How Social Workers understand and use their Emotions in Practice: A Thematic Synthesis Literature Review

Abstract

Emotions are intrinsic to social work. Social workers engage with people at points of crisis or need. The emotions of both practitioners and the people they interact with are central to the lived experience of practice. This paper presents a thematic synthesis of empirical studies which illuminate how social workers understand and use their emotions in practice. A search of electronic databases and reference harvesting located 28 papers which were screened against inclusion criteria and appraisal tools. Four analytic themes were identified: emotions as a dynamic relational resource; patterns of organisational and professional relationships; ambivalence, dissonance and distance; the place of emotions in professionalism and identity. Patterns and themes were found in diverse settings. This review brings together a small but valuable knowledge base. Findings suggest emotions constitute a paradox for social work and are potentially a constructive resource. The paper concludes with suggestions for further research into the situated emotions of social work practice.

Emotions in Contemporary Social Work

Social work is essentially a relational practice. This relational practice involves emotions in the process of engagement, communication and the building of working relationships. Contextually such relationships involve diverse emotions, whether social work practice is occurring in therapeutic, procedural, voluntary or involuntary contexts. It is relevant therefore to ask how social workers themselves understand, relate to and use their emotions in professional practice. The emerging picture from this literature review suggests that the presence and role of emotions in social work are considerable but their position in professional practice appears unclear.

It is pertinent to note that while internationally social work shares a global definition (IFSW, 2014) it varies in form. The degree to which social work is constructed as a state mediated activity engaged in commissioning services and/or undertaking legal interventions into people's lives is a further variation. Internationally social work has been widely affected by the extensive development of new public management (Hood, 1991) which has increased marketisation and managerialism, directly impacting how social work is resourced and delivered. Social workers are not immune to the *‘emotional politics’* of this socio-political environment, where individual and collective emotions can construct moral, social and political responses to risk and welfare ([Warner, 2015: 6](#_ENREF_84)).

However, regardless of legal and cultural variations social work occurs in the private domains of people’s lives responding to needs arising from structural and/or individual and family factors. Emotions are inherent in the relational, organisational and socio-political context of this practice which involves practitioners working with other people’s and their own emotions. How these emotions are understood or worked with is relevant to professional knowledge and practice.

The relevance of emotions in contemporary social work practice has been noted for some time ([Howe, 2008](#_ENREF_42); Ingram, 2015a; [Morrison, 1997](#_ENREF_58);  [2007](#_ENREF_59); [Ruch, 2012](#_ENREF_65); [Trevithick, 2014](#_ENREF_79)) with an increasing ‘turn’ to the role of emotions in child protection ([Cooper, 2005](#_ENREF_16); [Ferguson, 2009](#_ENREF_22); [Warner, 2015](#_ENREF_84)). Reflective and conceptual papers expose the complex emotions negotiated in practice ([Brǎescu, 2011](#_ENREF_6); [Dwyer, 2007](#_ENREF_21); [Mandell, 2008](#_ENREF_55)). Social work literature and research highlights the potentially negative impact of emotions in studies on stress, compassion fatigue and working with violence and aggression ([Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006](#_ENREF_13); [Harris and Leather, 2012](#_ENREF_40); [Koritsas et al., 2010](#_ENREF_51); [Littlechild, 2005](#_ENREF_54); [McFadden et al., 2015](#_ENREF_56); [Travis et al., 2016](#_ENREF_78)). Practitioners’ emotions are also associated with concerns about staff retention ([DePanfilis, 2006](#_ENREF_19)), supervision and compromised performance ([Munro, 2011](#_ENREF_60)). Emotions are frequently constructed as central to practice yet at the same time are seen as potentially harmful phenomena which require containment and control. Here, emotions are linked to traditional notions of professionalism, boundaries and resilience ([Cooper, 2012](#_ENREF_17); [Grant and Kinman, 2012](#_ENREF_35); O'Leary et al., 2013). Thus, it is suggested that emotions have an important place in social work whilst also representing a tension for practitioners.

