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Contributions of emotions and emotional intelligence to working relationships

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ABSTRACT

Understanding one's own and others' emotions can help practitioners form positive relationships with clients. The contributions of emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) to working relationships were studied in the context of Malaysian culture. The current research applied the ethnographic approach to the research design; however, it was not conducted as a full ethnography, but was underpinned and framed by ethnographic ideas. The social workers' perceptions of emotions and EI in the workplace were investigated through semi-structured interviews. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews with child social workers in Sabah, Petaling Jaya, and Kuala Lumpur were conducted. Individual interviews were executed to learn about the contributions of emotions and EI to their professional practices in terms of working relationships and decision-making processes. Information from the direct observation was also used to further contextualize emotions and EI in the eyes of social workers. Three main themes (i.e., aspects of EI) have been identified concerning EI in the social work profession in Malaysia, particularly in working relationships: 1) the skill of empathizing, and 2) the expression and regulation of one's own and others' emotional experiences. Regarding gender differences, the present research findings seemed to show a resemblance in the way both male and female participants reported using emotions in their work.

Contribution/ Originality: The research findings seemed to show that skills in empathizing, expressing, and regulating one's and others' emotional experiences, as well as factors related to religious practice, contributed to EI. The qualitative research findings also revealed the strength of religious beliefs among Malaysian social workers, which facilitate the qualities of EI. The present study implies that the spiritual and religious dimensions of practice should not be ignored in social work education and training.

1. INTRODUCTION

Emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) in the workplace are discussed in this article. The contributions of emotions and EI to working relationships were studied in the context of Malaysian culture. To begin, the roles and functions of emotions in the practice of social work with children and families are discussed.

The role and function of emotions in organizations have been neglected (see Luksha, 2006). Luksha (2006), on the other hand, believes that emotions play a significant role in human cognition and behavior. In discussing emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) in the social work profession, we can consider the debate over the dominance of rationality in public administration and assert that emotions in management and emotion management play a

significant role in public administration outcomes (e.g., Vigoda-Gadot and Meisler, 2010). EI has been considered the ability to reason about emotions as well as the skill to use feelings, emotions, and emotional data to aid reasoning (Vigoda-Gadot & Meisler, 2010). Thus, EI may also contribute to the development of social work/service user relationships (see Ingram, 2013). However, literature relating to EI and social work is rather limited.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. EI and Working Relationships

Understanding one's own and others' emotions can help social workers form positive relationships with clients. Some writers have also proposed that workers generate emotional benefits from their interactions with service users, such as feelings of closeness and belonging, as well as a sense of spirituality and self-awareness (Warrick, 2005). According to Bar-On (2000), the ability to be aware of emotions and the ability to form and maintain interpersonal relationships are linked. This correlation, according to Bar-On (2000), is most likely related to the way the construct is defined. Baron also asserts that the ability to give and receive emotional closeness in relationships is based on the ability to understand feelings and emotions within those relationships, as well as the ability to be aware of emotions. It is essential to comprehend the link between working relationships and the concept of EI. EI can aid social workers in accurately perceiving, understanding, monitoring, and managing information for themselves and their clients in intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.

Morrison (2007), in his conceptual paper on EI and its impact on social work practice, considers EI and emotions in relation to five core tasks, including 1) user engagement, 2) assessment and observation, 3) decision-making, 4) collaboration and cooperation, and 5) stress management. It is argued that, at a time when social work needs to demonstrate its professional competence, one way to do so is to demonstrate the ability to address users' needs through relationships. This necessitates the ability to effectively manage one's own and others' emotions (Morrison, 2007).

Identifying, collating, assessing, and analyzing information, as well as developing an intervention plan, are all part of the assessment process in social work (Wilson, Ruch, Lymbery, & Cooper, 2008). During the assessment process, professional relationships between social workers and clients are typically formed. Communication skills are crucial because they are at the core of all relationships (Wilson et al., 2008), aside from intra- and interpersonal skills, which can help the assessment process run smoothly (Morrison, 2007). The evaluation of complex cases of child abuse and neglect is a time-consuming and difficult task (Howe, Dooley, & Hinings, 2000). This necessitates not only data collection skills but also all of the skills listed above, which must be applied in order to provide clients with effective and appropriate services.

Practitioners in the field of social work deal with troubled individuals, families, groups, and impoverished communities. When working with people in need, social workers must consider issues of resilience and coping strategies (Morrison, 2007). One of the strategies that has been promoted in order to empower social workers to combat stress is to develop resilient personalities with good self-esteem and a sense of self-control (Collins, 2008). According to Storey and Billingham (2001), high levels of stress are common in the workplace. Stress is harmful not only to practitioners' health but also to the quality of service they provide to users (Storey & Billingham, 2001). Stress in the workplace is linked to practitioner characteristics such as age and gender (Chadsey & Beyer, 2001): research conducted by Storey and Billingham (2001) found that females were reported to have higher levels of stress than males, and practitioners aged 45 or younger appeared to have a higher level of stress than those aged over 45.

A good interpersonal relationship between practitioners and patients/clients, in addition to characteristic factors, is also important and very much needed because it can affect their practice. For example, research on nursing practice has found that having the ability to write nursing notes reduces the likelihood of nurses becoming stressed as a result of interpersonal relationship issues (Mäkinen, Kivimäki, Elovainio, & Virtanen, 2003). Writing nursing notes is a common practice in patient-centered nursing. According to Mäkinen et al. (2003), work overload and interpersonal

relations problems are linked to stress from high levels of responsibility. Another source of stress for helping professions practitioners is the tense relationship between practitioners, managers, and lawyers (Dickens, 2006). These groups' various responsibilities, priorities, and practices might compete. For example, inexperienced new social workers may seek more legal advice, which may be resented by managers due to the costs.

The relationship between social workers and young children in care services is influenced by their personal attitudes and values toward children and childhood (Winter, 2009). According to Viederman (2002), active and dynamic engagement in professional relationships can lead to the formation of a bond that facilitates the completion of the next steps. There is evidence that feelings and emotions experienced during decision-making can have a positive impact on decision-making performance in the context of decision-making (Seo & Barrett, 2007).

