



## Emotional practices of care and expectations of cost-effectiveness in social work with children and families in Denmark

Nissen, Maria Appel

*Published in:*  
European Journal of Social Work

*DOI (link to publication from Publisher):*  
[10.1080/13691457.2023.2208767](https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2208767)

*Creative Commons License*  
CC BY-NC 4.0

*Publication date:*  
2024

*Document Version*  
Accepted author manuscript, peer reviewed version

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Nissen, M. A. (2024). Emotional practices of care and expectations of cost-effectiveness in social work with children and families in Denmark. *European Journal of Social Work*, 27(3), 452-463.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2023.2208767>

### General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

### Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at [vbn@aub.aau.dk](mailto:vbn@aub.aau.dk) providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



# **Emotional practices of care and expectations of cost-effectiveness in social work with children and families in Denmark**

## **Følelsesmæssige omsorgspraksisser og forventninger til omkostningseffektivitet i socialt arbejde med børn og familier i Danmark**

**Maria Appel Nissen**

### **Abstract**

Research shows that emotional practices are a basic aspect of social work. This article provides knowledge about emotional practices of care in social work with children and families in Denmark in the context of governmental and managerial expectations of the cost-effectiveness of social work. Based on a Danish qualitative research project *Does social work care? Exploring relational, emotional and embodied practices in social services for vulnerable children and families* (2018-2023), this article identifies and presents three emotional practices: *Creating a feeling of a close and authentic mutual relationship with children and parents*; *Being tough and maintain professional authority by distributing attention to the child and by demanding parental responsibility*, and *Emotional endurance based on knowledge, solidarity and sympathy with disadvantaged families*. These practices reveal a differentiated socioemotional economy of sympathy and care (Clark, 1997) in social work with families that interact with incentives to take the level and use of services into account. Based on these findings, the article discusses this trend and its implications for social work and suggests further research that can illuminate the broader landscape of emotional practices in different socio-economic context of sympathy and care.

### **Keywords**

Emotional practices; Care; Children; Child welfare; Families; Cost-Effectiveness

### **Abstrakt**

Forskning viser, at følelsesmæssige praksisser er et grundlæggende aspekt i socialt arbejde. Denne artikel tilbyder viden om følelsesmæssige praksisser i socialt arbejde med børn og familier i Danmark i konteksten af styrings- og ledelsesmæssige forventninger til socialt arbejdes omkostningseffektivitet. Baseret på et dansk kvalitativt forskningsprojekt *Does social work care? Exploring*

*relational, emotional and embodied practices in social services for vulnerable children and families* (2018-2023), identificerer og præsenterer artiklen tre følelsesmæssige praksisser: *At skabe en følelse af en tæt og autentisk relation med børn og forældre; At være kontant og fastholde professionel autoritet ved at distribuere opmærksomheden til barnet og kræve forældreansvar; og Følelsesmæssig udholdenhed baseret på viden, solidaritet og sympati med dårligere stillede familier*. Disse praksisser synliggør en differentieret socioemotional økonomi for sympati og omsorg (Clark, 1997) i socialt arbejde med familier, som interagerer med incitamenter til at tage højde for serviceniveauet og brug af sociale indsatser. Artiklen diskuterer denne tendens og dens implikationer for socialt arbejde, og foreslår yderligere forskning, der kan belyse det bredere landskab af følelsesmæssige praksisser i forskellige socio-økonomiske kontekster for sympati og omsorg.

## **Nøgleord**

Følelsesmæssige praksisser; Omsorg; Børn; Velfærd; Familier; Omkostningseffektivitet

## **Introduction**

There is a historical European trend going back to at least the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century of a dual orientation towards moral worries about the wellbeing of and the need for sympathy and care for vulnerable children and families (Donzelot, 1979). In the establishment of the first social work courses in Denmark in 1939, social workers' capacity to show human compassion with and enable care for children and single mothers was considered essential. The social workers should have "knowledge about and love for people" (The County Council, 1939, p. 1147), "a heart in the right place" and the "ability to speak with the young women, comfort and encourage and give them personal support which in most cases is most needed" (The Danish Parliament, 1939, pp. 3575-3576). (Nissen, 2016, p. 8). One can perceive this as an emotional practice: a socio-cultural expression of how sympathy and care are expected to be given and received indicating capacities to establish relationships within a specific context (Clark, 1997, p. 5). Such a language, encouraging feelings, acts of compassion and the capacity to build caring and supportive relationships is less prevalent, if not absent, in contemporary Danish governmental discourses about social work with children and families. In the recent 10 years, discourses concerning child welfare and protection have focused more on the cost-effectiveness of social services. For example, the former Social Democratic Social Minister encouraged municipalities to "invest in methods that work" and to "do away with ineffective services" (Ministry of Social Affairs, 2012, p. 1). Following this, Local Government Denmark encouraged municipalities to think in terms of replacing expensive long-term placements of children in institutional care with social services as "temporary pit-stops"