Studies of social work show that emotions have considerable power. Research and theory papers demonstrate that powerful conscious and unconscious processes can occur in response to emotions operating ‘*at both rational and irrational levels’* ([Smith et al., 2003:668](#_ENREF_71)), a feature also noted in public sector organisations where social work is often located (Hoggett, 2006). Avoidance or denial in order to minimise the experience of difficult emotions can lead to individual and organisational defensive responses, including minimisation or avoidance of risk ([Cooper, 2005](#_ENREF_16)). Emotional responses to physical or psychological violence and manipulation can mirror hostage relationships in which practitioners feel powerless and isolated, compromising their capacity to engage in clear-sighted practice ([Goddard and Hunt, 2011](#_ENREF_32); [Stanley et al., 2002](#_ENREF_74)). These studies illuminate the potential power of emotions in social work practice and organisations. Similarly, practitioners’ emotions are both influential and problematic in ethical and professional decision-making ([Keinemans, 2015](#_ENREF_49); [O’Connor and Leonard, 2014](#_ENREF_61)) and home visiting ([Ferguson, 2010](#_ENREF_23)). Specific emotions have been explored in terms of their impact on practice, for example fear ([Smith, 2006](#_ENREF_70)), shame, pride ([Gibson, 2016](#_ENREF_30)) and anxiety ([Baird, 2016](#_ENREF_1); [Ruch and Murray, 2011](#_ENREF_66)). In contrast, positive emotions such as care, love or affection receive less attention in social work literature ([Turney, 2010](#_ENREF_81)) although the motivational aspects of hope and optimism are recognised ([Collins, 2007](#_ENREF_12); [Koenig and Spano, 2006](#_ENREF_50); [Ryan et al., 2004](#_ENREF_68)).

More broadly, how emotions are defined is the subject of significant ontological and epistemological debate, reflecting the fact that they involve complex physiological, cognitive, neurological, social, cultural and unconscious processes ([Day Sclater et al., 2009](#_ENREF_18); Feldman-[Barrett, 2012](#_ENREF_3)). An extant literature on emotions emerges from sociology, psychology, psycho-social/psychoanalytical, philosophy and neuroscience disciplines. Whilst there is no agreed lexicon across disciplines or cultures ([Izard, 2010](file:///C:\Users\louise\Documents\PhD%20Poss%20Papers\AAA%20complete%20paper\Lit%20review%20working%20doc%2021%20March%20recov.docx#_ENREF_47)) emotions such as fear, anger, sadness, happiness, disgust, surprise, and embarrassment, guilt, pride and compassion ([Immordino-Yang, 2010](file:///C:\Users\louise\Documents\PhD%20Poss%20Papers\AAA%20complete%20paper\Lit%20review%20working%20doc%2021%20March%20recov.docx#_ENREF_43); [Oatley and Johnson-Laird, 2011](file:///C:\Users\louise\Documents\PhD%20Poss%20Papers\AAA%20complete%20paper\Lit%20review%20working%20doc%2021%20March%20recov.docx#_ENREF_62)) are commonly recognised alongside increasing recognition of cultural variations in emotion concepts and terminologies (Watt-Smith, 2015).

Generally, psychological perspectives focus on ‘*phenomena of feelings, behaviours, and bodily reactions*’, exploring how feelings, their causes and functions can be explained (Frijda, 2008: 69). Sociological perspectives analyse relationships between macro structural / cultural dimensions and individual emotion experiences, drawing on dramaturgical, structural, symbolic interactionist, exchange and ritual theoretical perspectives (Turner & Stets, 2006:25). Goffman (1959) highlighted the role of emotions in performance and intersubjective processes, informing Hochschild’s (1983) conceptualisation of emotional labour, emotion work and management. This has been extended to analyse power, care and emotion practices in caring professions (Erikson & Stacey, 2013). These themes have been combined in relational approaches to emotions which bring together a range of sociological scholarship to conceptualise emotions as *‘the experience of social relations, rather than an idiosyncratic condition*’ (Spencer et al., 2012:4). Sociology and psychology inform extensive research on emotions in organisations, alongside increased recognition of emotions in unconscious organisational processes (Huffington et al., 2004). In addition, neuroscience has contributed knowledge of neural mechanisms in triggering and regulating sensory and memory processes experienced as emotion states (LeDoux, 1996). These extensive theories of emotion are beyond the scope of this paper. (See Trevithick (2014) for a brief overview relevant to social work). However, they highlight that emotions are complex phenomena. The theoretical approach taken in this review to emotions in the context of social work practice is outlined below.

