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## The emotional labour of austerity

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***The emotional labour of austerity. How social workers reflect and work on their feelings towards reducing support to needy children and families.***

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*Abstract*

In a context of austerity, governments are reducing spending on care and welfare. Yet, little is known about how this is experienced and enacted on the ground. In this article, we employ a case study approach in a Scottish local authority children and families social work team to consider how social workers deal with the tensions of working in times of austerity. We draw on the literature on the sociology of emotions to explore the impact on practitioners of working within a context of diminishing services and resources. This is experienced as conflicting with the professional, ‘caring’ values of social work. Such emotional dissonance, though, is dealt with in varied ways, each pointing to different moral pathways. Responses tend to be individual – there is no concerted social work response to austerity. We argue that it is vital to consider the emotional dimensions of austerity, to comprehend variations in individual acceptance or rejection of cuts to social work, but also to explore future ethical directions of social work.

**Key words**

Welfare state reform, austerity measures, social work, ethical stress, emotions

**Introduction**

In response to the economic downturn of 2007-8 and a renewed emphasis on self-responsibility, governments are scaling back care and welfare provision (Hastings et al, 2015). Staff reductions, money-led assessments and reduced response to client needs are common across social work. Retrenchment measures are said to lead to a new direction or slimmed-down version of the welfare state (Kersbergen et al., 2014; McCashin, 2016) or even, its dismantling (Eliasoph, 2011).

Theoretically, austerity provides both challenges and opportunities for social work. Critics argue that increased managerial and cost-cutting approaches undermine social work's purpose to provide responsive, needs-led care for deprived and/or disabled citizens (Rogowski, 2010). Reduced face-to-face time is said to be at the expense of trust building, often considered a prerequisite for good care (Wallace and Pease, 2011). Greater social distance between social workers and their clients may also erode moral responsibility, as needs are constructed as more abstract and technocratic (S, 2011). On the other hand, austerity may, conceivably, create new opportunities to reduce bureaucracy and fuel creativity (Garrett, 2012).

Recent empirical studies highlight that social workers experience austerity as creating a breach with social work ethics and one's moral values, inducing 'ethical stress' (Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Fenton, 2011; Pentaraki, 2016). Empirical evidence for increased social distance between clients and service providers resulting from austerity is more ambiguous. On the one hand, social workers report less frequent and more superficial contact with their clients (Aronson and Sammon, 2000). On the other hand, they find ways to bend the rules and/or do overtime to safeguard the quality of care (Aronson and Sammon, 2000) and may more directly relate to their clients' problems, increasingly being affected by austerity themselves (Fenton, 2011; Krumer-Nevo, 2016; Pentaraki, 2016).

On a structural level, a radical perspective might aid workers aiming to understand and respond to austerity. The recent British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Manifesto for Social Work reflects such a view, calling on the profession to act to ‘End austerity policies that cause harm to children, adults and families’ (2017, online) But, there are few clues as to how this might be done. Krumer-Nevo (2016) suggests the need for a multi-faceted approach, which includes emotional and relational dimensions based upon an ethic of solidarity with those who are subject to austerity. Bringing an emotional dimension to their practice can have a downside for social workers, evident in reports of anger, fears, feelings of incompetence and worries about having to work between care and cuts (Clayton et al., 2015). Emotions are, however, not only responsive, but also generative, challenging and potentially progressive (T et. al., 2013; Clayton et al., 2015). Whilst acknowledging emotions as deeply relevant expressions of social suffering in response to hardships (Frost and Hoggett, 2008), the way ethical stress is channeled can also reflect changing moral rationalities in social work. This study therefore aims to disentangle the complex interplay between emotions and moral judgment in social work in times of austerity.

