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Bjerre, Line Søberg; Nissen, Maria Appel

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Does it feel right?

— Emotional and embodied processes as a ‘shadowy epistemology’ in difficult child protection cases

Line Søbberg Bjerre & Maria Appel Nissen

Abstract

Social workers in child protection services must make difficult decisions often based on fragmented knowledge and the inevitable risk of not knowing what is important to know about a child and the family. Cases of severe neglect have been subject to public attention of politicians and media in several European countries often followed by reforms with a strong focus on standardising risk assessment and documentation. This article argues and shows that emotional and embodied processes are an important source of knowledge in child protection. Such processes appear in social workers’ narratives about worries for the wellbeing and security of children underpinned by moments of silence and symbolic bodily utterances. These ways of communicating emotions help social workers navigate and make sense in child protection cases, where knowledge is limited. The question *Does it feel right?* becomes crucial in terms of identifying and expressing potential risks. However, as a legitimate professional question that can lead to valuable knowledge it remains latent. Therefore, emotional and embodied processes constitute a ‘shadowy epistemology’ (Bruner, 1990; 1991). Instead of denouncing these processes, we need to develop a professional language of understanding and naming them, and the aim of this article is to contribute to this.

Keywords: Child Protection, Cultural Psychology, Embodiment, Emotion, Risk, Social Work.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to contribute to illuminating emotional and embodied processes as a form of knowledge in social work with difficult child protection cases. The article focuses on, how social workers communicate emotions verbally and bodily, and how emotions play a significant and important role in processes of meaning making and sharing of knowledge in the face of uncertainty. Emotions help social workers in child protection to navigate and make sense; they allow them to express worries in situations, where knowledge is limited. In that way, emotional and embodied processes can be important sources in risk assessment. They open for ways to explore the question: *Does it feel right?*

In quite a few European countries cases of severe professional neglect in child protection cases have received much public attention from media and politicians and have fostered reforms as well as continuous reflections on the political, legal, managerial and professional consequences of these failures (e.g. Munro, 2011; Featherstone *et al.*, 2014; Simpson and Nowacki, 2018; Poikolainen, 2020). This has also been the case in Denmark, and the *Child Reform* (2011) and the adoption of the electronic case records system *Integrated Children's System* (ICS) was a response to this (Socialstyrelsen, 2011), exemplifying how child protection models travel and are translated into different contexts (Nygren *et al.*, 2009). Moreover, in a report scrutinizing 10 cases of child abuse, The Danish Appeals Board criticized the child protection system harshly for lack of professionalism. A lack of a systematic approach and case overview, an inadequate focus on children's problems, too much focus on collaboration with the parents instead of children's needs, and a lack of corporation with the police, were some of the problems identified (Ankestyrelsen, 2012). In 2013, the 'child abuse package' was launched requiring social workers to act within 24 hours on information leading to suspicions of a child exposed to violence and/or sexual abuse. The development in Denmark shows how a holistic family oriented approach has gradually been supplemented with a child- and risk-oriented approach to child protection (Gilbert *et al.*, 2011) underpinned by regulations and standardised systems for risk assessment. In the UK, researchers have criticized this development e.g. as a

‘tragic tale’ (White *et al.*, 2010) and as a response “largely formulated within a rational bureaucratic framework that attempts to address risk with administrative changes, in which social work practice is regarded as little more than following rules in ways that can lead to defensive practice” (Whittaker, 2018, p. 2). In Denmark, responses from research have been more ambiguous. Social workers generally evaluate standardized risk assessment systems, such as ICS, positively, but consider them very time consuming and sometimes an obstacle to approaching and assessing cases holistically (Høybye-Mortensen, 2015; Sørensen, 2018). A holistic approach requires knowledge about and reflection on the emotional dimensions of social work (Ruch, 2005). Based on this, one can ask, *is there a realm of information related to emotional and embodied processes that can support risk assessment beyond standardized risk assessment systems?*