The best place for a child's welfare to be met is within his or her own family, where social and psychological development can be encouraged (Ballou et al., 2001; Gable, Belsky, & Crnic, 1992; Howe, 2005). The author believes that children's voices, as well as their parents', should be heard, and that their wishes and feelings should be taken into account when working together. Winter (2009) highlights the importance of social workers developing long-term and consistent relationships with the young children in their care. Inevitably, social workers will experience stress as a result of juggling multiple issues in such situations. In the United Kingdom, it is valued and emphasized in legislation that social workers collaborate with parents by involving them in decision-making (The Lord Laming, 2009), and one of the most important activities is to consider the wishes and feelings of children. Effective and appropriate relationships have been emphasized as a critical factor not only in working with families but also in learning environments and in the development of relationship competency between social work students and their practice teachers (Lefevre, 2005). This exemplifies how important the concept of relationship is in the field of social work. More importantly, it has been suggested that social workers can only conduct relationships with skill and compassion if they are emotionally intelligent (see Howe, 2008).

2.2. Philosophical Debate on Emotions and Emotional Intelligence

A research philosophy is a set of beliefs about how to collect and analyze data about a phenomenon (Levin, 1988). A number of classic theoretical or epistemological tensions can be found in the literature on emotions. Divergence on issues such as materialism and idealism, positivism and interpretivism, universalism and relativism, individual and culture, and romanticism and rationalism are just a few of them (Lutz & White, 1986). Each of these philosophical/epistemological positions has ramifications for how emotions are studied. Emotions, for example, may be treated as a variable that can be explained by other variables, such as cultural institutions or individual religious ritual participation, or as an inseparable part of cultural meaning and social systems. Whether a researcher claims to study emotions directly, affects or ideas about emotions, or both, is determined by these tensions. They also have an impact on the methods used, which include behavior observation, compassion, introspection, and cultural analysis. (Lutz & White, 1986).

In relation to the present research, psychological research indicates that some emotions can be found in all cultures and some expressions can be recognized across cultures. (see Brun, Doguoglu, and Kuenzle (2008)). According to Ekman and Cordaro (2011), emotions are distinct, automatic reactions to universally shared, culture-specific, and individual-specific events. Meanwhile, Parkinson, Fischer, and Manstead (2005) state that in individualistic societies, emotions can be seen as expressions of the unique self. Collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, perceive emotions as a response to a social context, emphasizing group relationships and promoting harmony and interdependence (Parkinson et al., 2005). In reference to the term EI and my pre-existing opinion on EI, I agree that emotional intelligence encompasses self-awareness, professional efficiency, and emotional regulation (see Akerjordet and Severinsson, 2007). Emotions and EI, on the other hand, are seen as the most contentious among theoretical perspectives by social constructionism. (see Cornelius (2000)). Due to Western concepts of the person as an individual, Lutz and White (1986) argue that the dominant view of emotions has been one that prioritizes inner

bodily experiences. However, such a perspective on emotions is regarded as constrictive, limiting both theoretical and practical understanding of emotions and social life (Lutz & White, 1986). As a result, the current study emphasized a different theoretical understanding of emotions, one that does not assume a sharp contrast between rational and irrational, individual and society, or public and private. (see also Savage (2003).

Social constructionism is the central epistemological stance in relation to emotions that underpins the current study. To unify my understanding of emotions, following to which are fortified by biology and can be reliably measured as well as socially formed, I also adopted the approach of pragmatism due to the concern in application and 'what works' (Patton, 1990) pertaining to emotions. The truth of a statement (knowledge) is measured by its function, according to pragmatic theory, which means that the statement is true if it has a practical application in human life (Rosyid, 2010). In the case of the present study, emotions and EI were considered to be the result of biological evolution, psychical and social factors (see Rosyid, 2010), and also as life experiences (Rosyid, 2010; Zakaria, Hamzah, & Udin, 2011). Emotions, according to social constructionists, are largely determined by social norms for emotions, or 'feeling rules.' (Hochschild, 1979). They adhere to a symbolic interactionist model, which states that people must first define situations before they can experience emotions. Symbolic interactionism is one of the sociological perspectives on emotions and one that is particularly well suited to the explication of individuals' construction of emotions and the part certain feelings play in social control (Shott, 1979). Shott (1979) summarizes the symbolic interactionist analysis of affective experience as individuals construct their emotions within the limited set of norms and internal stimuli. She adds that individuals' interpretations and perceptions are crucial in this frequently evolving process. According to Shott, internal states and cues, as important as they are for affective experience, do not establish feelings in and of themselves; it is the individual's definitions and interpretations that determine the emotional significance or non-significance of physiological states. This may result from the culture and beliefs of certain societies.

Aside from the supremacy of rationality in Western thought, which leads to the neglect or dismissal of emotions as irrational, private inner sensations (Lutz & White, 1986) in terms of the relationship between emotions and gender and/or emotional intelligence and gender, emotions have also historically been associated with women, their 'hysterical' bodies, and feminized activities such as caring. (see Wilkes and Wallis (1998)). Certain caring professions, such as nursing, have seen their professional standing eroded as a result of the identification of emotions with women. Gray (2010) claims that in nursing, there will be an emotional division of labor based on gender and gender stereotypes. The field of nursing, interpersonal and physical interaction with patients, the perceived roles of male and female nurses, and the roles of other health staff such as doctors are all shaped by opinions on appropriate and inappropriate emotions. However, there is role recognition regarding the kind of emotions represented in the nursing profession, and there has been little examination of the knowledge that emotions represent, particularly in social work settings (see Ingram, 2013; Morrison, 2007).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. The Ethnographic Approach

Based on the idea that emotions are being seen as affects and ideas with complex and subtle meanings (see also Lutz and White (1986)), the current research applied the ethnographic approach to the research design. The current research, however, was not conducted as a full ethnography. The current research is underpinned and framed by ethnographic ideas. The researcher's philosophical stance influenced how the ethnographic approach was used (see Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994), in which emotion is viewed as a synthesis of biological underpinnings shaped by a cultural worldview and social behavior script. As a result, I used the ethnographic approach to adopt the narrower focus associated with a mini-ethnography in the context of the social work profession in general. A mini-ethnography, like more conventional ethnography, allows for the insight of a local world as well as the framework and flow of interpersonal experiences within it; however, it accommodates the ethnographer's limitations and the difficulties that

prevent long-term immersion in the field (Kleinman, 1992). Furthermore, the ethnographic framework is thought to be a good fit for dealing with how Malaysian social workers operate and use emotions and EI in their daily activities, whether in their jobs or in their personal lives. Moreover, the ethnography framework was chosen as the research framework in order to gain a working familiarity with the frames of meaning that child social workers enact in their lives (Geertz, 2000).

