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Child Poverty: Understanding the Emotional Labor of Social Work Professionals

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Health

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Aamir Terry

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2025

Abstract

Child Poverty: Understanding the Emotional Labor of Social Work Professionals

by

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MSW, Walden University 2019

BS, Central State University 2008

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

Ten years of data revealed that one of central Texas' fastest-growing counties had shown a marginal decline in children's poverty. However, much less was known regarding how social work professionals emotionally perceived and managed their emotions when working with children experiencing poverty in a rapidly growing county. Hochschild's concept of emotional labor was used as the framework for this study. In this qualitative study, a purposeful sample of five social work professionals provided an understanding of critical perceptions of emotional labor when working with children experiencing poverty at a county agency. Semistructured interview questions included perceptions of genuine emotions (deep acting), incongruent emotions (surface acting), and the emotional management needed by a social work professional when working with children experiencing poverty. Themes regarding social work professionals' perception and description of emotional labor were derived from the interviews and analyzed through a thematic coding process. The analysis highlighted several key themes, including balancing emotional responses, emotional fatigue and burnout, work-life balance, and empathy. The data from the study could positively impact how social work leaders implement and identify supports needed to decrease the occurrence of emotional labor for social work professionals.

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Dedication

As I reflect on scholarly academic achievements, it has been a humbling journey that I have embraced with open arms. As someone who has experienced war, addiction, and homelessness all before 30 years old, I never expected to make it this far. I can still recall meeting with mental health and medication professionals, and they would reiterate the same thing to me constantly- "What do you want to do with your life?". Despite having a partially failing liver, no money, and just the clothes on my back, I still had hope. The hope was that if I could get my health and life together, I wanted to help others find a purpose in their life despite having the odds stacked against them like myself. I found my passion in social work, but sometimes I feel social work found me! When life hurled its challenges at me, I began to question myself, "Why bother becoming a doctor?" I would reflect on all my adversities and knew that quitting on myself was not an option back then, just as much as it was during my journey to becoming a doctor. This journey has taught me patience. I had to remain humble and hungry, just like with any challenge in my life. Similar to my recovery, success did not happen overnight. My God, children, family, brother, and mother have inspired me not to give up. I dedicate this study to you all and those still in the grips of their addiction and my family.

Acknowledgments

Pursuing my Doctor of Social Work (DSW) has been an amazing journey with challenges and sacrifices. First, I would like to thank God for showing me a spiritual light to guide me in pursuing my DSW. To my son and daughter, your smiles, laughter, and watching you grow into your personalities have been truly inspirational. To my mom, as I continue to watch you recover and regain your strength from your stroke, even during your challenges, you still have never hesitated to call or check on me. To my brother, we are living proof that we are not statistics and have become an extraordinary example of black fatherhood to our children. Lastly, thank you, Dr. Savage and Dr. Rice for the positive feedback and for challenging my thought processes and writing skills. Your guidance and encouragement were invaluable during my journey!

Table of Contents

List of Tables..... iv

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review1

 Problem Statement3

 Purpose Statement.....5

 Research Question6

 Definition of Key Terms6

 Nature of the Doctoral Project6

 Significance of the Study7

 Theoretical/Conceptual Framework.....8

 Values and Ethics10

 Review of the Professional and Academic Literature.....11

 The Contextual Dynamics of Children Experiencing Poverty 11

 Dynamic Roles of the Social Work Profession Affecting Emotional Labor..... 16

 Various Roles and Tasks of Social Work Professionals 17

 Understanding Emotional Labor in the Social Work Profession 20

 Agency Factors Affecting Emotional Labor 22

 Secondary Traumatic Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Burnout 24

 Work Family Conflict and Emotional Labor 26

 Deep and Surface Acting 28

 Supervisory Roles Affecting Emotional Labor..... 30

 Retaining Social Work Professionals Experiencing Emotional Labor 31

 Resilience and Emotional Labor 34

 Protecting Mental Health for Social Work Professionals 34

Methodology Review.....	36
Summary.....	40
Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection	42
Research Design.....	42
Methodology	45
Participants.....	46
Instruments.....	48
Data Analysis	49
Ethical Procedures	51
Summary.....	52
Section 3: Presentation of the Findings	53
Data Analysis Techniques	54
Findings	57
Themes.....	57
Balancing Emotional Responses.....	58
Emotional Fatigue & Burnout.....	59
Work-Life Balance.....	61
Empathy	62
Role of Support and Supervision	63
Summary.....	65
Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change	68
Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice	69
Recommendations for Social Work Practice	77
Impact on my Social Work Practice as an Advanced Practitioner	80

Transferability of the Findings.....	81
Limitations Impacting Generalizability and Trustworthiness.....	81
Dissemination of the Findings	82
Implications for Social Change.....	82
Summary	83
References.....	85
Appendix A: Preinterview Questionnaire Demographic Information:	98
Appendix B: Individual Semi-structured Qualitative Interview Questions	100

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographic.....	53
Table 2. Themes and Contributing Participants	56

Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Social work professionals serve many populations. Especially for children experiencing poverty, social work professionals must meet the basic needs by empowering children and families who face poverty and oppression (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2022). Research has shown that social issues can affect their psychological well-being when social work professionals become exposed to human or social issues, such as child poverty (McCarthy et al., 2022). While providing direct or indirect care to children experiencing poverty, social work professionals must maintain professionalism that represents an attitude of genuineness and compassion. Professionalism involves managing and regulating emotions, which is the essence of emotional labor. In this qualitative study, I addressed how social work professionals experience emotional labor and how they manage and cope with feelings associated with working with children experiencing poverty in an agency setting.

Social work is a profession that encompasses many elements that assist, advocate, or help to empower those in vulnerable societal situations. Research indicates that the social work profession promotes social justice and advocacy efforts for marginalized populations or individuals (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2022). For example, when providing social services and support for children experiencing poverty, a social work professional must consider that a child is dependent on a parent or caregiver. Furthermore, a child must meet certain cognitive milestones and skills as they mature (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021). If children do not meet their basic needs, there could be negative consequences as they advance into adulthood. For example, when children have poverty issues,

educational attainment levels become difficult to establish. Also, child poverty has negative health consequences, such as lower birth weights and brain function due to a lack of nutrients in food or proper diets (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021).

A social work professional meets many challenges when supporting or working with children experiencing poverty. Job stress can affect how social work professionals' complete tasks. Some factors contribute to social work professionals' difficulties in managing emotional labor, such as high caseload numbers, low organizational support, low wages, inadequate resources, and poor IT systems or outdated technology (Stanley et al., 2021). Burnout, emotional exhaustion, inadequate work performance, or ingenious external moods have an impact on a social work professional's mental and physical health (Sönmez, 2021). For example, an agency may experience high turnover, in which a social work professional could have more than the recommended number of clients on their caseload; however, they may refrain from expressing emotion about case management issues. The social work professional, in this instance, must use emotional labor and professional tones to voice their concerns regarding the issues. The gap in research will address how social work professionals manage emotional labor in an agency setting because of working with children experiencing poverty.

Social work professionals face complex and challenging situations (Stanley et al., 2021). Coping with stress and managing emotions can pose difficulties for social work professionals. Current literature discusses burnout related to social workers and those in the helping professions. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding how social work professionals describe, manage, and cope with emotional labor. This study is

necessary because mental health and emotional regulation impact how social work professionals perform in their positions, despite an increase in child poverty.

This study is divided into four key sections. The first section is the Foundation of the Study and Literature Review, which includes the following: Problem Statement, Purpose and Research Question, Nature of the Doctoral Project, Significance of the Study, Theoretical/Conceptual Framework, Review of the Professional and Academic Literature, and a Summary. The second section is the Research and Data Collection section, which includes the following: Research Design, Methodology, Participants, Instruments, Data Analysis, Ethical Procedures, and a Summary. The third section of the study is the presentation of the findings, which will include the following: introduction, data analysis techniques, findings, and summary. The fourth section of the study is the Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change, which includes the following: Introduction, Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice, Implications for Social Change, and a Summary.

Problem Statement

Social work professionals manage complex cases related to vulnerable individuals and families, including children experiencing poverty. Social work professionals must learn and develop appropriate mood management skills to prevent unprofessional emotions from displaying in front of clients and coworkers (Suh & Punnett, 2021). The management of appropriate and professional emotions is described as emotional labor. Emotional labor implies managing certain emotions and modifying expressions when

interacting with customers (Mastracci & Adams, 2020). Given the marginal decline in child poverty in Bell County over the past decade, from 23% to 20% (County Health Rankings, 2021), understanding how social work professionals manage emotions and utilize emotional labor to support children in poverty is relevant.

Child poverty significantly impacts every societal level (micro, mezzo, and macro). Social work professionals tackle issues that affect children's lives, including family and educational struggles, health issues, and more (McFadden, 2020). For example, although Texas's child poverty rate has remained steady at 19% since 2019, Bell County's child poverty rate increased from 19% to 21% from 2019 to 2020, then only dropped 1% in 2021 (County Health Rankings, 2021). Furthermore, although Texas has decreased its child poverty percentage from 26% in 2010 to 20% in 2021 (County Health Rankings, 2021), Texas is still ranked 45th (out of 50 states) in overall child poverty (Every Texan, 2021).

The social work problem of practice I considered in was the high degree of emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. As economic and social inequalities increase, social work agencies have increased demands to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty and fulfill an agency's requirements. While the demands to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty have increased, there was a gap in practice regarding how to support the staff providing direct services to these children as they undergo their job responsibilities (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021).

Working with and providing services to children experiencing poverty can have its challenges. The emotional demands that social work professionals take on to provide service support and maintain constant interaction with this unique population can cause social work professionals to perform inadequately. Emotional labor (EL) in social work or philanthropic work requires changing emotional responses and displays. Suh and Punnett (2021) mentioned that care professionals (including social workers) can have difficulties or lack emotional regulation, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, or self-estrangement from coworkers and society.

In this qualitative study, I examined social work professionals' experiences with managing and regulating emotional labor, drawing on their experiences working with children experiencing poverty.

Purpose Statement

I aimed to explore how social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills, when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. Social work professionals can experience various emotions while working with children experiencing poverty, which could affect how they feel about themselves, their agency, and how they perceive the population they serve (Cummings et al., 2020). Furthermore, the premise of this qualitative study was to understand better the experiences of social work professionals and their emotional labor as they provide services to children experiencing poverty in Bell County.

Research Question

The following research question (RQ) helped better understand how social work professionals describe the experiences of emotional labor when providing services to children experiencing poverty in Bell County.

RQ: How do social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, TX?

Definition of Key Terms

Emotional Labor: The management of feelings to create publicly observable and appropriate displays while masking actual or real emotions (Nam & Kabutey, 2021).

Social work professional: An individual who helps those suffering, fights for social justice, and helps to improve the lives and communities of those in marginalized settings (NASW, n.d). In Texas, the word “social worker” is a protected title under the Social Work Practice Act provision and is reserved for those with licensure in Texas (Texas Secretary of State, 2020).

Nature of the Doctoral Project

A qualitative generic study was used to explore the emotional labor of social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty. A generic qualitative study was most appropriate for exploring the experiences of individuals providing services to children experiencing poverty because it allowed for the collection of narrative, contextual data, which could not be quantified. Purposeful sampling was used to select

five social work professionals in Bell County. Interviewing social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty provided insight and understanding into the emotional labor experiences of this specific group of professionals.

The program director or manager of a local organization that employed social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty was contacted to inquire if the invitational letter could be shared with employees who met the study criteria. They were asked to email all eligible social work professionals a letter of invitation to participate in the research study. The letter included information about the study and instructions for interested social work professionals to contact the researcher. Follow-up communication was conducted with each social work professional who expressed interest in participating, and informed consent was provided via e-mail. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, allowing social work professionals to describe their experiences with children experiencing poverty. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to identify themes that developed answers to the research question. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2016) thematic analysis procedures.

Significance of the Study

This study helps fill the gap in understanding how social work professionals described and coped with their emotional labor from an individual perspective. The study is unique because I explored perceptions of how emotional regulation among social work professionals impacts service performance. The results from the study can provide insight

into the experiences of social work professionals when working with children experiencing poverty in an agency setting. The results can also provide insight into how the daily interactions with children experiencing poverty and families impact mood, job performance, and service quality. Insights from this study can also create professional dialogue about developing awareness and a better understanding of social work professionals' mental health and how implementing support areas could potentially increase job satisfaction and work performance. Likewise, this study can help social work leaders identify the necessary support to help decrease occurrences of emotional labor for professional employees.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor. Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labor explains the research problem and the gap. The emotional labor concept consists of the processes of managing feelings, emotions, and expressions to fulfill the emotional requirements of a job. Hochschild posited that workers in demanding jobs (such as social work or helping professions) frequently interact with clients where emotions become evoked, and the worker must control their feelings. Hochschild defined the parameters of the concept of emotional labor. The first parameter requires an employee to have face-to-face or voice-to-voice interaction or contact with the public (Hochschild, 1983). The second parameter requires the employee to produce emotions or an emotional state in a customer, such as fear, anger, happiness, or gratitude. Lastly, an agency, through training or supervision, has

some degree of control over the emotional activities of its employees. Hochschild claimed that emotional labor is a dynamic social and relational process that requires suppressed feelings to sustain an outward expression that produces the appropriate state of mind in others.

