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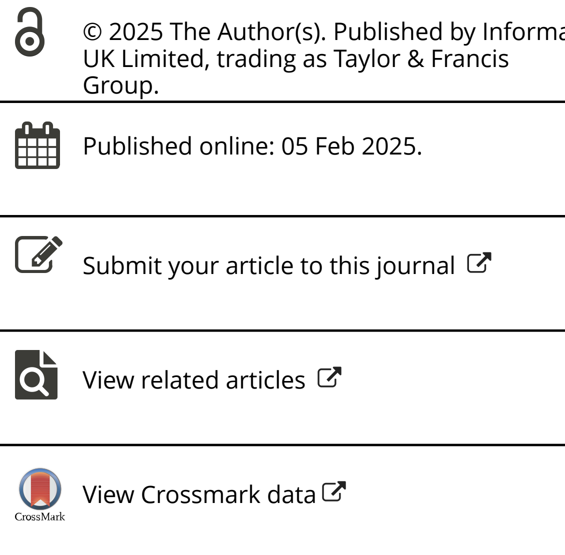

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Emotional labour in child and family social work teams: a hybrid ethnography

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ABSTRACT
Achieving good outcomes for children and families engaged in the social care system relies upon a healthy, confident, and stable workforce. However, child protection social work has been identified as an emotionally demanding area of practice, linked to staff burnout and poor retention. This article draws on a hybrid ethnography of two child and family social work teams in England during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings identify the team as a vital source of support for social workers. Paradoxically, the team also identified a place of emotional insecurity where team members must perform emotions in a way that is compatible with their professional role. Through the trifocal lens of emotional labour and the dramaturgical metaphor of Setting, Roles, and Scripts, a novel conceptual framework of team support is presented.

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Social work teams; emotional labour; hybrid ethnography; child protection; retention; burnout

Introduction

Child and family social work – in particular, child protection – is described as 'emotional work of a high order' (Howe, 2008, p. 1). While identified as a rewarding profession (Johnson et al., 2022) social workers experience the highest levels of stress-related sickness of any occupational sector (Ravalier et al., 2021). Emotional demands arise from direct work with children and families (Whitaker, 2019), within the organisational setting (Ferguson et al., 2020) and the wider socio-political landscape (ADCS, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified work-related stress resulting in exhaustion, virtual fatigue, and isolation (Cook et al., 2020). Despite the recognition that social workers operate in highly emotionally demanding contexts, the way emotions are used in practice is less well understood. Emotions present a 'paradox' for workers (O'Connor, 2019, p. 645) – they are considered an essential tool in relationship-based, reflexive, and emotionally intelligent practice yet are also considered a threat to rational decision making (Cooper, 2009). It is recognised that social workers must also consciously manage and display their emotions in line with the occupational expectations of their role – known as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983).

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The names of participants and the Local Authorities in which they work have been changed to protect their identity. Some identifying demographics have also been changed.

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Emotional labour and child and family social work

Emotional labour is defined as the process whereby organisations commercialise employees' feelings by requiring them to display emotions as part of their job (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour has been explored in a wide range of disciplines and contexts including nursing (Theodosius, 2008), health care professionals (Roh et al., 2016), teachers (Kinman et al., 2011) and, to a lesser extent, social work. Existing research on emotional labour explores the challenges (Barlow & Hall, 2007; North, 2019; Rajan-Rankin, 2014) or potential benefits in practice (e.g. Kanasz & Zielinska, 2017; Winter et al., 2019). However, Grandey et al. (2013, p. 17) argue that emotional is best understood through a 'trifocal' lens of 1) occupational requirements, 2) emotional displays, and 3) intrapsychic processes.