We draw on Arlie Hochschild’s sociology of emotions and more specifically her concept of ‘emotional labour’: the management of feelings to comply with job requirements (Hochschild, 1979, 2003). We explore if and how social workers across the organizational hierarchy reconcile their emotions with the demands of austerity. We use a Scottish case study: a child and families department, where 19 employees participated in in-depth interviews. We found that, when experiencing ethical stress, social workers have a wide range of emotional responses to working with austerity, ranging from emotional distancing to fueling one’s anger. Finally, we discuss to what extent each of these emotional strategies are indicators of changing moral

responsibility in social work.

### **Working with emotions**

Social work is often described as demanding frequent and intensive emotion management or ‘emotional labour’ (EL) (Hochschild, 1979; Aldridge, 1994; S et al., 2016). first coined the term to indicate the labour involved in managing one’s emotions in accordance with socially shared norms, or ‘feelings rules’ (Hochschild, 1979, 2003). In recent years, attention has also turned to the emotional demands placed upon care and/or social work, i.e. the need to care about and be responsive to clients’ emotional needs (James, 1989, 1992). Social work often requires “deep” (as opposed to surface) acting, i.e. trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling (Hochschild, 1979) for professional or philanthropic (principled) reasons (Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Grandey et al., 2013). Such “deep” acting is most demanding when workers have frequent interactions with clients that are marked both by an expectation of inducing emotions in others and the management or control of such interactions (Hochschild, 1983). Notwithstanding that social workers may derive joy from and take pride in dealing with emotions connected to their jobs (Wouters, 1989a; Hochschild, 2013), EL can be hard as it often receives less recognition than the more visible achievements of physical and organisational labour.

EL involves power dynamics; generally, low-paid, low-skilled workers perform EL in professional hierarchies where they have least professional discretion (Hochschild, 1979; Bourdieu et al., 1999). Recent studies, however, point to the importance of managers performing EL within organisations as part of their leadership role (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge et. al., 2008) and/or as a management instrument to handle workers’ emotions (Morrison, 2007). Faced with

austerity, emotional intelligence is considered a vital skill to keep the workforce motivated to provide high-quality services despite shrinking resources (Morrison, 2007; Leslie and Canwell, 2010).

When investigating social workers' emotional experiences of austerity, it is important to consider *which types* of EL are considered necessary, *by whom, for whom, and at what cost?*

### **A vignette study on emotional labour**

We employed qualitative methods to investigate the emotional complexities of austerity, using vignettes, i.e. stimuli in the form of short, fictive storylines. Vignettes are a validated means to tap into people's norms and beliefs, whilst taking into account contextual factors (Finch, 1987; Jenkins et al., 2010). Moreover, vignettes have proven worth for addressing sensitive topics that are otherwise difficult to talk about (Barter and Renold, 1999). We used them to discuss normative guidelines on how to feel about the cuts. We supplemented the vignettes with open interview questions about respondents' own austerity practices. This allowed comparison of respondents' general principles about how to feel about cuts to actual emotional responses.

We developed three storylines, each consisting of three stages, wherein characters are faced with austerity scenarios (see Table 1). First, we addressed the emotional complexity of having to communicate austerity measures to needy clients. Second, we looked at the intra-organisational emotional repercussions of austerity. Third, we tested if respondents viewed austerity differently when framed as working towards people's self-responsibility. The vignettes were piloted in five interviews with social workers from various organisations. The final vignettes were used with

participants across the organisational hierarchy in a Scottish local authority children and families team.