In this article we argue that emotional and embodied processes at play in difficult child protection cases work as a ‘shadowy epistemology’ (Bruner, 1990) that can support risk assessment in situ. More specifically, they work as a lever for identifying risks and exploring the question: *Does it feel right?* We base this argument on the findings of an extensive qualitative study of social work practices in the Danish child protection system. This study explored negotiation of meaning in child protection teams. It showed the importance of an emotional and embodied language in sharing knowledge and uncertainties about risks (Bjerre, 2017). Therefore, we will begin this article with reflecting on how it contributes to research on emotions in child protection. Following this, we will outline a cultural psychological approach to emotions and the concept of ‘shadowy epistemology’, before presenting the methodology of the main study as well as how this relates to the analysis of this article. Then we will present the findings that show how emotional and embodied processes help social workers navigate and make meaning in order to assess the need for intervention in difficult cases. Following the conclusion, we will suggest how this ‘shadowy epistemology’ can be cultivated as an important source for knowledge in social work and a subject for further social work research.

Research on emotions in social work

Research on emotions in social work and in particularly child protection is not a new field of research. We know that a high level of emotional exhaustion can be a characteristic of this work, but also that this does not necessarily correlate with lack of job satisfaction, which can be explained by the experience of meaningfulness in relation to helping children (Stalker *et al.*, 2007). Thus, emotions are an integrated part of social work, closely related to the purposes and practices of doing social work. As noted by Howe (2008), social workers' workday is permeated by emotionality.

A large body of research addresses this by exploring, how social workers are emotionally engaged in the job, and how this is tied to individual personhood. This is often understood in the light of the psychodynamic concept of 'countertransference' (Mandell, 2008). This individual approach to emotions is also visible in the more recent work of Ingram (e.g. 2013), but with a focus on emotional intelligence and decision-making capacities.

Another body of research has placed more emphasis on how emotions are an inherent, but largely ignored part of social work, due to the political conditions for doing social work. This has to do with shifting discourses and rationalities within child protection and the conflicting interests, they represent. In particular, risk oriented discourses and the adjacent administrative practices have been criticized for being counterproductive to developing a professional language on emotions (e.g. Benbenishty *et al.* 2003; Ferguson, 2005; Horlick-Jones, 2005). For example, Ferguson has argued that the knowledge of child protection "is constituted by snapshots, fleeting images and fragments of people's lived experiences" (Ferguson, 2005, p. 788). However, in order to meet the political and academic expectations of 'solid' knowledge this has to be translated into a standardised language of risk assessment. Following this, a continuing theme has been space for doing *social* work in a context of regulations, administrative procedures and risk assessment tools; a context that does not value informal and relation-based knowledge which is hard to measure (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2010; Hennesy, 2011). In recent years, this space has been explored in ethnographic studies that seek to make visible the informal, emotional and

embodied practices and experiences of social work with children and families (Ferguson, 2017; 2018).

A recent narrative literature review of 28 papers (O'Connor, 2019) focuses on how social workers understand, experience and/or use emotions in practice. The review finds that generally emotions are considered a dynamic relational resource for sense making, informing and safeguarding not only social workers but also clients. At the same time there is an ambivalence regarding how emotions relate to organizational practice and professionalism. According to O'Connor, this raises a question regarding how emotions are theorized in social work, and she identifies a lack of research on how social workers use emotions as a situated source of knowledge. This article seeks to contribute to filling out this gap by exploring how emotional and embodied processes in social work relate to risk assessment in child protection.

Forsberg and Vaglis (2006) compared the constructions of emotions in child protection in Finland and Norway. Drawing on ethnomethodology and frame analysis, they found that social workers had a special and strong language of emotionality, which they used metaphorically to describe despair and doubt. Riemann (2005) argued that in German family treatment, social workers shared knowledge about cases in "speech events". When social workers talked about a case, it was illustrative of the history of interactions with the family, but it was difficult for them to formulate what made the cases challenging except in a paralinguistic way. Despite being older, these studies indicate how emotions appear in interactions and communication, but potentially in a subtle way dependent on the social and cultural context. A more recent study by Cook (2019) offers a detailed picture of the emotions of social workers making initial home visits in families subject to statutory risk assessment. The study shows that social workers have a strong language of emotionality that can be a resource for professional judgement, but also suggests a critical reflection on how emotions are used. Uncritical use of social workers' emotions as knowledge about children and families can lead to wrong conclusions. However, if emotional experiences are used as an indication of hypotheses relevant for further exploration, they can be a source for knowledge in risk assessment. In relation to this, Cook points to the importance of supportive teams allowing social workers to express and critically

reflect on emotions. This requires a professional culture for communicating about and reflecting on emotions. Therefore, by focusing on emotions as a cultural phenomenon we might be able to show how emotional and embodied processes work as a lever for sharing and building knowledge among professionals in child protection.

