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Tension of Managerial Change in the Emotional Labour of Social Work

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Abstract: This paper is based on an empirical study of the experience of the welfare professionals in Hong Kong, in the face of a series of management reform instigated by the Government to enhance accountability. The study identifies compassion fatigue among the practising social workers, which is compounded by an evasion of trust created by intensified competition within and among welfare organizations. The managerialist reforms engender cognitive and emotional dissonance among the welfare professionals, upon the simultaneous imposition of divergent values from managerialism and social work professionalism. The paper discusses the dynamics contributing to the compassion fatigue, and reveals the tension between quality talk and managerial control in the emotional labour of social work. We propose that if the managerial reforms are to realize their good intention of enhancing the quality and effectiveness of human services, greater attention needs to be rendered to their emotional impact on those who deliver the emotional labour.

Keywords: Emotional labour, Social work, Caring professions, Managerialism, Professionalism, Compassion fatigue

Introduction

AS A HELPING profession, the practice of social work has always been characterized by its infiltration into the highly private and emotive lives of its service users. Emotional management as an integral part of social workers' job in their daily interactions with clients, the efficacious delivery of social work service are dependent on the ability of the social workers to harness productive emotions in the clients they serve. Their failure to display the appropriate emotion (e.g., empathy) or the manifestation of an inappropriate one (e.g., disgust) is significant to the well-being of the client and their continued relationship with the professional (Mann, 2004). In the realm of social work, practitioners are required to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper emotionality in their clients' affective lives (Hochschild, 1983). Thus, social work is constituted in this way as an emotional labour in which "feelings are underplayed, overplayed, neutralized, or changed according to specific organizational feeling rules and in order to advance organizational goals" (Yanay & Shahar, 1998, p.347). Customarily, social workers accommodate the demand of emotional labour at work by adhering to the ethical codes and working principles in the professional discourse of social work. The introduction of managerialist reforms to the welfare sector in recent decades, however, has challenged the usual equilibrium with which social workers perform their emotional

labour. Based on an empirical study of the experience of Hong Kong social workers in the face of encroaching management reforms, this paper endeavours to uncover the changing organizational climate within the social work sector, which can jeopardize the performance of emotional labour that is vital for achieving the acclaimed goals of social work service. The discussion is meant to reveal the tension between managerial control and the climate of nurturing which is necessary to sustain the emotion involved in the work of caring professionals.

Emotional Labour in Social Work

Social work is widely considered as "people-work" (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Mann, 2004). It encompasses an array of human interactions aimed to promote, maintain, and enhance the well-being of clients by relieving their hardship and suffering (Social Workers' Registration Board, 1998). Unrelentingly, social work deals with the "most unknown quantity in the universe – the emotional life of man" (Taft, 1994). To achieve the acclaimed helping goal, social workers are required to control the emotional responses of service recipients amidst the difficulties and ordeals that confront them. Social work intervention accordingly involves active strategies to modify, create, or alter the expression of emotions in the course of ongoing relationships and interactions with clients (Pugliesi, 1999). In performing social work duties, emotional control exercised by the social workers themselves is in turn necessary to contain



the private feelings emerging from handling the problems and pains of others. Both employee-focused and job-focused emotional management are accomplished by circumscription to feeling rules prescribing the “correct” emotional states, and display rules guiding the expression of emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Pugliesi, 1999). In emphasizing emotionality in job performance, emotional labour in social work calls for a coordination of thoughts and feelings, and draws on a source of self, which we honour as deep and integral to our individuality (Hochschild, 1983). This echoes the prominence that social work used to accord to the “use of self” (Miley et al., 2001; Hepworth et al., 2002), in which the workers as authentic human beings are the most significant tools to facilitate problem solving and growth in the clients they serve.