This paper reports on a thematic synthesis literature review which aimed to identify empirical studies of social work practice which evidence how social workers understand and / or use emotions they experience in practice. It begins with a brief outline of the theoretical position which informed this review. The literature search strategy and protocol are then outlined, followed by a thematic synthesis of findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications for social work and proposes areas for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical perspective used in this review takes a relational view of emotions in social work, combining two related constructs. The first draws on Burkitt’s conceptualisation of emotions as relational constructs, which emerge in active ‘*emotional scenarios’* to which participants bring feelings, thoughts, ‘*meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt’* (2014:20-21). These relational experiences do not exist in a vacuum, they are imbued with meaningsboth from the interaction itself andwider social and cultural contexts, for example, power, class, gender or race. As such, the interactions of social work practice include and create emotions consciously and unconsciously in ‘*patterns of relationship’* which give these emotions meaning (Burkitt, 2002:151). This interactional and relational conceptualisation of emotions is particularly applicable to understanding social workers’ emotions in the socially situated context of practice. Practitioners’ emotions emerge in interactional contexts involving subjective, conscious and unconscious experiences which include cognitive, sensory and embodied dimensions. They are dynamic ‘*complexes*’ (Burkitt, [2014](file:///C:\Users\louise\Documents\PhD%20Poss%20Papers\AAA%20complete%20paper\Lit%20review%20working%20doc%2021%20March%20recov.docx#_ENREF_9):171), occurring within the context of social relationships, performance, identities and power.

The second related construct is that social work is relationship-based. The relationship is the essential tool of professional practice involving both conscious and unconscious processes ([Ruch et al., 2010](#_ENREF_67)). The psychosocial model of relationship-based practice proposed by Ruch et al. emphasises psychodynamic concepts such as the unconscious, defence mechanisms, transference or containment which operate at individual and organisational levels of practice. Such concepts are integral to understanding emotions in the interactional micro-skills of practice, for example practitioners’ use of self and their ability to attune, observe and respond to emotions, behaviours and contexts in ways that combine empathy, trust and authority. They are equally significant in understanding the emotionally charged organisational, social and structural interactions of practice (Ruch et al, 2010). Drawing on this perspective, emotions such as anxiety, empathy or anger that arise in interpersonal and organisational practice can be understood as conscious and unconscious phenomena which emerge in the situated and increasingly managerialised contexts of social work.

Combining these views of social work as relationship-based, and emotions as relational constructs, provides a useful analytical lens to explore the data and from this develop understanding of how social workers understand, relate to or use their emotions in practice.

The research design, search strategy, method of analysis and limitations of this review are now outlined.

Research Design

A critical narrative literature review using thematic synthesis was chosen as the most appropriate methodology by which to identify and evaluate empirical studies and their findings. Emotions experienced by practitioners during their work are subjective and may be challenging to capture. Research may be limited due to methodological and ethical complexity. Narrative literature reviews are useful in reviewing methodologically disparate studies to map knowledge (Baumeister and Leary, 1997). They do not equate to the standards or resources of a traditional systematic literature review but, undertaken systematically with a transparent methodology incorporating analysis and synthesis, they can expand the knowledge base and highlight gaps ([Shaw and Holland, 2014](#_ENREF_69)). Thematic synthesis offers an analytic framework to synthesise diverse qualitative studies to identify patterns and concepts ([Thomas and Harden, 2008](#_ENREF_77)). As such, the approach taken in this review is configurative ([Gough et al., 2012](#_ENREF_33)) as it aims to explore and develop understanding of how particular phenomena are conceptualised.