A Cultural Psychological approach to emotions

This article draws on a Cultural Psychological understanding of emotions. Besides emphasizing how emotions are negotiated socially, this perspective allows us to focus on and pay attention to the more subtle bodily aspects of interactions.

According to Valsiner, human beings are “compulsory meaning makers” (2014, p. 1). Making sense of the world we live in is an ontological feature of human life. Following this, Cultural Psychology is concerned with social meaning making processes (Cornejo *et al.*, 2018, p. 2) and views culture as “acts of meaning” (Shweder *et al.*, 2008, p. 410). Culture is a term for the concepts, interpretations and meanings activated and constructed in and around social institutions, language practices and routines. People assign meaning, interpret and conceptualize the world, and it often happens automatically and beyond conscious attention. As for emotions, Cultural Psychology views people’s emotional life and experiences as culturally formed, bound to and shaped by human interactions and relations. This means that emotions are “contingent on the implicit meanings, conceptual schemes and ideas that give them life” (Shweder *et al.*, 2008, p. 410). In a group of social workers, it is the culturally established meaning of the group, which maintain and feeds a certain form of emotionality and display of emotions (Smith and Mackie 2008; Bjerre, 2017). Thus, even if emotions shape individual feelings, they are cultural artefacts expressed in practices that involve bodies, minds, the material environment and other people (Scheer, 2012). When people feel something, they can communicate it through bodily habits, rituals and routines pertaining to a culture maintained by a group, a community or broader society. In turn, cultural meaning and concepts form the psychological phenomena that take place in the individual, in practices and in social relations (Ratner, 2000). “Without culture we would simply not know how to feel”, it is said (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987, p. 28). This culture-practice perspective shows the

connections between our emotional experiences and normative social realities. Emotions are normative practices, because people attribute meaning in the socially normative structured practices they are a part of (Kofod, 2017, p. 20). Therefore, social workers' display of emotions is not an inner private or individual display, but a way of communicating a socially and morally conditioned response to social reality (Bjerre, 2017). In child protection social work, social reality is permeated with uncertainty, the risk of not knowing what is important to know about a child and the family, and normative responsibilities for safeguarding the wellbeing of children. Standardized risk assessment systems constitute a social reality assumed to provide meaning and a sense of order in the face of uncertainty. However, seen from a Cultural Psychological perspective, processes of making sense of a reality rarely happens in an orderly, easily standardised way. In relation to this, Bruner (1990) suggests that narratives, metaphors and allegories shape culturally embedded meaning and represent a unique epistemology. He names this narrativity a "shadowy epistemology" and suggests that besides being constituent to culture and action, it creates a space where human beings do not automatically take for granted the reality presented to them (Bruner, 1990, p. 55). Narratives allow people to explore the space between what is known and unknown or unusual, and as such to imagining possible social realities. In this article, we explore emotional and embodied processes in child protection social work with a focus on how emotions are communicated verbally and bodily, and how they contribute to making sense and sharing knowledge in the face of uncertainty. Cultural Psychology allows us to view this as a way of identifying potential risks by exploring the question: *Does it feel right?* Moreover, it emphasizes the relevance of studying professional teams as a site for reflection and negotiation of meaning (cf. Magnuson *et al.*, 2012)

Methodology

The findings of this article stem from an extensive qualitative study of social work in the Danish child protection system conducted by Bjerre as a part of a doctoral research project (Bjerre, 2017). A main research question of the Ph.D.-thesis (a monography written in Danish) was, how social workers approach difficult cases, when working

in teams, and how this connects to the use of Integrated Children's System. In relation to this, the social work team as an emotional space emerged an important theme. In this methodology section, we will first account for the methodology of the research project, secondly the analysis of this article.

