The Perception of Emotion: A Case Study in Child and Family Social Workers in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The present research aimed to investigate the perception of emotions among Malaysian people particularly workers in child and family social work practice. The perception of emotions in the arena of decision-making processes and the interrelationship between emotion and cultural context were explored. The overall research strategy was ethnographic. The researchers used a mixture of methods including individual interviews, participant observation, and a questionnaire. The research was conducted in three locations in Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur, Petaling and Kota Kinabalu. Participants consisted of child protectors and rehabilitation officers from the Malaysia Welfare Department and medical social workers in hospitals. This paper presents an analysis of individual interviews in the three locations. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted (twelve male, thirteen female; age range 29-51). Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research findings show that emotions were perceived and labelled as a negative element by the Malaysian social workers. In other words, the participants had a greater tendency to associate emotions with negativity than positivity. The workers suggested that emotions and feelings need to be avoided during practice in effort to perform professionalism.

Keywords: Emotion, cultural effect, child and family workers, human service organisations
INTRODUCTION

Decision making is one of the core tasks in social work practice. Child and family social workers routinely make decisions which would affect clients’ lives. In this case, social workers are required to make a good decision that suits the clients’ desires and needs. Working with children and their families requires the social workers to address the parents’ needs, as well as those of the children as both parties often require attention. When social workers begin to think about children, they may be confronted with dilemmas. For instance, social workers would have to focus on the children’s needs whilst attending simultaneously to the families’ circumstances in which they are located (Wilson et al., 2008). Power is one of the principles of effective relationship-based social work with children and families. Wilson et al. (2008) argue that one of the main reasons emotions run so high in social work with children and families relates to the statutory responsibilities of childcare social workers, which allow them under certain circumstances to remove children from their families.

Some researchers have viewed emotions as a dimension in decision making (see Damasio, 2006; DeSousa, 1987). There seems to be situations in which emotions can enhance decision-making processes even though it is widely believed that the influence of emotions on reasoning would create problem. The researcher posits that whether emotions are functional or dysfunctional for decision making, this depends on how social workers experience their emotions and what they do about them during decision making.

Emotions have been debated in many contexts and their conceptualisation remains contended. However, the development and organisation of emotional processes and experiences which could be argued to have biological underpinnings have been said to be influenced, sustained or modified by the system of meanings, in which one self, other people surroundings and social events or objects have their contributions. Even though biological approach is accepted in considering emotions, from reviewing the literature, the present research also consider that culture makes a key contribution to how people express, regulate and utilise emotions.

The present research aimed to investigate the perception of emotions in decision-making processes among Malaysian child social workers. After the process of data analysis, four major themes have been identified that relate to the research objective. However, this paper will only present one of the research findings (theme) which is perception that emotion as a negative and disruptive element in decision-making processes.

METHODOLOGY

The overall research strategy was ethnographic. The researchers used a mixture of methods including individual interviews, participant observation, and a questionnaire. The research was conducted in three locations in Malaysia: Kuala Lumpur, Petaling and Kota Kinabalu. Participants consisted of child protectors and child rehabilitation officers from the Malaysia Welfare Department and medical social workers in hospitals. This paper presents an analysis of individual interviews in the three locations. A total of twenty-five interviews were conducted (twelve male, thirteen female; age range 29-51). Data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the early period of the research process (e.g. during the interviewing stage), I found that emotions were perceived and labelled as a negative element by the Malaysian social workers. In other words, the participants had a greater tendency to associate emotions with negativity than positivity. The qualitative research findings revealed that there were similarities between all locations where this research conducted in terms of gender and length of work experiences concerning how the participants perceived emotions and their contributions in their work practice (e.g. decision-making process). The participants perceived emotions as a negative element and suggested that emotions and feelings need
to be avoided during professional practice (e.g. in the process of making decisions). They perceived that emotions could disrupt decision-making process. They said:

“I do not involve emotions ... to me, in the process of making decisions, sometimes, we can feel a mixture of emotions, either good or bad mood, or personal problems. In decision making, I would not be confident. And, sometimes, I would be doubtful too.”

