. Instead of questioning the rationalisations that exist in organisations, however, the rationalisations within social work discourse will be questioned.

The reason for such a turnaround is because what surprised me about the participant narratives was that whilst organisational reality was the main subject for critique, there appeared to be little or no criticism aimed towards social work as a discourse and its ideals for good practice. The apparent silence on this subject is significant, because it suggests that perhaps social work discourse is perceived to be beyond reproach. Critique of social work discourse could be misinterpreted as a critique of social work values, and so participants felt compelled to express their unconditional loyalty towards these values.

This lack of discussion around the subject of social work values and ideals could be the result of my own sense of loyalty to social work values. By setting out with my end goal of achieving a compelling critique of organisational reality, my own desire for the realisation of social work values would have been carried through to the interviews and, thus, any subsequent dialogue that emerged from engaging with participants.

Whilst participants may not have been explicitly critical of the ideals of good practice, their narratives do point towards the different adjustments they had made to meet these ideals in the context of the system in which they worked. This was exemplified by the way some were compelled to accept the unacceptable, or by the way others laboured emotionally to change the unacceptable. Either way, individual adjustment became a necessary aspect of practice. From such a perspective, personal adjustment is central. Indeed, good social work practice is as much about adjusting to reality as it is about trying to change it; adjusting to be good to clients; adjusting to be good to organisational objectives; adjusting to the idea of being a good social worker.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, the expectation that one is a good person is explicit in ethical discourse. In this chapter, it is argued that this expectation is accompanied by implicit assumptions about human agency and individual subjectivity. These assumptions are embedded within the core concepts that inform practice. Critiquing them poses a major challenge to the discipline and practice of social work, because it means questioning the very purpose of the profession and reframing it in more grounded and realistic terms. Whilst such a critique may cause some unease, it does have the potential for easing the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives.

In order to begin this discussion, the research question for this project will be revisited and the general findings of this research summarised.

The Research Question and Aims of the Research Revisited

Answering the research question presented in the title of this thesis, *what does it take to be a good social worker?*, began with the premise that good social work practice requires one to perform emotional labour. The idea of holding tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives was developed in this thesis in order to communicate the personal and structural qualities that define the dynamics of emotional labour in social work practice.

In Chapter Two, the disparity between the ethical heart and organisational objectives was explored. The ethical heart in contemporary social work is legitimised as a central tenet of practice within social work scholarship, and this creates the expectation that social workers give something of themselves to their practice. This expectation contrasts starkly with the contemporary context of child welfare, which is influenced by Neo-liberalist regimes, and thus characterised, for the most part, by formal rationality and impartial practices. Such disparity does not go unnoticed, and this was demonstrated by exploring some of the research into the lived experience of practitioners.

In Chapter Three, the idea of holding the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives was explored theoretically. It was suggested that Weber's notion of formal and substantive rationality provides insight into the cultural qualities that have given rise to the nature of this tension. These qualities play out in social interactions, and emotional labour provides a framework for comprehending the effort involved in dealing with this tension within the immediacy of lived experience.

In Chapter Four the methodological approach to researching tension, and in Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, the participant narratives for this research were presented. Overall, these narratives demonstrated the emotional complexity involved in social work practice. At the heart of this complexity is the paradox that whilst one may be sincerely committed to upholding good practice principles, one must also come to terms with the reality that doing so may not always be possible, because good social work practice is dependent on having the right systemic infrastructure and other professionals being committed in the same way.

It could be argued that in social work, what matters most is not the successful achievement of one's goals, but rather the personal and individual commitment to good practice. Indeed, this very point is made by the proponents of virtue ethics in social work, where the focus is on individual integrity (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Webb, 2010). This kind of insight was also reflected by several participants when they talked of the ways in which they have come to reframe the ultimate aims of their endeavour so that their professional goals were realistic and manageable. It is also reflective of the wisdom that is held in the words of the famous Serenity Prayer, which was first published by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1951. The more popular version of this prayer emerged later (Shapiro, 2008). It reads:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,

The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

These words are concerned with individuals coming to terms with their limitations and expectations as human beings. They are humbling and inspiring at the same time – on the one hand, individuals must be accepting of reality, while on the other, they must recognise that reality needs changing.

This message is highly relevant for social workers. Each social worker must take personal responsibility for knowing their own limitations and thus knowing when to continue the endeavour towards change and when to accept reality for what it is. At least this is the case in theory. In practice, this is complicated because social workers also have a professional responsibility to facilitate change. The dilemma they face is not just about what is right for them as individuals, it is also about what is perceived to be professionally acceptable. The Serenity Prayer does not deal with this issue.

The participant narratives revealed the different interpretations of the idea of change. Some participants, for example, had reframed the meaning of change so that facilitating change processes was more manageable for them as individuals. Such a strategy was not adopted by all participants. Some were left with the question that perhaps they had not done enough to fulfil their professional obligation to bring about change. Individual subjectivity is central to this issue. How one experiences the world, for example, will influence how one interprets the idea of change.

With the growing influence of postmodern theories in social work since the 1990s, there has been a burgeoning of discourses aimed at drawing attention to the way individual identity is socially constructed. The aim of this discourse is to critique the way power relations impact on individual subjectivity and, thus, identity (Healy, 2005) and, in so doing, further develop critical practice (that is to say “critical (with a lower case ‘c’)” (Gray & Webb, 2009, p. 77)). Such a critique is aimed at social workers, but only in so far as the role they may play in perpetuating existing power relations. It does not, for the most part, extend out to include analysis of the power relations at play on social workers’ subjectivities.

Instead, social work subjectivity appears to be something that is assumed, often being represented as an ideal type that assists the theorist gain conceptual clarity of his/her theory

(Weber, 1922/1978). In the following section of this chapter, this will be demonstrated with reference to three examples, which will be compared to the findings of this study. The examples offered are not meant to be representative of the whole of social work discourse. Rather, they serve to draw attention to the assumptions about subjectivity and agency that often inform the way social workers are represented in discourse.

Ideal Type Subjectivity in Social Work

The ideal type subjectivity in social work discourse is one of an emotionally intelligent subject (Howe, 2009; Ingram, 2013; Morrison, 2007) who is sensitive to the needs of others as well as to themselves. In a professional context, such awareness means that they can easily identify emotional turmoil and respond to it quickly in order to control it. The value of this construction is that the social worker is freed up from her/his emotional concerns so that s/he is able to fulfil his/her responsibility of being an agent of change with relative ease.

Whilst there is nothing wrong with this representation as such, it does raise questions about how it could be interpreted and whether or not it perpetuates gendered or other kinds of power relations. This will be discussed later. To begin, the popular construction of the professional social work identity will be explored before going on to discuss how this identity is supposed to engage in anti-oppressive and reflexive or reflective practice.

The Professional Self

In social work discourse, the professional self is, for the most part, represented in terms of an ethical agent who is striving towards realising the values of social justice. Such values are personal and professional. This duality is reflected by the construction of two selves that come together through the social worker's crafting of her/his identity as a social worker (Harms & Connolly, 2009).

