Capturing the organization of emotions in child welfare decision-making

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I feel so angry with Mum here. She should step up now and take responsibility, save her sons! Is there really nothing we can do? Are we completely powerless here?! (Observation of ‘Karen’)

Karen, an experienced social worker, made this exclamation during the weekly team meeting at a Danish child welfare agency. At the time, I was conducting an ethnographic study of the decision-making process in child protection. Five other social workers also were present, together with a family counsellor and the team manager. Over the course of three months of fieldwork, during which I participated in all the social workers’ weekly meetings, I had encountered numerous situations involving emotional expressions of this kind—of frustration, anger, worries, guilt and blame. While expressions of joy, pride, happiness and competence also were evident, the more negative and dramatic ones dominated my field notes. If such expressions provided insider knowledge about the practices of a child welfare agency, the negative ones especially could be viewed ethnographically as playing a defensive role in the practice of regulation and control.

In this chapter, I use my own emotional experiences as a starting point for arguing that both the emotional expressions and their regulation in the field spring from an inherent paradox in human service organizations, which, to a large extent, defines the practice of social work in child welfare. The paradox is formed on one side by the expected rationality of bureaucratic structures mediated by law and their associated economic-rationalistic demands. It is formed on the other side by a (sometimes frustratingly raging) humanistic care ethos built on taking responsibility for the care of human beings and related
demands for flexibility, personal engagement and constant availability (Davies, 1994; Daly and Lewis, 2000; Deery, 2008; Mol, 2008).

**Organizational contours of emotion**

Although numerous emotions arise from navigating the complexities of social work, they are often disregarded and viewed as being irrelevant for our understanding of decision-making in human services provision. To a large extent, emotions and emotional expressions are considered to be private (or personal); therefore, they are almost naturally excluded from the bureaucratic understanding of decision-making in child welfare (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006; Ingram, 2013; O’Connor and Leonard, 2014; Harrits, 2016). Organizational logic, in effect, is seen to be a world of structures and processes, separate from the logic of personal life. However, through an analysis of emotional expressions and regulations, I seek to demonstrate how ethnography can bring forward important knowledge about the role of emotions in organizational contexts and, in particular, how emotional expressions actively inform the everyday practices of decision-making in human service provision.

While the role of social workers’ emotions and their emotional intelligence is key to ongoing discussions in social work practice, there is a tendency to mainly focus on the individual social worker (such as Davis, 2001). Emotions are located within the individual as adaptive responses to current events. They are seen as underpinning decision-making through the degree of self-knowledge that social workers possess (for a more detailed discussion see Ingram, 2013). However, I found that assigning emotional responses to an individual social worker’s degree of self-knowledge, self-control or to their personality traits failed to take the formative interactional and structural aspects of emotions seriously. Denzin has also addressed this point: ‘All experiences of being emotional are situational, reflective and relational…[and] radiates through the lived body of the person’ (Denzin, 2007, p 3). During my fieldwork, individual social workers continually expressed emotions, but I also observed that these were balanced to fit the specific cultural guidelines of care and responsibility in the organization. These observations demonstrated to me how emotional expressions were not merely internal to an individual social worker but closely connected to their organizational contours and the related cultural context of human service work (Hochschild, 2012).

In what follows, I first consider what it meant for me to be ethnographically engaged with emotional expression in a particular field. Second, I discuss the overlap between my own emotional
experiences and those of the field by showing how this led me to focus on the role of emotions in social work practice. Third, I consider the role of emotions in everyday decision-making, demonstrating how ethnographic data allow for relatedly nuanced analyses of decision-making. And finally, fourth, I address how engagement with emotions is controlled both within the agency but also in the interactions between the field and myself as an ethnographer. I then conclude the chapter with a brief discussion of how ethnography may be used in the future to further investigate the role of emotions in the field of human service provisions.

Engagement with the emotions of a particular field

Ethnographically, child welfare agencies are a type of field, one with organizational contours. Not all fields are organizations, of course, such as the field of family relations. In that respect, the organizational contours of emotional expression need to be understood in their own terms, related to a specific paradoxical signature. Child welfare agencies make critical decisions regarding the futures of families, children and youth based on clear evaluations of family functioning and child well-being (Holland, 2011). Rational argumentation, legal support and systematic knowledge are paramount in this work; this is increasingly reflected in the use of manuals and control systems to ensure that social workers make ostensibly rational decisions based on the documented ‘facts’ of cases (Jacobsson and Meeuwisse, 2018). These are the resonances of one side of the paradox.