assumed to be more cost-effective (2015, p. 7). Research shows that this has created an environment, where social workers must struggle to translate managerial expectations of cost-effectiveness into practices that make sense in social work (Nissen, 2018; Nissen et al., 2018; Fallov, 2018; Jørgensen, 2021). However, it is still an open question if and if so, how these managerial expectations affect the emotional practices of social work with children and families. The aim of this article is to offer a modest contribution to answering this question by exploring the connection between emotional practices and managerial expectations of cost-effectiveness as they appear in the everyday context of social work. The article presents selected findings from a qualitative study of social work with children and families in the Danish child welfare and protection system: [Project title] (2018-2023). The research questions are: 1) What emotional practices of care are at play in social work with children and families? and 2) do they these practices relate to expectations of cost-effectiveness and if so, how?

### **Research on emotional practices and care in social work**

This article contributes to our knowledge about emotional practices of care in social work and how these may relate to expectations of cost-effectiveness.

In a recent thematic review of empirical studies on how social workers understand and use emotions in practice, O'Connor (2020) finds that emotions can work as a resource in processes of creating relationships with clients. However, emotions can also be a part of a defensive or even cynical professional culture suffering from a lack of emotional engagement. According to O'Connor, it makes a difference whether or not there is a recognition of emotions in everyday practices as well as in the policies and managerial strategies that shape these practices. In relation to this, she identifies a paradox: "The emphasis on maintaining professionalism and professional standards combined with negative associations of emotions creates a paradox for practitioners. Emotions are part of professional practice yet are not perceived as 'professional'" (O'Connor, 2020, p. 654). This discrepancy can foster an ambivalent approach to emotions and can disturb social workers' capacity to engage in a relationship-based practice, she argues. This article contributes to knowledge about this discrepancy by exploring emotional practices of care in social work and how these may relate to expectations of cost-effectiveness.

We know that social workers in child protection have developed a strong language of emotions expressed in "case-talk" (Forsberg & Vagli, 2006, p. 9), and that such emotional practices appear in professional settings such as team meetings (Magnussen et al, 2012). Social workers construct narratives and display emotions in order to make cases vivid and share knowledge about children and families (Bjerre, 2017). In a socio-cultural environment that recognises emotions,

emotional practices can foster wonder, critical reflection and knowledge for professional judgement and decision-making (Bjerre & Nissen, 2021). In addition, we know that emotional practices are a part of social workers' encounters with children and families. In home visits social workers make use of a strong language of emotionality that can work as a source for knowledge, for establishing a closer relationship with families and for professional judgement if subsequently made subject to critical reflection (Ferguson, 2018; Cook, 2020). Social workers' critical reflection on their emotional engagement in relationships is important in order to avoid jumping too fast to potentially wrong conclusions and preventing the risk of exercising an opaque yet decisive power over who deserves recognition and is eligible for care and support (Warming, 2019; Nissen & Engen, 2021). In relation to this, supportive teams and a socio-emotional culture allowing social workers to express and critically reflect on emotions are considered important (Ferguson et al., 2020). Therefore, this article focuses on emotional practices as socio-cultural expressions of sympathy and care thereby going beyond an individualised focus on social workers' use of emotions.

Emotional practices are closely related to the socio-cultural capacities for care. From care theory we know that care is a precondition to meeting human material, social and psychological needs and to establishing social relationships and maintain social bonds both in everyday practices and on the level of society (Tronto, 1993). However, we also know that different societies value (or devalue) care differently and that expectations of economic productivity and budgeting can affect the capacity to provide care negatively (Duffy et al., 2013; 2015). The latter can be explained by the basic features of care. Practices of care require time for showing socio-emotional attentiveness to the other person's needs and for building trusting relationship (Tronto, 2013; Nissen, 2021; Jørgensen, 2022). In social work, building such relationships is dependent on awareness of power relations, vulnerabilities, social differences and inequalities that foster different positions and needs, as well as the willingness to 'carry costs' (Nissen & Engen, 2021; Engen, 2023). In that sense, emotional practices of care in social work can be sensitive to expectations of cost-effectiveness. This does not necessarily mean that social workers' knowledge and judgements are overruled by considerations for costs. For example, Schrøder (2019) shows how in the context of Denmark, social workers take costs into account while at the same time knowledge about and investment in *protecting* children as well as the willingness to *maintain* care and support and *prevent* future problems in childrens' lives constitute an argument for spending time and resources (Nissen, 2018; 2021; Ferguson, 2020). Thus, there may be variations in how expectations of cost-effectiveness and emotional practices of care are related. This article is a modest contribution to illuminating the intricate connection between emotional practices of care and everyday expectations of cost-effectiveness.

