# Working at the edge: emotional labour in the spectre of violence

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## Abstract

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with police officers, door(wo)men and prison officers we present intimate, emotional and sometimes harrowing accounts of both the physical and emotional pain routinely endured by those employed as agents of social control. This article positions labour undertaken in such contexts as ‘edgework’; exploring how the boundary, or ‘edge’, between safety and danger is negotiated and managed ‘in the moment’ through embodied performances of empathetic and antipathetic emotional labour and emotional neutrality. Placing the concepts of edgework and emotional labour in dialogue, we open up a space in which to explore gendered conceptualisations of emotional labour and offer a more feminist appreciation of edge work that moves us beyond narrow concerns with pleasure, to account for embodied experience and emotional performance. In so doing, this paper offers a unique insight into the emotional labour repertoires of both men and women who work in the spectre of violence.

Keywords: pain, violence, emotional labour, police, prison officers, door staff, extreme work, edgework, embodied

## Introduction

\*\*Please note this paper includes accounts of domestic violence, the death of a child and physical assault. \*\*

The UK Health and Safety Executive defines work-related violence as ‘a**ny incident in which a person is abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances relating to their work’ (**[www.hse.gov.uk](http://www.hse.gov.uk)**).** This can comprise of verbal abuse or threats as well as physical attacks. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act (1974) employers are required to mitigate the risk of violence. Mitigation does not mean that violence is absent. This article presents first-hand accounts of what it *feels* like to work in such contexts as agents of ‘social control’ (Humphrey *et al.* 2008), offering a unique insight into the emotional labour required of both men and women undertaking what is traditionally positioned as ‘men’s work’. In so doing it challenges gender stereotypes associated with social control work, emotional labour and violence.

The emotional labour thesis is inextricably linked to gendered understandings of work and occupations. In the thirty-five years since the publication of *The Managed Heart* (Hochschild, 1983) the sociological literature on emotional labour has developed asymmetrically (Ward, 2019) as both empirical and conceptual research has focused almost exclusively on empathetic emotional labour performed by women doing stereotypically ‘women’s work’. In 2009, a special issue of Gender, Work and Organization sought to address this by curating a series of papers exploring masculinity and emotional labour. Building on a small but important body of work that recognised that gender is not just about women (see Simpson, 2004; Cross and Bagihole, 2002; Lupton, 2006), Dennis and Korczynski’s (2009) special issue presented the experiences of men working in (Gregory, 2009) – or who rejected work in – female dominated occupations (Nixon, 2009). Presenting experiences of men performing servility and subservience in roles characterised as ‘feminine’ the special issues offered insights and contributions to our understanding of gendered performances of emotional labour, but did not necessarily move conceptualisations of emotional labour beyond binary constructions of gender as they continue to prioritise gendered conceptualisation of self and work above the emotional labour performances themselves.

In contrast, this paper seeks to disrupt the binaries that associate specific gender constructions with certain occupations, tasks and performances. It also challenges those interested in the intersection of gender and emotional labour to move beyond the study of occupations characterised by empathy and servility to include the darker side (Linstead et al. 2014; Ward & McMurray, 2016) of organising and working. To that end, we consider the emotional labour repertoires performed by *both* men and women employed as social control agents (i.e. police, prison and door workers) wherein their purpose is to manage the boundary between order and chaos, civility and incivility, safety and danger. Informed by a critical reading of ‘edgework’ (Lois, 2001; Granter et al, 2018) we demonstrate how performances of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983) are key to understanding how those who routinely work in that which we define as the ‘spectre of violence’ manage the emotions of others.

Positioning labour undertaken in such contexts as ‘edgework’; this paper’s key focus is to understand how the boundary, or ‘edge’, between safety and danger is negotiated and managed ‘in the moment’ through embodied performances of emotional labour. Intimate, emotional and harrowing accounts of the emotional and physical pain routinely endured as part of this work challenge masculine and agentic conceptualisations of edgework as ‘pleasure’ (Lyng, 1990; 2004) and offer a feminist critique of ‘edgework in exchange for a wage’ as embodied and emotional. We then turn our attention to understanding just how the boundaries between safety and danger are managed and negotiated ‘in the moment’. We demonstrate how empathetic and antipathetic emotional labour, along with emotional neutrality are key to this negotiation by placing embodied emotional experiences of both men and women at the forefront of our analysis. We begin by unpacking the ways in which edgework and extreme work have, until now, been conceptualised in relatively narrow gendered terms.