Invariably, emotional labour is demanding. Research on work stress and burnout has summoned attention to the aversive effects that emotional labour potentially has on employees’ psychological well-being (Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Pugliesi, 1999; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Mann, 2004). The emotional demands of the job could be a particular source of stress for social workers, and the leakage of inappropriate emotion could have more serious implications for the well-being of the clients than such lapses might have in other industries (Mann, 2004). Bearing witness to the suffering of others, helping professions such as social work entail a discrete breed of burnout identified as compassion fatigue (Leon et al., 1999; Figley, 2002; Collins & Long, 2003). Leon et al. (1999) summarized the manifestations of compassion fatigue among helping professionals as “(1) decreased concern for clients, (2) decreased positive feelings or empathy for clients, (3) physical and emotional exhaustion, (4) increased job dissatisfaction, and (5) feelings of hopelessness related to the job and spilling over into other areas of the individual’s life” (Leon et al., 1999, p.44). The susceptibility of social workers to compassion fatigue is related to the necessary mobilization of empathy and emotional energy in establishing and maintaining an effective helping alliance, and delivering effective services to clients (Figley, 2002). By the necessary instrumentality of emotional energy in social work, the compassion fatigue among social workers is not only detrimental to the occupational health of the practitioners, but it also affects the efficacy of realizing the helping goal of social work service.

There are different ways in which employees of the service sector cope with the demands of emotional labour. Hochschild (1983), in her seminal research on flight attendants, identifies the dual strategy of surface acting and deep acting in performing the required emotional labour. In surface acting, the prac-

tioners exhibit the required emotional display by submerging their authentic expression of self, whereas in deep acting, emotional display is a reflection of authentic feeling which is properly aligned with their occupational role (Hochschild, 1983; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Mann, 2004). Studies on the labour process find that emotional strain or exhaustion has a better chance to emerge when workers need to expend energy to realign their feelings in surface acting (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003; Mann, 2004). Surface acting is also a significant predictor of depersonalization, and it contributes to a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). On the other hand, deep acting is associated with a sense of personal accomplishment and identification with one’s occupational role (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003), that can minimize emotional exhaustion when workers genuinely believe in what they are selling (Karabanow, 1999). Deep acting is hence realized as a more effective strategy to cope with the demands of emotional labour (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

Deep acting is constituted by intellectualization and rationalization, by which illegitimate emotions according to the feeling rules are turned into legitimate therapeutic feelings (such as empathy) in helping professions like social work (Yanay & Shahar, 1998; Mann, 2004). Such intellectualization and rationalization are largely enacted and operated by professional discourse in professional service organizations (Yanay & Shahar, 1998). From their study in a psychiatric facility, Yanay and Shahar (1998) identified that feeling rules and display rules are often disguised as ethical codes, professional techniques, and specialized knowledge, whilst mastery of the ‘right’ feelings signifies professionalism and a professional identity. Invariably, the professional codes of ethics and working principles in social work have always been in the service of inducing deep acting in the performance of the social workers’ helping role.

Biestek (1957) delineated the classic working principles of social work, which are still upheld as a manifestation of social work professionalism. These classic working principles in social work include “individualization”, “purposeful expression of feeling”, “controlled emotional involvement”, “acceptance”, “non-judgmental attitude”, and “client self-determination” (Biestek, 1957). In the context of emotional labour, these working principles represent the feeling rules and display rules that the claim of social work professionalism requires. “Individualization”, which is the tenet that guides professional judgment and analysis in social work, enables social workers to minimize interference by their personal values and experience to their understanding of their clients’ problems. It allows a re-shaping of the social

workers' attitude towards those they serve in terms of "acceptance", "non-judgmental attitude", and the "client's self-determination". By such a rationalization process in deep acting, social workers manage to re-construct their private emotions toward their clients however socially reprehensible they are. Such cognitive reconstruction facilitates an empathic engagement with the clients, which has always been recognized as crucial to effective helping. Meanwhile, to balance the feeling of emotional strain arising from the empathic human connection, "controlled emotional involvement" is enacted as a direct feeling rule, with which the social workers maintain an emotional detachment to ensure objectivity in their judgment. In similar token, the display rule of "purposeful expression of feeling" legitimizes the concealment of some of the social workers' raw emotions toward the service users. The social workers' ability to detach, displace, transform, and substitute feelings constitutes a legitimate difference between trained and untrained practitioners, as well as a legitimate contrast between common sentiments and the science of emotions (Yanay & Shahar, 1998). It is by such professional discourse that workers' emotional energy is conserved and re-directed amidst the stunting demands of emotional labour in achieving its acclaimed helping goals. The operation of deep acting has also nourished a professional value and culture that privileges nurture and trust in human interactions. However, the managerialist changes introduced to the welfare sector in recent decades have created a new organizational environment, which upsets the usual equilibrium that the professional discourse maintains for the performance of emotional labour in social work. The Hong Kong welfare sector is not exempted from this.