### **Theoretical and analytical perspective**

The research project behind this article, *Does social work care? Exploring relational, emotional and embodied practices in social services for vulnerable children and families* (2018-2023), shows that there is a willingness to care in social work but that practices of showing attentiveness and establishing relationships can be related to expectations of cost-effectiveness (Engen, 2022; Nissen, 2023; Nissen et al., 2023). This article focuses on the emotional practices of care within this realm by drawing on Candance Clark's concept of socioemotional economy of sympathy (Clark, 1997) that allow us to capture the socio-cultural and economic dimensions of care.

In her book, *Misery and Company: Sympathy in Everyday Life* (1997), Clark views emotional practices as socio-cultural expressions of sympathy and acts of care in the encounter with misery and human suffering. With reference to Hochschild's concept of emotion work (1979/1983), Clark argues that emotional practices of sympathy are created in everyday interactions and are shaped by cultural rules and norms for feeling, thinking and behaving which over time constitute a socioemotional economy of sympathy and care. She defines a socioemotional economy of sympathy as in the following quote:

Socioemotional economy is a system of give-and-take where people negotiate and constitutes identities and social worth and deservingness (a currency: sympathy credits that may be accumulated, used or exceeded). People balance sympathy according to their knowledge, ideas and their subscription of moral value to the other. This valuation constitutes narrower or wider 'sympathy margins' (Clark, 1997, pp. 130-131)

Following the quote, a socioemotional economy of sympathy is based on emotional practices of reciprocity, negotiations and ways of balancing sympathy informed by knowledge, ideas and moral evaluations of who needs and deserves sympathy (or the opposite). It is a social system of emotional practices and modes of exchange indicating how we perceive and respond to the other person's needs for sympathy and care. Inherent in this is a moral valuation of the other person's worth and deservingness that set margins for sympathy. Clark notes that culturally we tend to "believe that it makes sense to give positive emotions to others when they are in need if they *act and feel according to the same motives*, that is, if they are likely to reciprocate our beneficence" (Ibid., pp. 141-142). The immediate implication of this would be that sympathy and care is dependent on symmetry and sameness. In practice, sympathy margins are negotiated, and Clark suggests that in most societies there are 'entrepreneurs' (such as social workers) that advocate for, develop and sustain grounds for sympathy thereby seeking to expand lines of credit for certain

groups in society (Ibid., p. 150). However, this also indicates that margins for who is eligible for care and why appear.

In a context increasingly (e)valuating care in the light of expectations of cost-effectiveness, the willingness to ‘carry costs’ (cf. Engen, 2023) without the likelihood of immediate reciprocity can be narrowed. Indeed, Clark relates the negotiation of sympathy margins to the broader management of resources in society and argues that there is a close but often unrecognised link between economic and emotional resources:

Societies develop patterns for distributing monetary and socioemotional resources because these resources are valuable and scarce ... While Americans freely admit that exchange principles guide the monetary economy, we often deny that they are applicable to the give-and-take of socioemotional resources, a denial that leads us to overlook key features of both economies. We miss non-market features of the monetary economy and market-like features of the socioemotional economy (Clark, 1997, p. 132).

Drawing on Clark’s point, expectations of cost-effectiveness may not only be about saving money but just as much about adjusting emotional practices to new margins for sympathy and care. Such adjustments may appear in negotiations of responsibilities for care. In relation to this, Clark distinguishes between modes of emotional *over-* and *underinvestment* (Clark, 1997, p. 130). Overinvestment is an extension of sympathy margins beyond what is culturally expected whereas underinvestment represents the opposite. Thus, emotional over- and underinvestment is closely related to the reservoir and management of socio-cultural and economic resources within a specific context. Resources for sympathy and care can be accumulated but may also be scarce dependent on economic resources.

Based on the above, this article analyses emotional practices as as *socio-cultural expressions of sympathy and acts of care* related to *the building of relationships and distribution of responsibility* that set margins for sympathy and care and constitute a *socio-emotional economy of sympathy*. The socio-emotional economy may relate to expectations of cost-effectiveness expressed in cultural ideas about emotional *over- and underinvestment*.

## **Methodology**

The research project *Does social work care? Exploring relational, emotional and embodied practices in social work with vulnerable families* (2018-2022), from where the findings derive, explores practices of care in and across three different settings in social work with children and families in two municipalities: Statutory social work, homebased counselling and support, and