Table 1. Summaries of the vignettes

<b>Vignette</b>	<b>Episode 1</b>	<b>Episode 2</b>	<b>Episode 3</b>
1. Julie works for the city council's assessment team	Julie has to assess needs more stringently due to budget constraints	Julie experiences sadness when confronted with a crying client	Julie is told by her boss that emotions cannot play a role in the assessments
<i>Question</i>	<i>How should Julie feel about this?</i>	<i>May Julie show her emotions to the client?</i>	<i>What will this take for Julie?</i>
2. Jeremy works as senior manager in adult social care	Jeremy feels angry about the need to restrict care services for those with most critical needs	Jeremy finds his staff feels sad about the cuts	Jeremy feels trapped between demands of his staff and policy goals
<i>Question</i>	<i>May Jeremy show his emotions to the staff?</i>	<i>How should Jeremy respond to their feelings?</i>	<i>How should Jeremy ease his emotional struggle?</i>
3. Kate works as family support worker in child and family services	Kate has to implement a new policy that stresses self-responsibility	Kate is blamed by a client for being uncaring	Kate finds that the new policy is all about savings, but her boss tells her to feel less pessimistic
<i>Question</i>	<i>How should Kate feel about this?</i>	<i>How should Kate manage the client's feelings?</i>	<i>What will it take for Kate to try to do so?</i>

### **Case study and sampling**

As noted above, we worked with a Scottish children and families department, whose main concern is child protection. The department has faced budget constraints since 2011, and a staff reduction of 10 percent. There is no general guideline on how to

achieve savings, but services have become money-led rather than needs-led. Examples of concrete cuts are the withdrawal of financial assistance and supply of goods (e.g. nappies for babies) to families in need, reduced time for family visits, and a discontinued early intervention programme for children with autism. The reduced staffing and resources available contrast with increased need, given regionally rising birth rates, earlier diagnosis of children's problem behaviors and families' pressing economic needs. Most support is short term, but 'high risk' cases can be transferred to long-term assistance, where relatively more resources are still available. We sought a range of respondents across the organizational hierarchy: (senior) social workers, team leaders and senior managers. We also ensured a variation in age and gender to control for age or gender-specific views on emotions (Husso and Hirvonen, 2012; Cottingham et al., 2015). Participation was voluntary and unpaid. Almost everyone was willing to participate in the study; we worked on a first-come basis and ended interviewing once the data were saturated. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Edinburgh.

The final sample consisted of 19 respondents. Their average age was 49, ranging from 28 to 61. Seven were men, ten women. On average, they had been employed in social work for 20 years (and usually for quite some years in this council). The interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes. For a full overview of respondent characteristics, see Table 2.

We analysed the interviews using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. We compared answers to the hypothetical scenarios, and analysed if answers varied across gender, work history and job position. We then investigated the accounts through an emotional lens; at first, using broad categories to signify "emotional labour", "emotional dissonance" and "feeling rules". Second, we grouped comparable



emotional responses to respondents' accounts as "emotional strategies": ways of dealing with the emotional complexities of the cuts. Again, we controlled for in-group variations. Finally, we reviewed differences between normative standpoints (responses to the vignettes) and daily practices (based on personal accounts) of respondents' emotional strategies.

Table 2. Overview of respondents

Number	Job position	Age	Gender	Years in social work
R1	Senior manager	58	F	19
R2	Senior manager	51	M	28
R3	Social worker	47	M	20
R4	Social worker	45	F	15
R5	Social worker	28	F	2
R6	Team leader	50	F	22
R7	Social worker	40	M	18
R8	Senior manager	60	F	40
R9	Social worker	52	M	19
R10	Team leader	52	M	25
R11	Senior social worker	37	M	19
R12	Senior social worker	39	F	20
R13	Social worker	48	F	28
R14	Team leader	50	F	25
R15	Senior social worker	56	F	11
R16	Team leader	61	M	39
R17	Senior social worker	50	M	8
R18	Senior manager	50	F	7
R19	Team leader	51	F	14

## Managing hypothetical upset

The first hypothetical storyline invited respondents to judge if working under austerity causes ethical stress and if so how visible their upset may be to clients. Most commonly, the fictive social worker, Julie, was imagined to feel frustrated, angry, sad or distressed about not being able to serve client needs:

*Well I assume Julie feels guilty and terrible about it because, you know, you see a family who's struggling and you do think that family would really benefit from having some kind of respite service, but you just can't grant it... then you'd just feel terrible about it. (#12, KH, senior social worker)*

