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Emotional Sustainability in Human Services Organizations: Cultural and Communicative Paths to Dealing with Emotional Work

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Abstract: Emotional sustainability in the human services sector is crucial for both the organizations and the constituents they serve. However, human services professionals consistently struggle with emotional work as they care for the vulnerable. Despite such challenges, individuals in the human services sector choose to work in emotionally demanding careers and are motivated to serve others. However, such career pathways may not be consistent in other cultures and can further impact the way individuals cope with emotional work. This study explores South Korean social workers and how they experience and sustain themselves through emotional work. Findings show that emotional work led to burnout yet also resulted in fulfillment. Social workers also were mostly led to work in the human services sector by their education system that reflects the unique culture of South Korea. At the same time, these systems were foundational to building sustainability as they bolstered communication networks based on selective ties specific to school.

Keywords: emotional work; sustainability; selective networks; culture; human services sector

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1. Introduction

The emotional sustainability of human services professionals is crucial, not only for their well-being but also for the community constituents they serve. Human services professionals, such as social workers, attend to the needs of vulnerable populations and this work can be taxing [1–6]. For them, emotions are part of the job where emotional work (i.e., burnout and stress due to compassion and authentic feeling for clients) is abundant [4,7–10]. However, if caregiving workers cannot sustain themselves through emotional work, their services to the vulnerable can be compromised and it can interfere with their work [11]. Thus, how human service professionals sustain themselves in the face of emotional work is important to examine.

We explore emotional work, which is prevalent for human services professionals as they engage with clients. Emotional work often manifests negatively as stress or exhaustion but can also be experienced as fulfillment. These alternate experiences exist as employees feel for and feel with their clients [4]. Unlike emotional labor, which is more dominant in frontline workers (e.g., flight attendants, restaurant servers) where emotion is seen as a commodity for organizational profit-making, emotional work is an authentic and compassionate communication process [5,8]. However, if not managed, emotional work can also create feelings of futility [1], which threatens the sustainability of employees and organizations.

Sustainability, which we conceptualize as the capacity to manage emotional work so work with and for vulnerable communities can continue, is important for professionals. The existing research shows that managing emotions—whether positive or negative—is facilitated through individual and organizational efforts. For instance, when individuals have opportunities to learn about the job prior to entry, they are better able to manage their

emotional struggles moving forward [1,12]. Organizational rules and relationships can also influence how individuals regulate the expression and communication of emotions [13]. The successful management of emotional work can enhance job satisfaction [14,15] and assimilation processes [16,17].

However, little is known about how culture influences emotional work and sustainability. For example, social workers in South Korea struggle with emotional burnout, a common manifestation of emotional work. This results show a turnover rate of 64.5%, significantly higher than the United States (43.2%) [18–20]. Demanding, and even violent, interactions with clients (a type of emotional work) are often cited as the prime cause of the high suicide rates of social workers [18]. Thus, we explore how human service professionals in South Korea experience and navigate emotional work and sustain themselves.

The findings of this study suggest that social workers experience emotional work in many ways from stress and burnout to fulfillment and pride. They sustained themselves through emotional work by engaging in meaning-making as they communicated with clients. Additionally, social workers found sustainability through selective ties driven by cultural norms that guided them to the profession. Though compassion was an afterthought not a precursor to becoming social workers, emotional work and sustainability were influenced by cultural norms unique to South Korea.

This study makes several contributions by exploring a non-Western cultural context. The study underscores a specific aspect of culture that influences emotional work and organizational sustainability. The study advances the communication of emotions in organizations by demonstrating how culture can interact with various stages of an individual's career and emotional work. Furthermore, the study advances the notion of emotional work by showing how culture can be leveraged for individual and organizational sustainability. Ultimately, these critical cultural nuances offer important implications for organizations to leverage during socialization which can strengthen individuals' capacities to navigate the experience of emotion in organizations. Following, we review the extant research regarding organizational emotion and culture to provide a theoretical framework. Then, we detail our methods, report our findings, and explore the implications of this study.

1.1. Organizational Emotions, Communication, and Culture

Emotions are communicative and process driven. As Planalp stated, emotions are "elicited by communication, manifested in communication, and shared and socialized through communication" [21] (p. 218). Emotions in organizations are negotiated, performative, and interactive across all members and stakeholders [1,22–24], and these emotions are also fabricated and/or managed to meet situational demands [25,26].