family treatment. Inspired by institutional ethnographic field study (Smith, 2006) and the use of mobile methods (Ferguson, 2016), the research team applied a range of different qualitative methods to capture everyday relational, emotional and embodied practices that are complex, detailed, informal and not described in organisational documents. The main method was participant observation centred on following, observing and having conversations with social workers in different settings. Over a period of 2-3 months in each municipality, the researchers followed and observed in total 30 social workers of which approximately 16 social workers were followed very intensively in their everyday activities of having office meetings with families; visiting the families' homes; organising and having meetings with the family, the family network and other professionals; conducting family treatment sessions with individuals, families and groups; having informal conversations with colleagues, team meetings and meetings with external partners etc. Thereby, the researchers got access to observe and have on-the-spot conversations with social workers about their work and encounters with approximately thirty children and families. In addition, the researchers collected policy documents and work descriptions, and finalised the field study by conducting a focus group interview with the participant social workers to capture group perspectives and reflections on the practices of and conditions for providing care. The ethnographic field study generated a rich material of audio recordings of and/or field notes of 150 hours of observation written into thick descriptions of encounters between social workers, children and families. For this article, the entire data of audio recordings and field notes were coded for emotional practices: sociocultural expression of how sympathy and care are expected to be given and received within a specific context (Clark, 1997, p. 5). Based on close readings of the coded material, three emotional practices related to the building of relationships and distribution of responsibility were identified as socioemotional economies of sympathy and care (RQ1). These were subject to further analysis with focus on if, and if so how, they were related to expectations of cost-effectiveness expressed in margins for sympathy and care and culturally dependent ideas about over- and underinvestment in and across the settings explored (RQ2).

A weakness of the study is that it is limited to investigating three types of social work settings in two municipalities. Since emotional practices are sociocultural expression of how sympathy and care are expected to be given and received within a specific context, it is likely that more or other distinct emotional practices and socioemotional economies of sympathy exists. To investigate this, a study of the broader landscape of emotional practices in different socio-economic context of sympathy and care is required. The strength of this field study is that it provides in depth qualitative knowledge about forms of expressions and acts of sympathy and care that can inform such research.

## **Ethics Statement**

The research project including data collection has been reported and approved according to the legal requirements of The Danish Data Protection Agency. Informed verbal and written consent from social workers, children and parents has been obtained in advance and was reconfirmed in the process of doing the field work, thereby recognising participants' right to withdraw consent or from being subject to research in a specific situation. Ethical concerns regarding research that includes vulnerable people were an integrated part of the project. For example, both families and social workers were ensured that the research is not linked to a specific case, and that only the researchers would have access to data. Data are anonymised, and names are pseudonyms.

## **ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

In the municipalities and settings explored, expectations of cost-effectiveness were present. In some settings, there was a strong managerial focus on balancing the level of service and regularly evaluating the progress of children and parents in order to stop potentially cost-ineffective services, and the social workers were aware of this. As Louise, a social worker doing home based counselling, says, "The management wants black numbers at the bottom line" (Field notes). In other settings, expectations of cost-effectiveness were present in attempts to avoid placing children in expensive and potentially ineffective long-term placements by providing intensive support to parents in order to enhance their capacity to take responsibility for their child. Susanne, a manager in statutory social work explained these variations as potentially stemming from differences in the pressure to comply with budgets. "I think you will find many variations, but maybe such a pressure is dependent on how well a particular agency of social services is performing. If expenses are going up, a local manager might come under pressure," she reflected in a conversation (Field notes). In the following analysis, three emotional practices of sympathy and care are presented. As the analysis will show, there is an intricate relation between these emotional practices, expectations of cost-effectiveness and ideas about how social workers should balance their emotional over- and underinvestment in the encounter with human suffering and needs for care.

### **I: Creating a feeling of a close and authentic mutual relationship with children and parents**

The first emotional practice is concerned with creating a feeling of and sustaining a close relationship between the social worker, children and parents. It involves expressions of sympathy and acts that indicate a caring relationship as the following excerpt from a field note illustrates:

Ann, a social worker doing statutory social work, drives to a school to pick up William. Christian is in the front passenger seat watching YouTube. Just before Ann picks up William, she ruffles Christian's hair and says, *well it is amazing how much energy, one can use, but you can. Now you are tired, I guess. Are you falling asleep?* Ann has previously talked about William: *He is the kind of kid you just want to take home. When I had a child conversation with him, he just kept talking and talking.* Later, Ann tells how she loves these moments in the car: *It is important to have days, where I just write because otherwise, it piles up, but this is the most important for me. People talk a lot about making a difference and I feel, this is where I can make a difference* (Field notes).

As an emotional practice, it involves showing attentiveness and building relationships through actions such as driving a child placed in care to visit a parent; going on a home visit for a conversation and spending a little extra time on giving a hand with dishwashing; having a child conversation at a playground instead of in the office or another formal setting; answering a phone call from a mother outside opening hours. Apparently, these are acts of care that exceed what is perceived as the formal responsibility of the social worker. Thus, the social workers, who immerse themselves into this emotional practice, are considered especially caring by their colleagues:

Laura, a social work manager, emphasises, how Louise, a social worker doing home based counselling, is an especially caring person in that she engages in and allows herself to become involved in the lives of the families. Louise says that she visits the families when they call her, and that she prefers letting the administrative work wait in favour of being there for the families. Louise is also contact person for a girl. She often takes her to her private home (Field notes).