Emotional labour as an occupational requirement

Social workers are the 'public face' of the organisation (Orzechowicz, 2008, p. 144), and are subject to strict emotional display rules, ie: 'how employees "should" feel when interacting with . . . clients' (Grandey et al., 2013, p. 8). For example, Whitaker's ethnographic research (2019, p. 326) explored how social work managers encouraged the organisational mantra of 'bring yourself to work' where emotional displays were implicitly and explicitly reinforced through professional training programmes, induction, recruitment, policy, appraisal, and supervision processes. Part of working in a social work team involves the display of professional competence and credibility (Leigh, 2017). As such, staff may continue to work at great personal cost and hide their felt emotions, fearing that signs of distress will lead to them being viewed as incompetent or 'unprofessional' (Rajan-Rankin, 2014, p. 2432). Grootegoed and Smith (2018) found team managers faced the same emotional challenges as social workers, but these were less visible due to the managerial emphasis on performance. In addition, Ferguson et al.'s (2020, p. 33) study of the culture of child protection social work found managers 'walked a very delicate line' between acknowledging the emotional demands of practice and not showing too much distress.

Emotional labour as an emotional display

As an 'e*motional display*' emotional labour can be viewed as a form of 'impression management' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 35) to influence the mood of others. For example, Kanasz and Zielinska (2017) identified social work students supressed some emotions when working with hostile clients to instil a sense of calm. Within teams, managers adopt emotional displays to motivate and boost staff morale. For example, Morley (2022) found experienced social workers and managers had to 'dig deep' to maintain a 'professional face' during challenging periods . . . through the display of 'empathic gestures'. This approach differs from the psychoanalytic concept of containment (Ruch, 2004). Emotional labour involves the active shaping and performance of feeling within the social exchange (Hochschild, 1979). Social work teams have been viewed as communities of coping where collective emotional displays including humour, camaraderie and reassurance can provide informal spontaneous methods of stress management

(Korczynski, 2003). For example, social workers use humour and demonstrate self-care by bringing in and sharing food with colleagues (Winter et al., 2019).

Emotional labour as an intrapsychic process

Emotional labour involves two internal regulatory strategies, 1) surface level acting and 2) deep level acting (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting involves a conscious display of emotions for the sake of outward appearance and aligns with Goffman's (1959) presentation of the self in everyday life. Surface acting can be deployed by social workers to consciously distance or defer emotions when working with children and families (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Leeson, 2010). However, displaying emotions that are counter to how one feels can increase the risk of compassion fatigue and burnout (Ashley-Binge & Cousins, 2020). For example, Barlow and Hall (2007) identified social work students felt anxious and stressed when their emotional responses were incongruent with what they perceived to be the required 'public face' in supervision. Experienced social workers also hide their distress to achieve a credible performance in front of co-workers (Leigh, 2017; North, 2019). Deep level acting is synonymous with 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561). This includes actively applying hope and optimism to the social work task by reframing emotionally demanding encounters into positive challenges (Burns et al., 2019). The literature identifies deep level acting can result in feelings of self-efficacy, personal accomplishment, job, and customer satisfaction, higher coworking rates and feeling connected to the organisation (Zapf & Holtz, 2007).

Research has emphasised the relevance of emotional labour for social work practice. However, few have explored the enactment, costs, and benefits of emotional labour within teams.

Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore how teams support child and family social workers, engaged in child protection work, to manage the emotional demands of practice. This was driven by the need to look beyond the individualist emotional resilience paradigm that dominates social work policy, education, and practice. The research involved purposively sampling two child and family social work teams in England rated as 'Outstanding' by Ofsted. Whilst there is ongoing debate regarding the impact of inspection on the workforce (Hood & Goldacre, 2021), studying teams working in 'Outstanding' contexts provided the opportunity to explore how such work environments may or may not be experienced differently.

Team 1 was an Assessment and Intervention team that covered a large rural and urban local authority primarily focused on child protection referrals and initial assessments. The 12 permanent team members included 1 team manager, 2 senior social workers, 1 specialist social worker, 4 social workers, 2 newly qualified social workers, a family support worker, and a student social worker. The average time in the team was 5.7 years. The team were mostly female, white British and averaged 32 years of age.

Team 2 was a generic child and family social work team operating in an affluent, small inner city local authority and engaged with assessment, child protection and longer-term

care work. The 12 permanent team members included 1 team manager, 2 practice managers, 1 specialist practitioner, 2 advanced practitioners, four social workers, a team coordinator (administration support) and a systemic clinician. The average time in the team was 3.8 years. Team members were also mostly female, however represented a more diverse ethnic mix and were on average, 39 years of age.