The idea of the personal and professional aspects of oneself coming together is a metaphor for a self who is confident in her/his area of expertise, yet also flexible and, thus, easily able to adjust to meet the expectations of others. On the face of it, this construction of a self appears unproblematic. When one ponders this idea more deeply, however, it appears that something more may be expected from a person constructed of two selves. Take, for example, the following quote from Malcolm Payne (2011):

How can practitioners be a whole, complete, human being while practising? Because they are whole complete human beings, is it enough just to be themselves? No – they also have to be that special thing, as social work practitioner, integrating the professional with the personal, so they are more than themselves. (p. 90)

The combination of personal and professional means that social workers are perceived to be “more than themselves”. As a professional, it is not enough to be yourself, yet as a person it is not enough to be a professional. In this hybrid self, the personal qualities symbolise an individual’s ability to show empathy and to respond emotionally to social context, as well as the ability to demonstrate professional competence.

Such a construction relies on a fundamental assumption about the way these two selves are supposed to interact with one another. The power relationship between them suggests that the rational expert gains control over the personal self in order to uphold a professional countenance. The personal self thus plays a submissive role, and this is explicitly expressed by the idea of conscious use of self in social work, in which the personal self is literally ‘used’. Such a representation makes implicit reference to emotional labour in the sense that the rational expert manages the expression of emotions.

Such a theory is useful in the sense that it provides a framework through which to understand professional identity and, to some extent, may reflect reality for some practitioners. It needs to be acknowledged, however, that emotional reality can complicate this construction. This was demonstrated in the participant narratives when participants talked about their own unanswered questions and lingering doubts. These were all expressions of the personal self and its discontent in complex situations. These all suggest that whilst the personal self may be submissive in theory, in practice it can much more powerful. So much so, that it can, given the right circumstances, bully the rational self into submission. From this perspective it could be surmised that social workers may not always be in possession of that “special thing” (Payne, 2011, p. 90) that ensures they maintain control over their emotions.

Admittedly, Payne (2011) further qualifies his statement by explaining that his construction is based on an ideal type person/professional relationship. By asking if these two selves make social workers “more than human” (p. 90), for example, he responds to his own question by saying “no, superpractitioners do not exist; their humanity contains both the professional and the human being, and the professional as an aspect of the human being” (p. 90).

His qualification of this point is somewhat reassuring. In addition, his reflections of his own practice as a “social worker as a whole human being in relationships with others” (p. xiii) are revealing, because they communicate something about his own, at times, painful experiences of practice. Yet, his discussion of practitioners’ humanity is, for the most part, concerned with using this humanity as an instrument of practice. Social workers are to recognise the humanity of their clients, yet there is little or no discussion about the effort involved in this use of self. Rather, it is assumed that this will just happen and this gives the impression of practitioners gliding through their practice.

One of the most profound insights to emerge from the participant narratives in this research was that participants did not focus on discussing how well they manage their emotions, as Payne’s ideal type implies. They appeared more interested in talking about the details of emotional hardships and how this impacts on them as individual practitioners, and how they labour to conceal this experience of hardship. These narratives are important, because they point towards practitioners’ vulnerabilities and the problems these create in the immediacy of the lived experience of practice.

It could be argued that this ideal type is not meant to reflect reality, but that it is representative of a reference point from which individual practitioners can reflect in order to reconsider their own boundaries between the personal and professional. If this improves practices with vulnerable people, then this is not a bad thing. However, what is being questioned here is the assumption that all individuals will construct these boundaries in the same way (Zubrzycki, 2003) and whether or not this assumption has the capacity to contribute towards unrealistic expectations.

In order to understand this question, it is necessary to explore other constructions within social work. First, the idea of an anti-oppressive agent will be explored. This representation appears to contradict Payne’s acknowledgement that superpractitioners do not exist, by demanding that practitioners endeavour to achieve the impossible.

The Anti-Oppressive Agent

As explained in Chapter Two, anti-oppressive practice emerged from the radical social work tradition in social work and has been incorporated into mainstream social work discourse (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009). Such an idea has been invaluable for drawing attention to the

way power can be abused by practitioners, and it constitutes a central concept that influences the ethical heart of social work.

Enacting anti-oppressive practice is not for the faint-hearted. This is expressed in the following statement by Lena Dominelli (2002a):

Professionals in social work have a responsibility to eliminate oppression from their own practice or field of endeavour as well as contribute to the eradication of oppression in society more generally, because their profession is concerned with enhancing people's wellbeing. For social workers, this task is facilitated by having a value system which has a change orientation of securing social justice for their clients within an egalitarian and democratic framework. (p. 60)

In this statement, the anti-oppressive practitioner is assumed to be an autonomous agent with agential powers. The key assumption is that social work values are enough to drive anti-oppressive practice. Apart from values, there is no talk about the social worker's humanity, only that s/he is burdened with an enormous responsibility.

It is worth pausing to consider the theatrical language Dominelli (2002a) uses and how it creates unrealistic expectations. The idea of *eliminating* oppression from one's own practice, for example, is impossible to achieve. Even those of us committed to continually reflecting on how our privilege may contribute towards oppression cannot completely eliminate it from our interactions because, as individuals, we are always blinded, at least partially so, by our own location within a specific social context.

From a rational perspective, it could be argued that Dominelli's (2002a) statement is not designed to reflect reality. Rather, it is intended to inspire and energise weary practitioners or new graduates to pursue the cause of social justice within their own practice. It could also be argued that any reasonable person would not be so naive as to take the meaning of such a statement literally. From an emotional perspective, however, such a statement could be interpreted literally because the ethical heart is a perfectionist, driven by its desire for the elimination of all forms of oppression. This was reflected in the participant narratives; all sincerely desired a world where oppression does not exist.

Despite this desire for ethical perfection, ethics is always a question of compromise. Some participants in this study, for example, simply did not have the legal mandate required to ensure the needs of vulnerable children were always met. In such instances, they had little control over their practice because their actions were determined by factors beyond their control.

Structural factors can and do impede one's capacity to uphold the ideals of anti-oppressive practice. Despite this, the idea of anti-oppressive practice endures. It survives on the assumption that theorising about its value will automatically translate into practice. What such an assumption fails to acknowledge, however, is the individual effort involved in putting this theory into practice and how this effort is driven by the desire within the ethical heart.

As would be expected, some participants appeared more vulnerable to the desire within the ethical heart than others, and this was demonstrated by those who talked about their occasional sense of powerlessness. Their main inner question raised by this experience was 'what more can I do?', or 'what more could I have done?' Without the appropriate power to act, some participants turned inward towards a process of self-evaluation.

At the heart of this issue lies a dilemma between self-care and self-sacrifice. Whilst such a dilemma may be shaped and defined by one's personal disposition, it is also shaped by external forces. The ethical heart wants to bring about change and contribute towards eliminating oppression, because this is both a personal and professional responsibility. At the same time, however, fulfilling this responsibility also poses a threat to one's sense of wellbeing.

Such a dilemma raises questions about the idea of self-care in social work (van Heughten, 2009). It invites the question, 'when social workers engage in self-care, what exactly are they protecting themselves from?' Are they protecting themselves from their own ethical hearts, or from the powerful discourses that inadvertently make demands on their ethical hearts? Such a question is impossible to answer for sure, but it does provoke debate about the assumptions that inform theoretical frameworks in social work and how they may be interpreted.

The Reflexive and/or Reflective Agent

The idea of reflexive or reflective practice is also part of the ethical imperative discussed in Chapter Two. It sits alongside the idea of anti-oppressive practice in the sense that the professional self is located with a shared meaning system and is unable to fully transcend it. Compared with Dominelli's (2002a) perspective, however, it appears to expect less and asks that social workers at least make a small but meaningful contribution towards change.