Search Strategy

An initial scoping review identified that studies pre-2000 reflected social work prior to new public management which resulted in significant policy, organisational and professional changes. The associated emphasis on outcomes, accountability and the use of communication technology brought profound changes to the structure and delivery of social work internationally (Webster and McNabb, 2016). Practitioners’ time is increasingly directed away from direct relational practice to screen-based proceduralised activities (Broadhurst and Mason, 2012). Consequently, as this review aims to contribute to knowledge in contemporary social work, January 2000 was set as a cut-off date to systematically identify peer-reviewed studies relevant to current practice. A key criterion was that papers must report primary qualitative research undertaken with social work practitioners, this could include students. Inter-professional studies were included if samples included social workers. Papers had to include a primary focus on how practitioners understand or use emotions experienced in practice. Conceptual articles not based on primary research were excluded, as were numerous studies describing the impact or prevalence of emotions but not specifically identifying how participants understood or used these in practice. Quantitative studies, research in natural disaster or conflict situations and reflective descriptions of casework without a clear research design were excluded. The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme qualitative research criteria ([CASP, 2017](#_ENREF_11)) were applied to systematically screen papers to appraise relevance, rigour and quality of research design, ethics, methodology and analysis. Papers had to meet a minimum 7 of the 10 CASP screening questions.

Search terms were identified to facilitate comprehensive searches which could be replicated. Search terms for studies undertaken 2000 - 2016 included: (social work) AND qualitative AND emot\* OR feelings in title, keywords or abstract, to reduce irrelevant results and identify primary research written in English. Key terms were combined with selected terms for specific emotions using Boolean operators AND/OR/NEAR i.e. anger, fear, anxiety, disgust, affection, distress, sadness, cynicism, shame, compassion. Selected limiters in databases reduced irrelevant results.

Electronic searches were undertaken in ScienceDirect, Psychinfo, PubMed, Web of Knowledge, Social Care Online, ASSIA and JSTOR. ‘Reference harvesting’ from identified papers led to further qualitative studies not identified via electronic searches. 1012 studies were initially identified. Reading titles and abstracts enabled exclusion of non-empirical studies, those not eliciting how social workers understand or use their emotions, and duplicates. Searches of the Campbell and Cochrane collections identified no studies meeting the inclusion criteria. ProQuest was searched for doctoral theses. 3 relevant theses were identified, two were linked to previously included publications and not included to avoid duplication. 2 papers emerged from one study and were thus counted once. In total 921 studies were excluded, and 91 studies met initial criteria. This was further reduced to 28 on full reading and rigorous application of appraisal tools.

Method of Analysis

Initial screening used CASP and TAPUPAS frameworks. TAPUPAS enables appraisal of the quality of social care knowledge by considering standards of transparency, accuracy, purposivity, utility, propriety, accessibility and specificity ([Pawson et al., 2003](#_ENREF_63)). Diversity of qualitative research and publication styles meant not all CASP or TAPUPAS questions were applicable. Together they enabled systematic screening and application of inclusion and exclusion criteria. Abstracts were screened, then the findings and analysis to identify data relevant to the research question. Thomas and Harden’s ([2008](#_ENREF_77)) framework was then used to scrutinise the findings and analysis in each study for data extraction and thematic synthesis. This involved a three-stage process which enabled a transparent and structured approach to analysing diverse data: an initial coding ‘*to capture the meaning and content’* (Thomas and Harden, 2008:5) and further coding to identify key descriptive themes, which are not mutually exclusive. Informed by the outlined theoretical perspective, this coding involved initially identifying key words and concepts in the data. These included references to practitioners’ expressed or experienced emotions, communications and interactions which directly or indirectly used or showed emotions, including how practitioners’ emotions were perceived or responded to. Viewing emotions as situated and relational enabled attention to the interactional context of emotions in the data. Similarly, identifying and coding references to unconscious interactional and/or organisational processes facilitated identifying descriptive and interpretive themes. In the third stage this method facilitated generation of analytic themes informed by the outlined theoretical perspectives. These themes move beyond original content of studies to interpret and develop meaning in relation to the original research question. Findings are presented using these themes.