Organizational research was used to characterize emotion as a hinderance to rationality and professionalism. According to Putnam and Mumby, organizations treated emotions or displays of emotions as "inappropriate, disruptive, illogical, biased, and weak" [27] (p. 36). In Western organizational cultures, rationality has been honored before emotions, considering the latter as a deviation from being "sensible or intelligent" [28] (p. 62). Therefore, workplaces used to be considered an "emotional dead zone" where "getting emotional" was unprofessional and needed to be controlled [1] (p. 7). Over time, the research current shifted to consider organizational emotion as a critical part of the job, underscoring the relational aspects of organizational life [4]. Organizations also control emotional expressions, expecting members to follow particular display rules relevant to positions or responsibilities [24,29–31]. For example, management tends to put parameters on employees' emotions in order to reach their organizational goals, provoking emotional fabrication [32,33]. Such controlled emotion ends up creating emotional dissonance where inner feeling and external expressions clash, invoking emotional labor [8]. Although emotional labor is one of the most widely studied concepts in the organizational emotion scholarship, negative organizational emotions such as stress or burnout in human service occupations vastly differ from frontline service roles [34]. The stress and burnout from frontline service jobs are caused by having to fabricate emotions to accommodate the needs

of customers, while human service workers' burnout comes from compassion for the clients that are authentic [35]. Our study focuses on emotional work that is specific to human services professionals.

1.1.1. Emotional Work

Emotional work underscores the authentic experience of empathy and compassion [34]. In emotional work, emotional challenges do not come from having to perform inauthentic emotions, but rather are a "natural part of their tasks and responsibilities" [9] (p. 629). Emotional work is often seen in individuals engaged in human service occupations (e.g., social workers, teachers, and pastors) [33]. Emotional work also accumulates over time as workers perform their tasks and responsibilities for their clients, building long-term relationships [4,36,37]. Emotional work views emotions as part of the work itself, involving authentic and genuine empathy rather than fabricated displays of emotion as profit-making tools [16,33,38].

The research on emotional work also assumes that individuals entering human service career tracks are aware of their emotional demands. Oftentimes, these professionals report entering the career because they want to care for and help others [39,40]. The interaction between employees and clients creates an emotional connection that is a source of job satisfaction [41]. However, even such positive motivation could lead to challenging emotional consequences.

Human services workers are expected to care for their clients with empathy. This can generate both positive and negative emotional effects [42–45]. When employees develop strong connections with the clients they serve, they can share experiences of the clients' burnout [33]. If they receive little support from their organizations, this could also result in emotional distress [46–50]. Emotional work may create feelings of "compassion" but also in some cases "futility" [1] (p. 7). Consequently, the emotional exhaustion and burnout that workers experience can threaten their, and their organizations' sustainability [34,46,47,49,50]. These intricate emotional and organizational experiences are unique and inconsistent across cultures, which we explore next.

1.1.2. Culture and Emotional Communication

Culture—both organizational and national—influences the way people view and express emotions [28,51–53]. For instance, in Western cultures such as the United States or Europe, emotion is part of the true self that reflects "individuality, independence, and autonomy" [54] (p. 571). Thus, explicit and direct emotional expressions are encouraged and cultivated [53,55]. However, in East Asian cultures, group harmony and moderation are more important than individuality and explicit expressions of emotions are considered disruptive and need to be controlled [51,53,54]. People from Japan, for example, tend to hide their anger and instead present happiness to maintain interpersonal harmony [51]. In Tahiti, the emotion of anger is highly feared and there is very little expression of fury [52,56]. For Ukta Eskimos, the feeling of, expression of, and even talking about anger is highly discouraged [57].

Cultural values and beliefs also influence emotions and how they manifest [58]. Socially constructed language, for instance, is one predominant way emotions are expressed and displayed [26]. In many Asian cultures, the indirect circumlocution of emotions is an expected virtue [59]. What one says may imply something else in emotionally reserved cultures and the underlying message may not correspond with the actual surface-level communication [60]. Such culturally constructed communication is a type of face-saving [61,62] that inevitably produces fabricated expressions of emotions via verbal communication [63–65]. Face management is particularly dominant in collectivistic and emotionally reserved cultures [66–68]. Culture inevitably influences communication and the manifestation of emotions, although the research intersecting organizations and emotions in intercultural contexts is limited, especially in the consideration of how sustainability is achieved.

The research on organizational emotions in intercultural contexts is sparse, but there are a few examples. For instance, Krone and Morgan's study showed that, in China, entrepreneurs use emotion as an organizational learning tool for management control [69]. Kim and Leach explored the emotional labor of South Korean call center employees in the face of organizational injustices [70]. Ravalier et al. explored how social workers in the United Kingdom struggled with environmental challenges, such as work conditions or lack of acknowledgement of their work, and how that invoked stress [6]. Although these studies of emotion are grounded in intercultural contexts, what remains elusive is how cultural norms interact with emotional work experiences and how culture, in return, can facilitate sustainability. More specifically, we aim to explore how culture impacts the emotional experiences of individuals in a profession that is presumably built on compassion and empathy—concepts that are also culturally nuanced. Building on the literature examining emotional work, understandings of cultural differences, and conceptualizing sustainability as the capacity of human services professionals to manage emotional work and continue their human service work, we ask the following research question:

1. How do South Korean social workers engage with emotional work and ensure their work is sustainable?

2. Materials and Methods

To answer the research question, we employed a qualitative design using in-depth interviews to study South Korean social workers serving the needs of vulnerable communities.