Managerial Reforms in the Hong Kong Welfare Sector

The last decades have seen a wide-reaching quest for reforms in the public sector, in which post-bureaucratic control replaces hierarchies with decentralized authority, and places an emphasis on outcomes rather than rules (Exworthy & Halford, 1999). The Hong Kong welfare sector finally took on the zeal of reform in the late 1990s. These managerialist reforms embrace measures such as the devolution of financial control whilst capping the ceiling of welfare expenditures (the Lump Sum Grant subvention system), increased use of competitive bidding and contracting out, a fee charging policy for service, an enhanced emphasis on performance monitoring (the Service Performance Monitoring System), and transformation of the welfare service users into customer-citizens (Leung, 2002). In the irrefutable rhetoric of accountability, welfare service units in

Hong Kong are subjugated to a renewed mandate of managerial control that is largely premised on competition and performance measurement.

The implications of these managerial changes to the Hong Kong welfare sector are significant and far-reaching. The introduction of competitive bidding for new service projects and a more stringent service performance monitoring system has subjugated welfare organizations to an unprecedented survival threat, which was novel to them in the flourishing years before the 1990s. Meanwhile, by the Lump Sum Grant subvention system, the traditional funding formula that renders full support to the looming staff cost is replaced by a fixed lump sum funding, so that the government is able to contain the staggering rise in personal emolument cost that constitutes the bulk of welfare expenditures. Assuming a renewed responsibility in the use of funds, subvented welfare organizations have to formulate their own financial management and human resources policy in order to sustain organizational survival. Majority of welfare organizations manage their balance sheet by offering short-term contracts with a lower wage to new recruits whilst honoring life tenure and retaining a more generous pay scale for the existing staff. Financial pressure as triggered by these managerial changes would mark the declining bargaining power of social workers in relation to their employers (Leung, 2002). At the same time, operation in the frontline is also directly affected by the managerial changes. In the audit culture and enhanced centralized control accompanying the Service Performance Monitoring System, frontline social workers have to adapt to an inspection mechanism characterized by increased quantification and documentation to prove their compliance with the performance standards stipulated. Social work administrators and practitioners are subject to much closer scrutiny and supervision by an external form of appraisal and audit. Amidst these implications to welfare practitioners, whether the managerialist environment as encouraged by the current reform impetus can sustain the emotion work of helping professionals is an area of our concern. The study conducted in 2004 among social welfare practitioners in Hong Kong meant to address this concern.

The research sets out to study how welfare service practitioners conceive and react to the managerial reforms introduced in recent years, particularly how their reactions interfere with their performance of emotional labour in the helping profession. The research adopts a qualitative approach in the collection of data. In-depth individual interviews and focus groups were conducted with social workers in frontline or managerial positions in subvented welfare organizations in Hong Kong. By means of a snowball strategy, 16 social workers from eight or-

ganizations of various scales were interviewed individually. Five focus groups, involving a total of 30 informants, were also conducted among frontline welfare practitioners in a major welfare organization serving the elderly. All the individual interviews and focus groups were fully transcribed. The qualitative data were analyzed with the assistance of NVivo, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software.

Findings of the Study

The study identifies that the managerial changes imposed on the welfare service sector have stirred up much unsettled emotion among the welfare practitioners in Hong Kong. Whilst anxiety and fatigue prevailed subsequent to increased work pressure and decreased employment security, social workers' disillusionment with their job proliferated when they perceived an evasion of trust and care that the codes of practice in the social work profession used to nurture. The possible consequences of these negative affects were the increased demand for emotional energy to manage employees' private emotions, and their susceptibility to compassion fatigue in performing emotional labour on their clients.