Limitations

Limitations include the search process by a sole researcher and the variety of terms used to describe emotions may result in some relevant studies being missed. Reference harvesting identified studies not identified in electronic searches, suggesting the likelihood that other relevant studies were missed. Presentation of qualitative studies varies enormously, resulting in the exclusion of potentially relevant studies which did not meet CASP criteria. The focus of the review on how social workers understand and use emotions, rather than their impact, required careful reading and a degree of subjective decision-making. Delicate judgements were required to differentiate studies which report the presence or impact of emotions but provide no data on how practitioners understood or used these emotions. Similarly, application of appraisal frameworks and thematic synthesis involve subjective judgement and possible bias. However, in developing a critical synthesis of the identified studies, the intention is to expand empirical and conceptual knowledge on social workers’ emotions in practice.

Results

Twenty-eight empirical studies met inclusion criteria. All are qualitative and one used mixed methods. Practitioners’ emotions were the primary focus in 22 papers and in 7 a secondary focus but a primary element in the findings. Collectively the studies reflect a range of research methodologies: 6 ethnographies ranging from 4 months to 4 years; interviews (16), individual and group interviews (3), and groups (3). Two used interviews and documentary analysis and one used mixed methods, questionnaires and interviews. Sample sizes range from 4 to 70 participants, located in America, Australia, Canada, Denmark, England, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Norway and Scotland. A tabular summary is available (see supplementary material).

Findings

A critical synthesis of the studies is presented in four analytic themes: emotions as dynamic relational resource; patterns of organisational and professional relationships; ambivalence, dissonance and distance**;** the place of emotions in professionalism and identity.

1. Emotion as a dynamic relational resource

A key emergent theme is the role and meaning of emotion as both a relational practice and a resource which informed sense-making processes among social workers *and* in their relationship-based practice with clients ([Forsberg and Vagli, 2006](#_ENREF_27); [Gilgun and Sharma, 2012](#_ENREF_31)). Evident in ethnographic studies, emotions emerged from the relational interactions of practice. They were relationally processed through different forms of *‘emotion talk’* within teams, enabling acknowledgement of fear, despair, joy and compassion ([Forsberg and Vagli, 2006: 25](#_ENREF_27)). Such interactional communication reduced tension, enabling analysis and problem solving for practitioners. Creation of informal safe spaces to express and process emotions (Ingram, 2015b; [Kapoulitsas and Corcoran, 2015)](#_ENREF_48) facilitated sense-making of complex emotional experiences and dynamics. Gregor (2010) showed that this emotion processing frequently occurred unconsciously within teams, with limited recognition of the implicit skills used.

In relational interactions practitioners used *‘ways of feeling’*, combining empathy and imagination ([Larkin, 2015](#_ENREF_52):300) with embodied sense-making. This ‘*embodied knowing’* ([Sodhi and Cohen, 2012: 122](#_ENREF_72)) constituted a significant but not necessarily recognised form of sense-making. Arising in this the interactions of practice intuitive and fleeting feelings of unease, warmth or optimism were informative but required analysis (Cook, 2016; [Ferguson, 2016)](#_ENREF_24). Interconnections between relational embodied emotions and the ‘felt’ phenomena of contextual dynamics such as power, culture or racism which operated consciously and unconsciously ([Boyle et al., 2009](#_ENREF_5); [Gunaratnam and Lewis, 2001](#_ENREF_38); [Gunaratnam, 2011](#_ENREF_37)) illustrated Burkitt’s notion of emotions as dynamic complexes. Arising in and from the client-worker relationship these complexes incorporated emotions derived from the powerful situated dynamics of social work, comprising complex emotion scenarios. Social workers’ emotions can thus be viewed as dynamic resources which if analysed and theorised, for example practitioners’ analysis of their discomfort, fear or anxiety, can inform and safeguard practitioners and clients ([Gregor, 2010](#_ENREF_36); [Smith et al., 2003](#_ENREF_71); [Smith, 2006](#_ENREF_70)).

A further dimension of emotions as a dynamic resource was apparent when practitioners embraced conflicting emotions to facilitate engagement with clients ([Stanford, 2010](#_ENREF_73)). Similarly, as Carey (2014, 129) identified, cynicism, constructed as a ‘*deviant emotion’*, can be used as a protective defence mechanism and a form of constructive and collective resistance to organisational norms.