Hochschild (1983) also postulated that emotional labor involves managing feelings to create publicly observable body and facial displays. Emotional labor consists of employees' management of emotions and responses to emotional dissonance that occurs when interacting with the public on behalf of an agency or company (Hochschild, 1983). Zhang et al. (2021) mentioned that emotional labor has two regulation strategies: Surface acting generally involves masking actual or real emotions, like faking smiles or laughter, to hide real emotions. Deep acting involves putting effort into feeling the required emotion that matches the situation or agency protocol (Zhang et al., 2021). Unrecognized emotions can be exhausting when workers lack emotional regulation; hence, the conceptual reasoning of emotional labor has specific parameters and emotional strategies to describe and understand emotional labor (Mastracci & Adams, 2020).

This emotional labor concept correlates to the research problem because the current issues related to children living in poverty can evoke emotions in social work professionals who work with children experiencing poverty at agencies. The concept of emotional labor can explain how social work professionals describe their experiences working with children who are experiencing poverty. The emotional labor concept allowed me to explore how working with children experiencing poverty can affect social work professionals' ability to manage feelings, emotions, and expressions. Allowing

social work professionals to explain their emotional labor experiences can provide insight into the challenges of working with children experiencing poverty through interviews.

Values and Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2021) states that the social work profession's primary purpose is to enhance others' well-being, with particular attention to the vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished. The NASW Code of Ethics, which aligns with current social work problems and research, is about service and integrity. The value of service focuses on the social work professionals helping people (children experiencing poverty) in need to address social problems (NASW, 2021). Social work professionals have ethical obligations to address issues that could jeopardize their professional judgment and performance when providing services and care to clients. The value of integrity emphasizes the importance of social work professionals taking care of themselves professionally and personally to provide appropriate services consistent with ethical standards and practices (. Section 4.05 of the NASW Code of Ethics mentions the issue of impairment and instructs social work professionals facing difficulties and problems with professional judgment and performance to take action or steps to protect clients (. The NASW Code of Ethics provides examples to assist with impairment, such as consultation and professional help or making appropriate workload adjustments. Self-care for social work professionals is an essential aspect of the profession. It ensures that social work professionals provide quality service to children experiencing poverty and their families. Children may become

at risk if social work professionals experience impairment, such as emotional and mental health distress that is tied to emotional labor experienced at the workplace (Kendrick, 2022). To provide the values of service and integrity, social work professionals must understand emotional regulation in the workplace and how improper self-care outside of an agency can impact service proficiency and organizational function.

Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In this section, I review the literature on children experiencing poverty and the emotional labor of social work professionals at agencies. The literature for this study was retrieved from the Walden University Library and Google Scholar. The databases I used to obtain related literature for these topics included SAGE Journals, SocINDEX, PubMed, Science Direct, and PsychINFO. The keywords used to find journal articles were the following: *emotional labor, social work or social workers or mental health professionals, child poverty or impoverished children, job stress, burnout, agency or organizational turnover, self-care, mood management or self-management, and agency or organization supervisors*. The search and parameters included full-text peer-reviewed scholarly journals published in the last 5 years. However, earlier research also included context related to the constructs of emotional labor or children experiencing poverty.

The Contextual Dynamics of Children Experiencing Poverty

The social work profession assists various populations within the social work scope of practice. The NASW (2021) provided insight into how professionals should pay particular attention to those who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. Social

work professionals must forecast when children are at risk of becoming impoverished and when those currently experiencing poverty are. Lydon (2022) mentioned that it is essential for social work professionals to understand how poverty affects children's lives, including economic, social, and relational impacts. Adverse health effects include living in areas with higher levels of pollutants. Child poverty is also a unique issue because children living in poverty are wholly dependent on their parents or adults who were more than likely impoverished as children (Najman et al.,2022).

Najman et al. (2022) posited that generational poverty stems from “income and assets, patterns of marriage and employment (or unemployment), levels of education and skill attainment” (p.3). Researchers estimated that 15 million children in the United States (21%) live below the poverty line, and almost half of all children in the United States are now estimated to be living tremendously close to the poverty line (Odgers & Alder, 2018). According to the United States Census Bureau (2023), the national child poverty rate is 16.3%. In some states, it is above 26%. In current terms of assessing child poverty, researchers look at poverty in two measures- relative and absolute poverty. Lee and Zhang (2021) stated that absolute poverty looks at the federal poverty threshold, while relative poverty is less than 60%of the United States' median income. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau (2022) reported that the federal poverty threshold for a family of four was \$29,950, while the relative threshold was \$44,748 (60% of the U.S. median income of \$ 74,580). Whether absolute or relative poverty status, social work professionals must understand how children have an elevated risk of developing socioemotional problems that accompany poverty when living in chaotic living

conditions (Lee & Zhang, 2021). When children endure poverty, the issues associated with poverty can grow into adulthood; such problems include, but are not limited to, depression and substance abuse issues.

Various income-related issues also divide neighborhoods and housing inequalities (Dustmann et al., 2022). For instance, when neighborhoods and schools become increasingly segregated by income, race, education, and other social opportunities, children experiencing poverty do not reap the benefits of community division (Odgers & Alders, 2018). As income inequality increases, higher-income children will have more opportunities (Aiyar & Ebeke, 2020). However, lower-income children have fewer advantages and less wealth in disadvantaged communities (Odgers & Alder, 2018). Unfortunately, these income inequalities continue to plague children experiencing poverty. It is estimated that income inequality between the richest and poorest individuals in the United States has increased by 40-50% over the last 40 years (Odgers & Alder, 2018). As inequalities gradually increase, wealthier children have more access to resources and opportunities.

Conversely, children experiencing poverty and families have increased challenges rather than resources (Aiyar & Ebeke, 2020). Odgers and Adler (2018) found that 35 North American and European countries that report having higher income inequalities also have less physical exercise, higher body mass index, and lower quality of life. For instance, higher income inequality states tend to have higher infant mortality, worse birth outcomes, higher teen pregnancies, and higher school dropout rates (Dustmann et al.,

2022; Jang & Lee, 2022). Likewise, children with socioeconomic disadvantages are more likely to have developmental delays and higher rates of morbidity and mortality (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021).

The association between income equality and children's outcomes has a more excellent definition with more significant demographics, such as with states, rather than neighborhoods and local communities (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2020). Similarly, research suggests that policies and programs geared toward macro-level societal views and resource allocation play a pivotal role in children's outcomes (Odgers & Alder, 2018). From a microlevel perspective, when children experience poverty, they endure double disadvantages (Jang & Lee, 2022). For example, children experiencing poverty are likely to encounter hostile and subpar schooling and neighborhoods with inadequate resources, thus leading to toxic stress and lifelong negative trajectories of cognitive, social, and emotional development (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021). Furthermore, children experiencing poverty in high-inequality communities are less likely to have programs and social policies that reflect their needs (Odgers & Alder, 2018). Likewise, the respective needs may only reflect the more significant structural needs of the respective state, which may not reflect the needs of disadvantaged communities within the state.

The growing income inequality gaps also create opportunity gaps. Higher-income mothers spent more time with their children and could do cognitively enriching activities (Tomasi & Volkow, 2021). Wealthier parents can invest more money, resources, and time into their children as the income gap grows (MacDonald et al., 2020). However, the income gap poses different outcomes for children and their families when experiencing

poverty. Children in lower-income families continue to have less access to resources and opportunities that will further separate them from higher-income families (Odgers & Alder, 2018). This invisible form of segregation includes schooling zones, peer groups, and neighborhoods. When children grow up in low-income families, they have difficulties with social and economic mobility, thus having fewer examples of how to get out of poverty as they get older (Aiyar & Ebeke, 2020).

Children experiencing poverty may experience *status syndrome* (Damiens & Schnor, 2022). This phenomenon involves unfavorable comparisons and self-evaluations of those with higher incomes. These feelings can create adverse health outcomes (Damiens & Schnor, 2022). These subjective perceptions associated with status syndrome can develop or worsen physical and mental health into adulthood. Even if adults could control their socioeconomic status (SES), the physical and mental effects of getting out of poverty still pose health concerns (Siddiqui et al., 2020). Researchers defined SES as a wide array of structural (human capital) and behavioral or social (social capital) characteristics (Siddiqui et al., 2020).

Many characteristics are associated with the SES factor in intergenerational poverty (MacDonald et al., 2020). For instance, structural factors include assets and income, marriage (or divorce), employment (or unemployment), education levels, or skill sets (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2021). Social or behavioral factors include lifestyle and parenting patterns, which entail how parents feel about parenting or child rearing. It is unclear when children become aware of their SES (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020).

Intergenerational poverty persists when behavioral and structural factors carry through families over the years (Macdonald et al., 2020). Although there is no exact moment when children feel poor, they relate their environmental perceptions to income inequality as they mature. For instance, when children begin to understand their SES as higher, it can promote optimism, self-esteem, and a better sense of self (Odgers & Alder, 2018). When children begin to understand their social status as being low-income, it is easier for them to turn into the negative stereotypes associated with their status. Stereotypes related to being poor can cause children experiencing poverty to underachieve on school tests and reduce self-confidence (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020).

Three possible trends are contributing to the increase and long-term effects of poverty. The trends include the labor market, family composition, and the aging population (Maestas et al., 2023). In that case, the proportion of those in poverty will continue to live in increased poverty levels despite some individuals improving their social and economic circumstances (MacDonald et al., 2020). Researchers predict that the current high rate of single parents will contribute to the overall poverty rate (Lu et al., 2020). Approximately one in four U.S households with children has a single parent, and women run 80% of single-parent households (Parolin & Lee, 2022). Moreover, due to globalization, there is limited work for unskilled or manual labor positions for those with low education or job availability. Unemployment or low-wage job positions will also contribute to the overall poverty rate.

Dynamic Roles of the Social Work Profession Affecting Emotional Labor

Social work professionals practice on multiple levels (micro, mezzo, and macro). This multiple-level approach provides expertise and brings improvement to all levels of practice. Whether it is legislation, budgeting, local, state, or federal agencies, or any form of decision-making bodies, social work professionals work in pursuit of social and economic justice and seek to advocate for all vulnerable populations (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2021). Sentiments are thoroughly explained in the NASW, which mentions the importance of improving human well-being and helping others to meet their basic needs, as well as empowering marginalized populations (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2021). Social work professionals work in many complex and challenging scenarios. Complex and challenging scenarios pose risks for social work professionals to constantly use emotional labor to avoid feelings that do not align with the agency's professional policies. Emotional labor involves the explicit emotional requirements of the social work profession and the efforts or strategies to maintain the criteria (Suh & Punnett, 2021).

Various Roles and Tasks of Social Work Professionals

The role of a social work professional has many characteristics. Sometimes referred to as the “jack of all trades” or the “boundary spanners” profession, others who are not familiar with various scopes of practice or social work roles could have difficulties understanding what roles social work professionals could fill at agencies (Cootes et al., 2022). However, Susilowati and Achmad (2022) outlined some immediate social work roles at the micro level that help to describe various roles of the social work profession:

Intermediary Role

Considered the “broker,” the social work professional works connecting families with existing resources at various agencies or organizations. This role aims to connect families with faster access to social services (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022).

Enabler Role

This is one of the most important roles (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022). The social work professional empowers families to increase their capacity and ability to help themselves. The social work professional works alongside the family to identify strengths, enabling them to learn to overcome difficult times independently or with minimal support.

Mediator Role

In this role, the social work professional seeks agreement or reconciliation on various issues or conflicts (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022). In this role, the social work professional must use dialogue for both parties to understand the importance of an issue (or resources they need) while using persuasive or other various social work approaches to form solutions with families (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022).

Educator Role

In this role, the social work professional provides families with information about various resources to increase their knowledge or awareness to help themselves. The social work professional also helps the families develop skills to help in challenging situations or improve their quality of life (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022).

Although social work professionals may have multiple roles and populations to serve, this micro-level study aims to understand how they understand their emotional labor in the context of the community or county (mezzo-level) issues related to child poverty.

