



EMOTIONAL REGULATION IN THE EYES OF SOCIAL WELFARE PROVIDERS

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand the perspectives of five registered social work providers about emotional regulation in terms of positive reframing, boundaries and emotional detachment in the city of Roxas, Capiz for the year 2023-2024. Foreign and local literatures related to emotional regulation were reviewed in relation to the relevance of the study. A validated researcher made semi-structured interview guide was used. Qualitative research methodology using phenomenology approach to understand the lived-experience of the participants was utilized. Thematic analysis by Braun & Clarke (2006) was used to analyze and interpret the data. The findings of the study revealed that the understanding of social workers in terms of positive reframing was classified in two themes namely: ultra-positive reframing & intra-positive reframing. The understanding of social workers in terms of boundaries was classified in two themes namely: verbal limitation & non-verbal limitation. The understanding of social workers in terms of emotional detachment categorized in two themes namely: personal related reasons and professional related reasons.

Keywords: Emotional Regulation, Positive Reframing, Boundaries, Emotional Detachment, Social Work Providers

1. Introduction

Social work is a profession dedicated to enhancing the well-being and quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. Many individuals are drawn to this field due to their innate desire to make a positive impact and provide support to those in need. In the United States, there is significant emphasis on monitoring emotion regulation due to its association with self-harm and mental health. Emotion regulation refers to the ability to manage and control one's emotions in adaptive ways. Effective emotion regulation skills are essential for maintaining mental and emotional well-being, as they enable individuals to cope with stressors and navigate difficult situations more effectively. In an emotionally arduous job how does one handle stress and pressure? How does one manage unpleasant and uncomfortable emotions? When day - in and day - out the cases that a social worker handles are about stress, pain, abandonment, trauma or death? Salvilla & Bedoria (2021) on their Journal, entitled: Wounded Healers, they explained that in the event of helping others alleviate their pain and suffering, how do the community take care of the people that take care of the abused, abandoned and neglected? How does one protect the people who want to help? How does one protect themselves from vicarious trauma that stems from the lived experience of their clients? In ones' line of work, how does one keep their emotions and mental health in check? When one must experience and deal with trauma, loss pain and suffering every day in one's own profession and workplace, how does one go home to their family and bounce back from the difficult situations that they have just faced?

In the Philippine context, social workers hold a pivotal role as the primary helping professionals within the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Whether engaging in direct interventions or working behind the scenes, they are dedicated to enhancing the quality of life for the impoverished, vulnerable, and marginalized segments of society. As Dongga-as et al. (2022) aptly noted, social workers are extensively trained professionals who demonstrate unwavering commitment to assisting individuals, families, groups, and communities in navigating the multifaceted challenges and adversities they encounter. Within this framework, social workers in the Philippines undertake a diverse range of responsibilities, including but not limited to case management, counseling, advocacy, community development, and policy formulation. Their interventions are guided by principles of social justice, human rights, and empowerment, with the overarching objective of fostering resilience, promoting social inclusion, and facilitating sustainable change. Furthermore, social workers collaborate closely with various stakeholders, including government agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), community leaders, and other professionals, to address complex social issues and implement holistic solutions. By leveraging their expertise, compassion, and resourcefulness, social workers play an indispensable role in shaping equitable and inclusive societies where every individual has the opportunity to thrive.

In essence, social workers in the Philippines embody a profound dedication to social transformation and humanitarian service, serving as catalysts for positive change and champions of social justice. Their tireless efforts contribute significantly to the advancement of human welfare and the realization of a more just and compassionate society for all. In the city of Roxas, social workers undertake a myriad of challenging tasks, ranging from separating women and young children from abusive situations to providing rehabilitation services for individuals struggling with substance abuse and violence. Additionally, they offer crucial support and comfort to families coping with the loss of a loved one. These examples merely scratch the surface of the complex and emotionally taxing situations that social workers encounter on a daily basis. This study attempted to investigate the ideas and concepts that would help us understand how the social work providers are able to get up every day and face these taxing situations then get out seemingly unscathed of the reality they have just faced.