At some point, all of the classic theories of emotions have been questioned. Two of the more recent areas of theory are the affective events theory, which delves into the concept of time as it relates to behavioral influence on how people react emotionally to events, and the modern cognitive theories, which establish a link between interpretation and emotional responses (Bueno, 2004). Thus, the concept of emotions underpinning the present study is social constructionism, in which individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences (i.e., emotional experiences). The subjective meanings of emotions are often negotiated socially and formed through interaction with others and with cultural norms that operate in an individual's life. The present research also focuses on the specific context of the workplace of the social work profession in order to comprehend the cultural settings of Malaysian social workers. I accept that emotions are underpinned by biological responses and that, despite the limitations, there is some value in measuring them, but with limitations. Because the current research used a qualitative method of interviews, the participants were given the opportunity to explain their emotional experiences. In addition, what had been spoken about by the participants could also be examined further through the observations that were carried out. Therefore, the present research used qualitative methods to explore emotions and the contributions of emotional intelligence to the workplace.

In this ethnographic research approach, the procedures were carried out using a variety of methods, which enabled me to strengthen both quantitative and qualitative data in order to present a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2008). Quantitative data, for example, reveal the dimensions of a phenomenon, whereas qualitative data reveal richer and more complex findings. Furthermore, the mixed methods (i.e., questionnaires, observations, and interviews) were beneficial and added to the discussions (Denscombe, 2007). The quantitative aspects of the study were designed to see if any demographic characteristics relevant to social work were prominent, while the qualitative aspects were designed to learn about social workers' perceptions of these and other aspects of emotions that they thought were relevant to their work. However, this article only reports the qualitative data, which includes interviews and observations.

3.2. Interviews

The main research question is complicated, and it seeks to learn more about Malaysian child social workers' perceptions of emotions and emotional intelligence (EI), as well as their contributions to better working relationships in child protection, rehabilitation, and welfare organizations. Individual interviews were used to collect qualitative data, with the goal of gaining a better understanding of the frames of meaning in which child social workers regarded and used emotions and EI in their work. The social workers' perceptions of emotions and EI in the workplace were investigated through semi-structured interviews.

A total of 25 semi-structured interviews with child social workers about emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) were conducted. Individual interviews with the 25 child social workers were executed to learn about the contributions of emotions and EI to their professional practices in terms of working relationships and decision-making processes. One of the 25 interviewees, however, declined to have his or her daily professional practice and behavior (i.e., emotional experiences and emotional regulation) observed. The participants' perceptions of emotions and EI, as well as their contributions to their working relationships and decision-making processes, were investigated using a qualitative open-ended interview. Through a series of open-ended questions, the participants' perceptions of emotions and EI, as well as their contributions to their professional practices, were brought to the fore. These forms of insights

and meanings, which are part of a complex experiential process, could be captured with a qualitative approach but not with a simple quantitative method involving the affiliation of two variables (Patton, 1987).

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection. They were then manually coded and analyzed. Thematic analysis was used to look for themes and patterns in the data, as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The taped interviews were transcribed, to be more specific. The transcribed interviews, as well as written information like the organization's motto, were later translated into English. Codes were created to represent categories or themes based on the research questions (e.g., empathy, emotional expression, emotional regulation, spirituality, etc.). It is noted that any themes that didn't fit were excluded from the final report. More details will be given in the following sections.

3.3. Observation

Information from direct observation was used to further contextualize emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) in the eyes of social workers. Issues relevant to the research questions were noted in the field notes. A total of 20 observations of child social workers at times when they were in charge of cases involving children and families (e.g., during home visits, assessments, and court proceedings) were used to provide the qualitative observational data that helped explain how they managed and used their emotions and demonstrated EI in their workplace. There were 24 child social workers who agreed to participate in this study by giving their permission for their practice to be observed. However, only 20 of the observations (episodes) captured related to the present research questions. Not all of the participants showed particular episodes that fulfilled the present research questions or revealed the use of emotions and EI during the observation process. In other words, the observations did not fit into this study's area of interest and were therefore excluded from the analysis. The observations were conducted for three months between January and March 2011. During these formal observations, emotional expressions and experiences were observed that related to working relationships (i.e., with clients, colleagues, staff members, individuals in more senior management positions, and other professionals) and decision-making processes (i.e., child protection, child rehabilitation, child placement, organizational management, and administration).

I scheduled my daily activities to maximize the opportunities for research observations of the social workers' relevant activities. I positioned myself more at the observer's end of the participant–observer continuum. Direct observation was used to ascertain whether the participants' conversational claims matched their work practices in reality (Mulhall, 2003). My observations were not only focused on the participants' actions and behaviors that relate to emotions and EI, but also on the physical settings and on interactions between my behaviors and the participants' (Merriam, 2009). Some of the observations required the participants' clarification and explanation, such as regarding why they acted or behaved in certain ways or exhibited certain kinds of behavior. Despite the participants' claims that EI was a new term to them and that they had very little knowledge of the concept, in some scenarios during the observations, I explained to them that what they were doing was related to EI and/or that EI was being manifested in their professional practices. My knowledge sharing seemed to enlighten them as to the meaning of the concept of EI. However, my role was more that of an observer than that of a participant. As a direct observer, I did not typically try to become a participant in the context. I strived to be unobtrusive during the observations and I did not interrupt them while they were working. I also tried not to send any verbal or non-verbal messages during the observation process. If I needed further clarification concerning their behavior, I would ask them later but not during the observation process. My main role was to observe them during their work practices rather than taking part in those practices (see Langley (1988)).

The data were recorded in a field notebook. I noted down both the verbal and non-verbal information that related to the research questions. I also noted any information that I did not understand so that I could ask the participants later for further clarification. Mostly, the observations took place during home visits and case assessments. I gave them my full focus and attention and collected verbal and non-verbal information in as detailed a way as possible

about the behaviors of the people involved, i.e., how the workers behaved during home visits and the assessment process, and any particular factors affecting the workers' behaviors, actions, and decisions. In this overt observation, permission was granted by the participants for me to observe their behaviors concerning emotions and emotional intelligence when dealing with issues that might generate certain emotions, regarding how they display, express, and regulate their emotions, and so forth. The particular episodes in which the participants expressed, regulated, and utilized their emotions and the emotions of others were observed and noted in a field notebook. In most cases, the episodes were then explored through formal and informal interviews and/or informal conversations, particularly when I thought it was necessary to ask for further clarification and understanding. Some of the observation episodes raised questions for me. For example, due to my status as an outsider and the fact that I was not a practitioner, some of the workers' actions and behaviors, which were guided by their organizational policies, baffled me as I was not familiar with them. This needed some clarification from the workers, and I used formal and/or informal interviews to obtain these clarifications.

