The Impact of Emotional Labour on Workers in Day Harm Reduction Services

JOANNA FABIANOWSKA (1335422), Supervisor Name: Dr Niall Hanlon

Abstract
The aim of the research study was to understand how emotional labour impacts on workers employed in day harm reduction services. The study’s theoretical framework was based on Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotion used as an instrument of labour in the workplace.

The study had a qualitative design with in-depth interviews used as data collection method and purposive homogenous sampling approach. Having interviewed 10 workers, the data was transcribed, organised and analysed with the help of NVivo software.

As a result, four themes were identified. They were as follows: emotions and professionalism, emotions, learning and training, emotions and reflective practice and emotions and gender. The research study found that emotional labour plays an important role in harm reduction services.

Introduction
“All the world is a stage and, all men and women merely players” (Shakespeare, 1998, p. 150-151). In this way, through referring to the world of theatre, some of the sociologists start explaining their focus on the concept of emotion in the context of a person’s everyday life (Hochschild, 1983; Turner & Stets, 2005). People experience various emotional states most of the time in various social contexts. A workplace, where people spend a considerable part of their lives, impacts in a significant way on its workers. The aim of this research project is to understand how emotional labour impacts on workers employed in day harm reduction services.

A few words about harm reduction
Harm reduction model is rooted in pragmatism and it is based on acceptance that some people will always engage in risky behaviours (Marlatt, 1998, p. 49-58).

Method
This is a qualitative study with a purposive homogenous sample and in-depth data collection method used in order to investigate the research question.

10 workers employed in harm reduction projects took part in the study. They were keyworkers, outreach workers, project workers, a counsellor, team leader and a case manager. They represented 5 organisations and three councils in the Dublin Region.

Discussing emotions, even if relating to work practice, is always a difficult matter. The researcher was aware of the sensitivity of the subject throughout the research process. The ethical concerns relating to this issue were resolved during the conversations with managers of the organisations. The researcher circulated among the participants a very informative Research information Sheet together with an abbreviated topic guide to let the workers know what to expect and give the space for making the decision whether to participate.

“As a farmer puts blinders on his workhorse to guide its vision forward, institutions manage how we feel” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 49).

Results
The research findings have proved the significance of emotional labour in harm reduction model of working with substance use. Harm reduction workers spoke about the need of masking emotions, adjusting to professional mode of working, switching to automatic pilot, carrying their clients traumatic emotions.

They also spoke how a good quality training enhances their skills and their overall performance, also in terms of managing their emotions.

Support in the workplace, such as wind downs, taking time out, teamwork and adequate person supervision improved their ability to engage in emotional labour while on duty and enabled the maintenance of a healthy work-life balance.

Discussion
The findings of the research study suggest the following:
• the impact of institutionalization of care and healthcare
• the lack of recognition for the impact of emotional on the workers in harm reduction
• the pervasiveness of gendered beliefs about emotions
• the extent of physical and emotional exhaustion caused by engaging in emotional labour
• the sense of loneliness experienced by the workers due working within professional ethics
• the importance of fostering the culture of reflective practice in the workplace.

References