SOCIAL WORK AS AN EMOTIONAL LABOR: MANAGEMENT OF EMOTIONS IN SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION

Associate Prof. Emine ÖZMETE*

Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual explanation of social work as emotional labor related to the interactions between social workers and their clients in human service organizations. Emotional labor is a relatively new term. It is about controlling emotions to conform to social and professionals norms. The concept of emotional labor offers researchers a lens through which these interactions can be conceived of as job demands rather than as a medium through which work tasks are accomplished or as informal social relations. This powerful insight has informed studies of interactive work in all its forms, as well as called attention to the many ways that interaction at work is organized, regulated, and enacted. Therefore understanding the interactions between clients and professional influences on the construction and regulation of emotion at work are important challenges for the social work profession.

Key Words: Emotional labor, management of emotions, social work

Özet


Anahtar kelimeler: Duygusal iş, duyguların yönetimi, sosyal hizmet

Introduction

The concept of emotional labor describes the management of emotions as part of everyday work performance. Hochschild (1983) first disclosed this emotional demand on service providers in her study of flight attendants. She coined the term “emotional labor” to describe this occupational emotional demand. According to Hochschild (1983:7), emotional labor is defined as

*Ankara University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Department of Social Work
the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labor is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value”. This definition explicitly delineates that service providers are required to regulate or manage their “felt” emotions. After Hochschild (1983), much research has been conducted to further explore the concept of emotional labor on fast-food employees, waitresses, amusement park employees, cashiers, 911 dispatchers, police officers, to name a few. In this point; it can be said that “emotional labor” as concept is neglected both theory and application in social work.

Otherwise, even as human service organizations become more complex and technologically advanced, person to person interaction remains at the core of their work. Social workers’ jobs require contact with and questioning of clients, who may be hostile and uncooperative and whose needs rarely conform to the routinized questions of computerized forms. They must see how the needs, skills and aspirations of their clients correspond to these job openings. Emotional labor is the instrument through which worker-client or state agent-citizen interactions occur. It is relational work that elicits behaviors and feelings from clients and citizens, it so requires human service workers to manage their own emotions. It requires emotional engagement and emotional management (Guy, Newman, Mastracci and Maynard-Moody, 2010:291).

Emotional labor is control of a person’s behavior to display the appropriate emotions. This means that a person evokes or suppresses certain emotions to conform to social norms. The concept of emotional labor is not confined to the workplace; it invades every aspects of life (Wharton, 2009:148). Hochschild (1983) describes two types of emotional acting: surface acting and deep acting.

(i) Surface acting is expressing and emotion without feeling that emotion. This is the type of emotional acting of most concern in the workplace. Surface acting most often involves the masking of negative emotions, such as anger, annoyance, sadness, etc., with happier emotions, such as happiness, care, excitement, etc.,

(ii) Deep acting refers to two different emotional actions. The first is to exhibit the actual emotion that you feel. The other is true method acting, using past emotional experiences to encourage real emotion that you may not have felt otherwise.
There are three basic characteristics of emotional labor:

1. The face-to-face or voice contact between social workers and clients

2. The expression of specific emotions and attitudes during work that might be in contrast with the real feelings that the individual experiences

3. The display rules derive from three main sources:
   a). Training programs for a particular profession
   b). Organizational norms of work behavior

There are two elements that social work as one of the occupational categories high in emotional labor:

(i) *The social representation of social workers:*

It has been identified by several researchers (Dubayle, Zurfluh, Redjimi, Lert and Sobel, 1993:3) that a common social representation is the social worker who is caring, promoting prevention, sharing knowledge, listening to people, involved with clients, counselling, strictly social-former role. Showing commitment, supporting clients emotionally are the emotional role that social workers have to perform (Leidner, 1991:155; James, 1992: 490).

(ii) *The constant management and suppression of real feelings:*

- Being responsible for meeting of clients’s basic needs and allocation of resources equally (clothes, food, shelter etc.) is a social work duty that demands the suppression of feelings of discrimination (gender, age, religious, ethnic roots of clients). On the other hand, being responsible for clients’ care who are elderly people or handicapped people is a duty that demands the suppression of feelings of disgust and therefore constitutes an emotional act.

- Another basic duty is providing emotional support to clients. Dealing with terminal psychological, social and economic problems and intolerable conditions requires effective management of personal emotions and the mobilization of appropriate defence mechanisms in order for social worker to beneficially attend clients. Figure 1 shows that the types of emotions experienced, the six facets of
emotional labor, and role identification for social workers (Humphrey, Pollack and Hawver, 2008:165).

- Social workers have to manage their emotions when there is incongruence between their professional ethical standards and the organizational demands that often obstruct social work.

Social workers experience the greatest stress and burnout when they have to suppress their own emotions while expressing another emotion. In this circumstance, they feel that they must act as if they feel a certain way—sympathetic, rather than repulsed, for example—when they do not. This false face is the one dimension of emotional labor that discourages worker motivation and increases burnout (Guy, Newman, Mastracci and Maynard-Moody, 2010:293). Guy and his colleagues (2010) stated that diagram of emotional labor by indicating relationships between emotional labor, job satisfaction and burnout. In this point, management of emotions in social work profession can be seen on Figure 2.

It is clearly that emotional effort sometimes may affect social worker’s health negatively. One of the prominent reasons for worker’s job stress is display of a “compassion” face. This can leads to “compassion fatigue” in later time. Emotional labor may also affect worker’s somatic health. Continuous suppression of “real” emotions has a negative impact on the immune system with further implications on health, that range from sleeplessness and fatigue to hypertension. Emotional labor may also affect worker’s performance. Low involvement, dissatisfaction, low performance are among the various outcomes of performing emotional tasks (Adams, Figley ve Boscarino, 2007: 240).