2. Emotion as patterns of organisational and professional relationships,

A predominant theme which emerged is the role of organisational and professional constructions of emotions. The data show team and organisational cultures created emotional patterns of relationship in which emotions were constructed as phenomena to be managed and controlled in professional practice, patterns which impacted at individual and organisational levels. Researching Danish social work [Moesby-Jensen and Nielsen (2015)](#_ENREF_57) identified three modes of multidimensional emotional labour: shutting off, deferral and emotional involvement that impacted in and outside work. These resonated with findings from studies highlighting pressures practitioners experienced in trying to ‘manage’ emotion professionally ([Ingram, 2015](#_ENREF_44)b; [Smith et al., 2003](#_ENREF_71)). Such pressures created further emotions which operated as patterns of relationship between social workers and their employers. For example, such patterns of relationship are imbued with power, creating anxieties and fears evident in perceptions that emotional expression or humour might be deemed unprofessional (Gilgun and Sharma, 2012).

The experience and management of difficult emotions were linked by practitioners to organisational perceptions of professional competence or incompetence. Arguably reflecting contextual influences of increasingly risk-averse organisations and policy contexts, practitioners’ heightened concerns about accountability and blame were evident in hesitance about acknowledging or expressing emotion and associated fears of negative judgement or disapproval in the context of organisational practice (Boyle, 2009; Gibson, 2016; Gilgun and Sharma; 2012; Ingram, 2015b; Kapoulitsas and Corcoran, 2015; Smith et al., 2003; Virkki, 2008). Crucially, support systems were judged in terms of safety or trust that verdicts of incompetence or individual well-being were not being made. Gibson’s (2016) English ethnographic study illuminated how particular patterns of emotional relationships intersected in the organisations’ active use of practitioners’ shame, pride and humiliation to regulate practice *and* practitioners within new public management systems.

These patterns of thinking and relationship within social work organisations reflect tensions in how practitioners’ emotions are perceived and positioned, by themselves and others. From a relational and psychosocial perspective such patterns reinforce the conscious and unconscious power of emotions intra-organisationally as well as inter-personally. The data suggest that consequently the meanings given to social workers’ emotions in this interactional and organisational context are predominantly negative.

3. Ambivalence, dissonance and distance

The psychodynamic notion of the unconscious enabled further analysis of the complexities of social workers’ situated emotions and emotion patterns which emerged. Defensive self-protection against anxiety is a recognised response to the impact of proceduralised and blame-oriented organisational cultures, evidenced in unconscious processes of emotion management such as ritualised behaviour and overreliance on procedural processes ([Ruch and Murray, 2011](#_ENREF_66); [Whittaker, 2011](#_ENREF_86)). These protective functions are positive for practitioners but create emotional strain. This can impact relationship-based practice via defensive splitting, avoidance or distancing from clients and felt emotions (Ruch & Murray, 2011:440).

Constructing anxiety, and arguably any powerful emotions, as appropriate or productive requires significantly different organisational approaches to the realities of social work practice (Taylor et al. 2008). [Leeson (2010)](#_ENREF_53) found that management of emotions required recognition, resources and freedom to engage emotionally within a facilitative management culture. In the absence of such a containing environment, conflict between what is experienced emotionally and what is enacted and created in the interactional and organisational complexities of practice, can trigger increased dissonance, defensive ambivalence and distancing from emotional engagement. This creates a sense of personal and professional inadequacy for social workers ([Leeson, 2010](#_ENREF_53); [Tzafrir et al., 2015](#_ENREF_82)).

These themes also emerged in the dynamics of social work education. The meanings given to emotional interactions were heightened by inherent power dynamics and normative confusion about the expression or acknowledgement of emotions. These emotional scenarios intersected with power positions and unconscious processes such as internalisation or projection, impacting decision-making and professional identities for trainee and experienced social workers ([Barlow and Hall, 2007](#_ENREF_2); Finch & Taylor, 2013; [Rajan-Rankin, 2014](#_ENREF_64)).