(Child Protector 5, male, aged 34)

According to the participants, they will not involve emotions in their work practice (e.g. decision-making processes) due to their negative effects on practice and actions. For instance, Child Protector 5 said, “... it’s like ... if emotions are there, they would make me less focus on my work ... errr ... for example, if I have a personal problem, or any internal or external problem, of course, it [negative emotion] would disturb me. I would not make any decisions at the time I’m feeling emotional.” This indicates that certain emotions that rise from problems faced by the individuals could disrupt their thinking process as perceived by the participants. Another female participant also strengthens the notion that emotions are a negative element, as she said:

“I think we need to minimise the use of our emotions. I think if we are emotional, any kind of decision related to the patients will not be good.”

(Medical Social Worker 7, female, aged 37)

The participants avoid the involvement of emotions in their practice (e.g. decision-making processes) in their effort to show their professionalism. Even though they realise that their tasks may engage certain emotions (e.g. sadness, anger), they completely reject the use of emotions. Another female participant below also refused to use her emotions in her practice (e.g. decision-making process), as she said:

“Errr ... I am not saying that they [emotions] are negative, but I don’t want these emotions to influence me in my decision-making processes, and I am not saying that if I use emotions, my decision will be a correct one. But, I am kind of ... I don’t want to be influenced by my emotions.”

(Probation Officer 7, female, aged 30)

According to the participants, using emotions may lead them to wrong actions or decisions. They perceived that emotions could drive them to act unprofessionally. Probation Officer 7 above added, “I will try, I will try to use emotions to relate those information I get from the clients. Then, I will make a decision referring to all the information and my past experiences. OK, of course, I don’t follow my emotions. I am not saying that I don’t use emotions. I agree that emotions are there, but we cannot always follow our emotions. I am afraid if I am wrong.” Seemingly, the respondents perceived that if they use emotions in their decision-making processes, it would make them act unethically, like being biased, and treat their clients unfairly. A male participant said:

“OK. In .. errr ... myself, I am not [a man does not use emotions in decision-making processes]. It is because we want to make the right decision. What people say, there will be no bias. If I make a decision based on emotions, the decision will be biased or it may be more to our own interest. So, I don’t want to make any decision that is more to my own interest. I will try to think of the interest of all parties.”

(Probation Officer 8, male, aged 29)
In their effort to avoid the staff from thinking and acting emotionally, the participants were being suggested and strongly advised to follow the procedures provided by their respective organisations. A female participant below said:

“To me, you have to follow the procedures and you should. I, I think it is better for you to follow the procedures. If you are emotional, you ... I understand because you are human, you have emotions. .. the feeling of sympathy, I know you sympathize. But, in the profession, we have rules and regulations. Don’t trap yourself in any situation. Here, in this department, we should always mind our every single action. If you make a mistake, you will get a big consequence because everything is about money. If you are emotional, no, you can’t be emotional with the law. Am I right? For example, a client would say that his mother does not like him, his family disowns him, and he does not have a place to stay. I can’t simply give him a place to stay in the institution. We have rules and we have to follow the procedures. Yeah, I understand ... emotional ... we are sometimes emotional, but hmm ... but ...”

(Probation Officer 10, female, aged 34)

From the analysis, it was found that there was a greater tendency to associate emotions with negativity than positivity among the participants. During the interviews, the participants frequently talked about expressing negative emotions. This may be due to some possibilities which relate to the contexts of social work, such as working with vulnerable, poor and problematic people. Howe (2008) states that working with people who are under stress is one of social work’s given basics. Thus, the expression of negative emotions among the participants is seemingly relevant in its contexts, purpose and causes. The participants reported the feeling of sadness when relating to someone’s fate, for instance, the client’s fate. Meanwhile, the feeling of resentment was reported as well, especially when the clients do not cooperate with them during assessment processes. Anger was also reported when someone failed to play his or her role.