As soon as the observation data were collected, I expanded whatever notes I was able to make into descriptive narratives. The observations were normally scheduled in the morning and/or afternoon, depending on the type of case. Home visits, child conferences, and court cases were normally scheduled in the morning, while child and family assessments were scheduled in the afternoon. If the observation was conducted in the morning and I had plenty of time during the afternoon (particularly if no observation was scheduled in the afternoon), I would use that free time to expand my notes. For the observations scheduled in the afternoon, I would expand my notes in the evening at home. During the observations, I included and wrote down as many details as possible. If there were any observations that I did not understand or if I had questions in my mind after the observation session, I normally asked the child social workers who had volunteered for their activities to be observed for further clarification concerning their behaviors. I noted all the possible data in my field notebook and expanded the narrative accounts on the computer. Hard copies of the typed anonymized data were stored in a secure location, while the soft copies were stored on the computer with password protection.

3.4. Sample Selection

The social workers (i.e., child protectors and child rehabilitation officers) in this research were those who currently work in hospitals and welfare departments in Sabah, Petaling Jaya, and Kuala Lumpur on issues relating to 1) children in need of care and protection, and 2) children in need of protection and rehabilitation. The purpose of the non-probability purposive sampling method was to gain insight into specific types of practice (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983). In this case, the child protectors who were assigned to child and family cases at the time the research was being executed were invited to take part. The demographic backgrounds of the participants/interviewees involved in the present study are displayed in Table 1. Participants' demographic information (individual interviews).

Table 1. Participants' demographic information (Individual interviews).

Pseudonym child	Gender	Age	Marital status	Academic qualification	Position	Location	Experience (Years)
Child protector 1	Male	35	Married	Diploma	Child protector	Kota Kinabalu	3
Probation officer 1	Female	35	Married	Diploma	Probation officer	Kota Kinabalu	2
Probation officer 2	Female	35	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Kota Kinabalu	5
Probation officer 3	Male	32	Married	Diploma	Probation officer	Kota Kinabalu	2
Probation officer 4	Male	47	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Kota Kinabalu	5
Child protector 2	Female	33	Married	Diploma	Child protector	Kota Kinabalu	2
Child protector 3	Female	40	Married	Bachelor's	Child protector	Kota Kinabalu	19
Child protector 4	Female	48	Married	Master's	Child protector	Kota Kinabalu	>20
Child protector 5	Male	34	Married	Diploma	Child protector	Kota Kinabalu	5
Med Soc Worker 1	Female	43	Married	Bachelor's	Med social worker	Kuala Lumpur	2
Med Soc Worker 2	Male	51	Married	Bachelor's	Med social worker	Kuala Lumpur	>20
*Probation officer 5	Male	45	Married	Diploma	Probation officer	Kuala Lumpur	16
Child protector 6	Female	35	Married	Bachelor's	Child protector	Kuala Lumpur	5
Med Soc Worker 3	Female	50	Married	Master's	Med social worker	Kuala Lumpur	>20
Probation officer 6	Female	36	Married	Master's	Probation officer	Kuala Lumpur	5
Probation officer 7	Female	30	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Petaling	4
Probation officer 8	Male	29	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Petaling	2
Child protector 7	Female	34	Married	Bachelor's	Child protector	Petaling	9
Child protector 8	Male	39	Married	Bachelor's	Child protector	Kuala Lumpur	5
Probation officer 9	Male	29	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Petaling	1
Probation officer 10	Female	34	Married	Bachelor's	Probation officer	Kuala Lumpur	1
Med Soc Worker 4	Male	33	Married	Bachelor's	Med social worker	Kuala Lumpur	5
Med Soc Worker 5	Male	42	Single	Master's	Med social worker	Kuala Lumpur	6
Med Soc Worker 6	Male	33	Married	Bachelor's	Med social worker	Kota Kinabalu	9
Med Soc Worker 7	Female	37	Married	Bachelor's	Med social worker	Kota Kinabalu	3

Note: * Refused to participate in the participant observant.

4. ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Skills of Empathizing

In response to the research question to investigate whether social workers consider that good working relationships require the consideration of emotional intelligence (EI) – EI was related and found to revolve around two main themes in particular: 1) the skills of empathizing, and 2) the regulation of one's own and others' emotional experiences. These two main themes and their sub-themes will be discussed further below.

The analysis of findings showed that the participants seemed to perceive emotional intelligence (EI) as an important factor in working relationships. There are four sub-themes (concerning the usefulness of empathy) categorized under this main theme: understanding clients' situations and problems, sharing clients' problems, creating a strong bond of relationship between clients and social workers, and defining the concept of fate. These sub-themes in relation to the skill of empathizing (i.e., a domain of EI) will be discussed below. According to the participants, having the skill of empathizing could help them understand their clients' situations and problems. Moreover, the skill also enabled the clients to express their problems with ease and strengthened the relationship between the clients and social workers.

There is a general assumption in the literature that the involvement of particular emotions could either hinder or strengthen working relationships (e.g., Ehrenreich, Fairholme, Buzzella, Ellard, & Barlow, 2007; Rumble, Van Lange, & Parks, 2010; Stephan & Finlay, 1999). In particular, positive emotions are considered helpful for better relationships. In the present research, throughout the interviews, the social workers repeatedly mentioned the importance and function of emotions in their practice when working with others. When asked in the interviews whether they would consider that a good working relationship includes the consideration of emotions and emotional intelligence (EI), the participants seemed to agree that emotions and EI (e.g., empathy) could help in working relationships. They perceived that skill in empathizing could help them understand their clients' situations and problems. An understanding of the clients' problems and situations was seen as crucial by the participants. They stated that understanding the clients' situations was carried out by empathizing; thus, they tended to put themselves in their clients' situations. By doing so, they could feel and understand their emotions and thoughts. It also seemed that emotions played a role by encouraging them to take appropriate action in helping the clients. This relates to the discussions of emotions in the area of ethics and moral philosophy:

> *I think it can help [empathy helps working relationships with clients]. I understand their problems because of emotions. And as a reaction to my emotions, I help this family.*
>
> (Child Protector 1, male, aged 35)

> *… In terms of clients, I have no problem. My sympathy … I don't feel it is sympathy but more empathy, because when we empathize and look at their conditions, we understand their situations and that they need support. The clients who have been referred to us usually need our support in terms of understanding, materials, and psychology.*
>
> (Medical Social Worker 4, male, aged 33)

> *If the social workers had no empathy, I think it would be difficult for them to give help to their clients. For example, they [clients] always ask about the terms and conditions for them to get help. How can people [clients] with a salary of RM3,000 get help? We cannot only look at the surface. Even though their salary is RM3,000, what will happen if they have 10 children to feed? Today, a salary of RM3,000 with 10 children seems impossible. Besides, they need about RM500–RM600 for medical expenses. Furthermore, they are also parents and heads of their families. We also look at their expenses for medication back home. We do understand.*
>
> (Medical Social Worker 7, male, aged 33)

The preceding examples illustrate how skill in empathizing could help one understand the situations and feelings of others. One understands the situations of others by empathizing. The act of empathizing here refers to using one's imagination to put oneself in the client's situation. By imagining the situation as one's own, one can understand the client's emotional circumstances while dealing with their predicament. Thus, any child social workers who have this skill can easily understand their clients' situations. When there is understanding, it can help social workers decide on the appropriate actions for problem-solving.