However, as the observation introducing this chapter shows, decision-making processes are not neutral and detached from the emotions they entail and produce. Anger is activated as a response, feeding on concern, worries and professional integrity. Similar to what other researchers have found, this demonstrates that decision-making in child welfare agencies is not a straightforward process. Despite increased systematization of the field, decision-making continues to be defined by unsystematic processes and relationships (Helm, 2016; Skotte, 2018). Emotional expressions are not metrical; moreover, they are not necessarily articulated. Nussbaum (2001) has provided important information about how we always understand, experience and evaluate the world through emotions. Yet, despite this insight, emotions continue to be disregarded and marginalized in most research processes and, thus, in what constitutes relevant scientific knowledge (Holland, 2007). As Barbalet has stated: ‘Emotions are not optional extras. They are implicated in all human action, including thought’
Consequently, they inform our creation of new knowledge. For many ethnographers, this insight is part of their embodied practice when conducting fieldwork (Hastrup, 1992; Coffey, 1999; Hubbard et al., 2001; Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Within the tradition of auto-ethnography, there has been a focus on personal and inward experiences as being relevant for research through the ethnographer’s self-conscious autobiography, allowing for introspective emotional self-awareness (Ellis, 1999). While these insights clearly permit emotional expressions to be part of the generation of knowledge, not all ethnographic research that aims to investigate emotions can or should be autobiographical. While my own embodied and emotional reaction to the field became an important conduit for ethnographic understanding, it was less person-centred than organizationally mediated. I found emotional expression’s pattern of organizational linkages offered insights into social regulation that a purely autobiographical approach would not (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997).

Turning to the everyday practice of emotional expression

In my search to understand the emotions involved in the meaning-making of the field, I started to focus on the overlap between my own emotional experiences and those of individuals in that field. However, this overlap only slowly revealed itself in my multiple readings of the field notes when trying to systematize and understand them as I read them (Emerson et al., 2011). While the emotional expressions of the social workers appeared in the field notes from the first meeting, my own emotional responses were only gradually formed. At the start, I set aside the feelings I had during the fieldwork as merely personal and therefore irrelevant; thus, they were rarely included in my field notes.

When I first acknowledged their personal relevance, it was because, in many ways, they resembled the emotional expressions of the social workers. I was continually drawn into cases involving multiple stories about the social problems of children and families when the social workers presented them in great detail at the meetings. Although I had never met the children or their families, their pains and struggles, as presented at these meetings, travelled home with me, provoking restlessness and worries. Questions persistently popped up in my head: What should be done? Could I do something? What if this were my child? (see also Sparkes and Smith, 2012). I stopped myself, wondering if I could call one of the social workers between the weekly meetings, or perhaps I could call the team manager to ask for status
updates. I considered if I should expand the focus of my study and try to contact the children and families in question—obtaining data about the people experiencing the real issues, tackling an everyday life of struggles and pain, those facing the consequences of the decisions being made. For weeks, I found myself drawn into the multifaceted, contradictory and ambiguous nature of the field (Hubbard et al, 2001). I experienced an ongoing internal struggle to either respond to these emotional concerns and new ideas or adhere to the original plan of focusing on decision-making within the child welfare agency. Little did I know at the time, that what I and, in turn, the social workers felt and said were not just personal but had organizational contours.

At the beginning, I only attended the weekly meetings and conducted informal and formal interviews with the professionals in the child welfare agency. I rationalized that expanding my data to include meetings with the children and families would also change the subject of my ethnography. I would no longer be focused on understanding the decision-making processes in child welfare agencies; rather, I would be studying the experiences and perspectives of children and families. But, gradually, taking increasingly seriously what might be called the often agonizingly rationalistic linkages of emotional expressions, I started to reframe the study. By actively tracing the organizational resonances of emotions, which Hubbard et al (2001, p 121) describe as ‘emotionally-sensed knowledge’, I gained new insights that allowed me to refocus my fieldwork on the role of emotions. This process of realization led me back to focusing on the field and away from my own strong emotions, and to a focus on the field as one that was constituted as highly emotional and emotionally imbricated. This created an awareness that the emotions I experienced were not unique to me, or to individual social workers for that matter. Although the number and intensity of the emotions that I felt surprised me, they were a reflection of the emotional expressions that I observed in the field. Concerns, worries, sadness, hope and anger were overtly present at the meetings when the social workers were trying to navigate the complexity of their many cases, and were exacerbated by the social problems of the children and families.

