

The nature, causes and consequences of harm in emotionally-demanding occupations

Prepared by **Birkbeck College University of London**
for the Health and Safety Executive 2008

The nature, causes and consequences of harm in emotionally-demanding occupations

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Traditional approaches to understanding psychosocial job characteristics and well-being have been quite general in that they explore links between general job characteristics such as workload and control on workers in many different sorts of occupations. One example of a more specific approach can be found in research into emotional labour - the requirement to regulate both feelings and the expression of feelings for organizational goals. Early research into emotional labour focused on customer service workers (CSW) but has more recently also considered human service workers (HSW) such as nurses and social workers. A more specific approach to thinking about the outcomes of demanding psychosocial job characteristics can be found in research on burnout which is thought to have three elements: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (also labelled cynicism), and (low) accomplishment (also called professional efficacy). Much recent research has started to explore the links between emotional demands and burnout. The main aim of this project is therefore to explore the nature of such links through undertaking three distinct tasks. The first is a literature review of evidence and theory while the second two tasks comprise two empirical studies examining several key issues in burnout research.

This report and the work it describes were funded by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). Its contents, including any opinions and/or conclusions expressed, are those of the authors alone and do not necessarily reflect HSE policy.

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First published 2008

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank all the organizations and participants who gave their time to share their experiences of emotional labour with us. We are indebted to Gabriele Woelfle who prepared the final version of this report. We would also like to thank Peter Kelly and Kevin Mantle from HSE for their guidance and support throughout this project.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Traditional approaches to understanding psychosocial job characteristics and well-being have been quite general in that they explore links between general job characteristics such as workload and control on workers in many different sorts of occupations. One example of a more specific approach can be found in research into emotional labour – the requirement to regulate both feelings and the expression of feelings for organizational goals. Early research into emotional labour focused on customer service workers (CSW) but has more recently also considered human service workers (HSW) such as nurses and social workers. A more specific approach to thinking about the outcomes of demanding psychosocial job characteristics can be found in research on burnout which is thought to have three elements: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization (also labelled cynicism), and (low) accomplishment (also called professional efficacy). Much recent research has started to explore the links between emotional demands and burnout. The main aim of this project is therefore to explore the nature of such links through undertaking three distinct tasks. The first is a literature review of evidence and theory while the second two tasks comprise two empirical studies examining several key issues in burnout research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review examined the following six areas:

1. The main correlates and causes of burnout in human service work
2. Traditional work stressors that have been found to relate to burnout (and related outcomes)
3. The pathways through which these stressors lead to these end points
4. The extent to which and how the emotional demands of human service occupations are different from emotional demands of other related and un-related occupations
5. The relationship between emotional demands and burnout (and related outcomes) in customer service work and human service work
6. Interventions which may ameliorate the impacts of such emotional demands on outcomes

As the vast proportion of studies in this field is cross-sectional it was in nearly all cases only possible to examine associations. Most demographic and occupational factors (area 1) correlate quite inconsistently with burnout though the few studies which examine personality do find consistent relationships between negative affectivity and burnout. Some traditional work stressors (area 2), such as role ambiguity, job demands, and social support have shown reasonably consistent associations with burnout. While there is a general belief that burnout occurs in a sequence of stages (area 3), such that its different elements appear in a particular order, the available evidence does not support any specific sequence. Other approaches to burnout processes emphasize intra-personal processes such as emotion regulation. The nature of emotional demands (area 4) does seem to be different in HSW and CSW probably due to the different motivations behind and involvement in the emotional labour required. While emotional demands such as the quantity of customer interaction (area 5) do not seem to relate to burnout other demands, such as surface acting (or emotional dissonance), do seem to be associated. While in some senses HSW have the most emotionally demanding jobs they also have the lowest levels of emotional dissonance. There is very little research on burnout interventions (area 6) but that which has been done suggests some of these interventions can be effective.

STUDY 1: QUESTIONNAIRE SURVEY

A survey of 398 participants (around 40% response rate) was undertaken. The sample had three sub groups: CSW, mainly call centre staff (N=110); HSW-Other, mainly human service workers, such as social and care workers, but excluding teachers (N=184); and, Teachers, mainly primary school heads (M=104). The following research questions and sub-questions were addressed:

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Literature review: Most research about emotional labour and burnout is cross-sectional meaning that is not possible to make causal inferences. A number of features of burnout, including its inconsistent relationships with person and occupational factors and the mixed evidence about how it develops call into question aspects of its validity and reliability as a construct. Researchers have different views about how emotional labour is best construed and the nature of the relationship between emotional labour and burnout appears to differ across HSW and CSW. There are so few studies of burnout interventions it is difficult to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Study 1: Though scores on burnout and GHQ12 were not different from available norms for similar groups the three groups differed in a number of important respects including the level of different aspects of emotional labour reported and levels of different dimensions of burnout. Emotional demands were found to be related to burnout (after controlling for person factors and traditional job stressors) but the patterning of the relationships varied across the three groups again demonstrating the importance of contextual factors in understanding emotional labour.

Study 2: The double-edged nature of emotional labour for participants provided important suggestions for why it may be the case that HSW report higher levels of emotional labour but not necessarily higher burnout. Some light was also shed on why and how negative interactions with clients may be experienced as harmful. While all job characteristics depend to some extent on their context the results suggest that emotional labour plays out very differently depending not only on context but the specific nature of the events and episodes encountered by employees.

Recommendations for research and practice: Undertaking more longitudinal and less cross-sectional research is essential for understanding links between emotional labour and burnout. Future research should focus on theoretically unpacking both burnout and emotional labour in order to develop clearer and more elaborate constructs and find ways of incorporating context more fully. Given the current state of knowledge it is difficult to make sound practical suggestions. However, the available evidence suggests that emotional labour cannot be managed in the same way as traditional ‘stressors’ and that practitioners should start to engage more with the idea of emotional labour when looking at how work affects well-being.

Table 2: Demographics

		<i>HSW- Other (%)</i>	<i>CSW (%)</i>	<i>Teachers (%)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Male</i>	44.5	36.4	19.1	28.1
	<i>Female</i>	47.0	24.2	28.8	71.9
<i>Age</i>	<i>Under 20</i>	0	100	0	1.8
	<i>21-30</i>	27.2	57.9	14.9	28.9
	<i>31-40</i>	51.1	23.9	25.0	22.3
	<i>41-50</i>	64.4	9.9	25.7	25.6
	<i>51-60</i>	47.2	2.8	50.0	18.3
	<i>61+</i>	66.7	8.3	25.0	3.0
<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Single</i>	25.8	50.8	23.3	30.5
	<i>Married/with partner</i>	55.3	16.5	28.3	60.2
	<i>Divorced /separated</i>	54.3	22.9	22.9	8.9
	<i>Widowed</i>	100	0	0	.5
<i>School age children at home?</i>	<i>Yes</i>	58.6	17.1	24.3	28.1
	<i>No</i>	41.5	31.3	27.1	71.9