Literature Review

Emotional Regulation. Emotions serve as indispensable guides in our lives, imbuing our experiences with depth, significance, and connection. As aptly articulated by Leahy et al. (2011), emotions enrich our existence by conveying vital information about our needs, frustrations, and desires. They serve as powerful motivators, propelling us to take action, seek change, or find contentment in our circumstances. In navigating life's myriad challenges and opportunities, emotions serve as invaluable compasses, guiding our decisions and shaping our responses to various events and occurrences. Whether we experience joy, sadness, anger, fear, or love, each emotion offers valuable insights into our innermost thoughts, values, and aspirations. By honoring and embracing our emotional experiences, we gain a deeper understanding of ourselves and cultivate greater self-awareness. Moreover, emotions serve as bridges that connect us with others, fostering empathy, compassion, and solidarity. Through shared emotional experiences, we forge meaningful connections with fellow human beings, transcending barriers of difference and cultivating a sense of belonging and understanding. In essence, emotions are integral facets of the human experience, serving as catalysts for personal growth, social cohesion, and mutual understanding.

By recognizing the profound significance of emotions in our lives, we can cultivate greater emotional intelligence, resilience, and empathy, thereby enriching our relationships, our communities, and our collective humanity. How a person regulates his emotions when faced with difficult and uncomfortable situation, is beneficial to the ones giving help as it would ease the mind of the people we are trying to help. As stated by Leahy et al., (2011): Emotion regulation may include any coping strategy (problematic or adaptive) that the individual uses when confronted with an unwanted intensity of emotion. It is important to recognize that emotion regulation is like a homeostatic thermostat. It can moderate emotions and keep them within a “manageable range” so that one can cope. Or the moderation—up or down—may offset things so extremely as to create a situation that is “too hot” or “too cold.” Emotion regulation is like any coping style: It depends on the context, on the situation. It is not problematic or adaptive independent of the person and the situation at the present time. (Page 108). Emotion regulation, as conceptualized by Gross (1998), encompasses the intricate processes through which individuals exert influence over the emotions they experience, the timing of these emotions, and the manner in which they are expressed. This multifaceted construct involves a spectrum of conscious and unconscious strategies that individuals employ to modulate their emotional responses in various contexts and circumstances. At its core, emotion regulation involves a dynamic interplay between cognitive, behavioral, and physiological processes aimed at managing the intensity, duration, and expression of emotions.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework



2. Method

The study had utilized a qualitative research design using the lens of phenomenology. Straus and Corbin (2008) and Levitt et al., (2017) qualitative research as a method that explores meanings and insights in each situation. It investigates the meaning of the lived experience of the participants related to the phenomena through emerging questions and procedures, data collection in the participants' setting, data analysis through themes and the interpretation of data (Creswell, 2014). Data collection as well as the techniques used in the analysis of data applied a purposive sampling and semi structured researcher-made instrument with open-ended questions to generate the necessary data which later transcribed and interpreted as the study's variables. On the interpretation of gathered data, it was a contextual description and interpretation, it described and interpreted the phenomena from the standpoint of the respondents which led to attainment of the purpose of qualitative research (Mojan, 2018). Furthermore, the thematic interpretation of collected data traced the path like Ven de Ven (2016), with the focus on identifying the phenomenon on any problem, issue or topic which is chosen as the subject of an investigation, and perceived to represent on satisfying circumstance a promising an opportunity, a breakdown of anomaly in expected arrangements, or simply a topic of interest. The phenomena under the investigation were the emotional regulation in the eyes of social worker providers. Moreover, since this study is a qualitative one, it dealt with non-numeric data, mostly the behavior and perspective of participants were observed and interpreted with the snapshots of events, and interpreted their understandings, experiences, relationships, processes, and factors as perceived by individuals (Mohajan, 2018). Thus, it led to an insightful influence on social work as well as other related fields.

Results and Discussion

Emotional Regulation in terms of Positive Reframing.

To aid the presentation and analysis of data for Problem Statements 1, 2 and 3 - points of interest linked to each of the research questions are presented in Table 1.a. This table illustration would establish the first phase of thematic analysis used in this study.

Table 1.a. Emotional Regulation

Research Question/s	Codes	Initial points of Interest
How do social welfare providers understand emotional regulation in terms of positive reframing?	Positive Thinking Gratefulness	29 12
How do social welfare providers understand emotional regulation in terms of boundaries?	Action Words	18 11
How do social welfare providers understand emotional regulation in terms of emotional detachment?	Professionalism Empathy Rapport	20 13 10

There were three research questions that sought answers from the research participants followed by their corresponding codes gathered from the verbatim of responses from the research participants. The initial points of interests signifies the number of codes emerged from the data gathered in this study.

The first research question was on how social worker providers understand emotional regulation in terms of positive reframing. Under this, the following significant codes emerged: positive thinking with 29 points of interest; gratefulness with 12 points of interest.

For the second variable on how social worker providers understand emotional regulation in terms of boundaries, a response that has eighteen 18 points of interest was coded as boundaries in action and boundaries through words with 11 points of interest.