2.1. Research Context and Participants

The participants included licensed social workers (n = 14) representing six nonprofit social welfare organizations located in Seoul, South Korea (see Table 1 for participant demographics with pseudonyms; individuals in Korean culture refer to one another by last names in formal settings. Therefore, all participants were given a last name pseudonym to protect their identity with a prefix title that indicates their self-identified gender and marital status). The sample size reflects the dominant cultural trait that South Koreans are emotionally reserved, thus, participating in an interview without a built, trusted relationship is often not favored [59,71–74]. As Tracy argues, the sample number is not the only criteria that establishes quality of research but rather a congregation of breadth and depth of interviews and details drawn from them [75]. This sample represents a valuable population's perspective and through the repetition of themes in our interviews we were able to reach data saturation.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant	Years of Experiences	Affiliated Organizations	Tenure
Mrs. Yim	20	Expatriate Counseling	Director
Mrs. Koh	8	Kopino * Children Welfare	Account Supervisor
Mrs. Park	15	Pre-adoption	Section Chief
Mrs. Huh	16	Pre-Adoption	Section Chief
Mrs. Choi	24	Post-Adoption	Director
Mr. Han	3	Donor and Patron Relations	Assistant Director
Miss Hong	4	Disabled Welfare	Associate
Miss Cho	7	Senior Social Education	Associate
Mrs. Tak	34	Domestic Adoption	Director
Mrs. Noh	9	Senior Welfare	Associate
Mrs. Joo	3	North Korean Refugee Care	Associate
Mrs. Jeon	5	Single Mother's Care	Senior Associate
Mrs. Yong	10	Disability Vocational Center	Associate Director
Miss Lee	5	Welfare Counseling	Senior Counselor

* Kopino refers to bi-racial children whose fathers are Koreans and mothers are Filipinos.

The participants of this study represented diverse organizations and provided various professional services such as inter-country adoption, expatriate counseling, patron relations, and services to disabled children, the elderly, and North Korean refugees. All the participants were females except for one, which is representative of the social welfare industry in South Korea where 78% of licensed social workers are women [76]. Their tenure varied, ranging from two years to over three decades with an average of thirteen years.

2.2. Procedures and Data

The participants were recruited through a purposive sampling technique that honors the researcher's ability to discern what is typical within the expected sampling population [77]. Because we looked for individuals in a specific profession in a specific sector, purposive sampling was an appropriate choice. Licensed social workers in Korea are registered members of the National Association of Social Workers. The association has an online platform serving as a primary resource for social workers, offering information about annual training, job openings, and policy updates. Though the public can access the website, access to a social worker roster or contact information are not available. Thus, we recruited participants by posting a recruitment flyer and letter on the public forum where the general public can post, comment, and upload resources. The criteria for participation were: (1) licensed social workers; (2) works at a non-profit social welfare organization in South Korea; and (3) offer direct services to clients. Upon recruitment, we eliminated ineligible participants due to their position such as seasonal volunteers or those who do not offer direct services to clients.

2.3. Data Collection

We developed an in-depth interview protocol, designed to yield information about the social workers' emotional experiences in their organizations. Building on Miller and Miller and Koesten's research on emotional work and communication, the interview asked participants to describe their typical day at work, what they feel throughout and at the end of a workday, and about their emotional experiences as they engage with client services [33,78]. We also asked them to share why and how they joined the profession, how they communicate about their emotions and to describe the development of their organizational emotions over the course of their career. The interviews were conducted in Korean by the first author, recorded with consent, and transcribed in Korean resulting in sixty-three single-spaced pages.

Language Translation

Throughout the research we engaged in multiple rounds of language translation. Prior to the data collection, the first author translated the interview protocol and relevant study materials (e.g., informed consent, research overview, recruitment letter) from English to Korean. Then, a certified, professional translator back-translated it from Korean to English and both versions were reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board. As Lindlof and Taylor argue, if interviews are cross-cultural encounters, the interviewer should be a fluent speaker of local languages and a "sensitive traveler across cultural borders" [79] (p. 171). Therefore, the interview was conducted in Korean by the first author who is fluent in Korean and also aware of cultural and linguistic nuances.