The complex ethical issues of representation, which are pertinent when doing an ethnography of social service provision, are related to these insights. Not knowing that emotional expressions would be central in the fieldwork, I did not have a strategy from the onset that would allow me the means to analyse and write about emotional expressions in a non-individualizing and non-stigmatizing way (Hubbard et al, 2001). Uncovering emotional expressions in a
field where they formally have no role could easily lead to unjustly implicating individual social workers or the social problems of the children and families in the cases. With the reframing, I developed practice-based solutions, attempting to avoid focusing on individual social workers. In the analytical stage, with multiple readings of the field notes, I sought to avoid individualizing emotions as belonging to specific social workers by focusing on the expression of emotions in concrete situations. Furthermore, by changing the name of the participants in my field notes when beginning the analysis, I sought to relinquish some of my familiarity with individual social workers and challenge my readings of the field notes, creating room for a new reading that focused on the contextual and shared characteristics of emotional expression. In my writing, I edited the multitude of notes, impressions and recordings in order to deal with specific aspects of understanding the emotional paradox pertaining to social work practice (see also Inckle, 2010).

Thus, my ethnographic engagement with the field led to unexpected emotions, which showed me the relevance of emotions in the decision-making processes of social workers. This realization directly influenced how I read my field notes, and it led to the development of a more critical ethical strategy. It also pointed to the need for a more careful analysis of the role that emotions play in the everyday practice of social workers in particular, and more generally, it pointed ahead to situational and cultural understanding of emotional life.

**Emotions in everyday decision-making**

To empirically unpack the role of emotions in the everyday practice of the meetings, I will return to the meeting and circumstance I used to introduce this chapter, in which the social worker, Karen, is angry and frustrated with a mother who she finds is not acting in the best interest of her two sons. Before this meeting, I had heard about the mother and her two sons, 16-year-old David and 12-year-old Mark, as they had been on the agenda of almost all the weekly team meetings that I had attended over the past two months. They had been a case at the agency for many years, and all the social workers knew them, either from working directly with the family or from hearing about them in the meetings.

The group of social workers present at the meeting was responsible for handling all cases with young people between the ages of 12 and 18. At the weekly meetings, the agenda consisted of three parts: 1) the assignment of new cases, 2) the discussion of complex cases (put forward
by the social workers), and 3) the cases where new interventions might be needed. Karen’s case with David and Mark was put on the agenda as both a complex case in need of discussion and one that required new interventions. This need for new interventions was a surprise for most of us because at the meeting two weeks before it had been decided that an intensive home-based intervention needed to be implemented. For the previous six months, Karen had worked hard to make the mother realize that she needed help structuring their everyday life so that the boys would get up in the morning, go to school and also go to bed before midnight. The mother was also said to be needing tools for handling the many conflicts in the home, both between the boys and between her and her sons. At the meeting, everyone agreed that Karen had exerted an enormous amount of effort to get the mother to accept the intensive help that was offered. In my notes from the previous meeting, I wrote:

They appear almost happy. Yvonne, a family counselor, is stating: ‘I never thought we would get in. It is such a turnaround for Mum. Maybe she’s on something’ [laughing]. Karen, smiling, says: ‘Or rather, I think she may be off something. I never been able to get her to do urine tests but I just know that she has been using some kind of drugs, besides the alcohol’. Ann, the team manager, states: ‘Now we, hopefully, we will know a lot more, also about the boy’s difficulties’. Smiles around the table. Next case on the agenda. (Field notes)

At the meeting two weeks later, I noted how the smiles were all gone. All eight people around the big meeting table looked worried when Karen, in an angry voice, started to explain what had happened with David, Mark and their mother. I wrote:

Karen says: ‘Where should I start. It’s all a mess now. David disappeared last week and we couldn’t find him for two days. Mum blamed us, me and the family counselor, for being too much in their face, which apparently should have stressed David. He was located late Thursday night by the police, all high on something. They send him to the acute institution, and that’s where he is now. Refusing to get out of bed and talk to anyone. Although, he declared, that he wouldn’t move back home with Mum’. Karen paused, taking a breath.
Alex, another social worker, asks: ‘What about Mum, what does she say?’ Karen shaking her head from side to side says: ‘Well yes, you see that is the problem. She won’t have him back home and this weekend she turned up at the acute center with Mark, claiming that she could no longer handle him at home. So now he is also in acute care!’ Yvonne exclaims, putting her hands to her face, ‘Oh no!’ Karen looks at her and continues in an angry voice: ‘I feel so angry with Mum here. She should step up now and take responsibility, save her sons! Is there really nothing we can do? Are we completely powerless here?!’

Ann, the team manager, looks at Karen and says calmly: ‘Yes, I know, this is the last thing we wanted to happen! But I think there is no way back now; the boys should be taken into more permanent placements’. Karen strongly opposes the idea, referring to the fact that home-based family work never had a chance. Everyone, except me, takes part in the following discussion about what to do next. It is agreed that Alex, who earlier had a good relationship with David, should contact him to find out what he is thinking. Mark should, as quickly as possible, be moved to a foster care. In the end Karen says: ‘I just feel that we are letting them down big time’. Ann nods sympathetically and says: ‘Yes, but we must follow the procedures and find out what is going on with Mum before we let the boys move back home’. Karen states: ‘Then it’s too late, she won’t have them back’. Ann declares that it is time for a short break. (Field notes)

During the short break, Karen and Alex continued to discuss the case. I asked them what they thought would happen now? Karen explained that she thought they would lose Mum and so would the boys. She thought it was sad because she believed that Mum had some potential to be a better mother. Karen was not angry anymore, but her voice was strained, apparently because the team was not willing to go that way. Alex put an arm around Karen’s shoulders trying to comfort her. He said: “But I don’t think we can. We are obliged to put the children first, not Mum”. Karen turned her eyes to the ceiling. “And working with Mum is not putting the children first? You know, they only have one Mum”. The others returned and the meeting started again with discussions of new cases.
This case with David, Mark and their mother created emotional engagement, not only for Karen, but for the others who engaged with the case and with Karen’s emotional struggles. I also felt unsettled by the turn in the case and worried about what would happen with the two boys. To my surprise, emotional concerns such as Karen’s appeared to be widely accepted at the meetings, creating what Forsberg and Vagli (2006, p 26) call ‘environments for emotions’, allowing for shared reflections and ambiguity in discussions at the meetings. I had seen these kinds of emotional engagements in collegial evaluations and interpretations of client cases in many situations throughout the field study, and I saw them as being the result of a culture exceptionally open to the role of emotions, allowing for expressions of both despair and concern (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006).

In time, when rereading my field notes, I noted that although these negative emotions were visible and accepted, often they also created states of uncertainty and increased complexity at the meetings. Although uncertainty and complexity were key aspects of most of the cases, I recorded that only a limited amount of time was allotted during the meetings to sharing those feelings. After a while (a maximum of one hour), the uncertainty and complexity had to be addressed or, ideally, solved (Fahlgren, 2009). I found that uncertainty and complexity stood in the way of bringing the cases forward and reaching a decision about how to act next. When a decision was to be made at the end of the discussions, emotional arguments were often set aside, such as when Ann, the team manager, empathized with Karen’s feelings that the mother had potential but did not see them as being valid in deciding the future cause of action.