Saxena and Chandrapal (2021) determined that social work professionals with experience can make excellent advocates because they can understand the challenges of their clients and can clearly define the presenting problems. However, some agency norms and policies can impact how social work professionals practice and advocate for children experiencing poverty, which can cause emotional labor in social work professionals (Winters et al., 2019). Emotional labor entails social work professionals' understanding of environmental factors, presenting problems, mental and physical limitations, and clients' strengths (Winters et al., 2019). Likewise, social work professionals must also understand their boundaries, limitations, and strengths. Professionals and clients, "no matter their age, race, ethnicity or gender identity" (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2021, p. 1633), are all influenced by policies that could impact how social work professionals practice social work. Likewise, the same policies can affect how children experiencing poverty receive services on a social worker's caseload. When clients and social work professionals become impacted by policies, it influences emotions, thus influencing how social work professionals practice and carry perceptions about themselves and the populations they serve (Winter et al., 2019).

At the highest level of social work practice (macro), social policies are created to provide social welfare services and mechanisms to enrich social programs and human conditions (Saxena & Chandrapal, 2021). As a result, social policies can influence public

and private services and programs in communities. Public and private services, as well as community programs, play a crucial role in how children experiencing poverty receive services and support. Similarly, social work professionals must manage the emotional demands of their roles and modify their expressions when interacting or working with children experiencing poverty (McFadden, 2020).

Understanding Emotional Labor in the Social Work Profession

The origins of emotional labor emerged from a sociological study involving flight attendants and bill collectors (Winter et al., 2019). When the respective employees would have contact with service users on behalf of their respective companies, emotions would arise, and the employees of the respective companies would have to regulate their internal emotions so their external emotions would not be on display (Winter et al., 2019).

Emotional labor is a process for employees to help manage emotions when interacting with clients (Winter et al., 2019). Emotional labor processes and regulates feelings and expressions to help fulfill agencies' goals. Emotional labor helps social work professionals to comply with the agencies' expectations. Emotional labor is essential because managed emotions assist in creating appropriate impressions for those receiving a service (Sönmez, 2021). Sönmez (2021) argued that employees must comply with the agency's 'feeling rules' to increase service quality and customer satisfaction.

However, constantly managing outwardly expressed emotions can negatively affect social work professionals. When social work professionals have negative emotions, it can decrease agency outcomes, including job performance, job satisfaction, and

organizational commitment (Sönmez, 2021). Likewise, negative emotions can increase adverse consequences, including agency stress, burnout, and intentions to quit (Sönmez, 2021). Emotional labor is the management of emotions and expressions throughout a person's professional responsibilities (Nam & Kabuety, 2021). Nam and Kabuety (2021) discussed the multiple components of emotional labor, which require either surface acting or deep acting on the part of individuals. Surface acting occurs when an employee behaves in a certain way to make it appear that their emotions are different from what they are. This can include smiling cheerfully at a customer when they are frustrated. An example of deep acting is when the employee tries to change their emotional state. An example is thinking happy thoughts to try to change their demeanor and feelings fundamentally. Both types of acting are laborious and can cause stress on an individual (Nam & Kabuety, 2021).

There are similarities between customer service professions and social work (Nam & Kabuety, 2021). First, both professions require face-to-face interaction or some form of voice communication. Second, both professions also evoke some form of emotion from an individual or individuals. Third, the employer exercises a degree of control over the emotional activities of the employees. However, there are some differences regarding social work professionals' power and authority that can evoke a higher degree of emotions. For example, when social work professionals must work with non-compliant clients or clients who need severe intervention methods (Winter et al., 2019).

Another difference is that social work professionals (depending on licensure) sign an agreement to practice under a code or regulations dictated by governmental bodies.

When social work professionals agree to practice under regulations and codes, they have strict parameters on how they must conduct themselves (Winter et al., 2019). Winter et al. (2019) argued that social work's emotional dimensions have diminished due to bureaucratic requirements, and the profession has become a predominantly procedurally driven one. Winter et al. noted that at the grassroots level, social work professionals working with children and families often lose their emotional connection, prioritizing task completion and checklists over personal engagement. Emotions are not only managed by the individual, but they are also indirectly governed by the institutions or organizations (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2021). Therefore, social work professionals can lose sight of the significance of helping families and children and can turn themselves into faceless and emotionless administrators (Gomez et al., 2020). However, a bureaucratic and least emotional approach to social work can ensure professionals do not overly expose emotions in decision-making processes when engaging with families. Similarly, it is imperative not to avoid feelings, as they are an integral part of the social work profession (Winter et al., 2019). Likewise, it is also imperative for social work professionals to gain self-awareness and identity through theoretical frameworks and concepts.

Agency Factors Affecting Emotional Labor

Daily stressors when working with children experiencing poverty are present every day. However, prolonged and long-term exposure can lead to health issues, especially for social work professionals without adaptive coping skills (Cummings et al.,

2020). Emotional disharmony can arise when social work professionals attempt to support children and the agency's mission, leading to negative outward emotions if they do not adequately understand how to utilize emotional labor in challenging situations (Cummings et al., 2020). For example, some organizations or facilities may not understand the full scope of a social worker's responsibilities (Lou, 2021). Social workers play several different roles, ranging from administrative case management to crisis intervenors and social advocates (Lou, 2021). Even the administrative aspect of the job, which some organizations see as the focus, requires complex assessment of individual needs, available physical, emotional, and psychological offerings, and the provision of tangible supports like food, housing, and educational options (Lou, 2021). Properly supporting social workers who provide such a wide range of services can require thoughtful leaders who are educated about the requirements of the job. Lou (2021) argues that there is a gap in research around social work leadership and how to support social workers as they interact with members of the public during some of the most challenging parts of their lives.

Psychosocial risk factors for social work professionals include job content or work schedule, the workplace environment, organizational culture, limited colleague support or authoritarian supervision, conflict with work demands, inadequate pay, and poor investment in employee career development (Singer et al., 2020). According to the World Health Organization (2022), psychosocial risk factors occur in many work sectors. However, some workers are exposed more than others. The WHO (2022) suggested that

health, humanitarian, and emergency workers often carry an elevated risk of exposure to adverse work settings, which can negatively impact workers' mental health.

Secondary Traumatic Stress, Vicarious Trauma, and Burnout

Social work professionals encounter stressors common in everyday life (e.g., forgetting work badges or getting stuck in traffic). However, constant or long-term exposure that induces moderate and severe stress can lead to physical and mental health issues (Martinez-Lopez et al., 2021). These adverse effects due to long-term stress exposure often occur when there is emotional labor or a lack of positive coping skills. STS has similar components to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), such as anxiety and avoidance behavior (Cummings et al., 2019).

Not having situational awareness of the signs and symptoms associated with emotional labor and improper coping skills can have adverse outcomes for social work professionals (Lu, 2021). The profession of social work is highly demanding, especially when providing services to children (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2020). The demand to provide the basic needs for children experiencing poverty and to meet the agencies' goals can cause burnout, emotional exhaustion, and lower job satisfaction. When social work professionals have difficulties with emotional labor, they have a higher risk for burnout or other adverse symptoms related to physical and mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and sleeping disorders (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2020).

Although job satisfaction is subjective to the social work professional, feelings about their occupation and job satisfaction align with workforce retention and agency

turnover (Zhang et al., 2022). Social work professionals can also suffer from secondary traumatic stress (STS), which is a result of helping those who are traumatized (Quinn et al., 2019). STS can result in a lack of positive feelings towards the professional and negative perceptions about clients (Quinn et al., 2019). In a research study conducted by Quinn et al. (2019), 33% (n=107) of social workers reported feelings of STS because of directly working with trauma patients 40 hours a week. These feelings also correlate to emotional labor, as the social work professional can have limited coping skills or resources to balance mood (Quinn et al., 2019). STS can also occur from increased caseload sizes, poor supervision, and lower income wages for social work professionals (Quinn et al., 2019). In a study by Quinn et al. (2019), the researchers found that quality supervision facilitates relationships between employers and supervisees to discuss job stressors. Likewise, job wages for front-line social work professionals can help predict STS because social work professionals who directly interact with those experiencing hardship and trauma are most likely to make less than those who work in supervisory roles (Quinn et al., 2019).

For instance, the Job Demands- Resource (JD-R) model states that stress and burnout increase when high-demand jobs have low resources. This model serves as an antecedent that can predict the adverse effects of working in highly demanding populations and can help alleviate some job dissatisfaction, burnout, emotional exhaustion, and turnover. Job demands are aspects of a job that require sustained efforts that can negatively affect employees' physiological and psychological dimensions (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Studies reported that the impact of supervisory roles and

supervisors' not understanding the emotional needs of their staff is a predictor of burnout, emotional exhaustion, STS, and other forms of emotional imbalances associated with emotional labor (Quinn et al., 2019). When social work professionals experience constant pressures from the demands of an agency, the negative emotions they experience tend to lead to burnout and absenteeism from work (Nilsen et al., 2023). The imbalance of mood regulation is also related to cynicism (Nilsen et al., 2023). Cynicism correlates with agency turnover when there is a lack of positive reinforcements, support, and emotional labor to cope with work demands (Nilsen et al., 2023).

Work Family Conflict and Emotional Labor

Work-family conflict (WFC) is another component of emotional labor that affects work performance, job satisfaction, and a social work professional's family life. WFC involves the struggles of managing work and family life. WFC can negatively impact work performance and job satisfaction, diminishing physical and mental health (Speights et al., 2020). Negative work performance involves behavioral episodes while performing the standards of a position. The continuous need to perform emotional labor at an agency can cause negative behavioral patterns and attitudes among family members. WFC acknowledges that most people must carry two roles in life. For example, social work professionals can have a heavy caseload and have family issues to attend to, which can become both physically and emotionally exhausting (Speights et al., 2020). When social work professionals become burdened with stress, have limited coping skills, or cannot manage emotional labor, they are less likely to be embedded into their jobs and perform

less adequately (Zainal et al., 2020). Higher-level imbalances can cause social work professionals to lack an appropriate balance between work and family roles. Especially in modern society, when both members are dual earners, couples can feel emotionally and physically exhausted from work (Speights et al., 2020). Likewise, there is an increase in the number of dual earners, non-traditional family roles, and an increase in the number of hours families must work to provide for their families (Zainal et al., 2020). Seemingly, the change in society means that more families and individuals must meet the demands of family and work than previous generations (Zainal et al., 2020).

Lack of social support can be attributed to WFC. According to Zainal et al. (2020), social support is an antecedent in reducing work-family conflict. Researchers ascertained that burnout could result when social work professionals do not find social support or when support is not given (Singer et al., 2020). Researchers ascertained that burnout could result when social work professionals do not find social support or when support is not given (Martínez-Lopez et al., 2021). For example, Role Theory postulates that work-family conflict will result in an objectionable or unpleasant state when social work professionals become consumed with many roles and cannot navigate the roles successfully (Zainal et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the Conservation of Resource Theory claims that social work professionals' resources can assist in protecting themselves from the negative impact of WFC (Zainal et al., 2020). When social work professionals have helpful resources, these resources assist with the harmful effects of WFC. For example, resources that protect against WFC at an agency could be supportive supervisors and colleagues who offer solutions to issues. Likewise, support from family and friends can

eliminate negative appraisal social work professionals may have towards the social work profession or their agency when faced with challenges (Zainal et al., 2020).

Deep and Surface Acting

The choice of surface or deep acting plays a significant role in the quality of service to children experiencing poverty and job satisfaction. Surface acting involves suppressing inappropriate emotions for the agency and then expressing a more suitable emotion that matches the agency's requirements (Makudza, 2023). Deep acting involves social work professionals changing their cognition and thought processes to display authentic emotions. Nam and Kabuety (2021) determined that surface acting may improve the experience of customers or clients but takes a toll on employees. Deep acting and surface acting correlate to how social work professionals use emotional labor to impact service performance and tasks associated with their position within an agency. Deep acting means social work professionals try to feel emotions while pursuing the agency's goals. The social learning theory approach helps explain deep acting, in which supervisors emulate vicarious learning processes and pass them along to social work supervisees to accomplish job-related tasks that enhance social work professionalism (Jensen et al., 2023).

Deep acting is a cognitive strategy that helps social work professionals refocus or reframe their feelings (Suh & Punnett, 2021). Moreover, deep acting assists with emotional performance and client satisfaction, which aligns better with the characteristics of emotional labor—profound acting changes from the inside out, which involves

changing internal feelings rather than an outside appearance. Researchers have conducted several studies that confirmed deep acting meets the required emotions of most agencies or positions (Nam & Kabuety, 2021). Deep acting involves controlling internal emotions and adhering to the agency's policies and position requirements.

Researchers speculate that deep acting is exhausting and associated with psychosomatic symptoms due to constant attempts to deceive oneself, and is more harmful than surface acting (Guler et al., 2023; Suh & Punnett, 2021). Deep acting may require a significant amount of energy in some mental space regions, such as emotional intelligence, engagement, and motivation, which can be more psychologically damaging than surface acting when trying to achieve a standard of balance (Nam & Kabuety, 2021).