As regards the third research question on how social worker providers understand emotional regulation in terms of emotional detachment, three codes were identified: professionalism with 20 points of interest; empathy with 13 points of interest, and rapport with 10 points of interest. The data gathered on the respondents' understanding of emotional regulation in terms of positive reframing is shown in Table 1.b., which comprises the data extracts that are taken from the the verbatim of the respondents, codes that emerged from the transcript and the theme/s generated from the perspective of the respondents.

Table 1.b. Emotional Regulation in terms of Positive Reframing

Data Extracts	Coded for	Theme/s
We should remind them that in their self, they have strengths and weaknesses, and those weaknesses can be overcome. No person is unchangeable. Even someone in prison can change; it's not impossible for a person to change.	Giving hope to clients	Ultra-positive reframing
If you have a client and you're doing casework, focusing on them, ask about their strengths, support system, who they can turn to for help, and their feelings about the situation. In the interview, not everyone passing through problems is at a loss; there's strength in them.	Inspiring the clients	
Provide assurance that the problem can be solved as long as they're willing to cooperate because there are people who believe in helping them. Open their minds to stay positive.	Empowering the clients	
When it becomes too draining for me, I usually go to the beach I just sit there without doing anything and I find it calming to be alone without talking to anyone.	Personal rest, and Recreation	Intra-positive reframing
For example, if I'm too stressed and don't want to stay at home, I'll go for a hike or go diving. I do whatever I can to cope. you look at what you have accomplished. Have you been productive on those days? Have you done something to help that person, or have you solved anything?	Emotional self-control	

As shown in Table 1.b., all responses obtained two (2) themes: ultra-positive reframing and intra-positive reframing. Each said themes would have three (3) codes based on the data extracts taken from the verbatim of the in-depth interview conducted. Ultra-Positive Reframing. This theme emerged on the collective and dominant disposition of participants in connection on how they understand emotional regulation in terms of positive reframing. Social workers often employ various strategies to regulate their emotions effectively while engaging with their clients. One such strategy involves the projection of positivity towards their clientele. By consciously projecting positivity, social workers can create a supportive and uplifting atmosphere, which can be conducive to fostering trust, rapport, and a sense of safety for their clients. This positive demeanor can help alleviate tension, anxiety, or discomfort that clients may be experiencing during their interactions with the social worker. Radiating positivity and instilling hope in individuals who are facing daunting circumstances or navigating difficult life experiences is a crucial endeavor. Social workers undertake the responsibility of not only providing support and guidance but also uplifting spirits and fostering optimism in those who may feel hopeless. This task requires a delicate balance of empathy, compassion, and resilience. Thoroughly described by respondent 4, this means: It's like foreseeing what support you can offer. Assure them that you're there for them, there are people they can approach, agencies you can refer them to. Provide assurance that the problem can be solved as long as they're willing to cooperate because there are people who believe in helping them, not just one agency. Open their minds to stay positive. (Appendix D, Line 18, Page 95)

In a study conducted by Torronen et al., (2013), they stated that empowerment is a key concept in social work. By empowering clients, social work practitioners provide marginalized voices in our society with a greater opportunity to be acknowledged. As people become empowered, they can gain control of their lives and find ways to act in society. Their statement support the results extracted from the lived experience and testimony of the respondents. Furthermore, on the study made by Zoabi & Gal (2020), they concur on the significant potential for empowerment in methods designed to assist clients in altering their behaviors to enhance functionality and increase control over their clients' lives. Intra-positive Reframing. The second theme that emerged from the verbatim gathered in this study was intra-positive reframing. In the demanding field of social work, practitioners often face emotionally challenging situations that can impact their well-being. To effectively regulate their emotions and maintain a positive mindset, social workers employ various self-care strategies, including prioritizing rest, engaging in recreational activities, and exercising control over their personal thought processes. Rest plays a vital role in replenishing the physical and emotional reserves of social workers. By ensuring adequate sleep and incorporating periods of relaxation into their routine, practitioners can mitigate the effects of stress and prevent burnout. Additionally, rest provides an opportunity for reflection and rejuvenation, allowing social workers to approach their work with renewed energy and clarity.