Especially front-line workers advised Julie to tone down the occurrence of such (imagined) negative emotions, and create emotional distance to remain professional, despite the circumstances:

*As a worker, Julie has to kind of manage that and manage how she feels at her work and also be on one level quite dispassionate about who has a level of priority and who hasn't. (#16, GM, team leader)*

*I think you've got to be careful, you've got to protect yourself from all this emotional baggage..... I think there needs to be that kind of, I suppose a better word for it would be a sort of professional detachment from, you know, what's going on. (#3, JM, social worker)*

Emotional distancing served two purposes: first, as a self-protective strategy against exhaustion or burnout and second to safeguard the quality of service: emotions should

be curtailed when being overly emotional may be at the cost of the professional relationship. Being in control of one's emotions is considered important, especially at the frontline. Emotionally distancing oneself from the cuts, and their impact on (potential) clients, was found necessary to minimise one's own 'emotional baggage'.

This is not to say that (senior) social workers are believed to face more hardships than their superiors; a similar logic was applied to Vignette 2, where it was felt that managers' strong, negative feelings about the impact of cuts ought to be channelled, toned down or even hidden, as the interviewees attribute a leadership role to managers in upholding staff morale (cf. Leslie and Canwell, 2010). There is also recognition that whilst managers may face similar moral and emotional struggles as frontline workers, they are perhaps more invisible, due to the managerial emphasis on performance:

*I don't work in that tier of management, but I suspect that ... within the council there's less, you know, there's less touchy feely sort of space for feelings, you know, just 'this is the budget, get on and deliver it' kind of thing.*

(#14, PB, social worker)

In contrast to frontline workers, managers framed the hypothetical emotional dissonance about working between care and cuts not so much as a moral but rather as a 'practical' problem with 'practical' solutions. Whilst frontline workers imagined Julie (Vignette 1) to feel 'deeply' frustrated or 'quite' angry, managers did not use equally strong adjectives; one merely imagined Julie to feel 'annoyed'. In terms of coping, Julie was, for example, advised to change jobs if she could not alleviate her contradictory feelings about the cuts. Another strategy put forward by managers was

to try to change the circumstances of one's work. A senior manager advises Julie to fight for her case to achieve the best possible outcomes for her clients, to reduce emotional stress:

*If Julie feels they [the new parameters of budget controls, ed.] are unjust she might get less satisfaction from her job but actually she might also manipulate circumstances, she might emphasise certain aspects of her assessment to get what she wants. (#2, SF, senior manager)*

Frontline workers also saw advocacy as a worthwhile tactic to reduce or prevent ethical stress, but the thought of bending the rules led to doubts about equity. A social worker reasons that:

*You may feel pressure to advocate for some clients more than others to try and get them a service, and I suppose that would bring in tensions about who you feel should get a service and shouldn't, and then if it's increasingly restricted, it remains hard to be neutral – ..., but I think also there's a danger that, you know, rather than having an open and honest relationship, you almost take up cudgels on behalf of particular clients and advocate for them, and that's possibly at the expense of others. (# 9, RT, social worker)*

The respondent claims it is harder to be neutral in times of austerity; he signals heightened emotions, yet simultaneously questions the centrality of emotions in making exceptions to the rule in terms of redistributive justice. Nevertheless, respondents agree that emotions could signal risks, and hence function as an

encouragement to act:

*If (the mother) actually burst into tears at the thought of not getting a service then she's not fine. So that would be my argument to the manager would be that emotions do play a part in helping us understand need and what level that need's at, so yeah. (#R15, AA, senior social worker)*

Despite the acknowledgement that clients' and social workers' feelings about the impacts of cuts may influence an assessment, there is a tension between emotionality and rationality (Taylor and White, 2001), and between bending the rules and a concern for social justice. Fighting for a case based on emotional reflexivity is considered a moral minefield, and instead of stepping into it, some frontline workers would advise Julie to hand over the responsibility to her superiors:

*What you have to do is kind of be very clear about why you're asking for this kind of resource and what the consequences are, and then you hand over the consequences to the managers and say 'well if you can live with those kind of consequences it's up to you'. (#12, KH, senior social worker)*

When cuts were portrayed in the vignettes as an attempt to build client self-sufficiency (Vignette 3), respondents imagined the fictive character, Kate, to be happy about reducing unnecessary dependency on social work. When money-led assessments, however, are apparent (Vignette 3 b and c) respondents are generally much less positive about working towards self-sufficiency, doubting its sincerity. Overall, interviewees felt that austerity induces ethical stress as they imagined the

fictive characters to feel trapped between their caring ambitions and demands to realise cuts.

### **Managing actual upset**

Respondents' actual experiences with austerity closely resembled the hypothetical scenarios, with one exception: there was no top-down organisational perspective on how one should feel about the cuts. There was broad consensus however, that, coming from a time of affluence, the current constraints under which one has to work pose new challenges, including the increased need for emotion management:

*I think you have to be aware of your emotions and you have to kind of manage them more... I think now you need to be more aware that people aren't going to be happy and they will shout at you if they don't get what they want, and you can't do that, you need to kind of have an awareness of that on how it impacts on them and how it impacts on you, and how you deliver such information. (#R17, SR, social worker)*

Some experienced workers hoped that cutbacks were a temporary policy trend, just as many others they had witnessed. Most, however, worried that we had entered an area of permanent austerity, negatively affecting the societal importance of social work. Despite such worries, no one intended a career change, although some did fear burnout. In the absence of collective emotional guidelines (Korczynski, 2003) on how to deal with the emotional complexities of austerity, workers developed a variety of coping mechanisms:

*I observe people in various teams having a variety of responses and some people are very emotional and very angry and very sad, and then there's a continuum and other people are very just 'I come in, I provide what I can and then I go away and I don't think about, I suppose, the politics or the practicalities of the resources, I'm just here as the delivery person' kind of thing. And the majority of people are somewhere in the middle, but no I see the whole range of it, yeah. (#13, AL, social worker)*

Our analysis confirms that emotional responses to the cuts ranged from 1) emotional distancing to 2) fueling one's emotions to fight for one's case(s). In the middle there were workers, mostly on the frontline, who did not (yet) manage to channel their emotions to recreate a new balance in moral responsibilities in an age of austerity, and instead, 3) muddled through.

### **Emotional distancing**

Unlike those who had advised emotional distancing in the hypothetical scenarios, only a few respondents tried and/or managed to adjust their feelings to the new constraints under which they have to work. This strategy demands much emotional labour, as it requires workers to feel differently about people with unmet needs:

*I think we're becoming more able to show a bit less concern for people ... because we are having to prioritise our money, but in order to prioritise our money we're also having to prioritise our feelings about people as well! Because we don't want to feel bad about the people that we haven't helped, we*

*have to view them in a different way so that we don't feel bad about them anymore.....(#10, PC, team leader)*

Although the respondent speaks in plural form, this strategy was rare; it proved difficult for workers to reduce their ethical stress by downscaling their moral standards of needed service supply. Some aspired to adopt this strategy, and felt that new generations of workers might come in without a pre-austerity frame of reference:

*I'm hopeful that new generations of workers coming in, because they won't have been working prior to austerity, so they maybe won't feel the weight of it as much and they might feel more... more kind of buoyant about it. I'm hoping to feed off them like a vampire! (#13, AL, social worker)*

Emotional distancing was justified and rationalised by some workers as being consonant with social work values to promote self-determination and to avoid creating dependency, viewing such an outcome as a possible positive side-effect of austerity:

*There's lots of families that we work with who have had social work involvement for years and you kind of look at it and think 'actually, nothing's really changed, so what is our role, what have we done, what have we changed with this family?' ....I think you should be kind of pushing for more self-determination for people not to be involved with us (#17, SR, senior social worker)*

Learning how to care less about clients, though, proved difficult for many respondents, especially those working on the frontline, given the implied denial of the



importance of both clients' and workers' emotions. Nevertheless, the strategy was appealing, as admittedly, it could alleviate the emotional conflict experienced when reducing the response to clients' needs.

