

'We are swimming in darkness'

– social workers' experience of empathy and emotion within their work with children.

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1. Introduction:

- Competing narratives about the nature of social work (Munro, 2011, Featherstone & White 2014)
- Growing Interest in emotional labour and emotional resilience for practice. (Ingram, 2015, Winter et al, 2019)
- Debate about the role of empathy within social work practice (Grant & Kinman, 2014, Murphy, Duggan & Joseph, 2013)

"I cried, I did cry, I lay in bed that night crying and I left a 12 year-old boy in a children's residential unit and it felt really shitty, there's no two ways about it. I didn't sleep at all until I got up in the morning, you know...so until I got up and phoned and knew, right he did OK, he managed" (Maggie, p6/18)

2. Stages of Research Project

Study 1 Social worker's use of empathy and emotions with children 2018

Study 2 Supervisor & manager responses to workers' emotion 2019

Training Implications for social work education 2020

Examples of visual and textual data from study 1



'Getting over the wall without destroying it'



'Organised Chaos'

3. Methodology for study

- **Visual research methods** -image creation task - 'the 'world' technique (Lowenfeld, 1950,)
- **Semi-structured interview.**
- **Content Analysis & thematic analysis** of images (Rose, 2016)
- Narrative analysis using **Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis** (Smith, Flowers,& Larkin 2009)

"every time I have ever removed children from their parents I feel a real sense of sadness, sadness that the children are being separated, immense sadness if they show no response, I would rather they were devastated, but when they just come and take your hand and don't ask any questions, that's worse " (Keith, p.13/19)

Examples of visual and textual data from study 1



'Traumatic and Overpowering'



'Rescuing but not Saving'

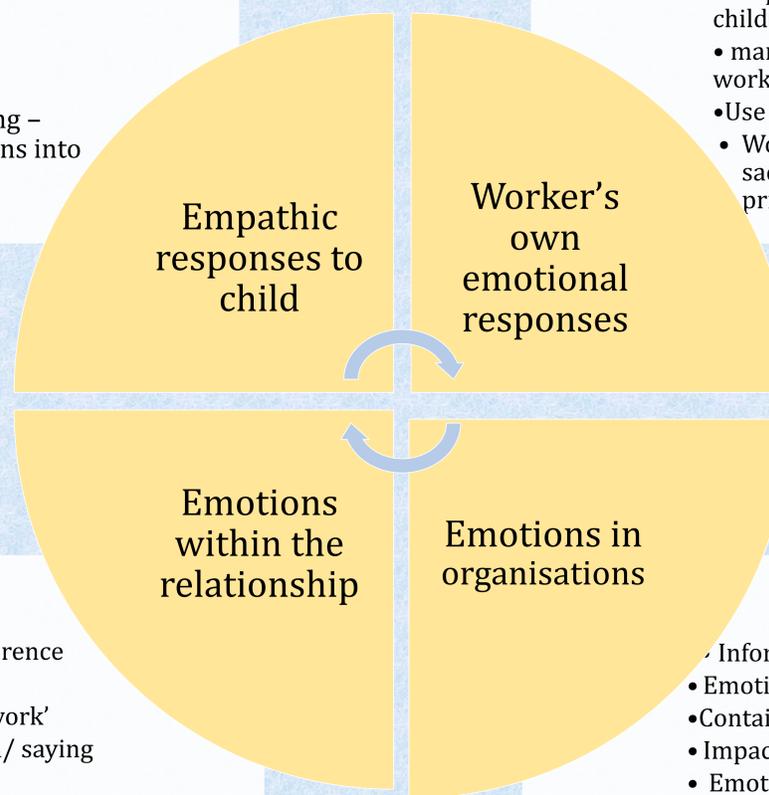
5. Visual data analysis - themes include:

- Engaging with chaos and complexity
- Issues of movement and space – belonging & identity
- The impact of conflict and fear
- Working with barriers and defences
- Worker's personal style of expression
- Professional confidence over time.

6. Narrative data analysis – early sub-themes

- taking child's perspective
- Conveying understanding
- Making meaning – putting emotions into context

- responses to removing children from home
- managing distress at work
- Use of authentic emotion
- Worker emotions – sadness, guilt, anger, pride, joy.



- counter - transference
- Use of touch
- Doing 'feelings work'
- Keeping in touch/ saying goodbye
- Parent child dilemmas

- Informal support systems
- Emotional culture -peers
- Containing anxiety
- Impact of re-structuring
- Emotions within & between agencies

4. Rationale for visual research method:

- **Symbolic /projective technique** supports exploration of difficult experience safely (Lowenfeld, 1950,Kestly, 2014)
- **Embodied experience** acts as a bridge between emotional and cognitive processing (Gauntlett & Holzwarth, 2006)
- **Encourages 'de-familiarization'** (Mannay, 2016) and emotional depth appropriate for topic (Kara, 2015, Guillermin & Drew, 2010)

"I have cried with families before and ... the first time I did it I was like, oh my God I can't believe I have just done that, but actually.. the families that I have cried with, or I have actually just shed a tear with ... are families that I am closer to now" (Laura, p.18/16)

" and I said 'just look up at the stars, they are always there, no matter where you are, they are always there and you can see them no matter where you are and your mum can see them' and that was the only thing I could think of and I thought –'I hope to God that he actually hangs on to that' " (Gillian, p.12/18)