According to Merighi and Dinis (2005), to be effective practitioners, social workers need to be highly proficient at managing their own emotions. For example, social workers in health care settings are at risk to suffer from physical and emotional exhaustion because their jobs require them to be emotionally accessible to care seekers and to display organizationally desired emotions. The management of such workplace emotions is referred to as emotional labor. Because emotional labor is intrinsic to social work practice, the meaning and influence of emotional reactions on a social worker’s professional comportment and well-being merit investigation. On the other hand, their study on emotional labor offers insights into how psychological and health-related factors affect social work practitioners. The findings in Merighi and Dinis’s research demonstrate how specific types of
emotional management (e.g., surface acting), perceptions of workload, and part-versus full-time employment status contribute significantly to feeling emotionally exhausted.

**Emotional labor as a necessary skill**

Emotional labor or emotion work is the engagement, suppression, or evocation of the worker’s emotions necessary to get the job done; it can be purposeful or unplanned, and influences the actions and responses of others. In general, the performance of emotion work requires a wide range of personal and interpersonal skills, which, like most skills, are based on talent and individual characteristics but can be honed and refined through practice and training. Emotional labor occurs in the context of a wide variety of organizations, and nature of these organizations can shape the expression and experience of emotional labor (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993: 89).

Another way to think about emotional labor is to view it as a specialized form of knowledge work for jobs that require person-to-person transactions. Emotional labor requires face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions, emotive sensing, perceptiveness, active listening, negotiating, empathizing, developing rapport, and monitoring one’s own affect as well as that of others. Emotional labor requires affective sensitivity and flexibility with one’s emotions as well as with those of others.

**Emotional labor as performance**

Emotional labor is proactive and reactive performance. It is deliberate and artful, and it is reactive and, to a degree, outside the conscious control of the worker. It is relational work that is tempered by the affective skills of the worker, the affective skills of the worker, the affective state of the client, and the purpose and nature of the exchange between worker an client. It requires the artful sensing of the other’s emotional state and crafting of one’s own affective expression so as to elicit the desired response on the part of the other (Zapf, 2002:240).

For the skilled professional worker, emotional labor becomes a performance art designed to elicit a predetermined desirable outcome. This outcome may be directly related to client outcomes, such as better parenting or job skills, or their own emotional responses (Guy, Newman, Mastracci and Maynard-Moody, 2010:298).
In this point, the role of social work educational institutions becomes crucial in development of a workforce that not only will be aware of the informal emotional skills necessary in practice but will also know how to use them effectively for his/her personal benefit as well as for the benefit of clients.

An initial strategic action involves the re-definition of social work education in relation to its values, aims and practices. In order to do that, the following principles can be suggested;

· Promote critical thinking and encourage students to evaluate their personal attitudes and behaviors in order to allow and help them (students) to explore their interests, abilities, difficulties

· Focus on teaching ethical codes of social work

· Promote/Increase students’ practice in order to help them understand more fully their future professional role, through a social work curriculum that: includes problem-solving/problem-based learning in relation to specific problems that students encounter during their practice, incorporates teaching of project management techniques based on real work situations, employs role playing in the class and story-telling as a method to transfer experiences and enhance tacit knowledge.

Conclusion

There is a need to make emotional labor visible and valued and counter the potential for ignoring and exploiting staff and clients’ emotional needs. In order to limit the effects of emotional labor and thus promote the well-being and health of the social worker’ workforce, the application of preventive strategies is a vital and cost-effective (in comparison to treatment) measure. To be effective practitioners, social workers need to be highly proficient at managing their emotions on the job. For example, social workers are at risk to suffer from physical and emotional exhaustion because their jobs often require them to be emotionally accessible to care seekers and to display organizationally desired responses. The management of such workplace emotions is referred to as emotional labor. Because emotional labor is intrinsic to social work practice, the meaning and influence of emotional reactions on a social worker’s professional comportment and well-being merit investigation. Therefore social work academic institutions can equip for social work students, through specific educational techniques and actions, with the
necessary skills and practical knowledge that will help them manage the emotional aspect of social work, communicate to them a clearer and more practical-based social worker role and teach them to adopt more holistic approaches in the provision of social work.

Using the concept of emotional labour helped to understand the difficult and painful position that social workers often find themselves in when working with clients. In order for social workers to be effective in meeting the needs of a significantly disadvantaged group of clients, it is clear that they require high quality training, skilled supervision and suitable and sufficient resources. It is satatated that the desirability of effective and meaningful training, outlining a clear training strategy involving key core conditions, which they recommend should be an integral part of the social work qualification. These include the importance of ethical and emotional engagement and the development of client-centred communication skills. It would seem that the existence of this training framework would significantly help to address the emotional labour needs of social workers by helping to clarify their role, giving them techniques and skills to use, thereby facilitating rather than inhibiting the development of effective worker/client relationships. Training of this calibre would enable social workers to hear life stories that are often painful and difficult, by offering listening skills and emotional understanding that would prevent the development of avoidance strategies or burnout. Better training would therefore help social workers learn how to deal effectively with their own emotional reactions, the essential emotion work for those involved in caring for others. Additionally, education and training may be as useful for the employers as the employees, as it enables the organization to ensure its values and expectations are clearly understood and upheld. In its turn, this can further help practitioners feel clear about their role and thus less likely to experience emotional dissonance. Social workers need recognition of their role as pivotal in the decisions-making process and that they are skilled practitioners, able to take responsibility for their actions.
Figure 1. The types of emotions experience, the six facets of emotional labor, and role identification for social workers (Adapted from Humphrey, Pollack and Hawver, 2008)
Figure 2. Management of emotions in social work profession (Adapted from Guy, Newman, Mastracci and Maynard-Moody, 2010:298)

References