### **Fighting**

At the other end of the continuum, workers channeled their frustrations to become more activist. A social worker describes how she used her emotions to try to change her work conditions to align with her moral standpoint:

*I've been up at the high end of emotion of being very strong and vocal and wanting to affect the supply of resources and arguing that quite passionately or debating it quite passionately. (#13, AL, social worker).*

This second strategy, which requires one to amplify and express one's concerns and frustrations about the cuts, was, in practice, often too exhausting. Frontline workers, who were not, individually, able to achieve systemic changes, finally gave in. For managers, who also channelled their emotions for activist purposes, the strategy seemed potentially more productive as they frequently met with local politicians and policy makers:

*I'm being quite selfish on behalf of children's wellbeing and making sure that everybody understands whatever your political colour... I make it my mission to make sure that they all understand the challenge in delivering this service for this community. (#18, SS, senior manager)*

Some employees were disappointed about the lack of political activism amongst social workers, and felt that social work organisations should be braver about criticising government. They however also saw the difficulty of doing that in a neoliberal state where, under the banner of self-responsibility, criticising people who are on benefits is a vote winner. Employees wanting to soften the impact of cuts, rather, chose to fight for singular cases, wherein the expression of emotions was considered an important, albeit unofficial, element of conveying need to superiors:

*RES: Yeah of course if I think it's needed then I fight for it, of course I would.*

*INT: And if it doesn't work out, how do you let go?*

*RES: Yeah, well it normally does work out. I give a good fight. If I really think it's needed then I normally get what I want, well what I think is necessary.*

(#12, KH, senior social worker)

Amplifying one's emotions to fight for a case, possibly creating exceptions to austerity measures, was considered a worthwhile strategy to soften the impacts of cuts. Whilst this strategy entailed a preservation of personal moral standards, respondents' rhetoric of 'being selfish' and 'get what I want' hints at its arbitrary nature. Just as in response to the hypothetical scenarios, respondents feel that such 'emotional selectivity' may compromise underlying principles of social justice, through bending the rules.

### **Muddling through**

The most common, actual emotional response to the cuts deviates from those in the hypothetical scenarios. This 'muddling through' mechanism shows a pattern whereby

workers keep going, and carry out their work in situations of continuous, unresolved emotional dissonance. They did not manage to create social distance from clients and/or successfully employ their emotions to bend the rules when necessary. Perhaps not surprisingly this was most often the case with frontline workers, who felt continuing emotional stress:

*When I go out and do an assessment whilst knowing that there's limited resources out there, it doesn't sit well with me, it is frustrating, it is somewhat upsetting as well to know that families might require a certain service but there's not enough resources out there. ( #4, MC, social worker)*

This frustration could lead workers to wonder, using the family metaphor, what kind of parent they were for children in need: well-off aspirational parent or one living on the poverty line. Employees who were muddling through were critical of managers, whom they felt did not provide an ethical framework through which to negotiate the cutbacks:

*[We're] waiting to be given a clear steer on how our service is to be provided cause somebody had a bloody vision when they redesigned, somebody had a vision of how it would work, but they've not shared it with us, you know, it was like 'right guys, you go and work it out' (...) and it's not any good..... you know, I'm usually a can do kind of person, but I have to say in the last six months particularly I've just been... I'm feeling a bit hopeless. (#15, AA, senior social worker)*

Managers admitted that they didn't always give a clear steer on how to achieve the cuts, labelling discussion about which clients *not* to help as too political. They felt that workers' ethical conflict was best managed through supervision, thus individualising responses and arguably underestimating the need for discussion on new moral boundaries to social work. Managers stressed that they 'all had a lot of losses' and faced hardships together, but frontline workers who muddled through missed a collective response to austerity on behalf of the profession. Continuous emotional stress was draining, and some feared burnout, compounded by increased caseloads.