In a declaration made by respondent 2, she said that “ It's very stressful, especially when the cases pile up. So what I do is go for a walk. For example, if I'm too stressed and don't want to stay at home, I'll go for a hike or go diving. I do whatever I can to cope” (Appendix B, Line 20, Page 83). Engaging in recreational activities is another essential component of self-care for social workers. Whether it's pursuing hobbies, spending time outdoors, or participating in leisurely pursuits, recreational activities offer a welcome respite from the demands of their profession. These activities provide an outlet for creativity, enjoyment, and self-expression, helping social workers to recharge and maintain a healthy work-life balance. Furthermore, social workers exercise control over their personal thought processes to cultivate a positive mindset. This involves practicing mindfulness, reframing negative thoughts, and cultivating resilience in the face of adversity. By adopting a proactive approach to managing their thoughts and emotions, practitioners can enhance their overall well-being and navigate challenging situations with greater ease that in turn would help their personal and professional development.

In the research made by Amy Branson, she explained that the activities you chose to participate in for your self-care should help you achieve balance in different areas of your life to promote your overall wellness. Having one's own self-care techniques leads to an improvement in overall mental wellbeing (Branson, 2023). This aligns with the statements provided by the participants regarding their strategies for maintaining a positive outlook on life. They emphasize the importance of self-reflection and prioritizing their own mental well-being, even in the midst of encountering challenging emotions and cases on a daily basis in their work. Moreover, self-care is part of the answer to how we can all better cope with daily stressors, explains Patel (2022).

Emotional Regulation in terms of Boundaries

The data gathered on the respondents' understanding of emotional regulation in terms of boundaries is shown in Table 2., which comprises the data extracts that are the verbatim of the respondents, codes that emerged from the transcript and the theme/s generated from the perspective of the respondents.

Table 2. Emotional Regulation in terms of Boundaries

Data Extracts	Coded for	Theme/s
I don't overtalk about myself. I let the client talk,	Resistance of oversharing	Verbal limitation
We provide the office number and explain to them that they can contact us during office hours. Yes, we are public servants, but we also have our own families. When you're in the office, your attention is for everyone. But when you get home, it would be unfair if you're still dealing with office matters.	Time Boundary	Non verbal limitation
The most important boundary for me is to keep my personal distance from my clients. I believe that when I am not so engrossed with my clients life story or situation, that is when I truly help them and see their situation as it is.	Emotional Distancing	
Therefore, the most important thing is how to handle your emotions, set aside your personal emotions, and be the strong person for your client despite your personal situation.	Handle emotions	

As shown in Table 2., all responses obtained two (2) themes: verbal limitation and non-verbal limitation. For verbal limitation, it had one (1) significant code and for non-verbal limitation it had three (3) codes based on the data extracts taken from the verbatim of the in-depth interview conducted.

Verbal Limitation. This theme emerged on the collective and dominant disposition of participants in connection on how they understand emotional regulation in terms of boundaries. Effective communication is essential in establishing and upholding these boundaries while fostering a supportive and therapeutic relationship with clients. Establishing expectations and boundaries from the outset or get go. As they use language that is direct, respectful, and professional, ensuring that clients understand the parameters of the professional relationship. When Social workers communicate clear limits around the scope of their role and the services they can provide. They explain the reasons behind any limitations and help clients access additional resources or support as needed. By being mindful of the words they speak and the manner in which they communicate, social workers can establish and maintain professional boundaries that uphold the integrity of the therapeutic relationship and promote positive outcomes for their clients. In this case respondent 2 made it clear when she said “ I don't overtalk It's better to ask questions than to be the one opening up”

Non-verbal limitation. The second theme that emerged from the the second problem statement gathered from the verbatim of the respondents was non-verbal limitation. Social workers often utilize non-verbal boundaries, such as emotional distancing and managing emotions and time, as essential strategies to prevent becoming overwhelmed by the emotional demands of their work while maintaining professionalism and providing effective support to their clients. Social workers employ emotional distancing as a means to maintain a healthy

separation between their personal emotions and the emotions of their clients. While empathy is crucial in understanding clients' experiences, emotional distancing enables practitioners to prevent their own emotions from becoming entangled with those of their clients. Social workers establish clear time boundaries to ensure that they can effectively manage their workload and prevent fatigue or exhaustion. This includes setting limits on the duration and frequency of client sessions, scheduling regular breaks, and maintaining a healthy work-life balance. By adhering to time boundaries, practitioners can prevent themselves from becoming overwhelmed by the demands of their job and maintain their overall well-being.

Based on the written book by Cloud & Townsend (2014), establishing personal boundaries in the workplace not only benefits the individual implementing the boundaries, but it also communicates to others that there are appropriate boundaries for work-related interactions. While it's a priority for social work providers to assist clients in finding solutions to their problems, it's equally important for them to allocate time for their families and personal lives. By setting these boundaries, social work providers can effectively balance their professional and personal responsibilities, ultimately leading to enhanced well-being and effectiveness in both domains.