The social workers who aspire to this emotional practice consider it a natural part of being a social worker. For example, the statutory social workers Ellen and Gemma talk about it as a habitual sense of humanity and care for families:

Ellen: So, this thing about caring for a family purely and simply comes from our humanity and the human beings, we are ... which we are carrying with us as a background ... from our upbringing.

Gemma: It is not something that we are demanded to do (Focus group interview).

As the quote shows, this emotional practice is not demanded. On the contrary, the management can consider it an emotional overinvestment (cf. Clark, 1997). For example, in a conversation with the researcher, Ann says that she values being “more than a professional” but that “My manager says, *you cannot be both a family therapist, foster family consultant and statutory social worker at the same time, when you have thirty cases.* My service level is too high...” (Field note). This expectation of taking the service level into account is a subtle yet significant expression of a

discrepancy between this emotional practice and local expectations of the need to economise care. In an interview with John and Karen, who are social workers doing family treatment, John describes how balancing the difference between his valuation of human relationships and local expectations of progress and results with regards to how the families develop. “It is an act of art. How can I be a fellow human being and still accommodate to be in my function?” he reflects thereby indicating that sustaining an emotional practice of creating a feeling of a close and authentic mutual relationship with children and parents can be difficult. The difficulty lies in the conflict between this practice and the time and resources for handling a certain number of cases and create progress the families in a cost-effective way without exceeding the service level.

## **II: Being tough and maintain professional authority by distributing emotional attention to the child and demanding parental responsibility**

The second emotional practice balance the potential conflict related to the first emotional practice (I) by focusing strictly on the child’s needs and parental responsibility for collaborating and accommodating to what is in the child’s best interest as fast as possible. Social workers aspiring to this emotional practice express sympathy with the parents but consider it important and caring to make clear demands. This involves being tough:

Miriam, a statutory social worker, thinks that being clear and tough is a way to care, and this is her approach: honest, tough and clear. She says that she likes the parents, even the father who has threatened her: *It is the only thing, he knows. They are so disadvantaged so in fact, I feel sorry, and I have cared a lot for him by asking: How is it for you? How are you? However, this does not mean that we should not make demands and use our authority. He has had approximately ten social workers, and one was almost going down because of him. Right now, he thinks that I am a stupid bitch. He tells me that I am fat and ugly – all kinds of insults* (Field notes).

This emotional practice involves holding the parents responsible for their child. Expressing authority and expectations of reciprocity with a clear focus on the child’s needs is a part of this:

Miriam: She [the mother] said, *then I will just withdraw my consent [for the child’s placement]*. Then I said, *well you are welcome. I would like to have this on paper tomorrow, just e-mail me, but give it a thought until then, because otherwise I will take it as an expression of revenge*. Then shortly after, she calls back: *well, I have no intention to withdraw my consent. Well, I know, but you should not threaten me at all*, I said. This is how I clarify my role as an authority because we do not move the child to a new foster family for her to have a weekend off from the children (Interview with Miriam and Ann).

The social workers, who immerse themselves into this emotional practice, think of it as taking a professional responsibility. As professionals, they consider it naïve if they pretend that building a close authentic relationship with parents is possible. Giving a hug as an act of care is not a part of this emotional practice. Consequently, this emotional practice expresses a conditional emotional engagement in the parents out of sympathy with the child. The following resume of a team meeting illustrates this:

Victoria asks her colleagues for input for a safety plan for a two-year old child. The parents are living separately. The mother abuses cocaine and medicine. Therefore, the child is currently living with the father. However, the father has a history of substance abuse too, and the mother's parents suspect that he smokes cannabis on a daily basis. The mother's parents would like to take care of the child. They fear that the social workers will place the child in foster care. Due to conflicts between the parents, the social workers are not sure about what the parents think about a placement in the family network. The colleagues ask questions and offer input. At some point, the manager advises Line to focus on the parents' responsibility and suggests that she talks to them in a direct way: "You both have an abuse, and your child cannot live with you, so where do you think he should live?", "You need to agree on this, and if you are unable, I will put it forward to my manager, and then we will decide". "I do not care if it is one or the other couple of grandparents, but you have to find out, because he cannot stay with you, because you are addicts and have an active abuse." "You will say it in that nice way of yours, Victoria, and you are doing well, but keep a focus on the child instead of all their conflicts." The colleagues back the manager up by indicating how Victoria is dealing with and should not be involved in or care for a parental conflict (Resume and quotes from a recorded team meeting)

The resume shows a socioemotional practice that distributes attentiveness to the child's needs and sets margins for the social workers' emotional engagement in the parents. The parents may be disadvantaged and troubled and the social workers may sympathise with them, but care for the parents must not lead to an emotional overinvestment in their needs. Therefore, being tough, economising emotional investment and setting margins for the level of service for parents is considered important and something that social workers may "fail" to control as Miriam exemplify in the following quote:

Miriam: I worked hard and many hours on the case; the mother shows up in the agency, insists on meetings, calls about this and that. I am on the edge of freaking completely out, and I actually try several times to draw a line, but it just bounces off her... At one point, I was simply so far out, I am simply sitting there, and my hands are shaking, and I have to say, *I cannot handle this anymore, and*

*I am aware that I have failed.* I had this sense of being behind all the time and unable to be up front and in control (Interview with Miriam and Ann).