A closer analysis of the data shows that feelings are still managed, but on a micro-level. As opposed to social distancing and becoming activist, social workers who muddled through did not change the way they felt about their clients nor try to use their emotions to fight for them. Rather, they performed emotional labour as *damage control*. This entailed a fragmentation of emotions: frontline workers aimed – albeit often unsuccessfully – to create a clear divide between work and home. To facilitate such an emotional divide, distractions such as drinking a whisky or going to the gym could help. Employees also rationalized their upset about austerity by saying that their daily stresses are a 'normal' aspect of social work or more generally, working life. Managers also normalised the stresses of austerity by advising workers to:

*..talk about it, you've done all you can, okay try and drop it, go away and do something else, it's not going to help you mulling over it, you know, try and do something to distract yourself, go out and, you know, go and get drunk! (#2, SR, senior manager)*

Dealing with ethical stress as such becomes a very private affair: workers are held accountable for their own mental health, whilst the conflict that induces their daily stress proves difficult to resolve individually.

Another way to ease the discomfort of muddling through was to present emotions as a *symbolic resource* to the client: showing one cares, with a subtle display and managed version of one's own upset:

*I could show her [client, ed.] sympathy, ...' but beyond that no, I think... I think she would probably see I was upset for her but, you know, I'm not going to go weeping and wailing cause it's not me it's happening to, but she would probably see that I'm concerned and I'm disappointed for her on her behalf. (#15, AA, senior social worker)*

Workers, including managers, deemed it important to show empathy and allow clients to express their emotions if they were negatively affected by reduced services and/or benefits. The only constraint to demonstrations of empathy lay in social workers' hesitance to be critical of their own department and/or Council. Unlike the fighting mode, expressed empathy was targeted towards acceptance rather than protest against any actual austerity measure.

### **Emotions and social work values**

The austerity agenda greatly affects social work. From an optimistic viewpoint, austerity creates opportunities to work more creatively, and reduce bureaucracy (Garrett, 2012), whilst critics regard it as an assault on welfare and of social work's

quest for social justice (Rogowski, 2010; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2013; Banks et al., 2014).

Empirically, studies so far have shown that many social workers experience a disjuncture between their personal and professional values and the demands of austerity. Austerity induces role ambiguity and emotional detachment from the job (Fenton, 2011; Van Heugten, 2011; Clayton et al., 2015), which are important precursors of job dissatisfaction, ('ethical') stress and burnout ( Fenton, 2011, 2014; Travis et al. 2016). But, as we also found, the implications of the emotions of austerity stretch further: emotional labour not only alters the way social workers feel about their clients, it also shapes their moral judgements of deservingness. In other words, emotions can serve to legitimize or delegitimize social workers' courses of action, or inaction (Pizarro 2000).

While our study was small in size: and limited to one local authority, we might claim that our analysis of how workers across the organisational hierarchy dealt with the emotional complexities of austerity, provides an important exploratory study on what is a critical issue for social work.

The interviewed social workers did not uphold a myth of rationality; in needs assessments of children and families, emotions may play a role, when, for instance, strong, negative emotions expressed by clients serve a signalling function of severe need. Such emotions can spiral upwards, when workers express their serious concern about such emotionality to their superiors, in addition to the ostensibly more rational argumentation of risk assessment. Social workers did find that it is more difficult to stay neutral in times of austerity, having to anticipate and deal with the social suffering caused by government retrenchment on a daily basis.