2.4. Analysis

In the analysis phase, we adopted a contextualized translation technique [80], which is a set of strategies for international research that involves "simultaneous online or face-to-face interaction with translators" [80] (p. 6). We collaborated with a professional translator and engaged in constant comparative methods as the translation post-interview took place. The first author (a native Korean speaker) did an initial round of translation that was then back-translated by a professional translator for analysis. During the process of multiple translation, the second author (a native English speaker) also participated to ensure

linguistic and cultural accuracy. In this phase, rather than literal translation that often misses the critical, in situ nuance, we tried to capture the linguistic and cultural sensitivity and complexity that could transfer from multiple connotations. We worked through each emerging theme, adding notes, making links to other materials and considered different interpretations of words and contexts to ensure the integrity of culture and language [80]. Then, we conducted a thematic analysis by following the process of familiarizing ourselves with the data, searching for, reviewing, then defining and naming themes [81]. We resolved disagreements and ambiguity through the constant comparison technique [82] and discussion at each stage of the coding and analysis. The interpretation of collected data and analysis process included meaning-making, which was not a process of precision, but rather influenced by the background, knowledge, and cultures of the researchers [83].

3. Findings

Our research question asked how South Korean social workers engage with and navigate emotional work for sustainability. We found that both positive and negative emotions manifest as social workers engaged with emotional work through transformational client interaction. Furthermore, cultural norms influenced how our participants became social workers and also served as a foundation for sustainability.

3.1. Engaging with Emotional Work, Communication, and Sustainability

The interviews revealed that our participants indeed experienced emotional work. For example, Mrs. Choi said she is always "exhausted and overwhelmed" because of her clients' demands. Mrs. Yim also noted that client demands were stressful triggers that made her question if she was doing her job correctly. Additionally, Mrs. Park shared her frustration and burnout as she described her work as "really tough" because everyone, including her clients and the organization, expect her "to have answers to everything" and to "help them no matter what". As participants shared, emotional work manifested in many ways, influencing social workers' organizational life.

Despite the inherent difficulties presented by emotional work, the findings suggest that participants were transformed through the communicative interactions they had with their clients. Client communication facilitated meaning-making that transformed the way our participants felt. For instance, participants reflected on their interactions with clients and highlighted meaningful moments. Mr. Han said:

> *When my day at work is over, I feel like each day is not totally in vain. I am also proud of myself and feel like I had a fun day. Of course this changes day by day, but in general I think the pride continues every day.*

Miss Hong shared a similar response that:

> *I feel like my heart is about to burst when I see disabled children going on their first trip, for the first time in their lives. It's a great feeling that I get to be the first person who can make it happen.*

These responses show that amid emotional work, engaging in improving clients' lives helped our participants engage in positive meaning-making about their roles.

Emotional work and meaning-making transformed participants' perceptions about the job. For instance, "adoptees finding forever homes" or "when disabled children made progress in their physical and social development" altered our participants' perceptions of their jobs to being "compassionate" and "fulfilling". Mrs. Choi said, "When I started working [as a social worker] in the 80s, I was working without a mission, without a sense of what I was doing. It was just a job". However, she said over the years her emotional attachment to the work grew and now she recognizes her role and the organization's mission as an important part of her life. Mrs. Huh also said she is "the happiest" when she sees an adoptee depart with the new parents because the fulfillment comes from knowing she has made a difference in her client's life which did not exist before.

Compassion came with self-affirmation and pride. Mrs. Koh said that despite the heavy burden she has because her clients are so reliant on her, she positively affirms herself with the work she does. She said, "I might be a nobody once I step outside this building but as long as I'm here, I'm trusted and needed. I am proud of what I can do". Similarly, Mrs. Park also said, "I receive countless 'Thanks Yous' from my clients. Sometimes it's frustrating that I can't attend to everyone's needs because I want to help them as much as I can". These statements reflect that being needed and depended on can be emotionally burdening, leading to emotional work. However, these interactions with clients transformed participants' burdens to motivation, fulfillment, and pride, providing them the opportunity to redeem their roles and recognize their impact.

On the other hand, while the work the social workers did for clients transformed their emotion, they also vacillated between fulfillment and experiencing transferred exhaustion from their clients. For example, Mrs. Jeon expressed strong frustration saying, "Sometimes, I just want to drop everything and disappear ... but someone's life can change because of what I do. Someone's life changes. That keeps me going".