### **III: Emotional endurance based on knowledge solidarity and sympathy with disadvantaged families**

The third emotional practice is concerned with enabling collaboration with the family as a whole combined with reflections on how vulnerable people feel, react and communicate in difficult situations, and how this affects the social worker emotionally, personally and professionally. As the following excerpt from an interview with a family counsellor and statutory social worker illustrates, emotional competencies to balance emotions are associated with “professionalism”:

Margaret: Our work is very much dependent on, how we are. No matter who we are, some things will affect us more than others. It can actually be very difficult to meet parents in an appreciative and caring way, if their behaviour or approach to their children affects you, because it is difficult to witness. It can be hard. It can be extremely hard. Therefore, it is so important that we share things, get supervision and reflect all the time, because after a while it is possible to understand a particular form of behaviour, oh yes, it is all about him being afraid.

Linda: This is professionalism, to be up to date with how you affect others, and what you can do better.

Margaret: Oh yes, it is an art to manage your role as an authority in a proper way. We have the power to make decisions, and therefore you must be a little bit humble, I think ... I try to be conscious about that we are in possession of power. Because of that we do not need to show muscles more than necessary (Interview).

“Showing muscles” more than necessary is not a part of this emotional practice, rather this is perceived as a symptom of a lack of reflection on the powerful position of the social worker. Therefore, the social workers, who immerse themselves into this emotional practice, seek to balance their emotions by making their feelings and actions subject to reflection “all the time.” They think of this as a way of being open towards knowledge instead of being prejudiced and use phrases such as being “curious about”, interested in “the lived life” or “going on an exploration”. The following resume illustrates the effort to include knowledge about the family as a whole:

Edith, Dora, Helen and Clara are working as a team with a family with a 13-year-old girl. The social workers have known the family for approximately 2 years and need ideas for how to move on. At the team meeting, the social workers conduct an exploration of the family situation vividly underpinned by narratives. The social workers share detailed knowledge about the parents (alcohol abuse, childhood, ADHD), their relationship (separation, conflicts, dependencies) and the family network

characterised as “colourful” but “loving and caring”. They reflect on the relationship between the parents and the children (needs, neglect, attachment, activities). Not the least, they talk about how the girl feel about her parents (ambivalence, loss, happiness, pain, anger, worries). They view her as “a lovely girl, but a girl that is only momentarily happy” (several examples are shared). The social workers are critical towards the school. The girl is behind (dyslexia), and it is difficult for her to cope with the noise and the other children. The social workers suspect the school is focusing only on avoiding a school dropout. The girl has no friends and leisure activities. They conclude that there is a positive development in the family. It is still an open question, if it is sufficient for the children but at the moment, understanding needs and providing support is more important. They decide to push for the ADHD examination and for alternative schooling. They still think that the girl benefits from personal support, although she is “difficult to reach”. Finally, they decide to talk with the mother about all these issues (Resume and quotes from a recorded team meeting).

The resume shows how this emotional practice is orientated towards knowledge, reflection and acts of care also in cases of disagreement. During the field study, Mary, as statutory social worker, tells the researcher about such a case. Some of the social workers are in favour of placing a child in foster care. This is based on the mother’s personal social record: a childhood of neglect, subject to violence and abuse in adulthood and three of her children placed in foster care, makes them doubt she can manage her new baby. However, Mary argues that based on knowledge there is no ground for this yet. Although social workers may emotionally feel sorry for a child, knowledge and critical reflection on how one is emotionally affected is important:

This affects me because professionally, there are no reasons for a placement. Emotionally there is but not professionally, and this is where it runs off the track, I think. Sometimes, I am affected emotionally too, we all do, but we have to look at what we know and not get too affected. I feel sorry on behalf of Trudy because every time she is trying to change, she is sent back to square one, as if you as a human being cannot get another chance once you have failed in your life (Field notes).

Mary’s reflection illustrates a socioemotional practice of sympathy and care based on endurance. The emotional investment and willingness to endure is based in knowledge about the family combined with solidarity and sympathy with disfavoured people, but can also be viewed as a way of postponing costs for expensive placements by offering “another chance”.