On the opposite end of deep acting, there is surface acting. Surface acting involves suppressing real feelings or expressions while using superficial expressions without changing internal feelings (Mastracci & Adams, 2020). Surface acting involves simulated emotions or feelings that a social work professional does not genuinely feel. Many front-line (non-supervisory role social) social work professionals can display a welcoming and friendly outside demeanor, such as warm facial expressions or welcoming gestures; however, the social work professional may feel differently (Makudza, 2023). Surface acting means expressing emotions that comply with regulations and displaying disingenuous emotions using tone, facial expressions, and gestures (Mastracci & Adams, 2020). Typically, with surface acting, social work professionals will express inorganic or passive feelings.

Emotional labor is the catalyst for surface acting because surface acting involves suppressing real emotions while faking actual feelings to complete tasks (Mastracci & Adams, 2020). Surface acting tends to involve more burnout and can cause more social work professionals to quit (Nam & Kabuety, 2021). Conversely, surface acting meets the basic or minimum requirements of conceptualizations of excellent customer service. However, surface acting can lead to negative results such as stress, emotional dissonance, and higher rates of burnout (Nam & Kabuety, 2021).

When social work professionals use surface or deep acting, it may lead to emotional exhaustion or job satisfaction (Nam & Kabuety, 2021). Job satisfaction can be defined as a positive mental state derived from approval of a paid position (Judge et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion can deplete energy due to excessive demands when interacting with customers constantly. For example, Makudza (2023) suggested, from an interactionist perspective, that daily interaction between individuals is the basis of societal development and that emotional exhaustion is the core of burnout and emotional dissonance, which is the result of constant emotional labor to perform a job (Makudza, 2023).

Supervisory Roles Affecting Emotional Labor

Supervision and managerial dynamics can affect social work professionals' emotional labor at agencies. Supervisors play a crucial role in communicating the importance of policy, service quality, and service climate. When transformational or quality leadership is absent (leadership that should evoke positive emotions), poor

leadership can cause social work professionals to use emotional labor (Suh & Punnett, 2021). Transformational leadership is also associated with employees' performance outcomes, which is also related to job satisfaction and turnover rates (Park & Pierce, 2020). Emotions passing from the supervisor to the employee have a trickle-down effect, where employees are deeply affected by the emotions of others (Suh & Punnett, 2021). Scholars have used the social exchange theory to elaborate on the trickle-down effect, which suggests that employees will try to emulate the behaviors modeled in the work environment, whether appropriate or inappropriate (Ahmad et al., 2023).

The social exchange theory also correlates to transformational leadership, in which abusive supervision can hurt social work professionals at their agencies. Abusive supervision is when people in positions of leadership display prolonged hostile verbal or non-verbal behaviors to individuals in subordinate positions (Fischer et al., 2021). The effect of abusive supervision can cause deviant or irregular behavior toward families and co-workers (Fischer et al., 2021). The imbalances of emotions or negative feelings can cause tension and frustration in an agency and can jeopardize service quality (Usman et al., 2022). When social work professionals receive unfair treatment at agencies or by supervisors, they are more likely to have negative work opinions or feelings, which reduces or deters social work professionals from performing at their qualified level or forces social work professionals to use emotional labor to fulfill the agencies' objectives (Chi et al., 2018).

Retaining Social Work Professionals Experiencing Emotional Labor

Another area related to using emotional labor is retention and staff turnover. Having to use emotional labor regularly can lead to burnout and emotional exhaustion; thus, social work professionals contemplate leaving an agency or the social work profession (McFadden, 2020). McFadden (2020) reported two plausible reasons social work professionals considered staying at some agencies: affective and normative commitment to their agency. Affective commitment is feeling emotionally connected to the job (McFadden, 2020). Normative commitment is when a social work professional feels obligated to stay due to financial reasons or employment and job-market availabilities (Kuhai et al., 2020). However, 'leaving' and 'staying' are more complex, which makes staff turnover and retention complex (McFadden, 2020). For example, a social work professional may experience job strain and job satisfaction but may leave for career development and other positive reasons (McFadden, 2020).

However, simply because an agency has low turnover does not mean the organization is healthy for social work professionals. For example, some social work professionals may not have job alternatives, which is why some social work professionals may stay at an agency (McFadden, 2020). Nevertheless, social work professionals have (personal and professional) challenges as they attempt to assess and intervene in complex situations related to children experiencing poverty and their families (McFadden, 2020). Research posits that a child's best interest can become compromised by difficulties an agency faces with retention and recruiting efforts (de Guzman et al., 2020). Furthermore, when agencies have higher turnover rates and staff shortages, caseloads become higher, which results in children and families having longer wait times for their needs and

resource support. Adverse reactions to stress and emotional labor issues can impair social work professionals' ability to perform critical case management tasks and functions (McFadden, 2020).

Tenure in the social work profession can also predict retention (de Guzman et al., 2020). For example, having substantial responsibilities and caseloads, coupled with work conflict, is higher among experienced social work professionals (Nilsen et al., 2023). However, fewer experienced social work professionals may have fewer responsibilities, smaller caseloads, and less direct contact with supervisory staff, which may not affect their emotions (or wanting to quit) as much as experienced social work professionals (Nilsen et al., 2023). On the contrary, an experienced caseworker may have a sense of autonomy, trust, and freedom at an agency and understand how to manage job requirements and emotions appropriately (Nilsen et al., 2023).

However, given the exact work requirements (to include caseload numbers) for a less experienced social work professional, he or she may view their tasks as excessive, daunting, and stressful, which can cause less job satisfaction, ultimately leading to a less experienced social work professional to quit (Nilsen et al., 2023). Professional efficacy is essential for how social work professionals feel about work requirements and having a suitable balance at an agency. For example, Nilsen et al. (2023) mentioned that a new or inexperienced social work professional who recently completed their studies may have difficulties trying to apply theoretical knowledge at their organization while still trying to learn their new position, software, and agency policies. Given this example, less experienced social work professionals may quit. However, one contributing factor for less

and more experienced social work professionals was overwhelming caseload sizes, which caused the most stress (de Guzman et al., 2020).

Resilience and Emotional Labor

Developing resiliency is another method to increase protective factors that cause adverse effects associated with emotional labor (Cummings et al., 2020). Emotional labor implies that customer service workplaces place an emotional demand on employees to interact with customers. Although emotional labor helps to create appropriate impressions for those receiving services, it may not help with the emotional dissonance associated with the adverse effects of emotional labor (Sonmez, 2021). From an agency or managerial perspective, despite having employees use emotional labor to meet customer or client demands, having a resilience development plan can prevent the adverse effects of emotional labor and increase retention (McFadden, 2020). According to McFadden (2020), a systematic review of child protection resilience and burnout across 65 studies found that peer and manager support enhanced workers' levels of reliance and staff retention.

Protecting Mental Health for Social Work Professionals

The adverse effects of emotional labor and prolonged exposure to stress can lead to health issues in employees (Cummings et al., 2020). The World Health Organization (2022) reported that about 60 percent of the world's population works, and approximately 15 percent of the adult working population has a mental disorder. Without proper support and decent working conditions, employees' mental health can affect their confidence,

identity, and their ability to be productive on the job. For example, approximately 12 billion working days are lost yearly due to depression and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2022). Furthermore, the global economy loses approximately one trillion dollars each year due to reduced productivity when employees suffer from depression and anxiety (World Health Organization, 2022). Although work can be a protective factor for those with mental health issues, some agencies can contribute to the worsening effects of mental health for social work professionals (World Health Organization, 2022).

The World Health Organization (2022) reported that about 60 percent of the world's population works, and approximately 15 percent of the adult working population has a mental disorder. Without proper support and decent working conditions, employees' mental health can affect their confidence, identity, and their ability to be productive on the job. The NASW estimated that there will be 708,000 social work jobs in 2021, and the profession is expected to grow by nine percent by 2031. With an increase of professionals entering the field, employees and supervisors must understand the importance of mental health and the support needs of employees (Russ et al., 2020). Even when social work professionals face disparaging treatment from clients, co-workers, or supervisors, they still must show customer-oriented responses and professional behavior that comply with an agency's policies.

All workers have the right to safe and healthy work environments. Adequate support at the workplace promotes better mental health and reduces the harmful effects of emotional masking (Zhang, 2021). Support for social work professionals' mental health includes having confidence, purpose, and achievement, opportunities for positive

relationships in the social work community, and a platform for structured routines that can make planning more predictable (World Health Organization, 2022). Likewise, preventing adverse mental health conditions consists of managing and forecasting risks associated with the profession of social work. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that agencies mitigate mental health risks by assessing, then modifying, or removing workplace risks to cope with mental health strain that causes emotional labor. WHO recommended three areas that protect employees' mental health: manager training, training workers, and interventions for individuals. Manager training for mental health involves training managers to recognize and respond to supervisees experiencing stress. Manager training also involves managers learning how to build interpersonal skills and foster a better understanding of supervisees' stressors. Training for workers includes providing staff with mental health and awareness literature to improve and reduce symptoms related to poor mental health and social stigmas associated with mental health. Lastly, intervention for individuals involves helping social work professionals manage and mitigate mental health stress. These tools involve psychosocial and leisure-based physical activities.

Methodology Review

Researchers who investigate the experiences of emotional labor among social work professionals who assist impoverished children use a qualitative approach most often. One example of a study in this space that used a qualitative methodology is the study conducted by Russ et al. (2022). Russ et al. (2022) assess child protection worker

experiences and perceptions related to resilience to understand how resilience is linked to job functioning. The study used a longitudinal design, with interviews as the primary data collection instrument. The concepts in this study were the importance of reflexive practice, relationship-building, and resilience. Russ et al. (2022) used NVivo to conduct a thematic analysis. In another example, Speights et al. (2020) considered the emotional experiences of family-work conflict events. They specifically considered situations where family events interfere with work events and vice versa. To conduct this research, they performed a qualitative content analysis. The relevant concepts for this study were emotion management, harmful emotion suppression, and the work or home domain concepts.

A qualitative approach often uses interviews or focus groups to explore social workers' personal and professional experiences. Qualitative methodologies provide detailed information about the emotional challenges these workers face, including their coping strategies and the emotional impact of their work. These methods are well-suited for highlighting the personal cost of the work and the resilience required in social work. One limitation of this approach is that it is not always possible to apply the findings more broadly (Azungah, 2018). The results may only represent small groups of people and may not hold for different areas or groups, thus limiting their applicability in other contexts (Azungah, 2018). This limitation relates to the relevance of the present study, which will focus on Bell County, Texas. As the results of qualitative studies generally cannot be applied universally to all contexts, conducting geographically specific research is essential for supporting social workers in a specific region. Furthermore, while

quantitative data has been collected on income and educational statistics for Bell County, Texas, there were no studies specifically on the personal experiences of social workers that were uncovered.

There are other non-qualitative examples of research in the field. Some researchers also used a quantitative or mixed-methods approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. Mixed-method studies use surveys to measure emotional stress and burnout while gathering personal stories through interviews. Quantitative studies primarily focus on gathering descriptive statistics or establishing correlations between relevant variables. For example, de Guzman et al. (2020) used a quantitative methodology to explore retention in child welfare workers. They found that employee intent to stay strongly predicted retention, suggesting that employees who feel personally dedicated to their jobs are likelier to remain. Other variables like self-efficacy, peer support, supervision, and organizational support were also meaningful. In another example of a compelling quantitative study on the topic, Gomez-Garcia et al. (2020) considered the demographic factors associated with social worker burnout. They found that demographic factors like race were poor predictors of burnout, but factors like offering specialized social services, status as a full-time employee, and sick time used were all more meaningful. Quantitative strategies can be effective for studying populations with large sample sizes available, where the quantitative data can be statistically representative while adding relevant factors. However, neither of these quantitative studies addresses the experiences of social workers; instead, they look at the

impact of discrete factors on outcomes. A qualitative methodology will be more appropriate for describing and understanding phenomena.

The concepts most relevant to this study's research question are emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills. These concepts occur in many studies related to social work, emotional labor, burnout, and management of challenging work situations. Russ et al. (2022) determined the importance of emotion management when experiencing feelings that could impact workplace performance. Additionally, Russ et al. (2022) found that challenging workplace situations could impact employee home life, which compromises emotional well-being profoundly. Gomez-Guzman et al. (2020) explored coping skills as they relate to burnout. These concepts recur in literature, supporting their utilization in the present study.