According to White (2009), reflexive practice is concerned with the individual's ability to analyse nuance in text and talk and see "how persuasive accounts are assembled and ambiguous signs, symptoms and competing accounts are interpreted and transformed in professional's talk" (White, 2009, p. 169). Reflective practice is similar in the sense that it incorporates a combination of self-reflective and empirically generated knowledge that promotes critical analysis and action aimed towards changing "constructed power relations, structures and ways of thinking" (Fook, 1999, p. 202). In each case, the reflexive or reflective agent is responsible for establishing critique with the view of instigating some kind of shift in the ways people think.

This expectation makes assumptions about the relationship between individual professionals. According to Taylor and White (2002), for example, reflexive dialogue is seen as something that needs to be shared within an "academic discipline or occupational group" (p. 206). The idea being that reflexive or reflective practice will cultivate a culture of critical dialogue amongst individual professionals. Through dialogue with one another, reflexive or reflective agents work together to identify ways of thinking that may be oppressive.

Whilst the logic underpinning this interpretation of reflexive or reflexive practice seems reasonable in theory, in practice it is questionable. What such analyses leave aside is that critique through dialogue can be met with resistance from others. This was demonstrated by the participants in this study who talked about their experience of emotional labour when trying to influence other professionals. Such labour involved patiently enduring the resistant behaviour of defiant individuals in order to build good working relationships with them. As was demonstrated in one example, building a relationship was not possible at all.

Reflexive or reflective practice relies on the assumption that there is "contextual continuity" (Archer, 2007, pp. 84–85) amongst different professionals within a given practice context

and, thus, a shared understanding of the issues involved in working with vulnerable groups. In addition to this, it also assumes that there is a shared understanding about the value of reflective or reflective practice. For the participants in this study, this was not always the case. For many, good practice involved working hard to gain respect from other professionals before convincing them of the value of their social work perspective.

Contextual continuity amongst professionals does exist in organisations. However, assuming it as a starting point in theory is problematic, especially in contexts where a culture of interdependence amongst professionals is non-existent. In such a context, attempting to share one's reflexive deliberations with others with the view of engaging in reflective or reflexive dialogue with them may be viewed with suspicion. Whilst this was not explicitly discussed by the participants in this study, it was implied. The value of supervision, for example, was not fully appreciated by many managers, team leaders and other senior staff.

Whilst the concept of reflexive practice is valuable, its success is dependent on a culture of trust amongst professionals. Without trusting relationships, where one is able to freely share one's inner deliberations, the idea of reflexive or reflective practice has the potential to be viewed as just another professional expectation that is unable to be fulfilled, thus adding to the long list of practice disappointments.

Thus far in this chapter, assumptions inherent in social work discourse have been explored. These misrepresentations can mean that the very concepts that are designed to offer guidance to practitioners actually have the potential to misguide them. This will not be the case for all practitioners, but it does lead to the issue of social work scholars' responsibility to represent the aims of practice through practice frameworks that are more grounded by the emotional reality of practice. This issue is also raised by Crawford (1994) when she suggests that "social work educators are seduced into claiming to be able to teach an objective, generalized and abstract set of knowledge and skills which practitioners may apply regardless of context" (p. 12).

The desire for an objective set of rules to be applied in social work has increased since the 60s and 70s when social work became more concerned with legitimising its knowledge base within the social sciences (Parton, 2000; Staller, 2014). In the US, for example, the doctoral programs in social work schools shifted the focus from trying to understand what good social work practice means to 'perfecting' research methodologies that adhere to the rules within

formal rationality and producing “formally educated social scientists” (Staller, 2014). This shift away from the substantive nature of practice towards developing theoretical consistency contributed towards widening the gap between theory and practice. Since this time “the conversation is about trying to educate practitioners to understand the importance of what academics produce, rather than hearing from social work practitioner about what they are doing and what they have learnt in the process of doing it” (Staller, 2014).

The idea of “getting practitioners to understand academics” (Staller, 2014) could also be understood through the lens of gendered power relations. This was explored by Moffat (2004) when he looked at the gendered relations between himself, a male social work professor, and his female students. The male professor, argues Moffat (2004), is able to disseminate how he imagines practice to be because he, a product of patriarchal control, engages in a process of denial about emotional reality. The female students, themselves a product of patriarchal power, feel shamed into taking on board the expectations inherent in the professor’s teachings. The message to emerge from Moffat (2004) is that educators must be mindful of power relations and their role in perpetuating them in the academic context.

Gendered power relations do not necessarily explain how female scholars have come to perpetuate the power relationship between themselves and students. Given that it is mostly women who chose to be social workers, however, it could explain why the assumptions implicit in the examples above are rarely questioned and why they continue to inform how social work practice is conceptualised. Women do not question them because, according to Moffat’s (2004) analysis, they feel compelled to aspire to them. Men do not question them because it suits them not to do so.

The issue of gendered power relations also relates to the issue of race relations. This is because social work is informed by theoretical frameworks that, for the most part, were developed by white middle class men. Furlong and Wight (2011), for example, argue that the constructions of human development in psychology that inform social work practice are essentially white constructions of individuality. They suggest that if social work is to live up to its own ideals of ‘eliminating’ oppression, then it needs to engage in “reflection of its own ideological and cultural location” (Furlong & Wight, 2011, p. 38).

Putting the issue of gender and race aside, those producing theory are often removed from the reality of practice. Those faced with the reality of practice rarely get to comment on the

inadequacy of theory, and often do not have input into the development of 'better' theories for practice (Brownlee & Delaney, 2009; Staller, 2014). This gap between theory and practice intensifies the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives and, in turn, this increases the demand for, and intensity of, emotional labour.

The possibility for easing tension will be discussed in the next section where the idea of a grounded social work is explored.

Grounded Social Work

The idea of grounded social work is intended to contribute towards lessening the gap between theory and practice. It relies on the inclusion of practitioners' knowledge and experience, or practice wisdom (Chui & Tsui, 2008; Klein & Bloom, 1995), in the production of knowledge. Not dissimilar to the notion of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) in social research, grounded social work is about stepping back and allowing an experiential reality to emerge from analysis and incorporating this into practice.

Grounded social work is not just about developing knowledge to aspire to how practice 'should' be, it is also about developing understanding of how practice is. In order to flesh out the idea of a grounded social work further, four elements of grounded social work will be discussed. The first is conceptualising the social worker in her/his context. The second is critical reflection on the forms of knowledge that exclude the expression of subjective experience from formal discourse. The third is the explicit acknowledgement of emotional reality in social work discourse, and the fourth is the further development of conceptual tools in order to facilitate dialogue.

Conceptualising Practice

Theories and ideas cannot emulate lived experience, but they can better accommodate it. Frameworks for social work practice need to be grounded with a theoretical understanding that is reflective of the emotional reality of practice. This could be achieved by representing alternative modes of subjectivity in practice frameworks. In her research into human reflexivity, for example, Archer (2007) identifies different modes of reflexivity that are reflective of the different ways that different individuals engage in their inner conversations,

make decisions and then put these decisions into action. This kind of knowledge could be used to better inform how social work aims and objectives are represented.

Social work practice can be better conceptualised by drawing on sociological theories that draw attention to the emotional nuance of social context and, in so doing, offer more insight into how practice might be experienced. In this research project, for example, emotional labour has been adopted to conceptualise the individual subject positioned in the context of emotional reality. In this conceptualisation, the immediacy of lived experience is expressed by the idea that social workers are not only surrounded by feeling rules, but that they also labour emotionally to adhere to these rules.