Ethnography has a long tradition in social work research and considered a useful methodology to explore team processes and support (e.g. Gregory, 2022; Pithouse, 1984; Ruch, 2004). The study was conducted during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic between September 2020 – March 2021. In response to social distancing measures, both teams used a mix of in person office and video conferencing via MS Teams to 'see each other's faces' and meet collectively. As suggested by Przybylski (2020, p. 5), 'seeing only a single part of the space precludes the researchers' ability to analyse sociality in participants full, lived environments'. A hybrid ethnographic approach was therefore considered an appropriate methodology.

Data collection included 30 hours of in-person office and online observations via MS Teams using an overt non-participatory approach. Observations included everyday office interactions, formal team meetings, peer reflective case discussions, informal hybrid 'coffee mornings' and 'team check ins'. 21 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted via MS Teams video conferencing as a complimentary data collection tool which helped to transcend geographical boundaries (Pink et al., 2021). Finally, 2 team group interviews (Team 1= n9, and Team 2 = n10) were conducted via MS Teams to enable established team members to share their collective experiences (O'Reilly, 2012). As with the individual interviews, video conferencing helped to alleviate the practical difficulties of bringing the team together during social distancing restrictions.

Observations and interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using Doucet and Mauthner's (2008) analytic framework, the Listening Guide, which has been successfully applied to the subjective emotional experience of social workers operating within wider systems (North, 2019; Poletti, 2018). The study was granted ethical approval from the University of East Anglia Research Ethics Committee in July 2020 and from the two participating local authorities' research governance. All participants gave informed consent to take part with names and identifying information changed to protect anonymity.

Findings

The findings from this study identified that collective emotional labour within social work teams helped social workers to manage the demands of practice. As described by one social worker,

> the ability just to come in and have a bit of a moan, a bit of a whine and then you're, kind of, getting that vent out and you're getting the support, as well. (Social Worker)

While the team was considered a place to process the emotional demands of practice, social workers also managed and performed their emotions to the audience of their peers and co-workers which, paradoxically, created an additional source of emotional labour. The everyday performances of emotional labour in child and family social teams can be considered through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework of 1) stage setting, 2) roles, and 3) scripts.

Stage setting

The observations and interviews indicated that the team space acted as a theatre for the performance of emotional labour. Social workers managed their outward display of emotions to perform the role of the good professional:

> The work we do is very traumatic. . . I wouldn't always want to express that this is making me really sad or it's affecting how I feel, because you don't want anyone to think that you're not capable or you're not managing very well. . . (Social Worker)

While Goffman identified frontstage and backstage regions of social performance, the findings from this study found 1) frontstage, 2) backstage and 3) offstage regions as important for the enactment of emotional labour in teams.

Frontstage region

In previous research, the physical office setting has been identified as a backstage region, where social workers can remove the mask of their professional performances. However, this study demonstrated the team space was also a frontstage region where emotional labour was performed to the audience of co-workers. The use of props reinforced the expected emotional display rules in the open plan office,

> On the wall a sign reads 'This should not be a one off . . . WE ARE ALWAYS POSITIVE', A larger poster is entitled '100 random acts of kindness' . . . a wooden plaque hangs from the thermometer with the words 'Live Laugh and Love'. (Office Observation)

The expectation that social workers should 'always remain positive' as suggested by the poster could be seen as a tool to guide professional performances within the team setting. However, the ongoing challenge for social workers was to produce the correct emotional display while avoiding 'masking' (Grandey et al., 2013, p. 8) these emotions entirely,

> You're dealing with sexual abuse, physical abuse, neglect . . . we just take and absorb that because that's our job. . . I think that emotional demand just to be okay and to keep going is . . . expected when actually, that's not necessarily normal to be hearing and dealing and managing with all that. (Senior Practitioner)

Regulating and managing emotional displays in accordance with occupational and organisational display rules therefore meant team belonging was simultaneously a source of support, *and* emotional demand. Drawing on the theatrical concept of 'stage direction', team members moved to backstage regions to alleviate some of these tensions.