## Edgework, Extreme Work & Emotion

The concept of ‘edgework’ was originally defined by sociologist Stephen Lyng as ‘activities that involved a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence. The archetypal edgework experience is one in which the individual’s failure to meet the challenge at hand will result in death, or, at the very least, debilitating injury’ (1990:857). Inspired by Hunter Thompson’s exploration of extreme experiences through drug taking – in the novel ‘*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas’* (1971) – Lyng’s work inverted academic conceptualisations of risk-taking (see Anderson and Brown, 2010). In particular, Lyng’s ‘edgework’ challenged previous understandings of the motivations behind risk-taking behaviour. Once understood as a compulsion to satisfy need (i.e. based on the extrinsic rewards of taking the risk) the concept of edgework opened up the possibility that there was an intrinsic motivation for risk-taking behaviours. Edgework acknowledged that risk can be exhilarating, seductive, intense and addictive. This led to a paradigmatic shift of understanding risk, risk-takers and risk-taking behaviours as emotional and embodied (Lyng, 2004; Lois, 2001).

More recently, the concept of edgework has been positioned in relation to ‘extreme work’. Over the past decade the term ‘extreme work’ has been gaining purchase in management and organisation studies literatures (Hewlett & Luce, 2006; Lyng, 2005; Granter et al, 2015) wherein ‘extreme’ is understood in relation to ‘work intensity, long-hours cultures and the normalizing of extreme work behaviours and cultures’ (Granter et al, 2015:443). Hewlett and Luce’s (2006) definition of extreme work assumes a minimum 60-hour working week. Those who undertake extreme work, (‘extreme workers’), are those whom thrive off the intense working patterns, behaviours and cultures associated with their labour. As Granter *et al.* (2015:446) point out, it is not uncommon for ‘high-achieving perfectionists and workaholics’ to undertake extreme work. They go as far as to ask whether these extreme workers have few means of resistance or whether they are indeed, ‘willing slaves’ (Bunting, 2004) who, through their own desire to achieve, increase the pace and intensity of their own work experiences. Gascoigne et al (2015:457) suggest that ‘extreme jobs derive not from the ‘nature’ of managerial and professional work but from working practices and occupational discourses which have developed to suit the gendered norms of ‘ideal workers’. In other words, extreme work does not objectively exist within the parameters of a working time directive, but is instead a consequence of cultural and gendered work practices that have become a structure of gender inequality.

It is noteworthy how both edgework and extreme work literatures are predominantly based on environments in which middle-class white men dominate (Gasgoigne et al, 2015; Newmahr, 2011). In extreme work the focus is on enduring long-hours of active work, always being available, and travelling extensively (Granter et al, 2018; Granter et al, 2015; Turnbull and Wass, 2015; Burrow, 2015 exceptions include Gascoigne et al, 2015). In edgework focus is directed on the ‘buzz’, understood as an appreciation of the embodied pleasures and arousal (Lyng, 2004), felt through extreme risk-taking such as that experienced in adrenaline sports of mountain climbing (Bunn, 2015) and sky-diving (Hardie-Bick and Bonner, 2015). Men certainly seem to be overrepresented here, however, this does not mean that the conceptual relevance of edgework and extreme work is disproportionate in the experiences of white-middle class men. Indeed in 2007, Lyng and Matthews cautioned against edgework being understood as masculine.

Consequently, a number of studies emerged focusing on women’s engagement in edgework, particularly in adrenaline sport contexts (Laurendeau, and Sharara, 2008; Olstead, 2011). However, as Newmahr (2011:684) so clearly articulates, ‘a focus on women as the subject of edgework studies is not necessarily the same as a feminist analysis’. Taking a critical feminist perspective on edgework means challenging the assumption that edgework is ‘a performance of masculinity’ (2011:686) and therefore that the conceptualisation of ‘the edge’ is in and of itself gendered. In so doing, this leads her to ask ‘which edges count as edgework’?