Conceptualising a reality that reflects the immediacy of lived experience does not have to be confined to emotional labour. It can be understood in other ways. Harry Ferguson (2011) for example, looks to mobility studies (Urry, 2007, as cited in Ferguson, H., 2011, p. 10) to capture something about the way practitioners experience practice. In his conceptualisation, movement, which is indicative of an emotional reality, provides the framework through which to understand practice. As he writes:

movement, potential movement and blocked movement are the very stuff of child protection practice and relate to fundamental issues such as whether professionals move towards children to properly see, touch, hear and walk with them to ensure that they are fully engaged with, here and now, on this home visit, or in this clinic or hospital ward, and the harm to them uncovered. (Ferguson, H., 2011, p. 9)

H. Ferguson's (2011) conceptualisation of movement means he is able to ground his analysis of practice in the way child protection practice looks, smells and feels. Like some of the descriptions offered by the participants in this study, H. Ferguson's practitioners are often thrown by the way emotional reality presents itself to them. They feel apprehensive, for example, when driving to a home visit or walking up to the door of a house where there is a vulnerable child. They feel fearful when entering the house and engaging with parents and they can be filled with dread when moving further into those areas of the house that symbolise the intimate areas of people's lives, such as children's bedrooms. In addition to this, they also grapple with the emotional turmoil that accompanies the dynamics involved in statutory child welfare organisations.

What is meaningful about H. Ferguson's work is that he grounds child welfare practice by drawing attention to aspects of reality that are often ignored in theoretical conceptualisations of practice. His analysis results in the development of what he calls "intimate child protection practice" (Ferguson H., 2011, p. 8). Intimate child protection practice is concerned with the development of a theory for practice, or improving practices, but this development is grounded by the "centrality of emotions and the body and mind of the worker" (p. 207).

Insider Knowledge

Grounded social work is grounded by insider knowledge. According to Brownlee and Delaney (2009), the need to include insider knowledge in formal discourse is "not about creativity or the need for people to exchange ideas, it is really about the process and the assumptions from which ideas are drawn" (p. 21). In other words, insider knowledge is essential because this is the only way to expose biases inherent with conceptualisations of practice. The process of knowledge production is ongoing, because as old assumptions are exposed, more assumptions will be made.

Because human relationships are central to social work, social work has always had to be inclusive of knowledge about human experience. Because it has also been vulnerable to the search for legitimisation within the social sciences, social work discourse has also been influenced by scientific rationality in the production of knowledge (Crawford, 2014). The consequence of this is that the legitimacy of practitioners' narratives remains a contentious issue for some within the profession.

This issue is discussed at length by Crawford (1994), who engages in an autoethnography of her practice in a remote part of the Kimberly region during the 70s and 80s. She tells of being faced with practice situations that were not accounted for in her social work education. In such situations, she was forced to come up with her own solutions, the constant thought on her mind being "they didn't cover this in the course!" (Crawford, 2014, p. 24). The point she makes is that social work knowledge cannot and must not be confined to a particular form, because social work practice will always constitute so much more than a claim to knowledge. Crawford (2014) continues to advocate for the interpretive turn in social work and its contribution to developing 'homemade' social work. In homemade social work, practice problems are defined by practitioners, so the practice wisdom to emerge from the lived

experience of practitioners grounds social work by informing the development of different new approaches to practice or “frameworks for practice” (Healy, 2005, p. 216).

Another way that social work practice can be grounded is through the dissemination of practitioners’ personal reflections about practice. These narratives contain rich and insightful knowledge. An example that springs to mind is Ian Hyslop’s (2007) narrative entitled *Twenty Years in an Open Necked Shirt*, in which he describes his experience as a new graduate and, eventually, supervisor in the context of child welfare practice in New Zealand in the 80s and 90s. What is valuable about his work is the way he draws attention to the ambiguity of practice, and, thus, reveals something about how practice is experienced by not only himself, but also his colleagues – the tensions, the ethical irrationality, the emotional labour. For a reader who may be in the process of experiencing these or similar issues in practice, such a compelling account could be of comfort.

The idea of personal narrative can also be extended to include more creative forms of writing, such as novels or plays. This idea seems out of place within a social scientific framework, but it does have value. According to Gadamer (1960/2004), art provides a portal to the truth. This idea was explored in relation to social work by Ungar (2011), who suggests “the novelist has the potential to interpret experience more profoundly than the scientist” (p. 291). S/he is able to do this because s/he is not so constrained by needing to maintain the impression of objective distance and thus is able to connect with the reader more directly. Because such directness appeals to the heart, it holds greater potential to expose silent assumptions and name that which has not been named (Ungar, 2011).

Thought of in terms of social research, these more creative approaches could be described as being more inclusive than traditional approaches (Denzin, 2014). Being inclusive of the creative or autobiographical, for example, assists in opening up dialogue about practice issues, because these forms of expression make it easier to capture mood, feeling and atmosphere. The journal *Qualitative Social Work* is an example of how this inclusivity is already being demonstrated in social work. Its aim is to provide a space for practitioners to write about their practice in different ways, as opposed to having to abide by the rules of traditional social science (Staller, 2014).

Being Candid About Emotions

The third element of grounded social work to be discussed is open and honest discussions about human feeling. In a disenchanted world, one is always faced with the prospect of feeling exposed if one talks publicly about how one feels. This is not just a whimsical feeling though. As was discussed previously, there is a very real possibility that in formalised contexts, the honest expression of feeling will be met with negative responses, such as ‘s/he needs to see a doctor’ or ‘s/he’s got issues’. Honest open expression about feeling is often interpreted as a personal deficit, not because people are necessarily bad, but because the feeling rules inherent in formal rationality imply this. Naturally, this means that individuals shut down and remain silent about their experiences of practice. The consequence is that the tacit assumptions that inform theories of practice remain unchallenged.

There needs to be a culture shift in relation to how emotions are seen and how they are expressed. A similar sentiment is expressed by Kathleen McKee (2009) when she writes:

We [...] need to build a culture of care in which we can actually speak truthfully about our work -- not just about our successes, but also our failures and disappointments, our uncertainties, anxiety, and confusion. We need to be able to speak about the pain and suffering we sometimes experience through our work, and the ambivalence and anger it can cause us. All of this is written into our very selves and becomes intimately reflected in our work. If, for example, I carry a tacit theory-in-use that says ‘I must not allow my pain to show’ or ‘I must appear to be strong at all times’ my work with my clients is unavoidably affected. This tacit theory deserves explicit rendering into language: it deserves telling in a community of listeners who can provide the care and support I need to fully process what is written in my body. We desperately need old-style models of supervision that make the care of the whole person of the social worker -- not just performance management -- the primary concern. (p. 330)

McKee’s honesty seems to echo the kind of feeling that came across in the participant narratives. The participants could see the senselessness of keeping up appearances. They participated in the study because they wanted an honest conversation about their practice with the view that this may contribute towards challenging the construction of the ‘perfect’ emotional disposition. Their decision to discuss their experience of performing emotional

labour is testament to this. By choosing to discuss their foibles so openly, for example, they were defying the norm that says “I must appear to be strong at all times”.

McKee’s (2009) powerful statement points to the importance of supervision for social workers. But in a climate of disenchantment and continuing denial of emotional experience, it is doubtful that all organisations will be willing to establish this for their staff. As was demonstrated in this research, individual workers need to deal with this issue for themselves.