Backstage region

Backstage regions consisted of a variety of physical, online and hybrid spaces. These included side rooms, supervision and group reflective spaces, the outside smoking area and online messaging and WhatsApp group chats. Backstage regions created opportunities for co-workers to test out ideas and perspectives, make mistakes, express frustration, doubt, humour, and vent. As identified by one social worker '*it will start off in the office and end up in the room next door in private' (Social Worker)*. The ability to drop the

mask of professionalism allowed team members to express emotions that were considered less appropriate in the office:

> If they want to cry or shout or swear or vent . . . it's usually picked up by somebody and they will say, come on, let's go and have a chat, or let's go downstairs even and have a cigarette. We make use of the space. (Social Worker)

Peer-led reflective spaces represented backstage regions away from the gaze of the manager where team members could '*talk about a case and potentially be able to make some mistakes . . .' (Social Worker)* and to '*digest*' the emotional demands of practice. It was also important for managers to have access to backstage regions away from the gaze of their team.

> We've started a managers' WhatsApp group . . . I think management can be a lonely place anyway, just by nature of it because you're in that sandwich . . . of things coming up and things coming down . . . it's a safe space. . . (Team Manager)

A third region – offstage – was routinely referred to by both teams. Whilst not evident in the literature, the offstage region encouraged and supported team relationships beyond the professional role.

Offstage region

The offstage region referred to social gatherings of team members outside of work hours, away from the office. This included meeting up for drinks, dinner and online 'house parties' (a virtual substitute used during the pandemic). In the offstage region maintaining the professional self was considered less important. Instead, the focus was primarily on social activities, personal connections and friendships:

> it's not like you're just a colleague, they're interested in getting to know you and spending time with you . . . I would much rather talk to a friend than just a colleague . . . someone who I've got that personal connection with. . . (Newly Qualified Social Worker)

However, social activities could exclude team members due to cultural, lifestyle or religious differences. Although offstage regions provided opportunities to temporarily de-role and create friendships within the team, these opportunities were more limiting for team managers and those in supervisory positions given the hierarchical nature of their role.

Team roles

Drawing on the theatrical metaphor of director and cast, team performance is guided and directed by an individual who has been given the authority to ensure adherence to the overall 'dramatic production' (Goffman, 1959, p. 103). Within this study, the social work team manager acted as a performance director who both modelled the expected performance and allocates roles to other team members – the cast.

Team manager as performance director

Through the induction process team managers *'mould[ed] the newcomer' (Team Group Interview)* and model availability and calm through their emotional displays. They also reinforced compliance with the expected emotional displays. For example, telling the team, *' ... you guys look sad! I can't have sad faces on a Friday!' (Online Observation)*. These wider prescriptions of professional behaviour appeared to influence the way managers and supervisors masked their own feelings of vulnerability, sadness, or anger (emotional labour) which was not always experienced as helpful by the team.

> I don't know if they're masking, they're trying to mask their own feelings . . . but sometimes that has been unhelpful . . . they do care, no doubt about it, but sometimes it doesn't seem that they really get the stress of what a social worker frontline can be . . .. (Social Worker)

Such emotional displays by the team manager and supervisors reinforced the team as a frontstage region, yet, hiding or attempting to mask emotions was sometimes viewed as incongruent by observing co-workers.

The cast of team members

Everyday social performances are enacted through the 'dramaturgical cooperation' [of a] 'cast of players' (Goffman, 1959, p. 84). The teams in the study drew on the collective strengths of the diversity and difference of its members. This required an emotional effort which acknowledged *'fear of feeling stupid, or ignorant or saying the wrong thing . . . ' (Practice Manager)*. The teams continued to work through these difficulties by creating *'safe spaces'* where the team could *'acknowledge the difference . . .' (Team Group Interview)*. For one team this included exploring narratives about gender and emotions:

> I do wonder sometimes whether ideas about masculinity and about males being quite stiff upper lip and not very emotional, which is not the kind of person I am, has influenced the way I've been supervised in the past. . . (Social Worker)

The collective strengths of the team contributed to practical support, knowledge exchange and emotional support. Both teams viewed themselves as stable and established, which created a strong team identity. Whilst this supported team cohesion and belonging, it also created pressure for social workers to *'fit in' (Team Group Interview)* to the established dynamics including the way the team spoke about themselves and the wider profession.

Team scripts

Teams acted as an important space for 'restorying' social work. This in turn helped social workers to manage the emotional demands of their role. Three key team scripts challenged the dominant deficit-based discourses around social work: 1) we are human too, 2) we don't manage alone and, 3) we are positive, hopeful, and proud.