When the 19 social workers were asked to give their normative opinions about

the ‘proper’ emotions of austerity, in response to hypothetical storylines (*vignettes*), they showed agreement on the importance of taking client emotions seriously when witnessing responses to diminished support. Moreover, reported emotions may serve to influence assessment trajectories, when their superiors would otherwise not consider bending the rules. Despite the sensitivity to these emotions, they advised hypothetical characters to create some emotional distance from the upset caused by cuts. In interaction with clients, exhibiting strong, negative emotions may undermine one’s professional distance towards the clients, needed to establish relations of trust, and also undermine loyalty towards one’s organisation, where upholding staff morale is considered of vital importance.

When comparing answers to the fictive storylines to respondents’ own experiences, greater variation exists in how social workers dealt with the emotional complexities of austerity. Along a continuum, we found three main positions in the relation between emotional labour and moral judgement. At one end, there were workers who report that they (wanted to) learn to care less about their clients. They followed their own advice to create emotional distance from clients who feel negatively affected by cuts. To reshape their feelings towards their clients they also adjusted the way they view their clients: they viewed them as self-sufficient or downscaled the effects social work can have on their lives. Whilst seeking to rationalise increased emotional distance behind technocratic eligibility criteria, or arguments around promoting client self-determination may help workers insulate themselves from some of the emotional impact of the job, it does risk creating further social distance between social workers and service users (S. 2016).

On the other end, we found workers who passionately fight for the importance of social work in their clients’ lives. They used their own and/or their clients’

emotions as strategic tool to demonstrate the urgency of an expressed need. Interestingly, they did not necessarily take pride in their efforts but worried that their actions might prove 'selfish' as they did not impact any wider social justice objective. Given the unofficial nature of this strategy, such resistance to austerity measures may be inhibited by feelings of insufficiency or fraudulence when it induces a fear of being called to justify their unofficial work styles. This is challenging when they, for example, bend the rules to reduce client's anxiety (Aronson and Sammon, 2000).

Most respondents, especially on the frontline, took a middle ground: failing to change or effectively instrumentalise their emotions about not being able to perform their work according to their personal and professional values, they 'muddle through' in a state of continuing emotional dissonance. They did perform emotional labour, not to resolve their dissonance, but rather as emotional damage control. Such workers aimed for a divide between their work and home, where they tried to forget about the stresses of austerity and move on to their 'other life'. The attempt was often unsuccessful, and may develop into a form of emotional distancing in the long run, if the need to reduce emotional dissonance becomes more pressing.

Additionally, those who muddle through strongly advocated that now that material resources are shrinking, social worker's empathy can become an important alternative, symbolic resource for the client (cf. Pentaraki, 2016). Such symbolic, resourceful use of emotions is a product of tacit, gifting emotional labour, which shows resemblances with the more activist end of the continuum. Such gifting emotional labour may come at a price. Like the performance of unpaid overtime and/or attempts to bend the rules in order to keep performing the job according to one's moral values (Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Clayton et al., 2015; Rodriguez, 2014), using emotional labour as a symbolic resource to uphold care (relations) is yet



another form of invisible resourcefulness to soften the impacts of austerity (Aronson and Sammon, 2000). Such emotional labour may receive little systemic recognition, with low rewards, which will make it difficult to sustain in the long run. Furthermore, whilst its intention is to ameliorate the pains of austerity, more systemic resistance or protest about cuts could also be silenced, as workers' empathetic approach may dampen clients' anger and encourage their grudging consent (Goffman, 1952; G, 2013).

Social workers' task to uphold social work values in times of austerity poses many moral traps, which are not explicitly dealt with in international statements of ethical principles (Hugman and Carter, 2016). The emotional labour of austerity which ameliorates but also hides the pains of austerity, is now framed as an individual or at best an organisational responsibility. Yet as we have seen, the varying emotional strategies also indicate new and varying moral pathways, which are not open to critical reflection or debate. In the long run, this personalisation of emotions may erode the kind of response based around professional ethics that might lead to a more concerted social work response to austerity.

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