A culture of trust, where open and honest dialogue about emotions is the norm, is not just about establishing supervision practices. It is also about the active acknowledgement of human experience in the here and now – about encouraging individuals to be more attentive to the emotional needs of their colleagues as they arise. This is a double-edged sword, because, as was demonstrated in this study, active listening to colleagues in the here and now increases the demand for emotional labour. Thus, whilst honest dialogue may ease the tension for some, it may increase the emotional labour for those who offer the time to listen. This is why the idea of grounding social work needs to occur at different levels. It requires more than proclaiming that team leaders or managers ‘should’ be more supportive of workers, because the problem is much more complex than this.

Instigating Dialogue in Education

It is one thing to suggest that dialogue about emotions should be encouraged, but it is quite another to actually facilitate dialogue about emotions. In formalised contexts, for example, it may not be possible to simply start talking about emotions and expect people to open up. For this reason, dialogue about practitioners’ emotional reality, and what it means to be responsible for being an agent of change, needs to be facilitated with conceptual tools to get the ball rolling.

The concept of holding tension and the emotional labour involved in doing this, or variations of this kind, could be used to facilitate discussions about the emotional reality of practice. Such dialogue could have different outcomes. It could promote the importance of what Gorman (2000) refers to as “soft skills” (p. 155) – skills that are essential for relationship-based practice, such as the ability to read and respond to the subtle emotional cues offered in social interaction. In this context, the performance of emotional labour is seen as something to be celebrated in social work (Gorman, 2000).

Further to this, such concepts could be adopted to promote critical reflection about practice expectations; those inherent in organisations, in addition to those that arise from the social work profession. Whilst the idea of social workers critiquing the demands made by their own profession may appear counter-productive in theory, in practice it could have the effect of contributing towards a culture of critical self-reflection. One of the problems associated with teaching students to think critically about their own assumptions, is that this can be an emotionally challenging experience for them. Often, students resist the idea of a critical reflection by refusing to engage in the process (Bratby, Blakeney & Sharpe, 2013). Inviting students to ponder the implications of social work without critical reflection, however, has the potential to lead to further dialogue about its value.

Whilst the concept of holding tension can be adopted in order to promote the advantages of critical reflection, it can also be adopted to facilitate discussions about the issues involved in putting critical analysis into action. In this sense, it acts as a framework for comprehending how one may experience the tension between self-care and self-sacrifice. It could provide a framework for informing “reflective questions” (Osmond & Darlington, 2005, p. 5) in supervision, such as ‘am I labouring too hard?’, or ‘am I labouring enough?’ This further opens up dialogue around the idea that social workers themselves may be limited, not only in the sense of their own cultural situatedness, but in the sense of their own emotional reality. Coming to terms with human limitation in this sense can be a painful experience for the individual. This is why conceptual tools grounded with a reference to emotional reality, but not specifically aimed at it, can offer a non-confronting way to open up dialogue about emotions in practice.

In this section, ideas for grounded social work have been discussed. First, the notion of conceptualising social work practice was explored before going on to look at the role personal narratives play in allowing more practitioners to contribute to social work knowledge. Then, the need for open and honest dialogue was identified as an important aspect of grounding social work before touching on ideas for initiating this open and honest dialogue. But what would all this mean for social work as a profession? This is an important question to ponder, because if fundamental assumptions are going to be challenged, this is going to impact on the way social work goals and aims are constructed.

Were subjectivity to be represented differently, or more reference made to emotional reality in practice frameworks or theories, this would mean that ideas for practice evolve around human limitations as opposed to dreams for a better world. In this construction of subjectivity, the influence of subjective powers would not just be understood to be something practitioners need to harness and use as an instrument of practice, but rather something that is a constituent of how practice may be experienced. Such a vision of practice acknowledges the ethical heart's desire to make a difference. Yet it also acknowledges that along the way, practitioners will experience tensions and dilemmas, and that these demand time and energy from individuals. So much so, that working one's way through these kinds of dilemmas can, in some cases, become the main focus of one's attention.

In the context of social work in child welfare practice, this construction would mean an acknowledgement that it may not be possible to uphold ethical practice in a way that will be meaningful for clients experiencing oppression. It will not always be possible to fulfil the social work expectation that one brings about change in individuals, families or communities, and it may not be possible to influence positive change in many organisational cultures. Indeed, it may even mean an acknowledgement that social workers will inevitably make terrible mistakes. The very idea that one may not be able to fulfil one's professional obligations is quite unpalatable. However, this is the reality of practice and not acknowledging this is irrational. Not only does this fail to reflect the overall purpose of good social work to begin with, it holds the potential to be harmful, not only for social workers, but also for clients (Ferguson, H., 2005, 2011).

The vision of grounding social work in the context of the practitioner's emotional reality poses a challenge to the social work identity as it has come to be constructed over the last hundred years. The idea of social worker as agent of change, for example, transforms into a practitioner who has skills that could help others in meaningful ways. The idea of the reflexive practitioner, transforms into a practitioner who is good at identifying oppressive practices, but who, for whatever reason, may or may not be able to communicate these to others, and thus may not be able to bring about positive change. The professional social worker may have statutory or even non-statutory *power over* his/her clients (Dominelli, 2002a), but this does not mean that s/he is necessarily able to facilitate positive change.

This is about breaking the stereotype of the professional as a rational expert. Such a stereotype emerged from a cultural value that espoused and assumed that all professionals will develop a certain way of responding emotionally to the world around them. This is not reflective of reality. Whilst all professionals may labour emotionally in order that their behaviour conform to particular feeling rules, the extent of that labour and how this may differ from one individual to the next differs. Recognising this difference is a way of acknowledging just how difficult social work practice can be.

The idea of grounding social work this way is about shifting the focus from looking at how scholars would like practice to be, to looking at how it actually is (Ferguson, H., 2011). This does not mean compromising social work values, or about losing sight of the aims of social work vision altogether. On the contrary, such grounding, which sees the emotional being in the context of his/her social relations, is itself a social work value.

By inviting practitioners to be themselves, as opposed to trying to be something “more than themselves” (Payne, 2011, p. 90), such grounding has the potential to improve practices. This is part of what it means to be authentic and genuine in practice. Ideas about authenticity and genuineness both begin with the honest recognition of human limitations. Such honesty is what social workers encourage with their clients, yet such a quality could also be of value within theories that describe social work.

A more robust incorporation of practitioner experience and thus emotional reality has the potential for creating a more supportive space within discourse – a space designated for easing the tensions of practice through a shared reflexive process. Accounts of how social work practice are always necessary, but acknowledging how practitioners are limited, both in terms of structure and their sense of agency, is also necessary.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the possibility of grounding social work in the emotional reality of practitioners lived experience has been discussed, with the view of easing the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. First, some assumptions inherent in social work concepts were explored. It was argued that these assumptions are represented in an ideal type social work professional, who, for the most part, is able to exercise his/her agential powers in practice with relative ease. Such a representation assists the theorist to gain clarity

in his/her representation of how practice 'should' or could look and, in so doing, paints a theoretical gloss (Smith, 1999) over the emotional complexity involved with tension and dilemma.

What the participant narratives in this study demonstrated, is that in the immediacy of how practice is experienced, tension is central to practice because it demands emotional energy and time. By glossing over this reality, theory has the potential to create unrealistic expectations of what social workers are expected to achieve. Thus, it has been suggested that a greater recognition of this emotional complexity within theoretical concepts is necessary.

Such an acknowledgement can be incorporated into social work discourse in different ways. It can inform the theoretical frameworks used to comprehend practice; it can inform social work knowledge; and can also inform dialogue and debate about the emotional reality of social work practice. Without this grounding, there is a risk that the divide that separates theory and practice will increase. Theories or frameworks for practice will continue to offer ideal types that cannot be attained in practice. Practice, on the other hand, in all its complexity, continues to be something different from the theory that guides it (Staller, 2014).