4. The place of emotions in professionalism and identity.

As previously noted, the interactional and organisational contexts of social work include and create emotions consciously and unconsciously in patternswhich give these emotions meaning. An overarching theme in the data was the ambivalence felt by social workers about the place of emotions in their profession, and subsequently the significance of emotions to their interwoven professional and personal identities. The emphasis on maintaining professionalism and professional standards combined with negative associations of emotions creates a paradox for practitioners. Emotions are part of professional practice yet are not perceived as ‘professional’. This paradoxical perception presents significant tensions if social work is seen as relationship-based and emotions as relational constructs. Personal and professional identities are interwoven in how emotions are experienced, conceptualised and used. Practitioners’ emotions are filtered through these identities, which in turn are used in relationship-based practice.

Professional and personal identities are not separable. Social and gendered constructions influence how emotions are made sense of, from early socialisation processes to social, cultural and professional influences on how they are articulated or displayed. In a Finnish interprofessional study [Virkki (2008:78)](#_ENREF_83) identified how capacities for empathy were valued by participants as ‘*natural*’, feminised skills linked to professional and gendered identities. Paradoxically practitioners’ ambivalence about articulating anger, guilt or shame was connected to their need to maintain status with employers. Masking of distress, anger and gendered abuse was interwoven with personal and professional sense of self. The meanings given to emotions were similarly interwoven with gendered constructions of emotion skills which silenced practitioners’ real emotions.

Similarly, gender, racial and religious identities contributed to differential emotional experiences in social work practice. Power and status differences intensified emotional responses and interacted with personal identities ([Rajan-Rankin, 2014](#_ENREF_64)). Gunaratnam’s research (2011; 2001) illustrated unconscious processes of fear, anger and shame operating in cross-cultural social work. Notions of professionalism intersected with biography, identity and power adding to the situated emotional complexities of practice.

Practice environments which enabled a ‘*depth of human connection*’ (Pooler et al, 2014:215) were identified as central to professional identity, reinforcing the role of emotions in capacity for authentic emotional engagement ([Leeson, 2010](#_ENREF_53); [Wendt et al., 2011](#_ENREF_85)) and analysis of the subtleties of interactions ([Gunaratnam, 2011](#_ENREF_37); [Ruch and Murray, 2011](#_ENREF_66)). Carey (2014) and Stanford (2010) showed that professional identity and confidence were reinforced by emotional engagement. Joy in the professional role sustained meaningful practice (Pooler et al, 2014; Wendt et al, 2011). Practitioners’ experience and use of emotions were intrinsically linked to their professional role and identity. The emerging paradoxical perception of the place of emotions in professional practice is therefore problematic.

Discussion

This review set out to identify and critically synthesise evidence from empirical studies which illuminate how social workers understand and / or use emotions they experience in practice. Applying a relational understanding of emotions as dynamic, interactional and situated processes, both conscious and unconscious, facilitated a recognition of the emotional nuances which emerged in studies of professional organisational practice. Synthesising findings from qualitative studies risks decontextualising data and losing context, so caution must be applied in extracting data. However, using narrative thematic synthesis with this theoretical framework facilitated development of interpretative themes, building on the findings of the identified studies. In further analysing empirically grounded knowledge, this review provides new insights into the phenomena of practitioners’ emotions in social work. A synthesis of key points will now be discussed and some emerging claims proposed.

Two key and apparently contradictory findings emerge. Firstly, that emotions are a dynamic resource for practice, having interactional and sense-making functions. Secondly, that social workers and social work organisations are ambivalent about where emotions fit in professional practice. The inherent tension between these two statements suggest emotions hold a paradoxical position for social work, raising questions about how emotions are understood and theorised within the profession. It is evident in existing literature and the identified studies that emotions are ubiquitous in the process, content and organisation of practice. Despite international variations in the social work role, engagement in relationship-based practice involves empathic communication, management of complex emotional dynamics and resilience. The centrality of these skills, knowledge and capacities is apparent in the four themes outlined. Powerful and challenging emotions are created in the dynamics of practice, not just at the individual level of direct practice between practitioners and the public, but also in the complex interactions which occur between practitioners, employers and perceptions of professionalism. Reflecting Burkitt’s notion of ‘emotion complexes’ the evidence suggests a complex interplay between social workers’ performance, use of emotion and the situated constraints of managerialism.