The qualitative study took place in a local authority office specialised in four social work teams: two teams working with child protection in relation to children and families; one team working with disabled children; and one team working with young people aged 15-18. The teams were handling both new and urgent referrals and long-term cases. Each team included 6-9 social workers. All social workers, including the team leaders, were female aged 20-50 years. Within this office, the two teams that worked with children under the age of 15 and with non-disabled children were selected for the qualitative study. These teams dealt with families who often had multiple social problems, and where the children's wellbeing was at risk. The study was designed as a participant observation study of team meetings within a period of three years from 2014-2016 (Flyvbjerg, 2006; 2011). In total 19 meetings with a duration of approx. 2 hours were observed and audio recorded, and in addition extensive in depth field notes were made.

The team meetings normally took place once a week for two hours. The social workers used the team meetings for discussing selected cases. Colloquially, the social workers called them "blackboard cases", because the team leader would draw and write on a large board while moderating in depth discussion of the case with a reference to ICS. The social workers selected a variety of cases based on what was acute and urgent; if they were in doubt; if there was a risk of child abuse; if collaboration with the parents was difficult, or if a child was to be placed in out-of-home care. The social workers explained that the meetings were important in the decision making process and as a forum to address issues difficult for the individual social worker to manage alone. Thus, the meetings were a space for sharing worries and knowledge for decision-making in difficult child protection cases, and became a site for studying professional practice as it is *done* (Spradley, 1980).

As a participant observer, Bjerre was present during the meetings, observing and taking part in informal dialogues, but was not an active part of the social workers'

case discussions (Antoft and Salomonsen, 2007). During participant observation, attention was paid to both verbal and nonverbal communication, and the latter was recorded in field notes to capture what would not appear from audio recordings e.g. bodies moving, voices changing, or glances shared. In that way, the study captured situated and culturally embedded communication in a professional social work setting. To make sense of such emotional and embodied processes, a first-person perspective in situ is always present and can be useful (Schraube, 2013; Valsiner, 2014). During the observations, it quickly became apparent that moments of silence and specific forms of nonverbal bodily communication supplemented verbal expressions and contributed to sharing knowledge hard to explicate. When bodies synchronically fell back in the chairs with deep sighs, when a voice was quivering, or a certain mimicking or gestures appeared, the researcher's cultural knowledge became important for understanding what was at play. In relation to this, Bjerre's educational background as social worker and master in psychology with vocational experience from child protection turned out to be valuable. The feeling of being touched by the atmosphere became a source for paying analytical attention and for further exploration. Informal dialogues with the social workers about their perceptions of the situation, combined with critical and theoretical reflection, made it plausible that emotions played a significant role.

The study was approved by the Danish Data Protection Agency, and information that could lead to identification of the municipality and persons were anonymised. Thus, the names in this article are pseudonyms. Data were subject to an abductive, creative and at times a messy analytical process with sense making prior to formalised coding (Law, 2004; Brinkmann, 2014). Audio recordings were listened to several times parallel to reading field notes and transcribing selected data verbatim. As an implication of Cultural Psychology, the focus was not on the social worker's individual psyche, emotions and cognition (cf. Kettle, 2013), but on practices of meaning making in the teams in which emotions played a part (Kousholt, 2018, p. 247). Themes within the scope of the study were identified by using condensation and further analysed (Kvale, 1998).

This article presents findings from a specific theme in Bjerre's Ph.D.-thesis concerning the team as an emotional space, and with a particular focus on how emotional and embodied processes appear in relation to information gathering, assessment and intervention. The analysis falls in three parts, each centred on one example of emotional and embodied processes as they appear in the face of risks and uncertainties. The three selected examples are typical in that they show 'negative' emotions. This was a pattern; the negative emotions helped the social workers navigate and make sense of difficult cases. The 'positive' emotions had another role of establishing security and a feeling of belonging between the social workers, a role of defusing intensity and a role of providing a psychological brake (Lazarus, *et al.*, 1980; Bjerre, 2017). As a "shadowy epistemology" (Bruner, 1990) the 'negative' emotions support risk assessment in situ and work as a lever for exploring the question: *Does it feel right?*

I: A lack of knowledge

The analysis begins with an example from a team meeting, where the team leader is telling the social workers that she has not had time to figure out what is going on in a particular family:

Team leader Anne says *"What fills me most now, is that I should have started a process of observation and counselling in the family, where there is a boy, who tells that his parents hit him. I simply have not had time for it.... And now the holiday comes up"*.

