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Book review

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In recent years, there has been growing recognition that emotions play a central role in effective social work practice. Increasingly, researchers and practitioners have questioned the traditional belief that professionalism requires social workers to distance themselves emotionally from their work. Alessandro Sicora's *The Emotions of Social Workers: How Reflecting on Feelings Can Enhance Practice* (2026) makes a significant contribution to this discussion by arguing that emotions are not obstacles to professional judgement, but valuable sources of knowledge that can strengthen practice.

The book explores how social workers can draw on emotional awareness and reflection to improve decision-making, professional relationships, learning and overall wellbeing. Rather than viewing emotions as something that should be controlled or suppressed, Sicora presents them as important signals that help practitioners better understand themselves, their clients and the environments in which they work. Through a combination of theory, research findings, practical exercises and real-life examples, the author demonstrates how emotional reflection can contribute to more effective and sustainable practice.

The book consists of ten chapters that move from a discussion of theoretical foundations towards practical applications. The opening chapters introduce concepts such as emotional intelligence, intuitive practice, emotional agility and reflective practice. Sicora then devotes individual chapters to six emotions commonly experienced by social workers: shame, anger, disgust, fear, sadness and joy. The final chapters focus on social work education, supervision, mindfulness, self-compassion and practitioner wellbeing. This structure allows readers and practitioners to gradually develop an

understanding of both the theoretical and practical dimensions of emotional awareness in social work.

One of the most striking features of the book is its accessibility. Sicora explains complex concepts clearly and consistently connects theory to everyday practice situations. As a result, the book is equally useful to students, educators, practitioners and researchers.

A central argument running throughout the text is that emotions should be regarded as an important form of professional knowledge. Sicora challenges the traditional divide between emotion and rationality by suggesting that emotional responses often provide valuable information about situations, relationships and ethical concerns. Rather than weakening professional judgement, emotions can enhance it when practitioners take time to reflect critically on what they are experiencing.

The importance of reflective practice is another dominant theme. Drawing on Schön's (1983) concept of the reflective practitioner, Sicora argues that professional growth depends not simply on experience alone, but also on thoughtful reflection about that experience. Emotions play an important role in this process, because they often draw attention to issues that require deeper exploration. Feelings such as frustration, anxiety or discomfort may indicate underlying concerns that need further consideration.

The book also highlights the strong influence of organisational culture on emotional experiences. Sicora explores how excessive workloads, bureaucratic pressures, blame-oriented environments and limited support can lead to emotions such as fear, shame, anger and sadness among practitioners. At the same time, he argues that organisations can foster resilience by creating supportive environments that encourage reflection, learning and emotional openness.

An especially refreshing aspect of the book is its attention to positive emotions. Much of the literature on social work focuses on stress, burnout and emotional exhaustion. Sicora acknowledges these realities, but also highlights the importance of joy, pride, satisfaction and hope. He argues that positive emotions contribute significantly to resilience, motivation and long-term commitment to the profession.

One of the book's greatest strengths is the way it combines theory with empirical evidence. Sicora draws on research involving social workers and social work students from several countries, including Italy, England, Scotland, Israel, South Africa and the United States. This international perspective broadens the relevance of the discussion and highlights common emotional experiences across different social work contexts.

The use of what Sicora calls "bonsai stories" is particularly innovative. These short reflective narratives allow practitioners to recount emotionally significant experiences in a concise and accessible format. The stories are engaging to read and effectively illustrate complex emotional situations, while maintaining confidentiality. They also encourage readers to reflect on their own experiences and emotional responses.

Another notable methodological feature is the use of group concept mapping. This approach combines qualitative and quantitative methods to examine emotions such as sadness and joy. By involving practitioners directly in generating and organising emotional experiences, the method provides valuable insights into how social workers understand and experience their work.

The theoretical foundation of the book is also impressive. Sicora draws on a range of influential perspectives, including emotional intelligence, emotional agility, reflective practice, emotional labour, mindfulness, intuition and self-compassion. Importantly, these theories are presented in a way that remains practical and relevant. Readers are not overwhelmed by theory; instead, theoretical ideas are consistently linked to professional practice.

The book builds effectively on previous contributions to social work literature. For example, David Howe's (2008) work on emotional intelligence emphasised the importance of emotional awareness in building relationships with service users. Sicora extends this discussion by examining specific emotions in greater depth and by exploring the organisational factors that shape emotional experiences. Similarly, while Richard Ingram (2015) highlighted the importance of emotional reflection in practice, Sicora advances the conversation through original research and innovative methodologies.

The book has many strengths. Its integration of theory and practice is particularly effective, making it both academically rigorous and practically useful. The inclusion of international research strengthens the credibility of the work, while the focus on often-overlooked emotions such as shame and disgust adds depth to the discussion. The attention given to joy is especially valuable, because it offers a more balanced understanding of social work practice than is often found in the literature.

At the same time, several limitations should be acknowledged. Much of the evidence presented is based on self-reported experiences and reflective narratives. While these accounts provide rich insights into practitioners' lived experiences, they are inherently subjective. In addition, some of the empirical findings are drawn primarily from Italian samples, which may limit the extent to which they can be generalised across all professional contexts.

Another limitation is the relatively limited use of large-scale quantitative research. Readers seeking extensive statistical evidence may find the empirical foundation less robust than they would prefer. Some chapters also revisit similar organisational issues, leading to occasional repetition. Nevertheless, these limitations are relatively minor and do not detract significantly from the general quality of the text.

Overall, *The Emotions of Social Workers: How Reflecting on Feelings Can Enhance Practice* is a thoughtful and important contribution to contemporary social work literature. Sicora successfully demonstrates that emotions are not barriers to professionalism, but valuable resources that can enhance understanding, decision-making, ethical awareness and resilience. By encouraging

practitioners to engage critically with their emotional experiences, the book offers a practical framework for strengthening both professional effectiveness and enhancing personal wellbeing.

The book is particularly relevant for practising social workers, supervisors, managers, educators and students. Its accessible style, strong research base and practical focus make it suitable for a wide range of readers. Researchers interested in emotional labour, reflective practice, resilience and professional identity will also find it a valuable resource.

At a time when concerns about practitioner wellbeing and workforce sustainability are increasingly prominent, Sicora's work offers a timely reminder that emotions should not be ignored. Instead, they should be recognised, explored and used as a source of learning and professional growth. For this reason, the book deserves a broad readership within the social work profession and beyond.

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