Emotional Regulation in terms of Emotional Detachment

The data gathered on the respondents' understanding of emotional regulation in terms of emotional detachment is shown in Table 3., which comprises the data extracts that are the verbatim of the respondents, codes that emerged from the transcript and the theme/s generated from the perspective of the respondents.

Table 3. Emotional Regulation in terms of Emotional Detachment		
Data Extracts	Coded for	Theme/s
If you feel that it's becoming too heavy, detach for a while, even if it's just for a short time, to re-energize yourself. I tell my family that we will go somewhere, or we will travel, to recharge immediately. I try to appear unaffected outwardly, even though deep inside, I may be emotionally impacted. The goal is to address concerns without letting it show that I am affected, ensuring that the helping process and making sure that assessment are not compromised.	Personal Detachment	Personal related reasons
Not the full extent (of showing emotions), because we are aware that you have to control your emotions. if I'm furious, I grip my here (hand). I remind myself or what I've been doing, I think in my mind, divert my attention to that thing so at least you won't feel too bad (too emotionally involved).	Objectivity Resisting to show emotions Diversion of attention	
When you have a problem, just remember that in every problem, there is a solution. And focus on the individuals involved, don't burden your family members because it's very unfair to them.	Focusing on solution	Professional related reasons
It's a principle in social work not to attach your personal emotions to your client's experiences and problems. Clients come to you because they have problems, and they draw strength from you	Social work principle	

Personal-related reasons. This theme emerged on the collective and dominant disposition of participants in connection on how they understand emotional regulation in terms of emotional detachment. Social workers strive to maintain objectivity in their interactions with clients, ensuring that their decisions and interventions are based on unbiased assessment and analysis rather than personal emotions or biases. Detaching one's personal emotion to serve the clients better and to provide a better solution to their current situation. By remaining emotionally detached, practitioners can approach client issues with clarity and impartiality, which is essential for accurately identifying underlying problems and developing appropriate solutions. In the world of social work, maintaining a composed demeanor despite encountering emotionally draining situations is a deliberate strategy employed by those in the caring profession. This approach serves to convey to clients a sense of assurance and confidence that solutions exist for the challenges they face. That no matter what their clients face, they will be there carefully guiding them and supporting their decisions. Giving them hope to carry on and take charge of their lives once again.

In a statement made by respondent 2, she explained how even though she was affected by the concern of her client she doesn't let them know that she was deeply affected, the following statement made her point "The goal is to address concerns without letting it show that I am affected, ensuring that the helping process and assessment are not compromised". In a recent study on communication skills in relation to empathy, there was a differentiated communication behavior with respect to verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication and empathy across those in the caring profession (Vogel et al., 2018). Some are much more comfortable showing and exhibiting non-verbal cues for their boundaries, while others really articulate them through speaking or the lack thereof. In the findings of the study made by Gaudiino & Giovanni (2023), which indicate that personal psychological detachment is an important factor that alleviates the detrimental effects of heavy work investment on employees' well-being. In a similar light, in a study conducted by Webb and others (2012), they proposed the idea that self-distancing serves as a perspective-taking strategy encompassing the adoption of a detached or observer viewpoint. This approach was identified as highly effective in facilitating emotion regulation, underscoring the significance of self-distancing in enabling individuals to manage their thoughts, emotions, and actions effectively (Kross & Ayduk, 2014).

Professional-related reasons. This is the second theme emerged on the collective and dominant disposition of participants in connection on how they understand emotional regulation in terms of emotional detachment. Emotional detachment, grounded in objectivity and guided by social work principles, serves as a valuable tool for social workers in facilitating effective problem-solving and empowering clients to navigate challenges more effectively. By remaining emotionally detached, practitioners can approach client issues with clarity and impartiality, which is essential for accurately identifying underlying problems and developing appropriate solutions. By keeping a professional distance, practitioners can avoid overstepping boundaries or becoming too emotionally involved in their clients' lives, which could compromise the integrity of the therapeutic relationship. In a statement made by respondent 3, that said "When we say we empathize, we feel what they are going through, their situation. Then, we take actions. Empathy involves taking concrete actions ". She explains how she looks at empathy as a means of motivating her to help her client. In agreement with the study made by Ay and others (2020), lower levels of empathy on the nurses were associated with difficult working conditions in operating rooms, intense stress, and high levels of potential stress-driven conflicts between workers and in their work settings. In a similar way, it talks about the paradox in the helping profession where in order for social workers to help their client better, one should detach themselves to be more objective and to focus on the best solution for the problem.

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