It must be acknowledged that mere recognition cannot eliminate the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. As was suggested in Chapter Three, this is an unavoidable aspect of professional life. What recognition can do, however, is ease this tension. It is only by acknowledging structural reality and how it is experienced, that it is possible to find some kind of relief from the torment it can cause. Second wave feminism exemplifies this point. By demanded recognition of the silent suffering of women and children in the private sphere, it brought relief to some, not because it eliminated the issue of family violence, but because it offered women a point from which to voice their experiences. Thus, recognising tension and the different forces that create it, offers individual social workers a point from which to voice their practice experiences. In so doing, they have a framework through which to share the heavy moral burden that can often accompany their practice, especially in the field of child welfare practice.

Theory will always constitute a simplified version of reality. But if it is to have meaning, it needs to at least reflect something of what people are experiencing. This is why great theories survive the test of time – they touch us because we are able to recognise our own reality within them. The rich insights gleaned from the participant narratives in this research have

offered a starting point for better grounding theories about, as well as for, social work practice.

Chapter Ten: Concluding Reflections

If you can keep your head — Rudyard Kipling

But feelings can't be ignored, no matter how unjust or ungrateful they seem — Anne Frank

This thesis has sought to understand more about the subjective experience of social work practice and, specifically, the emotional labour involved in holding the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. In the immediacy of lived experience, emotional labour means managing emotions in order to maintain the appearance of inner equilibrium so that one is better able to connect with others in a meaningful way. The act of doing this is a personal gift that social workers offer in their practice. Such a gift is what makes the act of building relationships possible, what makes relationships meaningful and, thus, what makes them instrumental in achieving the professional aims of social work.

One of the main points pursued in this thesis was that the act of offering this gift takes place in a disenchanted world. In such a world, sublime values, such as those that motivate the act of giving, have, for the most part, been driven from public life. The consequence is an overbearing focus on technical rationality, efficiency and functionality. These forces impact on individuals and can throw them off balance. This means that maintaining a sense of inner equilibrium is not something that just happens by virtue of being human, but constitutes a continual process of living the emotional ups and downs in a world that seeks to deny them.

This requires a continual inner commitment to self-reflection and inner adjustment. In social work, this inner commitment is encouraged by a professional discourse that emerges from a collective ethical heart. For most social workers, certainly for the participants in this study, this professional expectation is worth celebrating because, in a disenchanted world, individual gifts of genuine empathy and concern hold the possibility for re-enchantment. The idea of re-enchantment is extremely powerful because it can inspire and motivate social workers into action. This is important for those vulnerable children and their families who may be experiencing a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness (Scott, 2011).

Yet, here lies the contradiction. Whilst emotional labour is essential for cultivating a culture of optimism and hope, it can be self-defeating for the individual performing it. By masking feelings of disappointment and despair, for example, a social worker may be discouraged

from acknowledging the full extent of his/her emotional discomfort. This can create an emotional intensity which, in turn, increases the demand for emotional labour. This study has drawn attention to this issue theoretically and empirically.

What Does This Research Mean for Me?

As was explained in the introduction to this thesis, I was inspired to conduct this research because of my own experience of social work practice with vulnerable children and their families. For this reason, it is necessary to revisit my own experience of practice in order to explain what the findings have meant for me.

For me, holding the tension between organisational objectives and the ethical heart meant making a series of what I perceived to be compromises in my practice. Coming to terms with this reality meant a process of re-evaluating my ideals for social work practice, so that over time, I reached a point where I expected less of myself.

Learning that some of the participants also faced the reality of compromise is important for me personally, because it means that whilst my experience of practice may have felt isolating, it was not an isolated experience. So I have found comfort in the knowledge that my experience of compromise was ‘not just me’, but rather reflective of broader issues. This demonstrates the value of shared experience.

At a more intellectual level, conducting this research has resulted in a clearer understanding of the forces that create the conditions that make compromise an inevitable aspect of practice. This understanding was gained by exploring the idea of the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives. Such a tension has been identified by many authors from different disciplines and is expressed in different ways. Until conducting this research, however, I had not come across an explanation of it that spoke to me in quite the same way as Weber’s types of rational action, and how these individual actions translate into cultural qualities.

Understanding these conflicting values assisted me to be able to better conceptualise the lived experience of tension between two forces pulling in opposite directions. It also assisted me in coming to terms with the way social workers are positioned within this tension. They are not positioned as if playing the role of impartial mediator seeking middle ground between

opposing points of view. If this were the case, holding tension would be relatively easy. Social workers are positioned in such a way that they are personally and professionally *engaged with* this tension. On the one hand, they need to engage with organisational objectives and work with them, and, on the other, they must work against them. It is the same with the ethical heart. On the one hand, they must listen to the ethical heart, yet, at the same time, maintain a degree of distance from it and, at times, work against it.

This complex engagement with the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives is what makes social work “a contradictory and perplexing profession” (Ife, 1997, p. x). Weber’s notion of rationalisation and ethical rationality assisted me to comprehend this contradiction and what it may mean for individual professionals. According to Gayne’s (2004) interpretation, Weber himself was aware of his own positioning within it. He “remained critical of the nature and trajectory of the modern order, whilst at the same time working within and against the limits of the modern order” (Gane, 2004, p. 154). Weber’s analysis was informed by universalist thinking, yet, to some extent, he was also critical of this. This is why he did not try to solve the issues that arise from modernity, but rather, simply understand them (Gane, 2004).

Although Weber does not offer theoretical or technical solutions to modern problems, he subtly points towards the qualities that can make a difference. As in social work, his clue points towards the value of human relationships. Sublime values may very well have retreated from public life, but they did not disappear altogether. Instead, they continue to reside within the “brotherliness of direct and personal human relations” (Weber, 1919/1958b, p 155). As he writes:

It is not accidental that our greatest art is intimate and not monumental, nor is it accidental that today only within the smallest intimate circles, in personal situations, in pianissimo, that something is pulsating that corresponds to the prophetic pneuma, which in former times swept through the great communities like a firebrand, welding them together. (Weber, 1919/1958b, p.155)

Human relationships are important because they offer hope when there may be none. The problem in a disenchanted world is that once relationships are rationalised as instruments of hope, there is a risk their original meaning will be lost and, thus, their magic. This is a complex issue for social workers, especially when they need to be ‘genuine’ in their

interactions with others. On the one hand, they need to ‘use’ relationships as an instrument of hope, but on the other hand, they need to keep the magic of relationships alive. There is no resolution to this paradox. All one can do is “measure up to [it] inwardly” (Weber, 1919/1958a, p. 127) and do one’s best.

Hochschild’s (2003) concept of emotional labour complements Weber’s analysis by providing a conceptual framework through which to comprehend what it actually takes an individual to measure up inwardly. What is valuable about Hochschild’s (2003) analysis for social work is that she draws attention to *what it takes to put theory into practice*. This is such an obvious aspect of practice, yet, as was argued in the previous chapter, is often glossed over in theoretical constructions. The consequence is that as theoretical ideas for good practice are disseminated by theorists and scholars, practitioners are often left to do the heavy lifting in the context of contradiction and ambiguity (Crawford, 1994; Moffat, 2004; Staller, 2014).