In the advent of looming managerial changes, social workers in Hong Kong realized an apparent shift in organizational climate in favour of competition in market ideology. The competitive atmosphere was unrelentingly felt both in inter-organizational and intra-organizational contexts. Inter-organizational competition was invariably engendered by the new measure of competitive bidding in the allocation of funding resources for new service projects.

“Some agencies bid the new projects with a very low price – as low as half of the market price. They won the bid eventually, but suffered from a major financial loss. To put it frankly, these agencies are distorting and ruining the market.” (A service manager in a mid-range service organization)

Upon the introduction of competitive bidding, the commercial discourse of price competition in the market was taken up, revealing the competitive climate that the new measure in the allocation of funds has generated. There was a fear among management of the welfare organizations that failure in the unsettled competition with others could jeopardize organizational development, if not organizational survival. The competitive climate was manifested in a decline in trust and collaboration among the service organizations.

“I used to be open to collaboration with other service organizations. There could be genuine discussions between organizations.But with

competitive bidding, I feel that some agencies are not willing to cooperate. Some agencies spell out that they are not ready for collaboration. Neither do they open themselves for discussion on partnership. I am a bit unhappy about this.” (A service manager in a major service organization)

Unfortunately, the rhetoric of trust and partnership has always been the guiding principle in dealing with relationship in social work practice.

If social work service is a commodity to be priced in the competitive open market, the practitioners also conceive themselves as commodities with a market value. With the introduction of the Lump Sum Grant subvention system, unequal remuneration packages between the newly recruited contract staff and the tenured staff prevail. Whilst challenging the spirit of parity and engendering dissatisfaction among the contract staff, its prevalence also encourages a reconstruction of the employee's self as a commodity with a market value to be justified.

“Sometimes I would wonder if we, tenured staff, are assets or liabilities. The cost for one senior tenured staff is sufficient to support a few contract staff!” (A service manager in a major service organization for young people)

“We tenured staff are a burden to the organization.” (A frontline social worker in a mid-range organization)

The disparity in remuneration packages among social welfare employees has accordingly entailed a disturbed dynamics within the welfare organizations.

“As a tenured staff, I often have an uncomfortable feeling. There is a change in the work atmosphere in the team. In order to earn a continual job contract, the contract staff used to work very hard. We (as tenured staff) cannot afford to be left behind with our more generous employment package. In this way, everybody is striving hard in their work performance. If you ask me whether this is healthy competition, I would say no.” (A frontline social worker in a mid-range service organization)

Division between the tenured staff and the contract staff by different employment terms and remuneration packages has engendered an internal competition within the organization, which was conceived as unhelpful to sustaining the trust required of team building in the workplace. The notion of trust and a climate of nurture customarily nourished by the professional discourse of social work are susceptible to replacement by the market philosophy and a competitive atmosphere.

Another impact of the managerial reforms commonly conceived by the social workers was the loss of autonomy in the work process. This was largely related to the audit culture that the Service Performance Monitoring System encouraged.

“In the new service performance monitoring system, there are a lot of documentations required for accountability. I don’t think such accountability by documentation is really necessary. For example, what relevance does the organizational structure have for the service users? The clients don’t care about the structure of the management board. Neither are they concerned about who the board members are. These are remote to our clients. But you have to spend time doing something for the administrators’ eyes only.” (A frontline social worker in a small-scale organization)

With emphasis on procedural probity being an essence of the audit culture, social workers had to surrender to the documentation requirement, disregarding their conviction of it. In the rhetoric of quality talk in the management of care services, the notion of quality was translated in practice as the audit of professional activity (Gorman, 2000). The administrative and managerial demands dominating the work process of neo-liberal management has paradoxically limited the extent of work autonomy that social workers used to enjoy as professionals.

How did social workers react emotionally to these managerial implications? The study finds that a sense of insecurity, anxiety, and fatigue reigns when social workers recount their feelings toward the series of changes introduced by the managerial impetus.