Lois’ (2001) ethnographic study of a volunteer search and rescue team pushed the archetypal conceptualisation of edgework, so often thought about through the lens of physical danger, to one that explored the emotional edge. Compared to the physical risks faced the emotional risks, were more dynamic, actively negotiated and individually experienced. Having the ability to maintain composure and focus in the search for missing people, or retrieving mutilated human remains, often meant the distinction between life and death. For Lois, the rescue workers’ ability to manage their emotions, described as ‘emotional stoicism’ (2001:393) was key to maintaining these boundaries, both ‘in the moment’ and before and after a mission.

While Lois’ (2001) work highlights how individuals navigate the emotional edge, the focus is on volunteers. Volunteers choose to undertake such emotion management. Our concern is with those who do not have the same choice. Our aim is to explore the emotional edge as ‘labour’ where the failure to undertake edgework in exchange for a wage could not only lead to serious bodily harm but also runs the risk of losing one’s job. It also differs from Granter et al.’s (2018) work on ambulance responders who do take risks in exchange for a wage. Granter et al.’s primary focus is on the threats faced by the recipient of the work (i.e. the risk of death is with the patient), and less consideration is given to the risks to the responders themselves (2018). Building on Ward and McMurray’s work exploring the dark side of emotional labour (2016), our focus is on those paid to work at the physical and emotional edge, where the self and other is at risk.

Returning to Lyng’s (1990:857) description of the archetypal edgework experience, then, our interest is in the experiences of both men and women who undertake ‘activities that involve[d] a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence’. Our concern is not with voluntary risk in pursuit of the ‘buzz’, but with how edgework is experienced in relation to nonvoluntary risk, where taking risks is a routine part of paid employment and where the emotional edge is not only navigated by managing one’s own emotions but also in the ability to manage the emotions of others in the spectre of violence. Central to this is understanding how different (traditionally gendered) emotions are experienced and performed.

## Emotional Labour and Violence

Emotional labour is defined by Hochschild as ‘… the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has *exchange-value…* …This labour requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983:7, *emphasis in original).* The flight attendants Hochschild observed and interviewed in her original study, spent their days working to suppress their own feelings of exhaustion, frustration and fear whilst simultaneously enacting emotions to create a cheerful, carefree pleasurable experience for their passengers in line with the regulations prescribed by the airline. Positive interpersonal interactions such as this can be understood as the performance of *positive* (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) or *empathetic* (Korczynski, 2003) emotional labour.

The bill collectors Hochschild observed, whose emotion management was compared with that of the flight attendants, undertook work that required them to induce fear, surprise and intimidation in their clients. Such negative service interactions (from the client’s perspective) can be seen to entail the performance of *negative* (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987) or *antipathetic* (Korczynski, 2003; Ward & McMurray, 2016) emotional labour. Thus, the roles of flight attendant and bill collector are presented as involving antithetic emotion management practices. However, Ward & McMurray (2011:1585) argue that these dichotomous conceptualisations of emotional labour overlook job roles that require the suppression of felt emotions whilst “…displaying unemotional behaviour, wherein the suppression of the emotion is the performance itself”, which they define as *emotional neutrality*. Emotional neutrality has been identified as an important part of the emotional labour repertoire of GP receptionists (Ward & McMurray, 2011) and call centre workers (Bunting, 2004). Such conceptual distinctions are being made, then, on the type of emotion displayed during emotional labour performances (rather than the characteristics of the occupation, role or worker). Despite *The Managed Heart* presenting a comparison of job roles characterised by empathetic and antipathetic performances the studies it has inspired have almost exclusively focused on roles characterised by positive emotional performances thereby marginalising the emotional labour required by those employed to enact much darker (Linstead et al, 2014; McMurray & Ward, 2014; Ward & McMurray, 2016) and often unspoken work (Ward and McMurray, 2011).