Additionally, Mrs. Joo who serves North Korean refugees said:

> *It takes years for North Korean refugees to get out of North Korea. Whenever I listen to their stories, it's heartbreaking and I feel sorry for them. It's also extremely stressful to listen to their stories. And I'm deeply concerned for them because they need my help with everything.*

Mrs. Joo's response indicates that her interactions with the clients induce changing emotions as she learns more about the struggles. However, she also needs to negotiate the tension between compassion for the clients and the stress of the clients. Miss Hong also said her concern and care for her disabled children clients grew as she became deeper into the job. She said that now she knows "what the public perception towards disabled children is" and that she can "notice and see when people roll their eyes at the disabled children, sometimes wanting to keep their distance from them". Miss Hong's remarks illustrate that the empathy and sympathy came after she learned about the lives of the disabled through working with them. She said she had no prior experience working with the disabled nor had knowledge of what they would be like. When she first began, she "did not have the same sense of protection or compassion", but it developed over the years and even led her to think about what she would be like if she had a disabled child. Similarly, Mrs. Koh also said, "Of course there are positive feelings about my work. That's why I'm not quitting. It's just that my positive emotions are often weaker than my negative emotions (laugh)". Her statement reflects that emotional work is a continuous negotiation between positive and negative encounters, though positive emotions keep her grounded in her job.

Emotional work manifested in many different ways. Communication with clients over time facilitated positive meaning-making for social workers that sustained their work. The responses from the participants show the strong responsibility and compassion that Korean social workers develop through communication with their clients across various stages of their tenure. However, these feelings were not inherent from the start, nor do they explain why they became social workers in the first place, which is reported next.

3.2. Cultural Influence on Career Entry and Networking

An important cultural finding was how participants ended up working in human services professions. The interviews revealed that a cultural norm, particularly the education system, guided the social workers to their careers. Rather than choosing their career in response to a calling or intrinsic motivations (e.g., wanting to help others), the participants became social workers because of the educational system. For them, a college entrance exam score was the initial determinant guiding their choice of an academic major in social work or social welfare. The participants said that the college entrance exam score determined the tier of college available to them and directed their major choice as social work or social welfare—naturally leading them to pursue a career within that area (Sōoneung; Sōoneung is equivalent to the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in the United States and is

only offered once a year nationwide. The score determines students' qualification status for the universities and majors that are ranked in tiers according to their reputation [59]). For example, Ms. Lee said:

I never wanted to study social welfare but I had to because it was the only available major based on my Sōoneung score for the university I wanted to attend. I was assigned as a social works major during the second round of admission but I wasn't even interested in what I majored. [After graduating] one day I heard this [social welfare] organization was hiring so I went in for an interview and got the job.

Her statements demonstrate that she was not intrinsically motivated to became a social worker but the education system influenced her path. This is echoed by Mrs. Choi:

There is no particular reason [for becoming a social worker]. I [involuntarily] studied social welfare and that's it. As it was getting closer to my college graduation, I heard about a job opening [in this welfare organization] and because my GPA was pretty high, my [social work] professor recommended me for an interview. I got the job and I began working in January even before graduating in February [In South Korea, the academic year begins in March and ends in December. The commencement ceremony is typically held in February]. I didn't even know what job I was taking.

Mrs. Choi's statement shows a streamlined career entry without much individual effort to learn about the career and its consequences. Rather than finding a reason to become a social worker, she was led to a career in social work through her professor's recommendation and a timely job opening.

For some workers, certain socialization processes did occur, although still involuntary. The participants shared that in their senior year of college, they were required to intern at a local social welfare organization that also became an opportunity to learn a little about the work, although they did not voluntarily seek such opportunity. Mrs. Noh stated:

At first ... I chose social welfare major in college according to my Sōoneung score. Until my senior year in college I didn't really decide on what my profession should be. I first joined this organization because it was easier to make the transition from college to a job based on my mandatory internship which was a graduation requirement.

Her statement also reflects her choice of the profession per the pathway created by the educational system. The participants echoed that they did not have a "particular reason" for becoming a social worker. They unwillingly majored in social welfare or social work and that naturally led to a specific career path. Ms. Yong said, "I had zero knowledge about the [social welfare] profession. I was kind of interested in social activism when I was younger but that was about it". Her statement indicates that she had no prior plan to pursue a career in social welfare.

Furthermore, participants' responses also demonstrated that they did not necessarily have an internal calling for the profession or joining their current organization. Some had prior interest in "helping others", or "doing something meaningful", although these wishes did not directly resonate with social welfare or human services professions. For example, Mrs. Joo said,

I wanted to be an entrepreneur and open my own business. But my pastor was heavily involved in North Korean mission work and I saw a few North Korean refugees attending his church from time to time although I didn't care much at first.

However, she later joined a North Korean refugee relief organization despite not having thought of serving others as a job.

The ways participants shared their entry to becoming social workers reflect cultural and institutional systems that decide careers while limiting them from exploring other options. The test scores were critical determinants to university majors that guided these social workers' careers. The participants explained that although they were "not aware of the nature of the profession of social welfare" in college nor planned to pursue a career

in social work, they developed compassion and adapted to the profession later. The cultural system that guided career opportunity also facilitated sustainability later on, which follows next.