In addition, based on the participants’ perceptions concerning emotions in decision-making processes, it seems that the participants’ understanding, knowledge and terms concerning emotions and their contributions in their professional practice (e.g. decision making) are also limited to the negative effects of emotions. Moreover, the participants also perceived that if they included emotions in their decision-making processes, they could consider their acts as unprofessional and unethical. The management also seemed to discourage their staff from involving emotions in their profession, particularly in decision-making processes. The reason behind the negative perception towards emotions may be due to the categorisation of emotions themselves. The most widely accepted candidates for basic emotions as suggested by Paul Ekman (1969) are happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, anger and disgust, which are also known as the ‘Big Six Emotions’ (in Prinz, 2004). From the Big Six Emotions, four are categorised as negative emotions, while two are categorised as positive emotions. As for the emotion of surprise, according to Izard (1977), it can neither be categorised as basically positive nor it is a negative emotion, because it may lead equally to either positive or negative outcome for individuals (in Baun & Groeppel-Klein, 2003). Thus, there is a possibility that one may perceive emotions and being emotional as negative terms. Furthermore, when talking about emotions and their negative outcome, Nur Atiqah Tang Abdullah (2000, p.289), a Malaysian writer, in her explanation concerning the attributes and uniqueness of human emotions, emphasises that, “if human beings are too affected by emotions, this will result in negative consequences.” Thus, the negative perceptions of emotions among the Malaysian child social workers may come from the negative outcome of certain emotions. Work mottos, such as, “To think rationally without being influenced by instinct or emotions is the most effective way of problem solving”, may cause the workers to detach their emotions from rational thinking due to their perception that emotions could cause irrationality in decision making.
The situation, however, seemed to differ between novice and experienced workers, particularly among individuals who hold high posts in organisations. A female leader in one of the research locations considered using emotions in her professional practice (e.g. decision-making processes). She has 20 years of working experience as a child protector in the child rehabilitation centre. She has been holding the post of a leader in the institution for more than 20 years. In the early conversation with her (also known as Child Protector 4), I asked her opinion concerning emotions and their contributions to decision-making processes. At first, she seemed to perceive emotions as negative and said, “In the management, we cannot be emotional [laughed]. It [management] must be followed by the needs and rationales depending on our experience and the like. So people will not be saying ... Eh! Emotions have been involved in her decision making ... it must be natural.” This indicates that the participant (who was a leader) also perceived emotions as a negative aspect that should be avoided from decision-making processes. However, after a deep discussion, the participant seemed to agree to consider the positive effect of emotions in making decisions. The participant said:

“... this child, her age is already 21 years old. She needs to be sent out from here [the institution]. But she has no one and nobody comes to pick her up. Moreover, she actually has a mental problem and she fails to tell us her family’s information. But she has to be sent out from here ... .”

(Child Protector 4, female, aged 48)

The participant added:

“... the emotion towards this case varies. We are sympathetic, worried and sad. It’s like a mother’s feeling. We do think about her welfare. We try to find out her strength. We want her to be a person. We know the procedures, but we don’t simply send her out. We care about her. This is being emotional, isn’t it? Because of these emotions, we try to provide the best for her before we send her out.”

Similarly, another female leader, who is also the head of department in one of the research locations also perceived emotions as a negative element at first. She believed that emotions should not be included in decision-making processes. She has more than 20 years of working experience and has been holding the position as a head of the said department for more than 15 years. She said:

“Whatsoever kind of decision, it must be on professional basis, you know. We do not only follow our emotions, or follow what we feel, whether we feel angry, patriotic, love our work or elements of bias, no. But, it’s more to ... not only for the benefit of our service or our department. So, when we refer to our service, we usually gear more towards the patients’ benefits because our core business is serving the patients ... .”

(Medical Social Worker 3, female, aged 50)

However, Medical Social Worker 3 above added:

“... then, we also need to consider the workers themselves [her staff – medical social workers], their conditions, capability, limitations, and problems. We need to consider all these things. We cannot simply just focus on patients’ conditions and aspects in terms of service ... because we are human, we are not robot. As humans, we have feelings. We can feel it if anything happens to our family or ourselves. All these things could affect our work. So, if we don’t look at their personal problems especially our workers when we know they have limitations ... I agree I need to act professionally, but I also need to consider their emotions.”