We are human, too

By re-storying '*we are all humans … and sometimes we get it wrong*' *(Team Group Interview)* challenged wider societal discourse that create omnipotence and stoicism in social work (Beddoe et al., 2014). This made it easier for social workers to recognise and talk about the complex emotional demands of practice and seek support.

> I think it's about recognising it … let's talk it through and explain this happens, you're not alone, those feelings that you are feeling are completely normal. (Senior Practitioner)

Normalising emotional experience such as fear, uncertainty and frustration helped to rebalance and integrate the personal and professional self and thus took the pressure off the performative nature of the social work role. As described by one social worker, '*even though you are doing the job … you're only human so it's going to affect you*'. However, while emotional experience was restoried as part of everyday practice, it remained subject to cultural and occupational expectations, ie: expressions of anger were not perceived as '*the British way*' *(Team Manager)* or worry others will *judge you poorly for it or think you're not coping … (Advanced Practitioner)*. Whilst this was acceptable during the early career stage, it was deemed less so for more experienced social workers and managers.

We don't manage alone

Both teams engaged in practical assistance with visits and administrative tasks, practice specialisms and the sharing of knowledge, and skills. Family support workers, newly qualified social workers and students were also viewed as helpful '*extra brains*' *(Team Group Interview)*. This helped social workers to feel they were not alone.

> … someone read out the case and within five minutes one person was on the phone to the police, one was on the phone to the hospital, one was calling up the family … everyone just jumped on it … and within half an hour they had achieved all this stuff. (Social Work Student)

Team members also experienced a 'pressure to perform' which created additional emotional demands.

> … you want to show that you're learning, you're listening, and you're working as a team worker, you don't want to be the weak link … yes, you don't want to let anyone down…
> (Student Social Worker)

As a form of collective emotional labour (Korczynski, 2003), team members provided each other with reassurance, collegial humour, and a space to vent and let off steam together. Humour and playfulness in the team created '*a sense that no one's going to be judgmental if you're making a joke about things*' *(Social Worker)*. Humour provided sufficient respite from the requirement to act professionally but was also at times unhelpful.

> I was upset after this meeting, not visibly upset, but I was trying really hard to acknowledge and balance that emotion… and … they [colleague] joked about it… but I just don't think that's what I needed, right then … I think what I needed was someone to be like 'are you okay, what happened, do you want to go and talk about it somewhere'. (Senior Practitioner)

While humour was a strategy to manage emotional experience in teams, it was also important for co-workers to look beyond surface level acting to what may lie underneath.

We are positive hopeful and proud

The findings identified how positive, hopeful, and proud narratives at the individual, team, and organisational level re-storied and thus rebalanced wider negative discourses that surrounded social work. Overt praise that included '*. . . recognising positive practice in a world where we are guided by stats. . .' (Team Group Interview)* helped social workers to feel proud and confident in their work. Through a process of deep level 'emotion work' (Hochschild, 1979) team members cognitively reframed the impact of emotional labour which could then be thought of as transient,

> [we] want to let people know it's OK to feel overwhelmed or stressed, it's just part and parcel but tomorrow will be a different day and things will look brighter. (Senior Practitioner)

Social workers remained acutely aware of the stigma associated with their profession which was ' *. . . not something that you want to really talk about at parties' (Social Worker)*. However, props found in the office such as *'golden Oscar looking ornaments'* and '*photographs of . . . World Social Work Day' (Office Observation)* served as visual reminders that social work was a profession to be proud of. Both teams also referred to organisational pride manifest in corporate celebration days and recognition emails from senior leadership. However, upholding the 'reputation' of the team and working to *'a particular standard' (Team Group Interview)*, created an additional source of emotional labour.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how formal and informal everyday activities, relationships and interactions within the team setting supported social workers to manage the emotional demands of practice. Existing research has largely explored support at the team level through a psycho-social paradigm i.e. through the concept of emotional containment (Ruch, 2004) and team as a secure base (Biggart et al., 2017). However, the findings from this study identified that managing the emotional demands of practice was both a psychological process and socially constructed ie: in addition to *managing* emotions, team members also needed to *perform* emotions to the audience of their team. This meant the team was both a vital source of support, but also paradoxically a place of emotional insecurity.