### **Different socio-emotional practices of sympathy and care and their subtle relation to expectations of cost-effectiveness.**

The three emotional practices presented are socio-cultural expressions of how sympathy and care should be given and received within a particular socio-cultural context (cf. Clark, 1997). They

enact different forms of attentiveness, approaches to building relationships and ways of distributing responsibility as key aspects of care as well as ideas about emotional investment and how to balance this in the encounter with human suffering and needs for care (cf. theory section). As indicated in the analysis, these practices are embedded in a socioemotional economy of sympathy and care subtly related to expectations of cost-effectiveness expressed in considerations for the service level or the use of expensive services. The first emotional practice *Creating a feeling of a close and authentic mutual relationship with children and parents* is vulnerable in a context where expectations of cost-effectiveness require the social workers to set narrow margins for and economise sympathy and care. The second emotional practice *Being tough and maintain professional authority by distributing attention to the child and by demanding parental responsibility* may in such a context be considered more compliant with managerial expectations of cost-effectiveness. However, the culture of being tough might also foster a defensive and less supportive socioemotional environment (cf. Ferguson et al, 2020). The third emotional practice *Emotional endurance based on knowledge, solidarity and sympathy with disadvantaged families* may be an alternative to the first and second. It sustains emotional investment in the family as a whole conditioned by knowledge, reflection and responsibility for caring for human suffering and needs without ‘showing muscles’ more than necessary.

This socioemotional economy of sympathy of care shows that it is not self-evident how social workers should balance emotional investments in the encounter with expectations of cost-effectiveness and/or economic scarcity (cf. Clark, 1997). If this theme is important yet seldom addressed in a Danish welfare state context characterised by relatively generous social services, it may be even more important to address in European contexts where social services for children and families are subject to austerity and/or are focused narrowly on child protection and risk assessments leaving less space for relationship-based practices (Ruch, 2005). Economic resources for social services are continuously if not increasingly subject to negotiation (Nissen, 2018) and therefore, it is crucial that social workers critically reflect on their emotional practices in order to avoid developing a defensive or cynical professional culture suffering from a lack of emotional engagement (O’Connor, 2020). The third emotional practice could be a way of balancing emotions based on knowledge and critical reflection while at the same time sustaining solidarity and sympathy with disadvantaged families.

## **Conclusion and suggestions for further research**

This article has identified and analysed three emotional practices of care in social work with children and families in Denmark. The conclusion is that emotional practices of sympathy and care vary and can be related to expectations of cost-effectiveness expressed in cultural ideas about



over- and underinvestment. The ambition to create close and authentic mutual relationships with children and families is vulnerable to critique of exceeding the service level and risk suffering from a lack of recognition from management. The practice of being tough and showing authority based on emotional attentiveness towards the child and demands for parental responsibility may be more compliant with expectations of cost-effectiveness but may also erode the possibility of a holistic and relationship-based approach to the family as a whole. Emotional endurance based on knowledge, solidarity and sympathy with disadvantaged families could be a more balanced response to expectations of cost-effectiveness allowing social workers to sustain emotional engagement and avoid ‘showing muscles’ more than necessary. To put the question of how social workers should balance emotional investments in the encounter with expectations of cost-effectiveness and/or economic austerity on the agenda, further research on the broader landscape of emotional practices of care is needed. The identification of emotional practices and their relation to expectations of cost-effectiveness expressed in ideas about over- and underinvestment can inspire comparative mixed methods studies on changing emotional practices of care across Europe.

## References

- Bjerre, L. S. (2017). *Narratives and constructions of children in social work practice – a cultural psychological inquiry of social workers’ practice and how social workers navigate child protection cases*. Ph.D.-thesis, published in Danish. Aalborg University.
- Bjerre, L. S. and Nissen, M. A. (2021). Does it feel right? - Emotional and embodied processes as a ‘shadowy epistemology’ in difficult child protection cases, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 51(2), 600–616
- Bourdieu, P. (2000). *Pascalian Meditations*, Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, P. et al. (2002) *The Weight of the world. Social Suffering in Contemporary Society*. Stanford University Press.
- Clark, C. (1997). *Misery and Company: Sympathy in Everyday Life*. University of Chicago Press
- Cook, L. (2020). The home visit in child protection work: Emotion as resource and risk for professional judgement and practice. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(1), 18-15.
- Donzelot, J. (1979). *The Policing of Families*. Random House.
- Duffy, M., Albelda, R. & Hammonds, C. (2013). Counting care work: The empirical and policy applications of care theory. *Social Problems*, 60(2), 145-167.
- Duffy, M., Armenia, A., & Stacey, C. L. (2015). *Caring on the clock. The Complexities and Contradictions of Paid Care Work*. Rutgers University Press.