When reaching the phase of decision-making at the meetings, I observed a preoccupation with how to legitimize a decision; at that stage, feelings and emotions played an insignificant role, ceding the stage to procedures and a focus on facts and certainty (Forsberg and Vagli, 2006). It was not that emotional argumentation played no role at this phase; however, it was clear that a more bureaucratic form of argumentation increased the chances of the decision receiving the approval of the management and meeting the legal requirements. Reading over my notes, I found that the practice of decision-making at the agency followed this pattern whereby emotions were welcomed at the beginning of the discussions but were almost always automatically set aside at the end of the discussion and rarely present when the decision for future actions was made. The paradox worked in this way, virtually systematically replacing its emotion-laden ethical side with the interactional pulses of its organizational side.
Controlling emotions

Although they were fairly evident, I did not question these phases of the decision-making process during the fieldwork. At first, I was surprised to find that the emotional expressions and argumentation were integrated and legitimized in the context of the meetings. I remember returning from the meeting and conveying to colleagues that the field of social work indeed had not been dehumanized by increased demands of documentation and regulation. Rather, the field was packed with feelings and emotional expressions, which also emerged in the decision-making processes. While analysing the material, I had to moderate my initial impressions. Yes, there was room for feelings and emotions but this room was mostly allocated to parts of the discussions and not allowed to be an active part of the final decisions. Thus, I slowly discovered that, contrary to my first impressions, feelings and emotions were also highly regulated and controlled in the agency.

Not only did the organization of the meetings control the space allowed for the social workers’ feelings and emotions, more direct measures of control were implemented outside the meetings. I first noticed this one day when I was waiting in the corridor to conduct an interview with Alex, one of the social workers. At that time, I noticed a poster of a traffic light hanging on the wall. I took a photograph of it (see Figure 3.1).

I wondered what the poster was about and who it was meant for: the social workers, the families? When Alex approached me, I asked him what it was about. He shook his head laughing, saying: “I don’t know. I guess it is to control us, so that we don’t let our feelings take over [he continued laughing], thinking we can do as we like or something like that”. I laughed with him because I also found it a bit ridiculous and out of sync with the many emotional expressions I had observed at the weekly meetings. I did not pay more attention to it at the time. Later, when I looked at the poster again, I saw that the text used to frame the decisions and responsibilities was written in a language devoid of any emotions, which puzzled me. The phrase ‘domain of production’ led me to think of the production and manufacturing of goods, and I wondered: What is produced in the child welfare agency? Was it the production of decisions? It did not make much sense to me.

The poster and its rigid wording did not have any visible effect on Alex, and when I asked some of the other social workers about it, I got the same dismissive reaction. To my disbelief, no one appeared to pay much attention to the poster, finding it superfluous and without much
meaning. Consequently, it was not the topic of critical discussion that I had anticipated it would be. Nonetheless, for me, it was a highly conflictual poster which made me feel uncomfortable with its direct and controlling wording that instructed the social workers how to behave in the ‘domain of production’.

During the fieldwork, I succeeded in getting an interview with the head manager, Marianne, who apparently was the person who had suggested that the poster be created and displayed. Because the poster did not seem to have any direct impact on the social workers, I had not planned for it to be part of the interview. However, Marianne brought it up:

**Interviewer:** What do you think about the role of the law in social work? Does it limit or support the work?

**Marianne:** I think it is supportive because, in my world, it gives you a platform, it creates stability. But I know that many of the employees feel that it is a limitation because they are emotionally involved and [they] find it difficult to take a step back and look at what is actually going on. They can find it really difficult. And that is also why they get supervision. Everyone gets supervision because it is so incredibly important. It [the work] tears one’s emotions, of
course it does. Sometimes I’m a little rough [with them] and say that the brain is [the] biggest [organ] and sits at the top [of the body] because it needs to be used first, before the heart. I have tried to introduce [a model] of where you are in the area of the production domain. There are these posters of a traffic signal hanging around here.

**Interviewer:** Yes, I have seen them. They are very direct!

**Marianne:** [Laughing] Yes, they [the social workers] don’t like them, but I have been over them many times [with them]. Especially in relation to the red sign, I have said to them: ‘Here you have nothing to say. It is pure management. It is the law. It is the finances. It is political decisions’. There are so many areas where we can just say, ‘Well, okay then’, and that is the basis for our employment. It is what we have to comply with. Therefore, you can just forget about it. They [the social workers] use so much energy discussing if this or that is fair and right. And that is not working. I say, ‘Go and talk about the things associated with the yellow and green lights where you have some influence’. That [point] I make clear all the time. You have to know where you are in the production domain, making sure that you are not sliding into something that you cannot control. Make sure that you always have a good explanation for doing what you do by referring to what is in the law. If you are emotionally out of control, then you cannot help.