In terms of what is known from the literature, studies focusing on emotional labor in social work widely discuss emotional management and the toll emotional work takes on home and personal life (Sonmez, 2021; Susilowati & Achmad, 2022). Literature established the relevancy of emotional dissonance, where professionals' felt emotions differ from those they display, and emotional exhaustion, a prevalent form of burnout in this field (Russ et al., 2022; Singer et al., 2020). Researchers have found that high levels of emotional labor correlate with increased stress and job dissatisfaction, suggesting a significant impact on mental health and professional longevity (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2020). However, there is a gap in the literature related to how emotionally connecting to the role and work impacts employee performance, retention, and emotional well-being (Susilowati & Achmad, 2022). While emotionally connecting with the role can make

social workers more effective at their jobs and more compassionate with clients, it can also lead to mental health challenges, burnout, and poor retention (Winter et al., 2019). Further exploration is necessary to better understand the long-term effects of emotional labor on social workers' career trajectories and personal well-being (Winter et al., 2019). Current research often focuses on immediate or short-term impacts, leaving a gap in longitudinal studies that track changes over time (Russ et al., 2022). Mixed findings in the field also suggest that the relationship between emotional labor and job satisfaction may vary significantly depending on individual personality traits and professional training (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2022).

Summary

The literature discussed the emotional incongruities and the adverse effects of emotional labor on social work professionals. The literature also discussed how emotional labor can affect social work professionals' abilities to provide services and support to children experiencing poverty at their respective agencies. The themes discussed in this chapter depict emotional labor as complex and subjective to a social work professional's experience. Also discussed in this chapter was the impact emotional labor had on social work professionals' personal lives and how mental health considerations impact an agency's ability to complete tasks.

As the literature in this chapter mentions, there is an increase in the number of individuals entering the social work profession, as well as a marginal decline in child poverty. However, what is unknown is how services will impact children experiencing

poverty if social work professionals continue to experience emotional labor and have questionable working conditions, and what the negative impact on agencies will be if they cannot retain workers. Despite having some unknowns regarding emotional labor and child poverty in the foreseeable future, the gap in the literature was discussed, and how social work professionals experience emotional labor, and the by-products associated with emotional imbalances that occur when working with children experiencing poverty.

In the next chapter, the research design addresses the research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures.

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Child poverty has made a marginal decline in Bell County, Texas (County Health Rankings, 2021). Child poverty is estimated to have decreased from 23% to 20% from 2011 to 2021 (County Health Rankings, 2021). Supporting and providing services for children experiencing poverty can be challenging. Working with children experiencing poverty requires emotional responses and displays that may not align with social work professionals' internal emotions (Winter et al., 2019). The social work problem of practice considered in this dissertation was the high degree of emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. As economic and social inequalities increase, social work agencies have increased demands to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty and fulfill an agency's requirements (McFadden, 2020). While the demands to meet the needs of children experiencing poverty have increased, there was a gap in practice regarding how to support the staff providing direct services to these children as they undergo their job responsibilities (McFadden, 2020).

This section for the research includes the research design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures. I discuss the research design and methodology and the social work practice problem. I also explain why this qualitative study was appropriate. Lastly, I discuss the data analysis process and the ethical procedures the researcher used during the research and interview process.

Research Design

The social work problem of practice considered in this dissertation was the high degree of emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills, required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. To better understand the problem and gain information about managing the toll of emotional labor given the high needs of children in Bell County, the following research question guided the study: How do social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor when providing services to children experiencing poverty in Bell County, TX?

Qualitative research gathers information about people's experiences, behaviors, and perceptions (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The data primarily consists of nonnumerical information, such as interviews, observations, and textual analysis (Buessto et al., 2020). Qualitative research is beneficial for studies where context, culture, or subjective experiences and meanings are significant to the study's purpose. Qualitative research aims to understand human behavior (Buessto et al., 2020), considering why people behave in a certain way and how experiences unfold, or decisions are made. Therefore, qualitative research makes it ideal for studies that require a detailed examination of social processes, personal experiences, and the influences behind individual decisions.

In the context of this study on emotional labor among social work professionals dealing with children experiencing poverty, a qualitative methodology was particularly suited because it allows consideration of the personal and emotional aspects of social work. The methodology I chose supported collecting complicated narrative data that can reveal how social workers manage complex emotional experiences working with children

who experience poverty. Choosing a qualitative approach provided the necessary framework to capture the nuances of emotional labor, which cannot be quantified easily. It enable me to gather firsthand accounts of the strategies used by social workers to cope with emotional demands, which is essential for understanding the phenomenon thoroughly.

The design chosen for this qualitative study was a generic qualitative approach, which is used to focus on exploring and understanding the experiences and perspectives of participants regarding a particular circumstance. This approach is used to provide a comprehensive understanding of these experiences without being confined to the frameworks of more specific qualitative methodologies (Ellis & Hart, 2023). A generic qualitative study is distinct from other qualitative designs as it allows for flexibility in data collection and analysis, accommodating various techniques to gather rich, descriptive data from participants. Unlike other qualitative methods, such as case studies or ethnography, which may involve in-depth analysis of specific contexts or cultural groups, the generic qualitative approach is broader and more adaptable, enabling researchers to address a wide range of research questions and contexts (Ellis & Hart, 2023). Generic qualitative studies are ideal for conducting research on topics that have not yet been broadly explored.

The study includes several terms that are essential to the overall framework. The following terms were conceptualized as follows:

Coping skills: The techniques and methods workers use to deal with their work stresses and emotional strain, helping them maintain mental and emotional well-being amidst demanding work conditions (Guzman et al., 2020).

Emotional labor: Job responsibilities that involve in-person or voice interactions with other people that produce an emotional state, such as caring, comforting, or soothing others (Sonmez, 2021).

Emotion management: The strategies that workers employ to handle their emotions effectively, ensuring that their personal feelings do not interfere with professional responsibilities (Russ et al., 2022).

Emotional regulation: The ability of professionals to control and adjust their emotions to maintain a suitable demeanor in challenging interactions or environments (Russ et al., 2022).

Methodology

My data collection method was to conduct semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews allowed social workers to share their experiences with emotional labor (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semistructured interview format allowed for open-ended questions and gave social work professionals the opportunity to elaborate on the questions.

Individual interviews with social work professionals occurred in person or remotely through a communication platform. Coordination consisted of mutually agreed-upon dates and times for each respective interview. An email with a link to connect

through a communication platform was sent to individuals who could not interview in person. An audio recording application assisted with audio recordings for in-person interviews and dialogue transcripts.

The data collected from the research questions in the interviews allowed me to describe the emotional labor experiences of social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty and to understand how agency-setting factors affected emotional labor. Through individual interviews and data analysis, the findings explored strategies to address emotional labor that could help reduce the adverse emotional effects of working with children experiencing poverty. The concepts important to this study are emotional labor, emotional regulation, emotion management, and coping skills. These concepts are defined above. Additionally, they are discussed in the context of recent literature in the previous section.

Participants

The participants in this research were social work professionals in Bell County, Texas. Due to the title social worker being a protected title in Texas, the criteria or title of social work professional was used to gather more individuals or participants through purposive sampling. In the context of this study, a social work professional included individuals with titles such as case manager, child advocate, family support worker, youth counselor, and behavioral health specialist. These individuals were employed at organizations and agencies, including child welfare agencies, hospitals, community health centers, family service agencies, schools, and non-profit organizations dedicated to

child and family services. The sample aligned with the purpose of the study because the study focused on the experiences of social workers in Bell County, and the sample was drawn from social workers in Bell County.

Purposive sampling included five social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty and had been with an agency for at least 90 days. This method was chosen to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and exposure in their roles to provide information about the experiences of emotional labor within the context of child poverty. By selecting individuals who met these criteria, the study aimed to include professionals who were familiar with the challenges and demands of their jobs and were likely to have developed various coping mechanisms and management strategies. This targeted approach helped improve the relevance of the data collected, allowing for a better exploration of the circumstances (see Nyimbili & Nyimbuli, 2024). Purposive sampling yielded data from specific cases (involving children experiencing poverty) and perspectives from social work professionals from their respective agencies (Campbell et al., 2019).

The sample size included between five and ten individuals. According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), saturation occurs between five and twenty qualitative interviews. Five participants could support the smallest size since the study population is a homogeneous population of non-specific social work professionals, other than those working at an agency for 90 days or more (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

Program directors or supervisors at agencies that met the requirements of working with children experiencing poverty were contacted and asked to share the invitation letter with

social workers who met the research study's criteria. The letter included information about the study, instructions, and contact information for social work professionals interested in participating. Informed consent was sent to social work professionals interested in the research study.

Instruments

Data collection for this study was conducted through semi-structured individual interviews, facilitated using a semi-structured interview protocol designed around the central research question. This method allowed participants to provide detailed information about their experiences and perceptions. The interview protocol consisted of nine open-ended questions that prompted the participants to explore various aspects of their emotional experiences while working with children in poverty. Each interview was conducted in a private, controlled environment to ensure that participants felt secure and free to express their thoughts and emotions candidly. Prior to the interview, all participants were required to sign an informed consent form, which outlined the purpose of the research, the nature of their involvement, and their rights, including confidentiality and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time.

The use of semi-structured interviews in this study captured in-depth information and allowed for a free flow of thoughts from participants while still ensuring that the research question was addressed. As an instrument, semi-structured interview protocols draw their reliability and validity through thoughtfully designed research questions that rely on previous literature and do not introduce bias (Naz et al., 2022). Semi-structured

interview protocols are tested, and appropriate instruments are used for qualitative studies (Naz et al., 2022).

The semi-structured interview format allows for a flexible discussion of the topic, enabling participants to guide the conversation to areas they perceive as significant, which may not have been initially anticipated by the researcher. However, the protocol prevents the conversation from straying to unrelated topics and ensures uniformity in data collection across all participants.

Data Analysis

The data analysis strategy for this study was conducted using the thematic analysis procedures developed by Braun and Clarke (2016). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that focuses on assessing sets of qualitative data for cohesive themes, concepts, and ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2016). This approach involved a detailed examination of participants' responses, aiming to identify the fundamental aspects or invariant constituents that consistently appeared across all narratives.

In this study, the qualitative software NVivo was utilized to facilitate the data analysis process, as it is specifically designed to support qualitative research methodologies. The software's capability to organize, manage, and analyze large volumes of text data makes it an ideal tool for handling the complexities of qualitative analysis.

Prior to data analysis, the verbal data were transcribed word-for-word from the interviews. I first input the data into Verbatim, which effectively transcribed the data word-for-word (McGrath et al., 2019). Prior to each interview, I asked each participant to

state their name (pseudonyms were used in the published research findings). This information allowed me to identify each participant's voice and accurately transcribe the data.

Once the transcription process was complete, the first step in the data analysis was familiarization with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). I read through the entire dataset and became familiar with the contents. The second step was coding. This process was supported by NVivo, which allowed for the tagging and sorting of significant statements for easy reference. NVivo's coding capabilities aided in organizing these statements effectively, marking them for inclusion or exclusion in the subsequent analysis phase. The third step involved grouping the codes into initial themes. NVivo's functionality was used to create initial groups of codes based on the tagged items. At this stage, NVivo's advanced coding tools were used to cluster similar invariant constituents into distinct themes. In this crucial phase, the core meanings of the data began to merge into interpretable patterns. I reviewed the code groupings to make necessary changes. The codes could be grouped based on many different strategies, including topic, tone, emotion, or concept (Braun & Clarke, 2016).

The fourth step involved refining the themes. I checked the initial themes against the entire dataset to confirm their validity in accurately representing the participants' experiences. NVivo's query functions were instrumental in this process, allowing for comparison of themes with the coded data. The fifth step involved naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2016). NVivo supported this step by enabling the integration of all relevant data points into a cohesive narrative. This narrative described the emotional

labor dimensions as experienced by social work professionals, providing insights into their coping mechanisms and emotional strategies within the challenging context of working with impoverished children. The themes were given short, descriptive names (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The sixth step in the process was the production of a study report.

I also used reflexivity to ensure the credibility of the results. Reflexivity means that I remained aware of my perspective, background, and personal assumptions and how these elements could influence the research (Gonzalez-Salgado, 2024). I also used confirmability to ensure that the interpretation and findings derived from the data were neutral and unbiased (Riazi et al., 2023). Confirmability can be achieved by examining beliefs, judgments, and practices and how these elements could influence reprocessing and results (Olmos-Veg et al., 2022). I used engagement and collaborative dialogue with the chair committee members to discuss findings.