- Fallov, M. A. (2018). Socialt arbejdes oversættelse af det produktive menneske [Social work translations of the productive human being] In M. A. Nissen, M. A. Fallov & P. Ringø (red.). *Menneskesyn i socialt arbejde – om udviklingen af det produktive menneske* [Views on human being in social work – on the development of the productive human being]. Akademisk Forlag.
- Engen, M. (2022). Solidary authority – conceptualising relations of care in statutory social work with vulnerable children and families. *European Journal of Social Work*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2094344>
- Engen, M., Nissen, M. A. & Jørgensen, A. M. (2023). A theory of care for social work with families. In M. A. Nissen, M. Engen & A. M. Jørgensen. *Care in Social Work with Children and Families Theory, Everyday Practices and Possibilities for Social Change*. Routledge.
- Ferguson, H. (2016). Researching Social Work Practice Close Up: Using Ethnographic and Mobile Methods to Understand Encounters between Social Workers, Children and Families. *British Journal of Social Work*, 46(1), 153-168.
- Ferguson, H. (2018). Making home visits: Creativity and the embodied practices of home visiting in social work and child protection. *Qualitative Social Work*, 17(1), 65-80.
- Ferguson, H., Warwick, L., Cooner, T. S., Leigh, J., Beddoe, L., Disney, T. & Plumridge, G. (2020). The nature and culture of social work with children and families in long-term casework: Findings from a qualitative longitudinal study. *Child & Family Social Work*, 25(3), 694-703.
- Forsberg, H., & Vaglis, Å. (2006). The social construction of emotions in child protection case-talk. *Qualitative Social Work*, 5(1), 9-31.
- Hochschild, A. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Huppatz, K. (2009). Reworking Bourdieu's 'Capital': Feminine and Female Capitals in the Field of Paid Caring Work. *Sociology*, 43(1), 45–66.
- Jørgensen, A. M. (2022). Time for and timing in social work with vulnerable families: responding to needs in neoliberal times, *European Journal of Social Work*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13691457.2022.2040435>
- Local Government Denmark (2015). *Vulnerable Children and Young People – The future is theirs*. [https://www.kl.dk/media/15890/udspil-\\_de\\_udsatte\\_b-rn-\\_fremtiden\\_er\\_deres\\_-2015.pdf](https://www.kl.dk/media/15890/udspil-_de_udsatte_b-rn-_fremtiden_er_deres_-2015.pdf)
- Magnuson, D., Patten, N., & Looysen, K. (2012). Negotiation as a style in child protection work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 1(3), 296-305.

- Ministry of Social Affairs (2012). *Milliarder at spare med bedre indsats for udsatte børn og unge*. 15.03.2012, 379 words/1 page (web source retrieved from Infomedia)
- Nissen, M. A. (2016). Den produktive kvinde. Kroppen, kærligheden og økonomien. *Nordiske Udkast*. 43(1), 4-20.
- Nissen, M. A. (2018). We need to focus on resources. Struggling with Neoliberal Economic Rationales in Social Work with Children and Families, in M. A. Fallov & C. Blad (eds.) *Social Welfare Responses in a Neoliberal Era*. Leiden: Brill Publishers, pp. 19-136.
- Nissen, M. A., Fallov, M. A. & Ringø, P. (2018). *Menneskesyn i socialt arbejde. Om udviklingen af det produktive menneske*, København: Akademisk Forlag.
- Nissen, M. A. & Engen, M. (2021). Power and Care in Statutory Social Work with Vulnerable Families. *Ethics and Social Welfare*. 15(3), 279-293
- Nissen, M. A. (2021). Time matters: Changing time horizons in social services for children and their families in an era of productivity and competition, *European Journal of Social Work*, 24(3), 430-441.
- Nissen, M. A., Engen, M. & Jørgensen, A. M. (2023) *Care in Social Work with Children and Families Theory, Everyday Practices and Possibilities for Social Change*. Routledge.
- O'Connor, L. (2020). How social workers understand and use their emotions in practice: A thematic synthesis literature review. *Qualitative Social Work*, 19(4), 645-662.
- Ruch, G. (2005). Relationship-based practice and reflective practice: holistic approaches to contemporary child care social work, *Child and Family Social Work*, 10 (2), pp. 111-123.
- Scheer, M. (2012). Are emotions a kind of practice (and is that what makes them have a history)? A Bourdieuan approach to understanding emotion. *History and Theory*, 51(2), 193-220.
- Schrøder, I. (2019). Modes of timing and spacing professional decisions: On the relationship between costing and caring in child protection work. *Financial Acc & Man*. 35(4), 319-336.
- Smith, M., Cree, V. E., MacRae, R. Sharp, D., Wallace, E. & O'Halloran, S. (2017). Social Suffering: Changing Organisational Culture in Children and Families Social Work through Critical Reflection Groups—Insights from Bourdieu. *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(4), 973-988.
- Tronto, J. C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. Routledge.
- Tronto, J. C. (2013). *Caring Democracies. Markets, Equality and Justice*, New York University Press.
- Warming, H. (2019). Messing with the emotions of the other exploring ambiguous youth-adult relations in a residential care institution. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 32, 100512  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2018.05.005>