For me, the concept of emotional labour assisted me to put a name to my own experience of heavy lifting as a practitioner. It also helped me articulate how it felt endeavouring to uphold critical ideals, only to find I had to continually re-evaluate my own relationship with them. Emotional labour inspired me to critically reflect on my own relationship with the social work profession and ask the difficult question as to whether I was perhaps seduced by the lure of a critical framework, without understanding the full implications of what this would mean in practice.

This is not to suggest that a critical framework in social work is of no value, only that if individuals are to try to put such ideals into practice, that they be armed with an understanding of what they may be up against. From my own perspective, for example, understanding something about the forces working against critical endeavours, and what this endeavour may mean for the individual, has not resulted in my rejection of the cause. On the contrary, critical social work values are as important to me now as they were when I graduated as a social worker over fifteen years ago.

Being able to maintain my own inner commitment to social work values, whilst subjecting the professional aims and goals to a process of critical scrutiny, can be partly attributed to connecting with the participants who chose to talk about their experiences of emotional labour. From them, I learned that performing emotional labour is tough, and, some days, can

feel as if it is being performed in vain. But what I also learnt, was that the endeavour is still meaningful because, in a disenchanted world, this gift makes a difference.

What Does This Research Mean for Social Work?

Whilst conducting this research has helped me as a social worker, it must be acknowledged that its value is a matter of interpretation. Because the idea for this project emerged from my own subjective experience as a Western, white woman, only Western white women chose to participate in the study, and so the outcomes are reflective of the experiences of those who share a specific cultural standpoint (Harding, 1993).

The issue this thesis has sought to address, however, is broader than this. By identifying the emotional labour needed to deal with contradictory structural qualities, it has sought to draw attention to the emotional reality of practice, regardless of how it is experienced. For this reason, it would be worth exploring if the idea of emotional labour is meaningful to different gendered or cultured subjectivities. Perhaps Hochschild's (2003) concept may need re-evaluating in order to accommodate these different perspectives. This exploration could result in different conceptualisations of the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives in social work, as well as different perspectives on what it means to hold this tension.

The concept of holding tension, and the emotional labour involved in doing this, could also inform what is already understood about collaborative practice in the human services. Does the tension between the ethical heart and organisational objectives have the same meaning for those in other professions? If not, how does this differ and how can understanding this difference contribute towards more collaborative practices?

The issue explored in this thesis could also have been framed in a number of different ways. It could have been framed as a research project about emotional burnout, for example, or a study looking at self-care, or supervision in social work. For this reason, some of the ideas generated could be reframed to suit these specific discourses. All of these possibilities have the potential to contribute to a better understanding of what it takes to be a good social work practitioner.

Despite these limitations, this research has contributed towards the ongoing collective endeavour of lessening the disparity between theory and practice in social work. Lessening this divide is an ongoing process, because the more that is known about what human beings need to live happy healthy lives, the further governments seem to get from being able to meet these needs (Wilson & Pickett, 2009). So, whilst social workers may be armed with their knowledge about human relations, the systems in which they work can often pull them away from putting this knowledge into practice.

Being armed with knowledge, yet at the same time constrained by organisational systems, is an unenviable position. By identifying what it takes to break through this constraint, this research has drawn attention to the back stage workings of social work. 'Great' front stage performers are usually reliant on a back stage crew who labour tirelessly to make them look 'great'. These crews, stage managers, stage hands, designers, lighting and sound engineers, all contribute to the performance as a whole, yet because their presence often remains concealed from the front stage, they often do not receive the accolades given to the 'great' performers.

The main finding to emerge from this thesis is that the social work performance needs to be considered as a whole if the gap between theory and practice is to be lessened. That is to say, there needs to be more recognition and understanding of the heavy lifting that goes on back stage. This does not mean compromising the theoretical aims and goals that present themselves front stage of social work. It only asks for a greater acknowledgement of the activity that occurs back stage.

The inclusion of both front and back stage in analysis was discussed in terms of a grounded social work. Grounding social work, it was suggested, can occur in different ways. It can occur through conceptualising social workers within the emotional reality they may face in their practice; through being more inclusive of the knowledge that practitioners can offer academic discourse; through creating a culture in which the discussion of feeling is the norm; and through the further development of concepts that reflect the tension between the ethical heart in the context of organisational objectives and emotional labour.

Without this grounding, the expectations on social workers can seem unrealistic. Whilst coming to this realisation may ultimately be an individual process that needs to take place

over time, it does not have to be an isolated process. Dialogue about this issue can be shared with others, making it an integral part of becoming a social worker from the very beginning.

Grounded social work is ultimately about valuing the individuals who are already personally committed to being social workers. Social work educators understand that there is a risk their students will not be valued by those in the organisations that employ them when they graduate. The following statement from Dorothy Scott (2011) exemplifies this:

I was moved by the depth of vocation of these young women, and realized with great sadness that this gift had not been cherished and nurtured as it might have been in either the classroom or their field placements. And if their experience on graduation was similar to that of previous students I had taught, then I am afraid that in many of their first places of employment their gift of vocation would not have been cherished and nurtured either. I believe that this is one of the reasons we lose good people from social work. (para. 25)

Scott (2011) makes explicit reference to the ethical heart and the gift it offers. This gift is cherished and nurtured in the social work profession because social work is more than a profession, it is a vocation where “the heart’s desire meets the world’s need” (Scott, 2010, para. 21).

If such a gift is to be nurtured, the people who offer this gift need to be nurtured also. This kind of nurturing means engaging in dialogue about the contradictions one may encounter when the gift they offer comes up against organisational objectives – what it may take to deal with this if and when it happens, and what it may mean for individuals to deal with it. Understanding more about this is the first step to positive change for social workers. A similar sentiment is eloquently expressed by Karen Swift (1995) when she writes:

The first step in change making process is the development of knowledge designed to reveal the full complexity of social reality, knowledge that credits perspectives of all participants, that includes actual experience, that provides a view of our own part in social processes, and that attempts to unravel contradictions and dispel illusion. (p. 13)

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Appendix A: Information Sheet for Participants

Social Work Relationships in the Context of Working with Vulnerable Children and Their Families

I wish to invite you to participate in my research on the above topic. The details of the study follow and I hope you will consider being involved. I am conducting this research project for my PhD at the University of New England. My supervisors are Dr Myfanwy Maple, Associate Professor Gail Hawkes and Associate Professor Linda Turner of the University of New England. The contact details for each researcher are as follows:

Dr Myfanwy Maple: email, mmaple@une.edu.au or phone 02 6773 3661.

A/Prof Gail Hawkes: e-mail ghawkes@une.edu.au or phone 02 6773 2277.

A/Prof. Linda Turner: e-mail linda.turner@une.edu.au or phone 02 6773 3340.

I can be contacted on: e-mail lmorley@une.edu.au or phone on 0411 815 016.

Aims of the Study

This research project aims to find out how social workers who work in the child protection/welfare context build and maintain helpful relationships whilst at the same time meeting organisational demands. I want to find out about the “emotional labour” involved in this task. Arlie Hochschild defined “emotion work” to mean when we “induce or suppress our own feelings in order to sustain an outward countenance that produces a proper state of mind in others” (2003, p. 7). For Hochschild, we induce or suppress feelings according to what is expected from different social contexts. Emotion work becomes emotional labour when such work becomes a requirement (explicit or not) of one’s employment.