"Well, then you have to work instead of going on holiday," Maggie says. She is trying to make fun.

"Yea, then I'll come in Saturday," Anne says.

Maggie laughs.

"Ah...oh" Anne says, and takes a deep breath. She moves her lips, as if one side is pulled up with an invisible thread. *"And I just feel so bad about this ... It is simply just.... Can they even... "* she says.

"Yes, yeah but...." Maggie replies, but she does not finish her sentence.

Silence again. Anne breaths deeply.

"It's just that, like...," Anne says. She leans back and sinks down into the wool padded meeting room chair.

"This is, what I have, and now it is said. So I do not have control, not even in the sense that I can say that it does not affect the children."

The social workers in the room are completely silent. Only the sound of roadwork and machines from outside is filling the room. Anne breathes deeply again. Her co-workers are looking at her with flickering eyes. One is looking at her notepad, drawing flowers in the corner of the paper.

"Well" Anne says, and she almost heaves her body up from the chair thereby indicating it is time to move on (Bjerre, 2017, p. 237-238)

In this example, the team leader Anne is emotionally affected and worries about the children being at risk, and that she has not had the time to get an understanding of what is going on in the family. This "fills" her, and the example shows how a lack of knowledge can place a heavy burden on the individual. One of the social workers tries to use humour as a way of shifting the codes of the conversation, de-escalating the rising tension and providing a moment of relief (cf. Lazarus *et al.*, 1980; Meyer, 2000). Thereby she indicates that she knows what the problem is: time for "observation and counselling" is sparse. However, in this case humour is not sufficient. The team leader says, "I just feel so bad about this", and her bodily communication emphasizes this. The atmosphere in the room is tense with the seriousness of not having sufficient knowledge and not being able to say that what happens in the family "does not affect the children" negatively. Thus, the emotions are related to the normative practice of the team (Kofod, 2017). The tension is building up and constitutes an emotional and embodied process. Unfinished sentences, long moments of silence, mimicking and bodily communication that draw on culturally embedded meaning and ways of displaying emotions, allow the team to get a sense of the seriousness of, and risks attached to, the case. Without many words, the team knows and responds to what Anne ultimately concludes: "Now it is said. I do not have control".

The uncertainty expressed in the process exemplified above is hard to convey in the standardised forms of ICS. Therefore, narratives about worries, vulnerabilities, imperfection and feelings of being out of control constitute a "shadowy epistemology" (Bruner, 1990). In this case, the team leader legitimizes this as a culturally acceptable way of expressing emotionality (Ratner, 2000; Bjerre, 2017) and exploring the question: *Does it feel right?* In this case, it did not. More knowledge based on "observation and counselling" is needed.

II: Making sense of fragmented knowledge

The second example shows that even if the social workers have observed and have some knowledge about the child and the family, making sense of this knowledge can be difficult. Thus, an ‘evidence based’ risk assessment is hard to achieve.

At a team meeting, the social workers are discussing a case, where they have observed an infant, Julie, showing signs of withdrawal from contact. This alarms the social workers due to their knowledge of the social development of babies during the first months of their life. They have known the family for a while, and the relationship between the parents, and the psychological wellbeing of the mother, have been subject to attention. At some point, an experienced social worker interrupts:

Bridget says, *“But ehmm... I have actually raised my hand for a while now. I would like to return to Julie, the fact that she is having blue lips, the lack of oxygenation. Why and how does this fit into the picture? Why contact, and then suddenly no contact? Why is she getting worse again? What happened? Well, I think...”* She pauses.

“What do you think?” asks Anna, who is the social worker in charge of the case.

“I could have the hypothesis that she has been exposed to something”, Bridget says,

A long moment of silence follows. The bodies in the room straighten up. Everyone is looking at Bridget.