“We are all very afraid – afraid that the higher your job position, the greater chance you get in losing what you have. If I happen to have any fault in my work performance, I can lose my job..... I have to deal with the management’s demand, and the challenge by the community members. They would ask – are you not doing well enough in losing the service contract? There is a lot of stress in it.” (A service manager in a major service organization for the elderly)

Anxiety arising from survival threat among the social workers was compounded by the new job skills demanded of the social workers who used to pride themselves in their soft skills in dealing with human problems. Financial management was an arena that baffled the social workers.

“In the past, our management duties involve manpower deployment and planning for expenditures. But it’s more demanding now. I

have to make ends meet with the budget. The budget is getting smaller and smaller. There is going to be a 5% cut, to be followed by a further 15% cut. You would be very much perplexed in such a position.” (A frontline social worker in a major service organization for the young people)

Whilst financial management was a new job skill demanded of the social workers, the perceived resource strain and the accompanying competitive climate both within and between welfare organizations has engendered a considerable increase of workload among the social workers, contributing further to their fatigue and burnout.

“Nowadays, everyone (in the welfare sector) is exhausted..... When a cup is so full, to the extent of spilling over, how can you expect people to be creative and attentive to emerging service needs?..... We are praying every day for a chance to stabilize the financial situation..... In the present financial strain, there is a constant call for a cutback of manpower. In the reality of insufficient manpower, we have to ask our colleagues to keep striving. There are only bare resources to handle the day-to-day necessities – you won’t have the ability to strive better despite your intention to do so. Many of our colleagues are encountering poor mental health and are sacrificing their own family life.” (A service manager in a mid-range service organization)

Whilst the enhancement of individual well-being and the preservation of the family are the upheld mission in the social work service, the reality of threat to the personal well-being and family life of the social workers constitutes a cognitive dissonance that aggregates their disillusionment with the authenticity of the humanistic claim in the social work profession.

“I am increasingly doubtful about what constitutes commitment (to the social work profession). Does a total surrender of your private life represent your commitment?..... It is so paradoxical – we are sacrificing our own family for helping other families!” (A frontline social worker in a mid-range service organization)

Disillusionment is also compounded by the evasion of trust in the workplace, and is conceived by the interviewed social workers as the reason for imposing the audit machinery.

“(Can the documentations required by the service quality standards enhance service quality?) I don’t think so. It seems that things have be-

come clearer and more systematic..... But the inception of such a system is conveying its mistrust on us.” (A frontline social worker in a mid-range service organization)

The problem of the managerial ethos, for many social workers, is its incongruence, if not antithesis, with the professional codes of social work that are premised on empathic engagement, trust, care, and mutual support. The subjugation of their own personal selves to an organizational environment featured by the absence of a trustful and nurturing climate has put their “deep acting” in the performance of emotional labour to critical challenge. It also revealed the interpersonal tension emerging in the welfare work setting.

“Welfare service is there to fill the service gap. It should be our role to provide the most appropriate and quality service to our clients. It is premised on greater human care, empathy, mutual support, help, etc. But now, the commercial ethos is too strong. In our work environment, it seems that we are striving to defeat each other. In the competitive climate, you are required to be unscrupulous. Hong Kong is no doubt a commercial society. But when this climate intrudes into the welfare service sector..... We are doomed to lose our mission and the value of social work practice. If it comes to this, it represents our total failure..... We used to be concerned about self-realization. But now it is reduced to survival struggle.” (A service manager in a small-scale service organization)

The emotional strain and personal challenge engendered by the series of managerial reforms has re-directed social workers’ energy towards the management of their own anxiety and frustration in the absence of adequate collegial support. Emotional exhaustion and time constraint arising from adaptation to the managerial requirements incapacitate the social workers’ empathic engagement with clients in serving their needs.