Social workers perform emotional labour in order to sustain an outward countenance that communicates a calm strength to a client whilst also showing understanding and empathy. This is central to the social work profession. But it is not just about the work social workers do with clients. Social workers in child protection/welfare are also required to work together with medical professionals, professionals who work in partnership agencies, or managers. Such individuals may not have the same professional ethical base as social workers, yet they are still required to work collaboratively with people from different professions. I am interested in how social workers who work in this field of practice experience the process of developing and maintaining helpful working relationships with clients and professionals.

I am anticipating that by understanding more about how this work is experienced by social workers, it will lead to a better understanding of how relationships are negotiated in contemporary child protection/welfare practice. This could lead to recommendations for ways of better supporting workers, which ultimately will go towards being able to better meet the needs of children and families.

The project has stemmed from my experience as a qualified social worker. Most of my ten years of practice has been with children and their families, so I have an understanding of the research context from a practitioner's perspective.

Hochschild, A. R. (2003). *The managed heart: Commercialisation of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Criteria for Participation

- You are a qualified social worker eligible for membership of the AASW.
- You have no less than one year of experience working with vulnerable children and their families in a child protection/welfare context.
- You work with vulnerable children and their families either in the statutory or non-statutory setting. These include agencies such as family relationship centres, Dept of Community Services, Community Health (or other Health Services), Indigenous child welfare or other non-government agencies such as family support centres or private practice.
- You can work in this context part-time. For example, you may be a generalist social worker who works with vulnerable children and families as part of your broader role, or you may have two positions, one in this area of practice.

You may have colleagues who meet the criteria but are not members of the AASW. Please feel free to pass this information to them.

Time Requirements

The research will consist of two data collection methods. Individual interviews: these will take about 60-90 minutes. Journals: these can be kept for one or two weeks.

Interviews and Diaries

There will be a series of open-ended questions that allow you to explore your views and practices related to your work as a social worker in a child protection/welfare context. These

interviews will be voice recorded/electronically captured. They can be conducted in person or over the phone.

A diary will be sent to you if you agree to participate. You will be required to keep this diary for one to two weeks or longer if you wish. Things to be recorded are incidences or interactions and how you feel about them; whether or not there is conflict with AASW code of ethics; how they affect your working relationships with clients or other professionals; how you communicate these feelings and to whom, and is there a difference between how you feel and what you communicate to others including colleagues, managers, supervisors, etc. These journals can be written throughout your working day, at the end of each day, or every couple of days (see diary info sheet at the beginning of your diary).

Confidentiality

Any information or personal details gathered in the course of the study will remain confidential. No individual will be identified by name in any publication of the results. All names will be replaced by pseudonyms. Geographical locations of participants will be presented as being from 'metropolitan', 'rural' or 'remote' Australia.

I am attempting to understand the experience of practice from a professional social work point of view not from an organisational one. This is because I want to hear how you experience building and maintaining social work relationships in the context of your work. Consequently, the organisation you work for will not be identified in any publication of the results. They will be identified as either 'statutory' 'non-statutory' 'government', or 'non-government' organisations.

The voice recordings will be kept in a locked electronic file. Written transcriptions, journals and other written material will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. It will be kept for five (5) years following thesis submission and then destroyed. Only the investigators named above will have access to the data.

The researchers named above have a duty to report any undisclosed issues that have not previously been reported under mandatory reporting legislation.

Participation

Participation is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent from the project and discontinue at any time without having to give a reason and without consequence.

It is unlikely that this research will raise any personal or upsetting issues, but if it does, you may wish to contact your Employer's EAP (Employee Assistance Program).

Research Process

It is anticipated that this research will be completed by the end of 2012. The results may also be presented at conferences or written up in journals without any identifying information.

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England (Approval No.HE10 163, Valid to 1/12/2012).

Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at the following address:

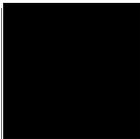
Research Services
University of New England
Armidale, NSW, 2351.
Telephone: (02) 6773 3449 Facsimile (02) 6773 3543
Email: ethics@une.edu.au

This project also has the support of the Australian Association of Social Workers. Concerns or complaints about this research project can also be made to:

The Public Affairs Officer
AASW National Office
PO Box 4956
Kingston
ACT 2604
Ph: (02) 6232 3900
Fax: (02) 6230 4399
Email: willm@aasw.asn.au

Thank you for considering this request and I look forward to further contact with you.

Regards



Louise Morley BA, BSW (Hons)

Appendix B: Consent Form for Participants

Social Work Relationships in the Context of Working with Vulnerable Children and Their Families

I,, have read the information contained in the Information Sheet for Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.

Yes/No

I agree to participate in this activity, realising that I may withdraw at any time.

Yes/No

I agree that research data gathered for the study may be published using a pseudonym.

Yes/No

I agree to the interview having my voice recorded and transcribed.

Yes/No

I understand that the records will be kept in a secure place and only accessible to the four named researchers.

Yes/No

.....

Participant

Date

Appendix C: Demographic Information

Pseudonym: _____

Date of Interview: _____

Area of Practice

Statutory

Non-statutory

Government

Non-government

Geographic Location

Metropolitan

Regional

Rural

Remote

Years of Experience

1-5

5-10

10 and above -

Gender

Female

Male

Ethnicity

ATSI

Anglo Australian

Other (please specify)

Diary Sent/Given: _____

Interview Conducted: In person (where?)

On the Phone

Length of Interview: _____

Appendix D: Guidance for Keeping Diaries

This diary provides a space for you to write down anything you forgot to mention in the interview. It also invites you to write about your experiences in the field of child protection/welfare and how you feel about them. For example, you can record interactions with colleagues or professionals from other agencies (perhaps partnership agencies), interactions with children or families, specific incidences, or even doing administrative tasks such as paper work. I am interested to know how these experiences impact on your capacity to develop and maintain good working relationships with families or other professionals.

You can keep this diary with you during your working day and write in it as things happen, although doing this may be tricky when you are busy. If this is the case perhaps you could just jot down pointers to remind you, and then fill it out when you get home at night. It is up to you. If you cannot get to fill it out for a couple of days, do not worry, get to it when or if you can. It would be good if you could record the time frames that lapse between diary entries.

Things you could include are how you feel about your experiences? Do you feel content, satisfied, happy with your work or angry and frustrated? Perhaps you feel all of these things at different times? What happens to make you feel OK, or not OK? Does this impact on you being able to develop and maintain working relationships, if so how does it impact? What are the barriers you face? How do they impact on you? What helps you to build good working relationships? How do you feel about this?

Are you able to talk to anybody about your experiences and how you feel? If you are, are you always able to be totally honest about this, or do you sometimes present something different? If so why? Who can you be totally honest with about how you feel? Does work impact on your personal relationships at all? How?

Sometimes when something happens we might feel or react a certain way, then, after reflection, we might feel differently. How are you feeling about past incidences now? Perhaps you are happy with how you reacted or perhaps you wish you had reacted differently, or said something different. If you feel differently what changed for you? Why?

You can write what you like in your diary if it relates to your experience and feelings about your work in child protection/welfare and how this may affect your relationships with other professionals or clients, or at home. You can draw pictures in it if you like and do not worry if what you write is not grammatically correct.

This information will remain confidential and the researchers will be the only people who will have access to this information. However, remember to make sure you maintain confidentiality of others by ensuring you do not write down the names of people in your notes.

You can keep this diary for two weeks or longer if you wish. After you have finished with it post it back to me using the envelope provided. You may feel that you want to keep the diary, if this is the case you could photocopy your reflections and send them back to me.

I am looking forward to reading about your experiences in this really important field of work. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards



Louise Morley

Appendix E: Front Cover of the Diary