3.3. Networked Sustainability

Cultural influence extended to sustainability. Amid negotiating emotional work in various stages of their careers, the participants sustained themselves through informal social networks composed of co-workers with whom they shared specific institutional ties. First, the participants formed selective informal social networks with co-workers for emotional sustainability, particularly with those who share similar tenure (e.g., position, rank) or educational backgrounds. For example, Miss Cho stated that she networks the most with "peers who started working at the organization the same year as I did", indicating she networks with those with similar tenures. However, this network did not involve those in leadership positions. Mrs. Koh said that she does not share her emotional struggles with her supervisors but rather only communicates about it with one of her "co-workers who graduated from the same university". She said, "Although we were not in school together, I knew of her by name and that we went to the same university. After joining [the organization], I became a lot closer with her because of the school tie". Having someone who went to the same college, in the same profession, allows Mrs. Koh to create a stronger bond and to communicate her emotional experiences. Mrs. Choi also said she mostly communicates about her feelings or emotional struggles with another employee who went to the same university and entered the organization the same year. Mrs. Tak also said, "I really don't have anyone to talk to besides my co-workers from the same university". Social workers also engaged in activities such as shopping or enjoying happy hours after work with those who share education and tenure ties.

The data also revealed that the participants preferred not to communicate about emotional experiences with interpersonal connections such as family or friends. For example, Mrs. Noh also stated,

> *My family members? They don't know much about what I do or what I experience other than, 'Oh, you're helping others. You are doing meaningful work for others'. My family and friends don't really know what I do other than I work with children.*

Additionally, Mr. Han said, "I think my wife only understands about 30% of my job. I don't talk about my job much because she doesn't understand what I go through". Mrs. Koh said, "I don't even bother talking to my family about my job" but she prefers to speak to her college connections about the job, feelings, and struggles that come with her work. The findings show that participants found sustainability through selective networks, based on institutional rather than interpersonal ties. Next, we discuss the implications of these findings.

4. Discussion

The findings complicate what has been theorized about emotional work and sustainability by underscoring how culture can influence not only emotional work but also sustainability. The findings suggest that for social workers in South Korea, emotion manifested in ways that facilitated meaning-making emotional transformation through communication. Additionally, although the cultural system pushed participants into careers serving the vulnerable, that very system also facilitated sustainability.

4.1. Cultural Systems, Emotional Work and Sustainability

The literature on organizational emotion, particularly emotional work, argues that individuals are motivated to join human services professions because of a calling. In the United States, for example, it is common for individuals to find careers that follow their motivations and aspirations [84,85]. Prior to career entry of their choice, individuals experience organizational socialization, which enables them to become more familiar with the role expectations of that career [86]. The socialization processes generally begin before one joins

an organization and continues throughout their tenure until exiting. The communication research on organizational emotion underscores the importance of pre-entry socialization as a critical precursor for sustainability, providing newcomers with a clear understanding of emotional demand, which helps them manage negative emotions [41,87,88]. Furthermore, knowing how to respond to various emotional experiences can cause individuals to be successful insiders of the organization [12,87,89], leads to higher job satisfaction [90–92], and facilitates stronger organizational commitment [93–95]. On the flip side, organizations can also facilitate sustainability by building a culture that encourages the expression of emotions [96]. The findings in this study, however, suggest that emotional management and sustainability are not necessarily induced by whether individuals knew a lot about the job or even had chances to socialize prior to entry. The findings imply that, lacking pre-entry socialization, our participants found sustainability through emotional work, communicating with clients, and selective networks.

4.1.1. Meaning-Making Communication for Sustainability

Though our participants had not chosen this emotionally taxing career and they faced immense organizational pressure, they sustained themselves through the emotional work by meaning-making in client interactions. Ultimately, the interaction with vulnerable clients transformed the way participants viewed their work, roles, and perceived impact on the communities they serve. The perception changed from meanings of work to meaningful work [97]. When they first started, their work was "just a job" and they did not know what they were doing nor how to make sense of their job. However, over time, the work turned into a meaningful job, becoming fulfilling and even heightening their pride. Such fulfillment achieved sustainable management of their emotional work. Recognizing their job as meaningful work exceeds job satisfaction because it achieves higher order aspirations and a sense of fulfillment [98].

The research on emotional work argues that individual's callings to a specific field based on a sense of compassion are often the precursor to career choices in human services professions. The research on emotional work theorizes that human service professionals choose and enter the profession with empathy and compassion, aware of the emotional consequences that may result in stress and burnout [39,40]. However, oftentimes the oscillation between the meaning of work and meaningful work are distinct when paying the bills and needing a career of some sort are reasons for working [97]. For example, some nonprofit employees report entering human services professions because they are simply following one's college major or because they just need a job [17]. Others work in human services because they are responding to religious or spiritual callings not necessarily individual interests [99]. In South Korea, as our findings show, the educational system was a strong indicator of not only college majors but also career trajectories [100]. Although participants lacked autonomy and had not developed compassion at the start of their careers, their emotional work transformed them as they developed stronger connections with their clients and recognized the meaningful nature of their work. Arguably, autonomy in career choice, or the lack thereof, can be an opportunity rather than a limitation as the work itself can produce resilience and coping for sustainability. Ironically, the cultural system that streamlined the social workers' education and career path became a foundational sustainability broker.