“I have to treat my clients as tasks in my job – I know it’s gross depersonalization..... But the management is telling you to do just what is stipulated. For example in some cases..... the clients came to apply for tangible service such as residence. I did want to explore their further needs, but just without the time. The feeling is – you can only do what you are asked. If you spend more time and energy on what is not asked of you, you have to give up your family time. My feeling is, time spent with my own family is getting less.” (A frontline social worker in a small-scale service organization)

The decrease of empathic concern for clients is a sign of compassion fatigue that expresses the costs of caring, empathy, and emotional investment in helping the suffering (Figley, 2002). The social workers’ susceptibility to compassion fatigue is a course for alarm in realizing social work’s acclaimed helping goal.

Discussion

The champion of managerialism in the last decade has instigated a series of managerial reforms in the public sector worldwide. Whilst encompassing legalistic and procedural imperatives, these managerial reforms also introduce an alternative work culture and organizational climate to the care sector.

As in the case of Hong Kong, competitive bidding and the increasing use of a short-term employment contract has nourished a contract culture in the social welfare profession. A deep-seated feature of the contract culture is self-interest and individualism, which is antithetical to mutual help, collaboration, and cooperation in social work practice (Adams, 2002). Amidst the tension within and between service organizations, intensified competition replaces nurture and support as a feature of human interaction in the social work settings. In the spreading logic of the market, which aligns with market liberalism and notions of flexibility and individual freedom (Fournier, 2000), economic rationality is privileged over emotion. The emotional dimensions of relationship in the social work profession become subservient to the administrative and managerial process that dominates it (Rogers, 2001; Gunaratnam & Lewis, 2001). Social workers are assisted in hiding from emotional engagement with the users of service by the bureaucratic requirements and processes that emphasize procedural fairness and impartial judgment (Rogers, 2001). In the emotional labour of social work, this submission of the emotional facet of work to economic rationality, competition, and pragmatism is the most unfortunate. Antithetical to the social work values and codes of practice that enable the workers’ empathic engagement with the clients, the prevailing managerialist climate poses a challenge to the organizational environment of trust and nurture which is expected to sustain the emotional labour of social work. In a depersonalized, technically focused environment, sustaining a rich emotional climate upon which the development of relationships and care depends becomes increasingly difficult (Rogers, 2001).

Shifting workplace culture away from commitment to care and nurture has been the cause of emotional arousal among the practicing social workers. They encounter cognitive and emotional dissonance upon the simultaneous imposition of divergent values from

managerialism and social work professionalism. Whilst they are required to induce empathic understanding of the clients they serve, the organizational environment demands intensified competition that encourages detached engagement and emotional non-involvement. Inauthenticity experienced from emotional dissonance is impeding the rationalization process of “deep acting”, in which the discourse of social work professionalism enables the performance of emotional labour in the care profession of social work. Emotional dissonance compounds the social workers’ anxiety and disillusionment, which has been cumulated from the evasion of trust, loss of work autonomy, and the increasing employment insecurity in their work setting. Greater energy has to be expended in handling their private emotions amidst the emotional demand in the performance of their job or other-focused emotional labour. As previous research indicates, such self-focused emotion management decreases employee job satisfaction and results in more pervasive negative effects on employees that are stronger in magnitude than those inflicted by the job/other-focused emotional labour (Pugliesi, 1999). In the anxiety chain that the empathic and relational disconnection unleashes, the social

workers’ retreat from their established care role is exacerbated (Rogers, 2001). Shifting the investment of emotional energy from the job/other-focused emotional work to self-focused emotional work among the social workers, as driven by the current managerial reforms, puts into question the rhetoric of service quality that the managerial reforms seem to promise.

The complicated interplay between managerialism and professionalism in the delivery of social work service is beyond the scope of discussion in this paper. However, this exploratory study conducted in the Hong Kong welfare sector has recaptured the significance of emotionality in the effective delivery of care services. If the managerial reforms are to realize their good intention of enhancing the quality and effectiveness of service, greater attention needs to be channelled to their emotional impact on the practitioners, which can substantially affect the performance of emotional labour in the delivery of social work service. As Rogers (2001) advocates, “a fourth ‘E’ is required at the best value table for success and for personal and professional fulfilment: the ‘E’ of emotion” (Rogers, 2001, p. 182).

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