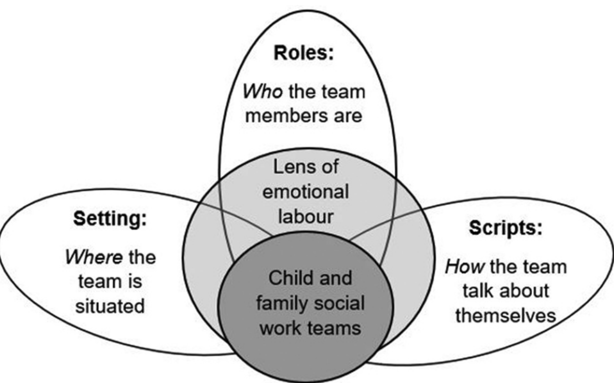

Figure 1. Emotional labour and team support.

While research emphasises the relevance of emotional labour as an inherent aspect of social work practice very few studies have explored emotional labour within teams (Grootegoed & Smith, 2018; Winter et al., 2019) and even less so through a dramaturgical metaphor (Leigh, 2017). In addition, no studies to date have explored emotional labour in social work teams through the trifocal lens of 1) occupational requirement, 2) emotional display and 3) intrapsychic process (Grandey et al., 2013). Through the dramaturgical lens of 1) *where* the team are situated (setting), 2) *who* the individual team members are (roles) and 3) *how* stories about practice are told (scripts), a novel framework for understanding emotional labour in teams is presented (Figure 1).

Frontstage, backstage, and offstage regions in social work teams

Where the team is situated – including the way physical, online and hybrid spaces are constructed is a significant factor in enabling social workers to manage the emotional demands of practice. The timing of this study provided unique insights into the way support was enacted in hybrid team settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the boundary between work and home became less defined, colleagues connected on a more personal level that had not been available before. This also paradoxically created challenges as co-workers felt unable to switch off or spontaneously reach out. The findings identified three distinct regions within social work teams, each governed by different emotional display rules and expectations of the professional self. This included front stage and backstage regions (Goffman, 1959), and a third, not identified in the literature, the offstage region. Traditionally viewed as a backstage, the team space provided social workers respite from performing their professional role. However, this study suggests there are some risks/limitations to this. Some emotions such as sadness, anger, shame or fear were not considered safe or appropriate to display in the office for fear of being judged as unprofessional or unable to cope. This meant the team space was also experienced as a frontstage region and a place of emotional labour and vulnerability. This study identified how access to and movement between frontstage, backstage, and offstage regions was an essential component of the team. This was an important finding, particularly given the ongoing trend towards open plan offices and ever-increasing hybrid and agile working practices.

Performance directors, team guardians and communities of difference in social work teams

Who individual team members are, and the way emotions are performed within the team is significant in supporting social workers with the emotional demands of practice. The findings identified the team manager as a 'performance director' who modelled the expected emotional displays to the audience of the team. As such, the team manager played a pivotal role in the professional socialisation of emotions. This strategy differed from the dominant psycho-social concept of containment (Ruch, 2004) as it involved not just the containment of anxiety, but the active shaping of feeling within the social exchange (Hochschild, 1979). The concept of 'institutional guardians' (Gibson, 2016), describes those who attempt to enforce compliance with institutional prescriptions through evoking shame for any transgressions within the professional performance. At a more localised level, the findings from this study identify how supervisors, and

managers are viewed as team guardians who reinforce the management and display of emotions within the wider team. Yet, despite emotional labour being a significant feature of the team managers role, it remains relatively absent in the literature. The team viewed as a 'community of difference' (Tierney, 1994, p. 11) identified how the collective strengths and diversity within the team reframed an individualist approach to practice. However, the presence of emotional labour in teams and adherence to wider occupational display rules paradoxically led to social workers supressing the emotional realities of their work for fear of being perceived as unprofessional or unable to cope.