4.1.2. Culture as Sustainability Broker

The cultural system, while limiting participants in terms of education or career autonomy, was foundational to sustainability. The findings imply that what began as a career defining system, education, and organizational systems brokered collective coping efforts, albeit selective. The social network research demonstrates that, whether formal or informal, connections and ties can enhance sustainability and resilience building in organizations [11,101,102]. By creating informal networks with each other, South Korean social workers sustained their work.

Connecting over specific types of ties, such as school or tenure, is highly cultural. People generally network based on familiarity, intimacy, a shared history, and potential future relationships [103,104]. In South Korea, connections through school-ties is one of the most common shared histories and bonding mechanisms grounded in identity construction and exchanging mutual benefits [59]. Koreans enmeshed in these kinds of social networks make clear distinctions between who to build relationships with and who not to [105]. In many social settings, South Koreans distinguish or filter certain ties based on political affiliations or academics [106–109]. Furthermore, connecting over schools or universities and/or regions (i.e., where one's hometown is) are a common, yet very selective, way to form informal networks and relationships [107,109,110]. The findings suggest that South Korean cultural tendencies regarding networking in organizational contexts result in emotional work and sustainability being managed via cliques. System-induced cliques such as school ties or tenures offer trusted relationships to navigate emotional work rather than interpersonal ties such as family or friends. Such cultural implications indicate the findings are particularly unique. Serendipitously, participants became social workers largely due to the systematic influence, yet ties from those systems are what sustain their emotional work. Trust-building in this emotionally reserved culture is leveraged through systemic ties that boost relationship building for sustainability. Ultimately, what could be a cultural hinderance—an institutional system choosing careers for individuals—could also serve as the foundation of sustainable emotional work. The findings also suggest practical implications for organizations to leverage socialization to foster emotional sustainability, which follows next.

4.2. Practical Implication

The findings imply practical steps organizations can employ to facilitate more effective emotional management and find sustainability. As the findings allude, South Korean culture is emotionally and communicatively reserved. Furthermore, the institutionalized system hinders career autonomy, which tends to limit individuals from engaging in extensive pre-entry socialization. As a result, our participants had limited knowledge of job expectations and the emotional demands of being a social worker. The communication literature has argued that organizational socialization is one of the most fundamental determinants to successfully managed emotions in the workplace [12]. Although, organizational socialization as a concept is not culture specific, its key premise offers practical insights that can help social welfare organizations nurture emotionally resilient and sustainable workplaces. Thus, we suggest three ways to enhance sustainability by incorporating organizational socialization tactics at both institutional and organizational levels.

First, educational institutions can partner with social welfare organizations to facilitate a pre-entry socialization phase for individuals who are led to pursue a human service career. Having the opportunity to learn about the emotional work and how to manage it before entering a career can help individuals prepare better for their career path. According to Jablin, organizational socialization starts even before individuals join organizations. For instance, acquiring information about the career through school or media reflects anticipatory socialization (i.e., pre-entry stage) in which people learn about the potential roles in the job they aspire [12,111]. The research also shows that schools are where anticipatory socialization is most likely to occur because it is where students learn about different careers [112,113] and how to navigate various aspects of organizational lives [114–117]. Our participants had sparse anticipatory socialization experiences because the school, major, and career were not streamlined based on their individual interests and aspirations. The participants said they did not fully grasp what would be expected as social workers and "did not know" what their job entailed. This implies that their pre-entry socialization did not offer enough information or they simply did not engage in these socialization activities. The pre-entry socialization is a critical step to help individuals prepare to deal with emotional demands by defining the emotional expectations and how to manage them [41,87,88]. As findings showed, school ties were critical facilitators for overcoming emotional work once they were

on the job. Thus, universities can reflect this cultural tendency and implement alumni panels to enhance pre-entry socialization for students. Engaging with alumni social workers and hearing their experiences about navigating emotional work can help individuals better prepare for a career in human services.