The participants also perceived that the skill of empathizing could provide comfort to the clients and encourage them to reveal and share their problems. In addition, synchronization of emotions was also perceived as important; hence, the social workers reasoned that if an emotion did not match the situation, this might hinder effective practice:

> *Through my experience, when emotions exist between us and the clients, it is easier for the clients to explain because of our empathy. However, if our emotions are different, this can become a problem. For example, when clients come to us feeling sad, we should not be stern during that time; otherwise, they will not explain to us what they want, which means we will not understand their needs.*
>
> (Probation Officer 3, male, aged 32)

> *In cases like teenage pregnancy, we know, err... we understand our clients' and the families' feelings. It [teenage pregnancy] is a shame. It is a big shame for the family and society as well. However, we don't show our anger or resentment. We need to solve the problem professionally. Give them time. If the time comes, they will tell us. It's not easy to reveal our story to strangers, particularly in cases like teenage pregnancy, according to my experience.*
>
> (Medical Social Worker 1, female, aged 43)

> *There was one case where I suspected it was child abuse. It involved a single mother with six children. One of the children was in the hospital due to a serious injury. The mother said that the child fell in the bathroom. However, I knew that was not the case. The child did not fall. The family lived in a remote area. When I visited the other family members [the grandmother and other children], they seemed to be hiding something… err… as if they were trying to cover up for the suspect [the mother]. I could sense this from the grandmother's behavior. Err… the grandmother and the other children did not offer much cooperation; even the neighbors behaved the same. I understand that, err… I mean, they were frightened and worried. They were worried if I reported the case to the police. So, I tried to build their [the grandmother's and the other children's] trust in me and told them that I wanted to help their family because there were another five children that needed to be protected. I showed my interest. I said to them that I wanted to help because we did not want the same thing to happen to the other children. I needed to convince them [the grandmother and the other children]. It took some time, and they eventually cooperated.*
>
> (Child Protector 5, male, aged 34)

The examples above seem to show us that helping others who are facing difficult issues in their lives, particularly issues that are in conflict with social and community expectations, requires the professional social worker's understanding. This understanding should be displayed using appropriate emotions in accordance with the expectations of others. When one displays the required emotions, it is easier for others to confide in their problems no matter how difficult the issues are. In this manner, child social workers who show their skills in empathizing, understanding, and expressing appropriate emotions could provide a comfortable means for clients to share their problems.

Apart from the two perceptions mentioned by the participants above, they also perceived that emotions and skills in empathizing could help create a strong bond of relationship between clients and social workers. In addition, skills in communication appeared to be an important aspect of strengthening a relationship.

The following excerpts from the participants' responses illustrate this:

Hmm … to me, yes they can, they can [negative emotions such as sadness and sympathy could reinforce a relationship]. Having emotions makes us feel closer to them, because when we listen and go deep down into their heart, we will understand their inner feelings. It is better than doing nothing without any involvement, because this will make us fail to feel what they feel.

(Child Protector 2, female, aged 33)

My client is the youngest in his family. However, he is naughty and stubborn! He tells me that his parents always compare him with his brothers, who are good at their studies and in their behavior. Actually, he is a good boy, but he needs more attention, especially from his father. I always listen to what he wants to say, and he feels appreciated. I always tell him about his parents' expectations of him, and I will communicate this in such a way that he can feel valued. He always comes to visit me at home. Sometimes, we eat together, and we become close.

(Medical Social Worker 2, male, aged 51)

The excerpts above seem to show that having the right communication skills (i.e., being a good listener) with people who are facing problems is important. When one can show one's skill in listening to others, this enables them to gain trust due to the understanding displayed. When one is trusted by others, complicated and difficult issues may be revealed with ease. Furthermore, when there is trust, the relationship will also be reinforced. Thus, by possessing skills in listening to others during their communication with clients, child social workers will be able to create a strong relationship between themselves and the clients.

In strengthening the positive contributions of emotions, the quote from a female social worker below further stresses that it is impossible to build a
relationship without having emotions:

I don't know, maybe [emotions may hinder professional practice]. Maybe it depends on experiences and discussions so that we can guide ourselves. Without emotions, it is like … impossible. Without emotions, for example, empathy, we will not be able to understand others. We need to understand why a person becomes like this. I don't blame any party. I don't blame anybody because apart from understanding ourselves, we also need to understand others as well.

(Probation Officer 7, female, aged 30)

The female social worker was also asked about the motto that was displayed by the top level of management. From the quote above, this female social worker seemed to disagree with the motto and suggested that it may be the result of past experiences (i.e., bad consequences of misguided emotions) in handling similar or other child and family cases and discussions with colleagues and/or leaders. However, like many other participants, she also emphasized that emotions are important in understanding others. Seemingly, past experiences and regular discussions could help individuals regulate their emotions and guide them towards more positive actions, behaviors, and thoughts. The participants seemed to consider that emotions can be guided by sharing dilemmas or issues through discussions. One of the male participants added that

If I am not sure about something or I feel bad about something, for example, in deciding whether an action is right or what action I should take, err... or if I am being empathetic or too sympathetic, I will consult my senior colleagues or my boss. I am not easily influenced by my emotions. My past experiences in handling similar cases have also taught me what is right and wrong.

(Probation Officer 8, male, aged 29)

From the illustrations above, the participants seemed to disagree with the idea of separating emotions from their professional practice (even though management encourages them to do so see Appendix 1). It appears that emotions have a positive contribution, particularly in understanding others. Emotions, however, as perceived by the participants, need to be used with caution. Actions and decisions prompted by either the wrong or right emotions, or

by excessive emotion (i.e., being overemotional), could challenge one in carrying out one's duties. In addition, as perceived by the child social workers, emotions can also be guided by consultation, which shows that emotions can obscure their actions and decisions. When there are no definite situations, one can get advice from experienced individuals.