Restorying professional identity in social work teams

How social workers talk about their work, the team and their wider profession is key to managing the emotional demands of practice. The finding identified that social workers required more than containment of emotional experience within their teams, they also actively shaped and reframed the meaning of their work through deep level emotion work. Team scripts were constructed to re-story and thus rebalance the wider deficit discourses that surround social work. This was encapsulated through three themes 1) *'we are only human'*, 2) *'we don't manage alone'* and 3) *'we are positive, hopeful and proud'*. Reframing their experiences not only enabled social workers to cope with the emotional demands of practice but helped to redefine their professional identity in ways that supported them to thrive. To process the complex and emotionally demanding nature of the work, social workers – including team managers – need the opportunity to express their full range of emotional experiences. This includes expressing vulnerability, sadness, or anger without fear of judgement that such expressions suggest unprofessionalism or an inability to cope. The findings also identified the challenges of maintaining team scripts that were not always congruent with how team members felt. This paradoxically maintained the team as a frontstage. Team managers in particular experienced tensions between acknowledging the emotional demands of practice whilst also motivating and boosting team morale. The way teams' re-story their work therefore has important implications for how social workers, and those in supervisory positions experience and manage the demands of practice.

Implications for practice

Despite the prevalence of emotional labour in child and family social work teams, it remains underrepresented in social work practice, education, and policy. Current models of team support only minimally acknowledge the performative aspects of the social work role. This has important implications for practice and the way in which social work and emotions are thought about and responded to at an individual, team/organisational and macro level.

At the individual level

The study has shown how team members engage in emotional labour by temporarily masking their emotions to get the job done, cognitively reframe experience, perform the occupational requirements of their professional role and shape and influence the emotional experience of others. Social workers and managers would benefit from access to regular, structured spaces to explore the impact of emotional labour within their work.

Reflective discussions should recognise when emotions are perceived as inappropriate to display and identify where these can be safely expressed.

At the team and organisational level

The accelerated move to open plan and hybrid working practices mean the team can be experienced as a frontstage region. This raises important implications for equality, diversity and inclusion policies and practices within organisations. Social work teams would benefit from mapping where frontstage, backstage, and offstage regions are located, who has access to them, who does not and how any identified gaps can be addressed. Teams would also benefit from exploring how their wider team scripts and social norms, including how emotions are expressed, can support or hinder team members' ability to provide and seek support.

At a macro policy level

Emotional labour is an intrinsic part of social work practice yet rarely acknowledged as part of team support. It is important that social work educators incorporate emotional labour into their core training, post qualifying and workforce development programmes. It would also be beneficial for Social Work England to review their practice standards (Social Work England [SWE], 2021) to ensure the language of professionalism acknowledges the emotional realities of the work. The social workers in this study were extremely proud of their professional identity but remained hesitant to share what they did outside of their organisation. This raises important implications for how to re-storying pride, hope, and optimism in social work practice at a local and national level.

Strengths and limitations

This study is the first to adopt a novel hybrid ethnographic methodology to the study of team support in child and family social work. A move to remote and hybrid working practices is not new in social work, but rapidly accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Traditional practice near ethnographic approaches values the researcher's physical presence in the field, however, observing in person, online and hybrid spaces transcends this to one that aligns with practitioners' day to day lived experiences of their team. This not without its limitations. While an overt, non-participatory approach sought to address potential feelings of surveillance, the researchers physical and video presence inevitably influenced the teams' natural interactions. Rather than impeding the ethnographic research process, the performative aspect of the professional role and that of the researcher contributed to the data analysis and the findings. Video conferencing as a qualitative interview method offers flexibility and access to dispersed populations such as socially distanced teams, but can inhibit rapport building and connection, particularly when discussing sensitive issues (Seitz, 2015). Despite this, the interview data evidences participants deep reflections and thought about their teams that could not be captured by observation alone.

This study purposively sampled local authorities rated by Ofsted as 'Outstanding' with gatekeepers putting forward child and family social work teams they considered exemplars

of supportive practice. The findings identified both teams were well resourced, relatively stable and were not experiencing the kinds of organisational or socio-political demands – i.e.: inspection monitoring, structural reforms or ‘Oftsted anxiety’ (Murphy, 2022) commonly identified in the literature. Teams such as these may be the exception rather than the rule in workforce research, however in the absence of such pressures, this study provided new insights into the emotional labour of operating in such organisational contexts.

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