My minimal expression of scepticism towards the poster during the interview did not disturb Marianne, just as the social workers’ scepticism did not seem to disturb her. For her, the task appeared to be to make me, and the social workers, understand that the poster was a way to help the social workers handle their unavoidable emotional engagement with children and families in a productive, rather than an unproductive, way. It was an active attempt at controlling critical discussions about the fairness of the law, the legitimacy of management and the room for decision-making. Marianne’s poster was directed at what Hochschild (2012, p 58) called ‘display rules’ by telling the social workers when and how they should express their feelings. In some ways, during the interview I felt subjected to similar display rules, by not fully revealing the depth of my scepticism.
I felt that the social norms guiding the interview did not allow me to critically question Marianne’s imposing of display rules attempting to control the social workers’ engagement. She had granted me an interview in her busy schedule and she was clearly proud of her poster and the thoughts behind it. This left me feeling that there was little room for letting her know that I found the poster and its message to be highly controversial and controlling (Hubbard et al., 2001). One could always consider what could have happened if I had shared my dislike and had been more critical of the poster in the interview. It could have led to an interesting and, most likely, a more emotional exchange of opinions. It could also have led Marianne to show me the door. In this situation, I held back and allowed Marianne the option to share her perspective.

Marianne was a key gatekeeper of my access to the meetings in the child welfare agency, so maintaining her support was a vital concern at the time. I also felt obligated, not only towards her but also towards her employees, which made me hold back. They had all so willingly led me into the ‘backstage’ of decision-making, sharing with me their thoughts, concerns and emotions, bypassing the formalities of written casework and interactions with children and families (Goffman, 1990). Consequently, I did not want to be overly critical of a poster that the social workers did not seem to care about and that Marianne took great pride in. Like many ethnographers before me, I wanted to be accepted and, if possible, blend in—which depended on my personal relationships with ‘key individuals’ in the field (Coffey, 1999). However, this choice to uphold field relationships also meant that it was difficult for me to deepen my understanding of the role the poster and its display rules had in the everyday power dynamics of emotions in decision-making.

Conclusion

My ethnographical engagement with emotions provided me with insight into the emotional paradox at the centre of much of the practice in human service provisions. At first, the expected rationality of the bureaucratic structures was overshadowed by my surprise that the emotional expressions of the social workers were a recognized and central part of their everyday practice. At the weekly meetings, I observed that emotional expressions were allowed time and consideration; they were recognized as an important part of the social work practices, and colleagues were empathetic and sympathized with each other. However, over time, I found that, although emotions were
an accepted part of the process, they were only allowed to play a minor role in the final defining phases of the decision-making processes. In the final phase, emotions were pushed aside; primacy was given to the facts, the law and to identifying concrete solutions. I was only able to see this pattern in the role of emotions in the decision-making processes because of the exploratory nature of ethnography. I sat in on many meetings and took many notes that I did not know how I would use. Ultimately, it was the very experience of being present at the meetings at the child welfare agency that allowed my own emotionally-sensed knowledge to play a role in the analytical process. Nonetheless, to determine how and if emotional expressions inform the final decisions would require a stronger focus on emotions from the onset of the field work, leading to more detailed field notes and interviews, and would perhaps also require video recording of the meetings.

Likewise, it was fleeting ethnographic curiosity that led me to take a photograph of the poster in the hall—one that, afterwards, provoked me but apparently did not upset the social workers in the field. This led me to see the field as a culture wherein emotions are tolerated because they are seen as an unavoidable aspect of the work with children and families. It also showed me a culture wherein emotions are expected to be controlled to fit an overall idea of decision-making as a rationalistic, bureaucratic process. At the end of my ethnographic work, I found that the many negative emotions experienced by the individual social workers in relation to the cases were given little room when the final decisions were made. It was only possible to acquire these insights about the role of emotions in the field of human service provisions through my ethnographic engagement; few other methods would, to the same extent, recognize the ethnographer’s own emotional engagement as being relevant for generating significant knowledge. While ethnography helped me to discover aspects not emphasized in research, it also lead to a new research interest in the need to better understand the role emotions play more generally in the decisions made in human service organizations where rational argumentation, legal support and systematic knowledge are paramount.

References