Ethical Procedures

Before the social work professionals completed the informed consent form, the agency director or supervisor sent potential social work professionals an informational e-mail regarding the premise of the research study. The first step in the ethical procedure process was to have social work professionals complete the informed consent form. I e-mailed all interested social work professionals an informed consent form describing the nature of the research study. The informed consent included the risks and benefits, the

right to participate in the study voluntarily, and the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

The ethical process also included steps to ensure confidentiality during the interviewing process and to ensure that identifying information was not shared on the Internet. Confidentiality consisted of elements such as identities, research locations, and any identifying information that could jeopardize a social work professional's career or livelihood. All interviewers' names and transcripts were assigned pseudonyms. Lastly, all data and information were stored on a password-protected computer for five years and are scheduled to be deleted after five years.

Summary

The research design involved five to ten social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty. Participants in the study had worked for an agency for at least 90 days. Through a Google search, I solicited willing participants from agencies within Bell County that serve children experiencing poverty. The data were collected and analyzed using qualitative software to understand themes associated with the research. All digital or handwritten material was shredded or deleted five years after the completion of the research project. In section three, I discuss the qualitative research findings, including open-ended questions asked to social work professionals and themes associated with the emotional labor experienced by social work professionals.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The social work problem of practice I considered was the high degree of emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills, required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. I aimed to explore how social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills, when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. To address this purpose, one research question was asked:

RQ: How do social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, TX?

The participants in this study included five social work professionals who work with children experiencing poverty and have been with an agency for at least 90 days. A purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and exposure in their roles to provide information about the experiences of emotional labor within the context of child poverty. By selecting individuals who met these criteria, I aimed to include professionals who were familiar with the challenges and demands of their jobs and were likely to have developed various coping mechanisms and management strategies.

All the participants in this study were between 35 and 54 years of age. They were all female, and all identified as Black or African American. More than half of the participants had master's degrees. They had been with their current employer for 3-10

years, and had held their current position for between 11 months and 2 years. Table 1 below provides detailed demographic information about the participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographic

Survey	Age	Race	Gender	Marital status	Highest education level	Licensure or certification	Years employed by current employer	Years in current position
TL	45-54	Black or African American	Female	Never married	Master's degree	License professional counselor	7 years	1.5 years
TF	35-44	Black or African American	Female	Married	Master's degree	License professional counselor	3 years	1 year
TC	35-44	Black or African American	Female	Divorced	Master's degree	LMSW	10 years	2 years
LHT	35-44	Black or African American	Female	Divorced	Bachelor degree	Unknown	8 years	11 months
LA	35-44	Black or African American	Female	Never married	Bachelor degree	Unknown	3 years	1.5 years

The results of the study are presented in this section. The results from the analysis of interview data will be presented by theme, following a discussion of the data analysis techniques. The section will end with a summary.

Data Analysis Techniques

Five interviews were conducted for this study. The data analysis strategy I employed in this study followed the thematic analysis procedures developed by Braun

and Clarke (2016). Thematic analysis is a qualitative research method that focuses on identifying cohesive themes, concepts, and ideas within sets of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). This approach involved a detailed examination of participants' responses, aiming to identify the fundamental aspects or invariant constituents that consistently appeared across all narratives.

In the study, I used the qualitative software NVivo to facilitate the data analysis process, as it was specifically designed to support qualitative research methodologies. The software's capability to organize, manage, and analyze large volumes of text data made it an ideal tool for handling the complexities of qualitative analysis. Prior to data analysis, the verbal data were transcribed word-for-word from the interviews. The data were first input into Verbatim, which effectively transcribed the data word-for-word (see McGrath et al., 2019). Prior to any interview, each interviewer was asked to state their name (pseudonyms were used in the published research findings). This information allowed for the identification of each participant's voice during the transcription process, ensuring accuracy. Data was collected over a 30-day period. Participant recruitment occurred through a posting in a professional Facebook group for mental health practitioners. All respondents were screened according to the following eligibility criteria: (a) being a licensed social work professional, (b) currently working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, and (c) having been employed at their respective agency for a minimum of 90 days.

Interested individuals were given 7 days from the time of the Facebook posting to respond. Of the eight individuals who expressed interest, five met the eligibility criteria.

Two eligible participants responded on the second day, one on the third day, one on the fourth day, and the final participant on the sixth day. Eligible participants were scheduled for data collection sessions according to their availability and work commitments during the remaining 23 days of the 30-day timeframe.

Once the transcription process was complete, my first step in the data analysis was familiarization with the data (see Braun & Clarke, 2016). The entire dataset was read through to become familiar with its contents. The second step was coding. This process was supported by NVivo, which allowed for the tagging and sorting of significant statements for easy reference. NVivo's coding capabilities aided in organizing these statements effectively, marking them for inclusion or exclusion in the subsequent analysis phase.

My third step involved grouping the codes into initial themes. NVivo had functionality that made initial groups of codes based on the tagged items. In this phase, NVivo's advanced coding tools were used to cluster similar invariant constituents into distinct themes. In this crucial phase, the core meanings of the data began to merge into interpretable patterns. The code groupings were reviewed to make necessary changes. The codes were grouped based on various strategies, including topic, tone, emotion, or concept (see Braun & Clarke, 2016). The fourth step involved refining the themes. The initial themes were checked against the entire dataset to confirm their validity in accurately representing the participants' experiences. NVivo's query functions were instrumental in this process, allowing for comparison of themes with the coded data. The final step involved naming the themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2016). NVivo supported this

by enabling the integration of all relevant data points into a cohesive narrative. This narrative described the emotional labor dimensions as experienced by social work professionals, providing insights into their coping mechanisms and emotional strategies within the challenging context of working with impoverished children. The themes were given short, descriptive names (see Braun & Clarke, 2016). The sixth step of the process was the production of a study report.

I also used reflexivity to ensure the credibility of the results. Reflexivity meant being aware of my perspective, background, and personal assumptions, and how these elements could influence the research (see Gonzalez-Salgado, 2024). Confirmability was also used to ensure the interpretation and findings derived from the data were neutral and unbiased (Riazi et al., 2023). Confirmability was achieved by examining beliefs, judgments, and practices and how these elements could influence reprocessing and results (Olmos-Veg et al., 2022). Engagement and collaborative dialogue with the chair committee members were used to discuss the findings.

Findings

Themes

I sought to answer the question, “How do social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, TX?” Five themes were identified: (a) balancing emotional responses, (b) emotional fatigue and burnout, (c) empathy and compassion, (d) role of support and

supervision, and (e) work-life balance. Three to five participants contributed to each theme. Table 2 below describes these themes and the participants contributing to them.

Table 2

Themes and Contributing Participants

Theme name	Description	Contributing participants
Balancing emotional responses	This theme reflects the emotional struggle social workers face in balancing their personal emotional responses with the professional requirements of their role.	LA, LHT, TC, TF, TL
Emotional fatigue & burnout	This theme highlights the emotional exhaustion and burnout experienced by social workers due to the demands of working with vulnerable population.	LA, LHT, TC, TF, TL
Work-life balance	This theme emphasizes the importance of maintaining a healthy work-life balance to prevent burnout and ensure long-term effectiveness in social work roles.	LA, LHT, TC, TF, TL
Empathy and compassion	This theme focuses on the central role of empathy and compassion in the emotional labor required by social workers when working with children and families.	LHT, TC, TF, TL
Role of support and supervision	This theme discusses how supervisory support and organizational structures influence the emotional labor of social workers and their ability to manage the emotional demands of their work.	LHT, TC, TL

Balancing Emotional Responses

The theme balancing emotional responses emerged as social work professionals described their need to regulate their emotions while engaging with clients in distressing situations. Participants spoke about the emotional complexity of their work, where they

often had to mask personal feelings or navigate emotional turmoil to remain effective in their roles.

Participant LA explained the taxing nature of their job in that in order to respond appropriately to a child's emotion, they first had to understand and process it:

Because I work with several children at one time, the emotional requirements of my job can be quite taxing. I have to understand the emotions of each child so I can understand the messages they're trying to convey to me before I'm able to respond. And each child is kind of different and has a different way of communicating with us.

Similarly, LHT discussed the challenge of emotional regulation: "I've learned to kind of be honest with myself... but sometimes it's tough when you're emotionally exhausted and still need to remain composed for others". TC reflected on the importance of empathy while maintaining emotional distance: "A Genuine feeling has always been empathy for me but still holding them accountable for their outcome".

This theme addresses the research question by demonstrating how social work professionals effectively manage their emotional responses. They engage with clients' emotional needs while maintaining emotional control to ensure the delivery of effective services. The ability to balance these emotional responses is a crucial aspect of emotional labor, enabling social workers to remain both compassionate and professional despite the emotional challenges of the work.

Emotional Fatigue & Burnout

The theme emotional fatigue and burnout reflects the emotional toll that social work professionals face in their roles, particularly when working with children experiencing poverty. Social professionals expressed that the constant exposure to trauma and the challenges of their work often led to emotional exhaustion. In several interviews, participants shared how they dealt with the mental and emotional fatigue resulting from the demands of their jobs.

One social work professional, LHT, discussed the difficulty of managing the workload, saying, “Even as a coordinator, I find it hard to coordinate time for myself.” While this does not expressly indicate burnout, LHT went on to say that they have learned how to cope with difficulties that could cause burnout. LHT said,

I guess an immediate coping skill is just telling myself that I’m doing the best I can with the time that I have. Like I said in the beginning that I’m super competitive, some would say type A but I found over the years, it can be emotionally draining to think I must have and I have to daily rolling with the punches. And not having immediate answer to every problem goes along with the position.

This quote seems to indicate that while LHT can cope with the demands of their job, they needed to develop coping strategies that kept them from burnout. Phrases like “emotionally draining” indicate they are experiencing emotional fatigue, if not burnout. Another participant, reflecting on the challenges of emotional detachment, mentioned, “I’ve learned to kind of be honest with myself... but sometimes it’s tough when you’re emotionally exhausted and still need to remain composed for others” (LA). TC echoed

similar sentiments, noting, “You have to recognize your triggers... if you have no awareness, then they will go off every time”. TC spoke about how they were “hard on themselves” and indicated that they engaged in behaviors that indicated emotional fatigue and risk of burnout. TC said,

Sometimes I make the choice to stay in the office and work after hours, and I’ll make it to the gym, or if I go on vacation, I may bring my work phone, which defeats the purpose of relaxing, but I’m working on it.

These quotes illustrate how emotional fatigue arises from the intense, ongoing emotional engagement required in social work, particularly when working with many children. While not all of these participants named their experiences as “burnout” they did describe working long hours and emotional toll their work takes and indicated their behavior should change to better protect their mental health. This theme directly answers the research question by highlighting the emotional labor involved in social work. The participants described the impact of burnout on their emotional capacity to continue providing care to children in poverty.

Work-Life Balance

“Work-life balance” was another significant theme, as social work professionals discussed how balancing their personal and professional lives was essential to maintaining their emotional health and job satisfaction. Many participants acknowledged the challenge of separating the demands of work from personal time, but they also

emphasized the importance of doing so to sustain their ability to provide care for children experiencing poverty.

LA highlighted the importance of setting boundaries: “I just tell myself, it’s okay, it’s just eight hours of work, and that’s it... I stopped bringing my work phone and laptop home with me”. The LHT transcript reflected on the personal impact of work-life balance: “Even as a coordinator, I find it hard to coordinate time for myself”, showing that despite the recognition of the need for balance, the challenge of managing time remains a common theme. TC also said they were striving to find work-life balance, they said, “Like how I was explaining before with my vacations and going to the gym. It allows me to self-reflect and decompress with some of the stress that happens at work.” This theme answers the research question by demonstrating that work-life balance is a critical coping mechanism for social workers. Setting boundaries and engaging in self-care practices such as taking time off and disconnecting from work help mitigate the emotional toll of the profession. By maintaining a balance between work and personal life, social workers can sustain their ability to serve children and families experiencing poverty while also protecting their own emotional well-being.

Empathy

The theme empathy was central to the experiences of social workers, as it was not only an integral part of their professional identity but also a necessary component of their emotional labor. Social work professionals discussed how empathy guided their

interactions with children and families, even in challenging situations where personal feelings of frustration and disappointment had to be managed.

TC stated, “Genuine feeling has always been empathy for me, but still holding them accountable for their outcome... but I usually try to be empathetic and use active listening skills.” LHT said, “I definitely had to provide empathy and some form of situational and cultural awareness...we worked out a payment plan for the month, broke it down into weekly payments, and she was fine with that.” TF said,

I would say you have to have empathy...in that line of work, you’re going to see a lot of stuff. You’re not always going to be able to relate to it, or sometimes you think you can, but you’re looking at it with your eyes and not someone else’s eyes. So that’s why you got to have empathy.

These quotes underscore the necessity of empathy in fostering meaningful connections with clients while maintaining a professional approach. They indicate that empathy is critical for social work professionals in this context because it allows for effective engagement and managing work-life balance. By demonstrating empathy, social work professionals help clients navigate complex situations, even when they are emotionally drained. This theme answers the research question by emphasizing that empathy is not only a professional requirement but also a source of motivation and emotional connection in the work of social work professionals in this study.