Another male medical social worker who is also a leader for another unit in one hospital (known as Medical Social Worker 5) also agreed to include emotions in his decision-making process. He has been holding the position as a head of the said unit since 6 years ago. He said:
“I am positive with emotions. Errr... I use emotions in any decision making and intervention with patients. Emotions are very important because if you do not use your emotions, to me, you are not human! You’re a robot! Emotions must be there. As I said, there are positive and negative effects of emotions. I will use these kinds of emotions for the benefit of my patients and staff members. But how we use them, either positively or negatively, I mean ... we can look at the outcomes. We should ensure the right emotions for the right situations to achieve good outcomes.”

(Medical Social Worker 5, male, aged 42)

Emotions are needed in order to understand others. In understanding others’ behaviours and thoughts, we need to communicate with them using emotions, particularly positive emotions. Another male participant (known as Probation Officer 5) perceived emotions as a good element that needs to be used in decision-making processes. He is a head of the child rehabilitation unit and has 16 years of working experience as a probation officer. He said:

“To me, when dealing with humans, I think we need emotions because we want to understand the situation. When we understand the situation, it then would influence our decisions. If individuals do not use emotions, then any perceptions will only be dependent on their own perceptions. I think they will not understand others.”

(Probation Officer 5, male, aged 45)

Emotions can be used in acquiring one’s confidence at the workplace. The use of emotions is also dependant on situations and cases. Another male participant, who is also the head of children rehabilitation institution, perceived emotions as beneficial to be used in gaining support and confidence for programmes that one wants to conduct. He has been working as a probation officer for more than 20 years and has been holding the post of a leader in this institution for the past five years.

“With regard to any decisions related to the management or administration after I’ve made references to my staff and people who are in the top level, at the final stage, I need to make the decision myself. I use emotions, but the right emotions ... I mean the emotions in my relationship with my staff. The challenging decision is when it is related to policies. For example, if I want to create a new programme or activity for the children in this institution, I need to think of how far it will benefit the children, man power, and financial matter. All these things will make us think a lot before we make a decision because it involves the government money. I don’t want to carry out a programme where our children will have no interest in it. It will waste our money. So, we would feel doubtful. So, that’s why I need to share it with my colleagues, my staff. I need their support. So, I use emotions and EI, but this depends on situations and cases.”

(Probation Officer 4, male, aged 47)

The differences between novice and experienced workers (i.e. workers who hold high posts in the organisation) in perceiving the contributions of emotions in decision-making processes may be due to the length of their working experience. The less their working experience, the less their knowledge, understanding and level of confidence in using emotions, and vice versa. In one situation, the more they work emotionally (i.e. using the right emotions), the more they feel satisfied. Probation Officer 4 added:

“To me ... if we manage our emotions correctly, it will be positive. If we fail to manage our emotions, it will be negative. That means, in decision-making processes, the procedures remain as the guidelines. However, our emotions must go parallel with the given procedures. I feel satisfied using both equally.”

(Probation Officer 4, male, aged 47)
What can be considered important from the illustrations above, at the first stage, the Malaysian social workers seemed to perceive emotions as a negative element, and thus, they should not be included in their professional practice. However, after a deep discussion with them, particularly with the experienced workers, they revealed that emotions have their positive contributions in social work practice. From Plato’s time until the closing decades of the 20th century, the dominant view was that – emotions are quite distinct from the processes of rational thinking and decision making, and are often a major impediment to those processes (Loewenstein, 1996). Furthermore, this view seemed successful in influencing the Malaysian social workers. However, the Malaysian child social workers, particularly the experienced workers, also seemed to agree and emphasised the importance of emotions in the workplace. The influence of emotions on decision making is largely ignored due to the perception that emotions are the opposite of reason, an untrustworthy force that cripples judgement (see Fineman, 1993). Damasio (2006), however, hypothesizes that emotions are the loop of reason, and that emotions could assist the reasoning process rather than necessarily disturbing it. Similarly, Gaudine and Thorne (2001) demonstrate that individuals who experience arousal and positive effects resolve ethical dilemmas in a manner consistent with more sophisticated cognitive moral structures. The present research findings may result from certain contexts and status level as is evident from the experienced workers and leaders.

CONCLUSION

Emotions were perceived by the Malaysian social workers as a negative element that needed to be avoided in the workplace. This might relate to the traditional assumption and view that emotions are disruptive and irrational. However, these emotions were also perceived to have their contributions in the workplace, particularly among the experienced workers.

REFERENCES