At an organizational-level, social welfare organizations can also devote efforts to implement formal structures to facilitate ongoing socialization upon entry and throughout the employees' tenures [96]. Because Korean culture tends to honor avoidance rather than confrontation and fabrication of emotions rather than honest expression [71], emotional management is often underemphasized in social workers' training. Institutionalized practices such as emotional management workshops can become resources for newcomers to reduce uncertainty inherent in early career stages [118]. Upon entering the career, when members are socialized by design (i.e., formal organizational systems guiding socialization) rather than individualized experiences (i.e., individuals' efforts to learn about organizations and expectations), they are less likely to be anxious or uncertain about their work [119]. The participants in this study were often challenged with their organizations' expectations of emotional displays causing uncertainty and frustration. Organizations pressured social workers to communicate in expected ways—or not communicate—about emotional work rather than offering practical guidelines to help them compartmentalize or cope. As a result, the social workers engaged in selective social networks that were highly informal and represent individual rather than institutional efforts. Thus, if organizations adopt formalized socialization support such as training around coping with emotions, employees may find ways to professionally manage their emotional work. For instance, employee assistance programs could ensure a more systematic remedy. One of the participants, Mrs. Yim said her organization offers in-house therapy sessions for employees experiencing severe emotional burnout. Learning how to strategize emotional management is a useful socialization tactic that organizations can provide to enhance emotional resilience and sustainability of the organizations.

As an extension of organizational-level efforts, workplaces can also systemize internal networking opportunities to create a safe space for workers to compartmentalize and communicate their emotions. The participants often complained that the leadership "discouraged" employees' informal social gathering such as an "afterwork happy hour" because they feared that employees would form rebellious groups against them. However, research argues that organizations can be critical facilitators in providing opportunities for socializing [120]. Therefore, if organizations can foster formalized gathering opportunities and garner safe spaces for networking, members can find other ways to sustain themselves and each other amid emotionally intense work. Rather than viewing the informal gatherings as a threat to the organization, perceiving them as an opportunity to create positive synergy for organizational sustainability is vital. Invigorating these networks on an organizational level can trigger more open outlets for the members' emotional work whether positive or negative. Effective emotional responses can help individuals become successful insiders of organizations [12,87,89], lead to higher job satisfaction [90–92], and facilitate stronger organizational commitments [93–95]. This combats the negative emotions that may emerge from exhaustion or burnout from the work as well as insufficient organizational support [46,47,49,50]. Considering Korean culture, formalized social networks can also take the shape of mentoring where individuals from the same universities are paired as mentors and mentees, which can assist an employee as they enter and become a member of the organization. The research on mentoring has already proven the benefits such as offering care and assistance for career well-being [121,122], as it is an important development tool in organizations [123]. The mentored employees report more positive organizational experiences than those who were not [124,125]. Mentorship also provides the employees with opportunities to develop support and power as well as emotional stability that results in commitment to the organization [126]. Therefore, encouraging systematic mentoring practices can facilitate meaningful relationships and provide emotional support [127].

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

This study has three notable limitations that present opportunities for future research. First, it focuses on social welfare organizations in one country. While this is a novel attempt to add another international case to existing theory, future research should explore multinational cases and compare how the emotions manifest and are sustained across different types of emotionally demanding careers. Second, the study did not capture social workers who exited the organizations. The participants in the study were currently employed and found ways to sustain themselves from emotional work as they continued their job. Therefore, future research should study social workers who exited their organizations to better understand what triggered such decisions. Finally, the study explored a culture that is heavily influenced by education standards and systems that guide majors and careers. In some other cultures, career choices are even more restricted. For instance, in economically underprivileged countries, family responsibilities often pressure individuals to find a job that is the most lucrative and available immediately rather than a meaningful aspiration of the person [128]. Future research can explore other cultures and compare the ramifications of various types of non-autonomous career entry on sustainability.

5. Conclusions

This study explored organizational emotion as a cultural and communicative process. The findings revealed a complex interplay between emotional work and sustainability in a unique cultural system. While culture may become a frame to guide one's education and ultimately career, this in turn can serve as a foundational facilitator of sustainability in emotionally demanding jobs. Additionally, communication can offer emotional transformation that shifts apathy and discontent to empathy and pride. Although emotional work is not easy to undergo, meaning-making and sustainable networks facilitated resilience for social workers.

Emotions are social [14,25,129]. Through social relationships with clients, human service professionals experience positive emotions of fulfillment and pride, redeeming their roles as caregivers [42–45]. As employees experience emotions as part of their work, work relationships create shared identity in organizations [16,24], which become identity anchors for resilience-building [130,131]. To sustain their job through emotional work, participants leveraged relationships that are unique in the South Korean culture: tie-specific networks for sustainable organizational and emotional life. Such networks show how cultural differences can honor varying ways of building connections to find support, from formal to informal and from open to selective.

The work of social workers is a critical backbone to the survival of the vulnerable, yet these professionals' emotional and organizational sustainability receive little attention, particularly in a global context. While social workers experience an emotional toll because of the nature of their work, there are several systemic remedies that organizations can implement to enhance sustainability. Finding healthy ways to sustain emotional work is important. In a unique cultural context, sometimes sustainability needs to be brokered by the system.

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