In terms of the effect of gender on the application of emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) in professional practice, it seems that male and female Malaysian child social workers showed some similarity. Both male and female workers used emotion (skill in empathizing) and EI in the workplace. Showing and/or using skill in empathizing may be due to the necessity of the social work profession itself. In working with emotional beings, having the right skills in handling them is important. Involvement with emotions is inevitable. The desire to help others, to show interest, and to be emotionally warm are some of the important aspects that go along with emotions that signify efforts to show effective assistance and practice in social work (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Larsen, 2009). Most of the participants, regardless of gender, seemed to indicate the usage and importance of certain emotions. For example, Probation Officer 7 (a female), above, appeared to disagree with the idea of working without emotions: she emphasized that empathy is a crucial component of understanding others. According to her, empathy is important in preventing bias. It also appeared that the female participants are capable of distinguishing between emotional under- and over-involvement. Furthermore, the female participants also appeared to be able to differentiate between useful and useless emotions in their practice. As Probation Officer 7 mentioned, "*I don't know, maybe [emotions may hinder professional practice]. Maybe it depends on experiences and discussions so that we can guide ourselves.*" Likewise, the male participants gave the same comment. For example, Probation Officer 8 (a male) responded that he would play with his emotions and consider them in his actions; he said

> *If I am not sure about something or I feel bad about it, for example, in deciding whether an action is right or what action I should take, err... or if I am being empathetic or too sympathetic...*
>
> (Probation Officer 8, male, aged 29)

Thus, the qualitative findings confirm the quantitative findings concerning the differences in emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) between genders, in that both qualitative and quantitative findings seem to show similar emotions and EI between male and female child social workers in Malaysia. The difference between genders in emotions and EI is also discussed in Chapter Five under Subsection 5.4.

Personal experiences (e.g., social status and/or social roles in the family) also influence emotions towards clients, particularly when children are involved. It seems that empathy can be described as an attempt to put oneself in another person's shoes. It explains that one's sadness can be felt by others; for example, if one is a father, one may feel how another man (also a father) is feeling. According to one of the participants, who is a father, it is important that children should be taken care of by their own family members:

> *I was quite touched by that case. I also have children, so I know how it feels. Our children should be under our care.*
>
> (Child Protector 1, male, aged 35)

The male social worker in this case (Child Protector 1) is a father of three children, and his client is a father of two children. The case states that the client could not look after his own children because he needed to work and improve his socio-economic status, and consequently, this forced him to send his children to the children's home. He actually did not want to give up his children to the children's home to live separately from him. The social worker who handled this case mentioned that he was able to empathize with his client's feelings during the assessment processes and hearings. What can be highlighted here is that this male participant, along with the other male participants (see the other illustrations above), indicated that he was not encouraged to use emotions when dealing with clients.

A further aspect relating to empathy, which is central to the concept of fate (from God, which relates to spirituality), was also identified in this research. The concept of fate shows how professionalism has created cultural and social norms that influence the enactment of emotions. The types of cases that the participants had dealt with were seen as contributing factors to different modes of empathy. According to the participants, they are more empathetic towards children or people who have disabilities than towards those who are involved in social problems or from broken families. The empathetic behavior was relatively perceived as a belief in the acceptance of fate (i.e., the belief that one's fate comes from God). In other words, the participants perceived that an individual who is born with a disability must accept his or her fate wholeheartedly. Thus, the participants seemed to be more empathetic to their clients' feelings and situations if they accepted their fate wholeheartedly. It also appeared that empathy is easier to display when problems are better understood or if the reasons for 'abnormalities' are seen as coming from God, as compared to problems created by the individuals themselves. One of the participants said

> *Being emotional in children's cases, especially those involving disabled children or 'kanak-kanak istimewa' [children with special needs], presents a different emotional experience. We are more empathetic towards special children compared to those involved in social problems or from broken families. Our empathy extends to children who are born with disabilities. We are more empathetic because we understand these are Allah's [God's] gifts.*
>
> (Medical Social Worker 5, male, aged 42)

With reference to the concept of fate in Islam, there is a belief that everything that occurs in heaven and earth is by Allah's (God's) will. As stated in one of the Surahs in the holy Al-Quran, with regard to the concept of fate, "When He intends a thing, it is only that He says to it, 'Be!' – and it is!" (Sura Ya-seen 36:82). In other words, things do not occur without Allah's will. There is, furthermore, a belief that when things are fated to happen, it is the way Allah tests His creatures (see ref). However, those who believe in Islam are also taught to be patient, pleased, and strong in facing their fate because there is wisdom behind every occurrence. As reported by Abu Yahya Bin Sinan Syuhaib, Mohammed said

> It's a good chance people believe because in all cases they get better. And there is no better reward like this, except for those who believe. When in enjoyment, he will be grateful; then thanksgiving is good for him. When he is afflicted, patience is well for him.
>
> (Reported by Muslim, as cited in Zamzam (2004))

In this respect, the participants said they are more empathetic towards clients who are born with disabilities, in which case it is easier to show and use emotions. Medical Social Worker 5, for example, did not show or refer to the specific emotion of sympathy, but to empathy, as he said, "*we are more empathetic because we understand these are Allah's [God] gifts.*" Hence, it would be awkward for any Muslim individuals who practice the teachings of Islam to reject the 'abnormalities' that Allah has bestowed. It would be like blaming Allah for these 'gifts.' In addition, the participant used the word 'gift' instead of 'lesson' from Allah. In relation to this, it may be considered that the use of empathy and the concept of fate in religion could lead to emotional regulation. Religious teachings pertaining to the state of being patient (i.e., the concept of '*rida*' in Islam) have been used as a medium not only for understanding others but also for moderating emotions, healing emotions, and so forth. The aspects of religion and religious teachings and their role in regulating one's emotions are also discussed in Section 6.3.1 – Religious Beliefs and Practices.