Role of Support and Supervision

The theme role of support and supervision emphasizes the influence that supervisors and organizational support have on the emotional labor of social work professionals. Participants in the interviews discussed how effective supervision and support systems contributed to their ability to manage the challenges of their roles, particularly the emotional and mental toll of working with children experiencing poverty. The theme also highlighted the importance of having approachable and understanding leadership to provide guidance and help manage the emotional demands of the job. TL reflected on the positive influence of supervision, saying,

I have a good supervisor... lets me have the latitude to create my own work schedule, you know, flexibility and so forth... There are times, though, where I have been frustrated just recently with leadership, you know, where it created a negative mood and frustration, because I was very concerned with, like, staff and client safety. The morale was kind of low, because it felt like there was no support. But generally, I have to say [my supervisor] is pretty supportive.

This quote stresses the importance of having a supportive supervisor who provides the flexibility needed to manage both professional responsibilities and personal well-being.

Another participant, TC, echoed the importance of supervisory support, stating,

From a manager perspective, [the challenging work environment] is very impactful. Like I was saying in the beginning, we want to hire new case managers as well as retain the ones we have now. So it's one of many jobs I have to create a work environment that promotes self-awareness...I make myself available and

approachable for my staff, which I hope translates to positive productivity while providing services for our citizens.

This reflects how a supervisor's approachability and willingness to support their team can foster a more productive and emotionally resilient work environment. Additionally, LHT discussed how the flexibility within their organization allowed them to manage their emotional labor, stating,

The flexibility and the ability to use my creativity to provide and coordinate services is pretty cool... but I can't really please everyone... Even as a coordinator, I find it hard to coordinate time for myself. But, since we basically follow the district school calendar days, there's always predictability to know when I'm off. My supervisor is pretty cool with me taking time off when I need it.

This flexibility helps social workers feel empowered to balance the emotional demands of their roles with their personal needs, which is vital for sustaining long-term professional engagement. This theme answers the research question by illustrating how organizational support, particularly through supervisors, plays a significant role in managing emotional labor. Positive supervision practices, such as providing emotional support, offering flexibility in scheduling, and fostering an approachable work environment, enable social work professionals to navigate the emotional challenges of their roles more effectively. The supportive leadership structures not only help alleviate stress but also create an environment where social workers can feel more equipped to handle the emotional demands of working with vulnerable children and families.

Summary

The social work problem of practice considered in this dissertation was the high degree of emotional labor, including emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. This study aimed to explore how social work professionals describe their experiences with these emotional labor demands and how they navigate the challenges posed by their roles. Social work professionals in this context are tasked with balancing their emotional engagement with clients while managing the personal toll the profession can have on them.

The participants in this study included five social work professionals who work with children experiencing poverty and have been with an agency for at least 90 days. A purposive sampling method was chosen to ensure that participants had sufficient experience and exposure in their roles to provide information about the experiences of emotional labor within the context of child poverty. Their experiences were captured through in-depth interviews, which provided rich qualitative data on the emotional labor involved in their work.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2016). Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within qualitative data. In this study, the data were carefully reviewed, coded, and organized into themes that reflected the common experiences and emotional challenges reported by social work professionals. The analysis highlighted several key themes, including balancing emotional responses, emotional fatigue & burnout, work-life balance, empathy and compassion, and role of support and supervision. These themes

were crucial in understanding how social workers navigate the emotional demands of their roles, manage their personal emotions, and seek support from organizational structures to prevent burnout.

In the next section, I will explore the application of these findings to professional practice, discussing how the identified themes can inform interventions, policies, and strategies aimed at supporting social workers in their emotional labor. This discussion will focus on the importance of fostering emotional resilience, creating supportive supervision structures, and ensuring work-life balance in the social work profession.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The social work problem of practice considered in this capstone was the high degree of emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills required when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. The purpose of this study was to explore how social work professionals describe their experiences with emotional labor, such as emotional regulation, emotional management, and coping skills, when working with children experiencing poverty in Bell County, Texas. Social work professionals can experience various emotions while working with children experiencing poverty, which could affect how they feel about themselves, their agency, and how they perceive the population they serve (Cummings et al., 2020). Furthermore, the premise of this qualitative study was to understand better the experiences of social work professionals and their emotional labor as they provide services to children experiencing poverty in Bell County.

I used a generic qualitative study method to explore the emotional labor of social work professionals who work with children experiencing poverty. Purposeful sampling was used to select ten social work professionals in Bell County for this study. Data was collected using semistructured interviews, allowing social work professionals to describe their experience with children experiencing poverty. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded to identify themes to develop answers to my research question. The data were then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2016) thematic analysis procedures. This study was conducted to provide insight and understanding into the emotional labor experiences of social work professionals working with children experiencing poverty.

Based on the data I analyzed in this study, participants reported the emotional complexity of their work as they often had to mask personal feelings or navigate emotional turmoil to remain effective in their social work roles. The results suggest that participants had to regulate their emotions while working with clients in difficult situations. Further, participants demonstrated emotional fatigue and burnout, which they encountered in their daily social work practices with children experiencing poverty, as constant exposure to trauma and the challenges of their work often led to emotional exhaustion. Work-life balance was also mentioned among participants, stating that balancing their personal and professional lives was essential to maintaining their emotional health and job satisfaction, with some participants highlighting the importance of setting boundaries and engaging in self-care practices. The importance of empathy and compassion was also emphasized by participants who expressed the need for empathy and compassion as an integral part of their professional identity and a guide to their interactions with children and families, despite difficult situations. In this study, participants also discussed how effective supervision and support systems contributed to their ability to manage the challenges of their roles, particularly the emotional and mental toll of working with children experiencing poverty.

Application to Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice

In this section, I explore the application of these findings to professional practice, discussing how the identified themes can inform interventions, policies, and strategies aimed at supporting social work professionals in their emotional labor. This discussion

emphasizes the importance of fostering emotional resilience, establishing supportive supervision structures, and promoting work-life balance in the social work profession.

This study has demonstrated the importance of social work professionals balancing their emotional responses while working with clients in distressing situations, such as children experiencing poverty. Due to the emotional complexity of their work, social work professionals struggle between maintaining professionalism and acknowledging their emotions while working with children experiencing poverty. Social work professionals should be able to engage with clients' needs while also keeping their emotions regulated to ensure effective service delivery. Such ability to balance these emotional responses is a key part of emotional labor, allowing social work professionals to remain compassionate and professional despite the emotional challenges of their work roles.

The results demonstrate the importance of balancing emotional responses, suggesting the need to have emotional competence training for social work professionals. For example, when social work professionals particularly suppress their emotions, they are more likely to be indifferent. Conversely, when they overidentify, they may risk violating their boundaries, impacting their relationship with their clients. Therefore, ethically, social work professionals must demonstrate competence in the management of emotions for enhanced service delivery. In this regard, social work leaders or supervisors should identify lapses in emotional regulation among social work professionals and offer them training on emotional regulation strategies such as self-care practices, mindfulness, and reflective management or supervision.

Emotions passing from the supervisor to the employee have a trickle-down effect, where employees are deeply affected by the emotions of others, and emotional competence training may help employees cope with emotions related to working with distressed clients (Suh & Punnett, 2021). Emotional competence training for social workers includes providing staff with mental health and awareness literature to improve and reduce symptoms related to poor mental health and social stigmas associated with mental health for working children in poverty (Suh & Punnett, 2021). Comparably, with an increase in professionals entering the field, employees and supervisors must understand the importance of mental health or the support needs of employees (Russ et al., 2020).

My study has demonstrated the importance of the ethical duty of self-care as emotional fatigue and burnout impact service quality and impair the judgment of social work professionals who may feel exhausted from their interaction with children experiencing poverty. My findings highlighted the emotional labor involved in social work as participants described the impact of burnout on their emotional capacity to continue providing services. Strategies such as emotional regulation, self-reflection, and seeking work-life balance were identified as critical to managing emotional labor. The need for self-care and maintaining emotional resilience was essential for social work professionals to prevent burnout and ensure continued support for families in need. Thus, social work administrators should implement self-care programs to provide social work professionals opportunities to engage in practices that would help them regulate their emotions for effective support services to children and their families. Working with and

providing services to children experiencing poverty can have its challenges. Accordingly, the emotional demands that social work professionals take on to provide service support and maintain constant interaction with this unique population can cause social work professionals to perform inadequately (Suh & Punnett, 2021). EL in social work or philanthropic work requires changing emotional responses and displays, as demonstrated in Suh and Punnett's (2021) study, mentioning that care professionals including social work professionals can have difficulties or lack emotional regulation, leading to emotional exhaustion, burnout, or self-estrangement from coworkers and society, suggesting the need for self-care programs.

My study may help agencies in addressing this challenge by emphasizing the need for self-care as an ethical obligation. Such an obligation may be achieved through offering social work professionals the needed mental health resources, including mental health counseling services and sessions for debriefing on the kind and magnitude of work social work professionals do daily. Another way this may be attained is through encouraging social work professionals to have regular breaks through having manageable casework or caseloads that could reduce or prevent compassion fatigue. However, given the exact work requirements (to include caseload numbers) for a less experienced social work professional, he or she may view their tasks as excessive, daunting, and stressful, which can cause less job satisfaction, ultimately leading to a less experienced social work professional to quit (Nilsen et al., 2023). In this regard, professional efficacy is essential for how social work professionals feel about work requirements and having a suitable balance at an agency. From an agency or managerial perspective, despite having

employees use emotional labor to meet customer or client demands, having a resilience development plan can prevent the adverse effects of emotional labor and increase retention (McFadden, 2020). Thus, peer and manager support enhanced workers' levels of reliance and staff retention through the availability of mental health resources to social work professionals.

Encouraging regular breaks may help social work professionals to reduce their level of burnout and emotional fatigue as they may use such opportunities to engage in self-care practices such as physical exercises and mindfulness, as well as seeking mental health counseling services. Further, this study may help leaders in social work agencies to prioritize providing mental health resources to social work professionals who are emotionally fatigued and burned out such as hiring qualified and professional psychologists and mental health counselors and this may help them regulate their emotions while working with children living in poverty who have a myriad of problems. Children may become at risk if social work professionals experience impairment, such as emotional and mental health distress that is tied to emotional labor experienced at the workplace (Kendrick, 2022). To provide the values of service and integrity, this study has demonstrated that social work professionals must understand emotional regulation in the workplace and how improper self-care outside of an agency can impact service proficiency and organizational function.

Work-life balance, as demonstrated in this study, can be an important aspect of emotional labor among social work professionals, as balancing their personal and professional lives can be essential to maintaining their emotional health and job

satisfaction. I have provided important insights into the importance of work-life balance, indicating that work-life balance is a critical coping mechanism for social work professionals. The ethical concern is that social work professionals may be at greater risk of becoming impaired as far as professional judgment and decision-making are concerned. In ethical application, social work agencies need to reinforce policies that enforce flexible and reasonable hours of work with flexible scheduling that are consistent with the ethical obligations to ensure sustainability in social work practices. Social work professionals can have a heavy caseload and have family issues to attend to, which can become both physically and emotionally exhausting (Speights et al., 2020). When social work professionals become burdened with stress, have limited coping skills, or cannot manage emotional labor, they are less likely to be embedded into their jobs, and this may lead to minimal performance standards (Zainal et al., 2020).

Leadership in social work agencies may need to ensure effective work-life balance among social work professionals by ensuring they have flexible working hours and that they can balance their professional and family obligations. In this regard, setting boundaries and engaging in self-care practices such as regular breaks by taking time off and disconnecting from work may help mitigate the emotional toll of the job. By maintaining a balance between work and personal life, social work professionals can sustain their ability to serve children and families in poverty while also protecting their emotional well-being. Higher-level imbalances can cause social work professionals to lack an appropriate balance between work and family roles. Especially in modern society, when both members are dual earners, couples can feel emotionally and physically

exhausted from work (Speights et al., 2020). Likewise, there is an increase in the number of dual earners, nontraditional family roles, and an increase in the number of hours families must work to provide for their families (Zainal et al., 2020). The change in society means that more families and individuals must meet the demands of family and work than in previous generations, thus impacting work-life balance.

My findings suggest that empathy and compassion were central to the experiences of social work professionals because it was not only an integral part of their professional identity but also a necessary component of their emotional labor. Thus, empathy and compassion are critical for social work professionals in this context because they allow for effective engagement with children and families in poverty. This study I found that empathy is not only a professional requirement but also a source of motivation and emotional connection in the work of social work professionals. While providing direct or indirect care to children experiencing poverty, social work professionals must maintain professionalism that represents an attitude of genuineness, empathy, and compassion (McCarthy et al., 2022). As a result, social work professionalism involves managing and regulating emotions, which is the essence of emotional labor, as empathy and compassion may help social work professionals manage and cope with feelings associated with working with children experiencing poverty in an agency setting.