New public management systems contribute an additional layer of complexity to this dynamic, as evidenced in practitioners’ fears about blame and error. This perpetuates practitioners’ concerns and ambivalence about the place of emotions in their practice, while increasing their experience of problematic emotions in the context of practice. Internationally there is a recognition that emotional distance can be reinforced by bureaucratised systems which reduce and effectively devalue face-to-face relational practice ([Broadhurst and Mason, 2012](#_ENREF_8)). Increased bureaucratisation appears to leave little room for recognition or analysis of the intra-organisational and interpersonal emotional dynamics of social work organisations and how these impact on perceptions of emotion in contemporary practice. The findings suggest there is a significant gap in professional understanding of emotions, despite recognised concerns that quality of practice can be compromised by unacknowledged or uncontained emotions associated with stress, retention challenges, manipulative relationships or misplaced optimism ([Haringey, 2009](#_ENREF_39)). The research analysed in this review show that cognition, emotions, the physical and the unconscious interact in relational social work, suggesting a gap in technical-rational managerialist practice systems in which the latter three elements receive limited attention.

The reviewed studies represent 10 different regions ranging from Northern Ireland and Scotland to Scandinavia and America. A significant finding is that the paradoxical views about whether emotions are deemed to be ‘professional’ emerged across the studies, indicating that this phenomenon crosses international boundaries and regional variations in how social work is constructed and practised. Social work in these regions is likely to be socially and culturally diverse yet similar patterns of thinking in how emotions are constructed can be identified.

Similarly, uncertainties about the place or role of emotions in professional practice are identified by experienced practitioners, practice educators and social work students. This presents a further problematic challenge for the profession. It raises questions about how emotions are theorised and represented in social work education as well as in the intra-organisational contexts of practice. Both these elements connect with themes of professional identity and the micro-politics of practice, intersecting with feelings related to identities and power, which operate as ‘place markers’ (Clarke, 1990) in organisations. Uncertainties about the place of emotions in professional practice and their organisational use to regulate it feed into the emotional politics which Warner (2015) argues construct cultures of risk and blame, directly impacting how social work identities are negotiated.

This review demonstrates that research into practitioners’ perspectives on their emotions is relatively limited. There is a small, growing research base focusing on emotions as an integral element in social work. However, there remains a gap in empirical studies which explore how practitioners understand, construct and use their emotions in practice. A limitation in the studies reviewed is the lack of attention to how practitioners theorise emotions, which arguably could provide further insight into this complex but central area of practice. The evidence from this review further suggests that recognising emotions as a source of knowledge involves acknowledging their intersection with the complexities of individual biographies and wider socio-cultural environments. Paying attention to such situated emotion experiences is important for social work practice.

Social work as a relatively new profession may benefit from research which develops evidence-based understanding of these phenomena. Suggestions for research arising from this analysis include:

* Researching the interactional dynamics related to emotions in social work organisations
* Exploring social workers’ theoretical frameworks for emotions and the links between emotions, identities and power
* Researching the role and use of positive emotions
* Exploring the role and dynamics of shame for both practitioners and people they work with
* In the context of new public management developing comparative studies to research organisational and practitioners’ construction and use of emotions in different regions
* Build on ethnographic studies in contemporary practice to identify how particular models of practice inform, constrain or direct how emotions are conceptualised or used.

Conclusion

This literature review has identified a small, potentially useful empirical base which demonstrates the complexity, power and importance of practitioners’ emotions in social work. Applying a relationally informed analysis of the complexities of emotions as interactional and relational constructs in social work has identified emotions as both a dynamic relational resource and a paradoxical construction in professional practice. The available evidence suggests that there is a dissonance between relationship-based practice and how emotion skills and knowledge are legitimised, conceptualised or used in organisational practice. Suggestions are made for further research. Social workers and people who need social work services can benefit from research, practice and organisational systems which facilitate and enable a deeper understanding of emotions.

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