The participants expressed different views about the extent to which they should show empathy. They commented that it should be used with caution. They seemed to suggest using empathy only for understanding clients' situations, but they also mentioned that it should be avoided as it may affect their emotions and other daily routines. Besides the positive contributions of empathy in building a professional relationship with clients, the responses indicated that emotions could also have negative effects. There was a perception that too much involvement of empathy (understanding others) could affect the social workers themselves. If they failed to create a boundary

between themselves and their clients, this would have a negative effect on both parties. Thus, it is sufficient to use empathy only to understand the clients' feelings and situations. Some of the negative effects on social workers as perceived by the participants are stated below:

> *I don't involve too much empathy. Empathy is needed, but I don't overuse it. It is dangerous if empathy is overused because we also need to take care of others' feelings, for example, the feelings of our children and wife. In cases involving mothers and their children, or children being abused by their relatives such as the father, we will try to understand their feelings without using too much empathy. I don't want to display too much empathy. It is enough to understand their feelings. That's it.*
>
> (Child Protector 8, male, aged 39)

> *When we empathize… errr … use empathy, it does not mean we need to show our tears. It is enough to show our clients that we understand their situations, for example by looking deeply into their eyes and nodding our heads, then giving them the appropriate advice. For me, it is enough to show my empathy here [at work/during a professional task]. There is no need to take it home. Otherwise, my wife will question me [laughs].*
>
> (Probation Officer 3, male aged 32)

The male participants above seemed to show that they were able to differentiate between empathy and sympathy. The participants seemed to consider using empathy only to understand the situations. They said they avoided being influenced by their clients' situations when it would make them appear too emotional. The participants seemed to perceive that being too emotional could affect their personal lives. In my understanding, this may derive from the use of the terms for 'emotion' and 'emotional' in Malaysia. In the Malay language, the term for 'emotion' is '*emosi*', which is often used to refer to negative emotions, such as anger. In the Malaysian context, 'emotion' and 'anger' are often used interchangeably. For instance, when someone gets angry, other people will advise him or her by saying "*jangan emosi*", translated as "do not be influenced by your emotion of anger". On the other hand, the term for 'emotional' is used in relation to sad events. For example, in social work practice involving children and families, when the court decides to send a child to the child protection home without the family's consent, sadness will be clearly apparent. Malaysian people would only use the term for 'emotional' to refer to sad events. Meanwhile, with regard to positive emotions such as happiness, the term for 'emotion' is not used. This may be due to the perception that 'emotion' denotes a disruptive force and, hence, it is still largely viewed in the traditional way, particularly in the workplace. In addition, the social workers seemed to avoid situations where they would be seen by others as being too involved or emotional. Thus, they tended to refrain from becoming too emotionally involved. By doing so, they believed this would show their professionalism in carrying out their duties as social workers. Needless to say, these social workers still need to explore their emotional responses and seek ways to develop their professional practice.

All the illustrations above portray Rogers (1957) definition of empathy, which in this case is a social worker's ability to perceive the client's innermost thoughts as if they are his or her own, but without ever losing the 'as if' quality Rogers (1957). The term 'empathy' has been greatly emphasized and used by Malaysian child social workers, particularly in their efforts to understand their clients, strengthen professional relationships, and make it a bit easier for clients to reveal their issues. The Malaysian child social workers mentioned that by putting themselves in their clients' situations, they can feel and understand their emotions and thoughts. Empathetic understanding, as described by the child social workers, is about their capability to reflect on the experiences of clients, as well as to motivate and assist clients in becoming more self-aware of their lives. Hence, this process opens new opportunities to help the clients see things from a different angle (see Sinclair and Monk (2005)). Empathy also seems vital to counteract or prevent communication barriers in relationships, according to the participants. Based on the participants' perceptions, empathy is conceptualized as a distinctive means of communication that is transformed into a method in which the social workers perceive the clients' emotions and situations, then express their understanding of the subject matter, and, subsequently, the clients perceive the understanding of the social workers. This conceptualization of empathy

does not indicate a predefined response, or, for that matter, a response that is verbal (see Kunyk and Olson, 2001). The end result of this process is an accurate perception of the clients in which their feelings are understood. Thus, the skill of empathizing helps child social workers build good relationships with their clients in accordance with their perceptions.

According to Butler (2007), understanding one's own and others' emotions is essential for effective social work practice. In this manner, being emotionally intelligent – for example, having the skill to empathize with clients' situations – is an essential requirement for effective social work practice, and it has been accepted within the profession (see Hepworth et al., 2009). This ability is one of the EI categories: the appraisal of our own and others' emotions, as identified by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as well as Schutte et al. (1998). This ability is not only practiced in Western social work settings but also appears to be used in the Malaysian context. The present research shows how Malaysian child social workers perceive the use of empathy, particularly in their efforts to understand their clients. The Malaysian child social workers who participated in this study also consider empathy a contributing factor in building and sustaining cooperation in working relationships. In addition, empathy has numerous advantages for social interaction, as it can be a useful tool for dealing with misunderstood behaviors and thus maintaining or improving cooperation (see Rumble et al., 2010).

4.2. Regulation of One's Own and Others' Emotional Experiences

One of the themes that was also identified when studying the consideration of emotional intelligence (EI) in working relationships was the regulation of one's and others' emotional experiences. According to the participants, skills in regulating emotions could help others acquire confidence in solving their problems, gain others' cooperation and appreciation, and maintain harmony in the workplace. The contributions of this domain (i.e., emotional expression and regulation) of EI will be discussed in detail below.

The participants in this research perceived that it is vital for professional workers to possess intelligence in regulating the emotions of others who face problems in their lives. In addition, the participants reported that exhibiting intelligence in regulating others' emotions will help their clients acquire confidence in solving their problems. Not only are their problems handled and solved, but relationships and trust can be improved. A participant said

> *I can see the issues between us and our staff, or between us and the children. As the people closest to the children in this institution, we are required to always show our willingness to listen to them [the children]. So we need to always give a positive view; I mean, we should use a positive perspective. For example, we should tell them that their failure does not mean the end of the world. They still have chances to change their behaviors. So, I think that through this positive view [positive view of the children], individuals who face challenges in their lives will feel relieved.*
>
> (Probation Officer 4, male, aged 47)

The Malaysian child social workers seemed to emphasize the importance of using positive perspectives to help their clients in their professional conduct. In addition, to gain the clients' confidence, skill in listening to their problems was also perceived as important. To force oneself to be a good listener requires emotion – that is, the willingness to know and to understand. The Malaysian child social workers again emphasized the importance of emotions and emotional intelligence in their professional relationships with the clients. The workers must be able to build clients' confidence in their ability to resolve their problems. This confidence can be achieved through the workers' support of the clients. Therefore, from the respondents' viewpoint, those who are capable of conveying their emotions in a positive way (i.e., avoiding bias, displaying the desire to help, etc.) and regulating the emotions of others (i.e., the emotions of those who are under pressure) will be able to gain the confidence of others.