Bridget eventually says, *“It is a horrible thing to say”*.

A young social worker Sidsel asks, *“Do you think she has been shaken?”*

“Yes”, Bridget replies.

Another social worker, Ann, suggests *“Okay... is mom on medication or?”*

Bridget bypasses the question, and says *“It doesn’t have to be the kind of violence that gives bleedings in the eyes”*.

Anna says, *“But we have to, she is withdrawing”*

“Yes” Bridget replies.

Anna says, *“Well, the care centre is offering massive help; the healthcare worker is on the family. I have to be clear, they are to tell me, if she [the baby] cannot stand being under these conditions. They are the ones that know something about this, right? And then I have to take action based on what they say. However, they have to be sharp. They shouldn’t be doing all kinds of other things”*.

Bridget says, *“But ... I just can’t help thinking that the mother made Marcus [the older brother, when he was a toddler] cry so she could comfort him”*.

Anna leans forward, and puts both hands up in front of her face. *“Ooooooooooh ... stop it”*, she says loudly.

“I know, it sounds disturbing, but it is a relevant focus for us to have. It might also be, because they are too rough, when changing her diaper”, Bridget says.

Anne says, “*We must see, if she improves*”

“*Pretty quickly ... we don't have months*”, Bridget says.

The team leader says, “*Yes, she is the one, we use as a measure, her wellbeing*” (Bjerre, 2017, p. 211-212)

The suggestion of the “horrible” hypothesis that the child is exposed to violence is followed by a long moment of silence and bodily communication indicating alertness. The emotional and embodied process at play addresses the risk that even though they know something about the child and the family, there is still a risk that they might overlook something that puts the child in danger. The fragments presented by Bridget (“blue lips”, “no contact”), in a language of worry and questioning, calls for attentiveness and further communication about what they know and do not know. Anna, who is in charge of the case, summarizes the services offered, and emphasises (“I have to be clear”) the responsibility of the professionals, who observe the family more often than she does. Moreover, she asks for the backing of the team (“right?”). Something is at stake, and Bridget pushes this emotion further by introducing a fragment indicating a possible pattern of abuse (“I just can’t help thinking that the mother made Marcus cry so she could comfort him”). Anna verbally and bodily responds to this. The conclusion is that they have to be very attentive to the child’s wellbeing in the immediate future.

The example shows how emotions work as a cultural and embodied way of doing social work, and as an important element in sharing knowledge in risk assessment. Moreover, it emphasises that social work deals with “*fragments of people’s lived experiences*” (Ferguson 2005, p. 788), and that making sense of these is difficult and requires knowledge from many sources. Emotions as a cultural form of communication allow the social workers to talk about hypotheses (Cook, 2019) and to question their own knowledge about the child’s wellbeing. Thus, emotions work as a “shadowy epistemology” enabling an attentiveness and reflexivity that standardised risk assessment systems do not ensure, because they do not ask, *Does it feel right?*

III: Are we doing the right thing for the child?

This ‘shadowy epistemology’ is also valuable in the evaluation of interventions not for controlling whether a decision made complies with standards, but for securing a

child's wellbeing. In the third and last example, the social workers are discussing the wellbeing of a 14-year-old girl previously thrown out of home and now placed in a foster family. However, the social workers are in doubt if the foster family can support her adequately:

In the beginning of the discussion, Emma, the social worker in charge, says, "*She absolutely doesn't trust any adults. She doesn't think that anybody wants to do her good. I used to think that, but I was the one who picked her up and placed her, and her mom was 'Just take her away. I don't know how to handle her'. I was feeling so bad, when we left. I sat with tears in my eyes and I thought, 'Wow, this is tough, because mom didn't care. Mom doesn't care about her'.*"

In the end, the team leader asks the social workers to assess the girl's needs. Bente says, "*She is well aware of how they [the foster family] see her, so she will fight to confirm that 'nobody cares about me' and 'if they try, I will make sure they do not'. There is a need for more support for a more professional approach in the foster family.* Emma says, "*Yeah, my stomach aches by the thought that once again nobody likes her*". The team leader continues, "*I simply get a stomach ache, when I hear a girl with such a background being described as a nuisance for people that we hire to understand and take care of her.*" Following this, the social workers list needs such as "love", "understanding" and "respect", because even if she is 14, she is still "a very little girl, who is really, really sad" (Bjerre, 2017; p. 132, 148).