My findings suggest the need for trauma-informed care training and improved supervisory practices. Such trauma-informed care training and supervision can assist social work professionals in establishing a balance between professional boundaries and empathy. With more social work professionals joining the field, employees and

supervisors must understand the importance of mental health and support needs of employees, such as training about trauma-informed care and empathy (Russ et al., 2020). As a result, even when social work professionals face disparaging treatment from clients, co-workers, or supervisors, they must show customer-oriented responses and professional behavior that comply with an agency's policies. All workers have the right to safe and healthy work environments.

My study's findings emphasize the need for support and supervision to alleviate burnout among social work professionals. One of the ethical concerns is that the lack of administrative support could cause emotional distress among social work professionals. I noted the important role of support and supervision for social work professionals in providing quality services to children and their families who have been affected by high levels of poverty. Through this study, social work agencies may be mandated to offer support and supervision to social work professionals to enhance service delivery and regulate emotions during their work roles with poverty-stricken children as an ethical application. Such support may include constant clinical supervision practices by social work professionals, establishing peer support groups, and advocating for systemic changes, such as advocating for adequate financing and lower caseloads assigned to social work professionals. Adequate support at the workplace promotes better mental health and reduces the harmful effects of emotional masking (Zhang, 2021). Therefore, support for social work professionals' mental health includes having confidence, purpose, and achievement, opportunities for positive relationships in the social work community,

and a platform for structured routines that can make planning more predictable (World Health Organization, 2022).

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

There is a need for social work leaders to strengthen institutional supervision and support. The results showed that social work professionals experienced increased emotional fatigue and burnout due to limited support. In this case, adopting reflective support and supervision would be ethical in guiding social work professionals to enhance service delivery. Such supervision may include trauma-informed care to help these professionals deal with and manage their secondary emotional labor or trauma associated with working with poverty-stricken children. Supervision and managerial dynamics can affect social work professionals' emotional labor at agencies. Thus, supervisors play a vital role in communicating the importance of policy, service quality, and service climate (Suh & Punnett, 2021).

Still, on support and supervision, there is a need to develop a peer support program and general mentorship programs by pairing social work professionals with experience with those without experience in coping mechanisms. Additionally, leaders in this field should advocate for lower caseloads for social work professionals by advising policymakers and social work agencies to reduce unrealistic caseloads, aligning with the findings of Nilsen et al. (2023), who noted that experienced social work professionals with reduced caseloads, and less direct contact with supervisory staff, may not quit their job. Such reduced caseloads ensure that social work professionals can offer quality

service and care without experiencing unnecessary burnout and emotional fatigue (Nilsen et al., 2023). Leadership support and peer support through mentorship programs can help social work professionals experience enhanced employee performance outcomes, which are also related to job satisfaction and turnover rates by reducing burnout and emotional fatigue (Park & Pierce, 2020).

There is a need to promote emotional resilience and regulation training for social work professionals. As demonstrated in the current study's findings, social work professionals have struggled with balancing their emotions while responding to their clients, contributing to increased burnout. As a result, it befits administration in these social work agencies to incorporate emotional intelligence training that would help in creating self-awareness, empathy, compassion, and emotional regulation, thus helping social work professionals to circumnavigate the multifaceted emotions they experience working with poverty-affected children. This aligns with literature that professional training in emotional intelligence can help enhance social workers' job satisfaction in working with poverty-affected children (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2022). The literature indicated the need for specific parameters and emotional strategies to describe and understand emotional labor, thus promoting quality care (Mastracci & Adams, 2020). Emotions passing from the supervisor to the employee have a trickle-down effect, where employees are deeply affected by the emotions of others through training programs (Suh & Punnett, 2021).

Another recommendation is that there is a need to emphasize self-care and mental healthcare resources for social work professionals. Social work professionals can develop

self-care programs such as daily physical exercises, therapy, and mindfulness practices in their professional development programs. The NASW Code of Ethics (2021) provides examples to assist with impairment, such as consultation and professional help, or making appropriate workload adjustments and self-care for social work professionals is an essential aspect of the profession. It ensures that social work professionals provide quality service to children experiencing poverty and their families (NASW, 2021). Further, ensuring there are adequate mental health resources, such as hiring mental health counselors and subsidizing such services for employees, may help them seek the needed help. Section 4.05 of the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) mentions the issue of impairment and instructs social work professionals facing difficulties and problems with professional judgment and performance to take action or steps to protect clients (NASW, 2021), thus providing mental health resources may help in addressing the difficulties social work professionals face daily. Children may become at risk if social work professionals experience impairment, such as emotional and mental health distress that is tied to emotional labor experienced at the workplace (Kendrick, 2022). To provide the values of service and integrity, social work professionals must understand emotional regulation in the workplace and how improper self-care outside of an agency can impact service proficiency and organizational function, and this can be attained through effective programs on self-care and access to quality mental health resources.

Social work agencies also need to strengthen community collaboration with local organizations to help share resources and lower the burden on social work professionals. Social work professionals are more likely to feel isolated in their roles to support clients

in poverty areas, and engaging in community partnerships and advocacy may help address the causes of poverty rather than the effects of poverty (Suh & Punnett, 2021). The World Health Organization (WHO) recommended that agencies mitigate mental health risks by assessing, then modifying, or removing workplace risks to cope with mental health strain that causes emotional labor among social work professionals working with children in poverty (World Health Organization, 2022). The collaboration of social work agencies, mental health professionals, legal advocates, and casework supervisors may help alleviate the impacts of emotional labor.

Impact on my Social Work Practice as an Advanced Practitioner

This project's findings may have a significant impact on my social work practice as an advanced practitioner. The understanding of how emotional labor can be exhibited while working with poverty-affected children demonstrates the need for effective coping mechanisms and intentional emotional regulation to enhance wellbeing. I will thus integrate these information into my practice by becoming mindful of emotional regulation and demands associated with my profession. As a result, I would have to learn to set professional boundaries and practice self-care and develop resilience.

The results of this study underscores the importance of support and how social work professional can manage emotional labor. As for my role, I have learned the importance of supportive working conditions or environment. As a result I will advocate for positive and supportive working environment in my social work practice. Creating peer-support groups may also be part of my social work practice to create a supportive

working culture in my social work practice. Further, the findings of this study will inform the need to mentorship in leadership. As an advanced practitioner, I would support a leadership that mentors the social work team about emotional regulation, and provide them effective tools for their social work practices.

Transferability of the Findings

The results of this project provide valued information about emotional labor among social workers who work poverty-affected children in Texas, Bell County. Although the findings of this study are specific to Bell County context, workplaces challenges that need effective coping strategies, emotional regulations can be experienced in other contexts across the social work profession. Therefore, professionals in different regions other than Bell county Texas may find similar emotional labor in their workplaces. The coping strategies could inform supportive environment and training and supervision in different social worker agencies across the United States.

Limitations Impacting Generalizability and Trustworthiness

Various limitations in this study may impact the trustworthiness and generalizability of findings. The study was limited by single setting of Bell County Texas. This limits the transferability of the study findings to different location or settings with diverse resources, population, communities, and social work practices or strategies. In this study, purposive sampling including five to ten social work professionals who worked with children experiencing poverty and had been with an agency for at least 90 days, was adopted for sampling selection. Although this method was chosen to ensure

that participants had sufficient experience and exposure in their roles to provide information about the experiences of emotional labor within the context of child poverty, purposive sampling restricts participation of social workers with limited experience, who new in the field and those in different agencies. Social desirability bias may be a limitation of this study, as social workers may have framed the responses based on their perceived professionalism and acceptability, affecting the trustworthiness of the findings.

Dissemination of the Findings

The findings of this study may be disseminated through presentation at academic seminars and workshops. Academic conferences at both national and regional levels could be an important mode of disseminating this study's findings. National and regional conferences of social work professional may allow this study's findings to reach more researchers and social work professionals, as there is opportunity for peer conversations and feedback regarding the contributions of this study. Also, peer reviewed journals on social work practices may be used to publish this study's findings, as they can be accessed by broader academic and social work professionals.

Implications for Social Change

The results may provide insight into how the daily interactions with children experiencing poverty and families impact mood, job performance, and service quality. Thus, the implication for social change is that social work agency leaders may use this study's findings to advocate for effective policies to protect the workforce. The limited policies to address challenges faced by social work professionals may contribute to

emotional fatigue and burnout. As a result, advocating for legislation on limits of casework may help address the issues of emotional fatigue and burnout. The policies should also advocate for mandatory mental health resources for social work professionals to address emotional fatigue and burnout.

Leaders in the social work field may adopt this study's findings to mobilize communities and create public awareness about emotional labor and its challenges. This would help address the public's misunderstanding about the emotional labor that contributes to stigma and limited funding. Hence, promoting campaigns to educate the public and engage clients in lobbying for policies that support social work professionals can help address the challenges they face in providing practical and quality support to children and families. Insights from this study can also create professional dialogue about developing awareness and a better understanding of social work professionals' mental health and how implementing support areas could potentially increase job satisfaction and work performance. Similarly, findings from this study can help social work leaders identify the necessary support to help decrease occurrences of emotional labor for professional employees.

Summary

This study aimed to explore how social work professionals describe their experiences with these emotional labor demands and how they navigate the challenges posed by their roles. Social work professionals in this context are tasked with balancing their emotional engagement with clients while managing the personal toll that such work

can take on them. This study has provided important insights into the experiences of social work professionals when working with children experiencing poverty in an agency setting. The study has demonstrated the emotional complexity of work as social work professionals had to mask personal feelings or navigate emotional turmoil to remain effective in their social work roles, and thus the need to regulate their emotions while working with clients in distressing situations.

In this study, I learned the importance of work-life balance mentioned among participants, stating that balancing their personal and professional lives was vital for maintaining their emotional health and job satisfaction. The importance of empathy and compassion was also emphasized in this study as an integral part of social work professionals' professional identity and a guide to their interactions with children and families, despite challenging situations. There is also a need for effective supervision and support systems that help social work professionals manage the challenges of their roles, particularly the emotional and mental toll of working with children experiencing poverty.

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Appendix A: Preinterview Questionnaire Demographic Information:

- What is your age?
 - 18-24
 - 25-34
 - 35-44
 - 45-54
 - 55-64
 - 65 and over
 - Prefer not to answer
- What is your race?
 - White
 - Hispanic or Latino
 - Black or African American
 - Native American or American Indian
 - Asian/Pacific Islander
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
- What is your gender?
 - Male
 - Female
 - Other
 - Prefer not to answer
- What is your marital status?
 - Married
 - Never Married
 - Divorced
 - Separated
 - Widowed
 - Prefer not to answer
- Highest Education Level
 - Diploma or GED
 - Associate degree
 - Bachelor's degree
 - Master's degree
 - Doctoral degree
 - Some college

- Licensure and certifications level

- o LMSW, LBSW, LCSW, LISW, LICSW

- o Other _____

- Do you currently work as a social work professional serving children/adolescent population in Bell County, TX?

- o Yes o No

- Please describe the setting you serve children/adolescent in (a hospital, in the community, in a homeless organization, non-profit, for-profit, etc.):

- _____

- How long have you been employed by your current employer?

- _____

- How long have you been in your current position?

- _____

Appendix B: Individual Semi-structured Qualitative Interview Questions

RQ 1: How do social work professionals describe their experiences as represented by their emotional labor when working with children in poverty in Bell County, TX?

Introductory Script: Hello, my name is Aamir Terry. I am the researcher for this research study on emotional labor and social work professionals working with children experiencing poverty. The purpose of this research study is to understand the experiences of emotional labor among social workers providing services to children experiencing poverty. I want to ensure you that this interview is confidential and only the researcher will have access to this recording. In the research study, only an assigned pseudonym will be used to protect participants. For research purposes, this interview will use audio-recording. Do you consent to recording?

1. Describe the emotional labor requirements of your job?
2. Describe an instance or experience where you had to use surface acting.
3. Describe an instance or experience where you had to use deep acting.
4. Can you describe a situation in which you had to provide case management services to a difficult child or family? Which approaches did you use to deal with the situation?
5. Please describe how you manage your emotions when working children experiencing poverty and their families?
6. What (positive and/or negative) coping skills do use to regulate emotions/moods when working with children experiencing poverty and their families?
7. Describe how your work environment or organizational structure impacts your mood when working with children experiencing poverty and their families?
8. How does your job allow for you to have a work-life balance?
 - a. Please describe any potential benefits, if any, of self-care use you experience.
 - b. Please describe any potential challenges, if any, of self-care use you experience.
9. Do you have any additional comments or questions relation to this topic?