In terms of organizational management, the participants who held important posts in their respective organizations and who had skill in understanding others (i.e., the staff) and expressing their understanding either verbally or non-verbally found it easier to regulate others' emotions, as well as to obtain their staff's cooperation and appreciation. One participant reported

> *I always respect them [the older female workers] like my mother, and I notice that they want to be appreciated as experienced workers because they have been working here much longer than I have. I am always concerned about their emotions; I mean, I will try to understand them. Then,* alhamdulillah *[praise be to Allah], they accept me as their leader even though I am a new staff member here and younger than they are.*
>
> (Probation Officer 6, female, aged 36)

> *I am lucky because my boss is very understanding. I feel relieved because if I have issues concerning my practice, I just refer to him openly. He always gives me guidance and shares his experience with me as a new staff member. So, I feel relieved and enjoy working with him.*
>
> (Probation Officer 8, male, aged 29)

> *I have begun to consider their benefits, and I can feel it; it's good. When we consider our staff's limitations and understand their situations, they will appreciate us. They will come to us and thank us. Then our relationship will become closer, and they will respect us as their leaders.*
>
> (Child Protector 3, female, aged 40)

The data showed that the social workers' and/or leaders' emotional intelligence (i.e., regulating one's own and others' emotions) could help them in developing a positive relationship with clients and/or subordinates. Expressions of respect, appreciation, understanding, and willingness to help others are useful and important in gaining cooperation in the workplace. Expressing all of these was also perceived by the participants as a means of helping others to regulate their emotions. When one is stable in one's emotions and feels appreciated, this helps towards building a good working relationship in any form (i.e., between the client and the worker, or between the leader and the subordinate). In organizational management, a leader with this skill will be successful in maintaining harmony in the organization (Grandey, 2000) and gaining workers' cooperation and support. Grandey, (2000) mentions that, in the workplace, where optimistic expressions are expected, feeling good about the surroundings may require less emotional effort. Workers can genuinely sense the emotion that is expected of them in a service environment if the interpersonal relationship is optimistic and encouraging. In addition, the participants also perceived that support from leaders could help employees cope with the stress of job services and regulate their emotions.

In spite of the value of positive emotional expression in the workplace in gaining the cooperation of others, the participants also emphasized the avoidance of certain emotional expressions. The desire to maintain harmony in the workplace and in relationships with colleagues, as well as to show respect to superiors at the highest level, were suggested as the reasons why the participants preferred not to express their emotions. Furthermore, they also believed that these were appropriate ways of regulating their emotions. The participants reported

> *If we work under one roof and have those kinds of feelings [resentment and anger], it doesn't help us. I think it's not good because we interact and work with them every day. So, I am not comfortable if I show my feelings because we need to maintain harmony with our boss.*
>
> (Probation Officer 1, female, aged 35)

> *I'm not sure. Maybe this is me. It's not easy for me to show my emotions [anger] even when I am in a state of anger. No, I won't show it [anger]. I think it's not applicable here [in the workplace], because we are always dealing with them [clients/colleagues]. I will not feel comfortable if I show my anger.*
>
> (Probation Officer 2, female, aged 33)

The expression of positive emotions and avoidance of certain negative emotions (e.g., anger) during professional practice, such as in the areas of child protection and child rehabilitation, was perceived by the participants as very

important when interacting with clients and when dealing with their coworkers, leaders, and subordinates. The verbal and non-verbal displays of love, care, concern, and pride were viewed by the participants as appropriate and acceptable in building and maintaining professional relationships, particularly with the clients. This is similar to the Western research findings; for example, Barrett and Campos (1987) state that in most cases, submissive emotions, particularly sadness, do not pose a threat to interpersonal interaction, whereas anger has the potential to do so. Sadness communicates personal vulnerability, which signals a necessity for consolation and support from others that demonstrates a willingness to entrust oneself to another's care (Barrett and Campos, 1987). One participant said, "*Sadness does not mean that we are sad, but it's like we understand their situations [empathy]*" (Prohibition Officer 3, male, aged 32). In contrast, both rage and happiness, when they occur at the cost of someone else, are disharmonious emotions. Barrett and Campos (1987) add that anger and joy convey a desire to achieve one's own goals or to take pride in one's accomplishments over others. The participants perceived that if they (the social workers) fail to show seriousness in professional matters, such as laughing when dealing with clients, the clients will feel offended and taken for granted. For instance, a male participant reported.

> *Here in his department, if we laugh or are not serious, the Sabahans would think that we are insulting or making fun of them.*
>
> (Probation Officer 3, male, aged 32)

The participants perceived that emotional expression (e.g., empathy and understanding) and emotional regulation may result in mood states that are more adaptable and reinforced. In the end, these two themes (aspects) of EI (i.e., emotional expression and emotional regulation) will contribute to better working relationships between social workers and clients, or leaders and subordinates. Furthermore, the child social workers believe that observing emotional regulation in themselves and others is an important effort in meeting particular goals.

5. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the contributions of emotions and emotional intelligence (EI) to working relationships. Three main themes (i.e., aspects of EI) have been identified concerning EI in the social work profession in Malaysia, particularly in working relationships: 1) the skill of empathizing, and 2) the expression and regulation of one's own and others' emotional experiences. Within the first theme, the skill of empathizing, Malaysian child social workers perceived that being empathetic could help them understand their clients' situations and problems, provide comfort to the clients in revealing their problems, and create a strong bond between the clients and themselves. They also added that the skill of empathizing could help them understand and admit the centrality of the concept of fate – the belief that everything comes from Allah – and thus they would interpret challenges in life as God testing their belief in Him. The second theme pertaining to the concept of EI relates to the expression and regulation of one's own and others' emotional experiences. Within this theme, the workers perceived that exhibiting skill in regulating others' emotions could help the clients acquire confidence in solving their problems, obtain others' (i.e., subordinates') cooperation and appreciation, maintain harmony in the workplace, and show respect to superiors.

Regarding gender differences, the present research findings seem to show a resemblance in the way both male and female participants report using emotions in their work. They seem to agree on the importance of using certain emotions (i.e., positive emotions) in building good working relationships. The similarity between genders in perceiving and using emotions may be due to the workplace requirements themselves – those of social work practice. This is generally different from the findings in the literature; however, it can be understood in terms of professional requirements. The literature indicates that the findings in this area have some inconsistencies concerning emotions and gender, and related subjects including children, college students, adolescents, adults, and married and unmarried couples (Bar-On, 2000; Mitchell, 1975; Reynolds, Scott, & Jessiman, 1999; Scheff, 2006; Tudor, 2004).

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Appendix 1. A written notice concerning emotions and thinking Malaysia social welfare department.

The framed notice read "To think rationally without being influenced by instinct or emotions is the most effective way of problem solving".