The example is typical of how the social workers refer to bodily experiences, when talking about a child's wellbeing. It could be the social workers describing their here-and-now bodily state ("tears in my eyes", "stomach ache") (cf. Wilson, 2004). However, it could also be a symbolic and metaphorical way of communicating not just their own emotions, but also the assumed emotions of the girl. The latter is also plausible, because such expressions appear, when they use direct speech as if quoting the girl with the result that she becomes vivid in and through the social workers' narrative. If so, this narrative is an expression of compassion. However, at the end of the team meeting, the social workers translated this narrative to the category "attachment disorder" (Bjerre, 2017, p. 148). This type of categorisation disguises the emotional and embodied compassion for the child in a language of expertise. In relation to this, the social workers often emphasised that decisions should not rely on "gut feelings", but on "neutral" "assessment" based on "professionalism" (Bjerre, 2017, p. 243). However, in the light of what helps social workers make sense in difficult child protection cases, ambitions for neutrality and objectivity can be an

element in defensive practices (cf. Whittaker 2018, p. 2) against critiques of emotionality, subjectivity and normativity in social work. Nowadays, *it did not feel right* is not considered a legitimate professional answer in risk assessment.

Conclusion: cultivating an emotional and normative language

In the beginning of this article, we asked, *is there a realm of information related to emotional and embodied processes that can support risk assessment beyond standardized risk assessment systems?* In this article, we have shown that emotional and embodied processes appear in relation to both information gathering, assessment and intervention in difficult child protection cases. These processes emerge when there is a lack of knowledge, when it is difficult to make sense of knowledge, and when social workers are uncertain if the intervention benefits the wellbeing of a child. They appear as verbal communication ranging from exclamations, unfinished sentences to vivid narratives displaying emotions underpinned by moments of silence and bodily communications in situations, when worries are hard to express verbally. This emotional display represents a ‘shadowy epistemology’ (Bruner, 1990) that supports assessment of risks in situ and works as a lever for identifying potential risks and for exploring the question: *Does it feel right?* The shadowy feature lies in the verbal and non-verbal sharing of knowledge, but also in the subordination of emotional and normative narratives concerning the child’s wellbeing to a professional language of standardised and academic categories. The possibility for displaying emotions depends on the social environment. The team meetings were affective niches (Brinkmann and Kofod, 2018) where this form of professionalism was cultivated and thus became possible.

Some would argue that a cultivation of emotional and embodied practices will jeopardize the professionalism and achieved legitimacy of social work. However, as reflected in the beginning of the article, emotions are widely considered an integrated aspect of social work and can be a source for knowledge in risk assessment if made subject to reflection (cf. O’Connor, 2019; Cook, 2019). Therefore, one can argue that by keeping emotional and embodied practices in the shadow, there is risk that over time an important cultural capacity of social work will erode, such as the ability to

share emotions and ultimately the capacity to feel and care. Even though this sounds dystopic, it is the assumption of Cultural Psychology that without culture “we would simply not know how to feel” (Scheper-Hughes and Lock, 1987, p. 28). Emotions are social signals with the purpose of affecting another human being (Griffiths and Scarantino, 2009; Brinkmann and Kofod, 2018), and as in any other language (and culture) they must be cultivated through human relations. Thus in the end, cultivation of an emotional and normative language will affect how it is possible to sustain a caring society (Tronto, 2013). In this article, it appears that the inevitable uncertainty in child protection cases can only be addressed, if social workers have time for “observation and counselling” providing them with knowledge beyond fragments and snapshots (Ferguson, 2005). In relation to this, we know that social workers in Danish child protection must juggle time to be able to talk and work with children and their families in accordance with or beyond what is legally required (Nissen, 2019). Therefore, cultivating an emotional and normative language in child protection requires a broader political and managerial recognition of the cultural practices and forms of knowledge in social work. It also requires more research on the organisational and professional possibilities and barriers for expressing and reflecting on emotions in everyday social work.

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