Studying emotional labour in the context of violence, in which the ability to navigate the ‘edge’ lies in one’s ability to manage the emotions of self and others, particularly when an inability or failure to do so risks serious physical bodily harm and emotional pain, offers something new. To that end, we consider the emotional labour repertoires performed by *both* men and women employed as social control agents, wherein their purpose is to manage the boundary between order and chaos, civility and incivility, safety and danger. They are required to work ‘at the edge’ of decent behaviour, acting as a buffer against and in the shadow of the very real potential for violence (Thompson, 1971; Lyng, 1990). Each of the three occupations explored in this paper serves this function; the prison guard, the police officer and the door (wo)man who, as social control agents, are likely to experience emotions such as anger, fear, frustration, aggression and irritation (Humphrey *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, they are often required to perform similar emotions in the execution of their work, as display norms and task completion require them to ‘express emotions that most people do not enjoy expressing’ (Humphre*y*, 2013: 85). This includes displays of anger and toughness, and the suppression of fear, weakness, and disgust (Tracy, 2005). As Rafaeli & Sutton (1991:750) note, these negative or unpleasant emotions are often used by control agents as ‘tools of social influence, especially when they have more power than those they are trying to influence’. In emotional terms, this means that police, prison and door workers are required to do more than offer the positive empathetic performances usually associated with emotional labourers such cabin crew, entertainers or nurses (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987; Korczynski, 2003; Williams, 2003). As such ‘social control agents’ invite an alternative gendered conceptualisation of ‘emotional labour’. They move us beyond thinking about emotional labour as women’s work (Erickson and Ritter, 2001; Tyler and Taylor, 2001) or even as ‘demasculinising’ work (Nixon, 2009) towards an appreciation of masculinity and femininity in emotional labour repertoires performed in work at the edge.

Placing edgework and emotional labour in dialogue also allows us to challenge masculine conceptualisations of edgework; effectively moving beyond understandings of edgework as embodied pleasure, towards an appreciation of the potential for emotional pains in edgework. Mobilising the concept of edgework in this way develops our understanding of the intersections of masculinity and emotional labour too. In what follows we consider what it *feels* like in physical and emotional terms to be required to work at the edge, in what we describe as the spectre of violence, paying particular attention to the lived experience of social control agents. To date, there has been relatively little qualitative research explaining how social control agents such as police, prison and door workers manage the consequent challenges of their work (Tracy, 2005). In response, we give voice to the embodied nature of the emotional labour required to navigate ‘the edge’.

## Methods

The analysis presented below draws on 16 interviews with social control agents. Eight of the interviews were initially collected as part of an inter-occupational exploration (Hughes, 1984) of the nature and effects of emotional labour. While the original sample drew across occupations as diverse as caring, retail, banking, management, medicine, voluntary work and the public sector, it became clear that a small but important cohort – prison, police and door staff – were distinguished by their routine exposure to the threat of physical and emotional violence.

Recognising that while the original interviews offered rich data, they were small in number, a further eight interviews were conducted with police and door staff. We were unable to interview more prison staff due, we believe, to nationally reported political sensitivity over the number of prison guards and the acceptability of their conditions of work at the time of interviewing. The one prison interviewee is however retained in so far as it adds breadth to the sample and indicates a site for future research.

Accesses to all interviewees was initiated through personal contacts, with purposeful sampling being driven by snowballing – an approach identified as particularly suited to generating knowledge which is emergent and inter-relational (Noy, 2008). It is also effective in accessing close knit or closed groups who are cautious about the judgement of outsiders (Waters, 2014). Table one provides a breakdown of participants. Two of the police officers were Police Community Support Officers (PCSO) who are civilians with many of the same powers as fully commissioned officers (e.g. issues fines, seize property, search premises, tackle anti-social behaviour and request information). For our purposes their role, experiences and exposure to violence are similar to warranted police officers and are therefore categorised as police officers.

[INSERT Table 1 HERE]

Between them, the respondents had 193 years’ experience of acting in a social control occupation. Ten were men and six women. The sample over-represented women as a proportion of the occupations in question (e.g. in England and Wales 28.2% of police officers are women (Home Office, 2015)). However, within this study a comparison across sex reveals little difference in accounts of working at the edge in emotional terms. The significance of gender in what follows lies in the shared experience across the sample of living and working with violence.

Interviews were conducted across England, and took place away from work sites, primarily at the respondents’ homes (n=13), in public spaces (n=2) with a further interview on campus. Interviewing away from work sites ensured confidentiality, reduced fears of being overheard and disrupted power hierarchies between participant and researcher (Elwood & Martin, 2000). Lasting between 40 minutes to one hour, all interviews were semi structured in nature and included open questions on job role, career duration, key tasks, challenges of the jobs, how work made individuals feel and how they coped with the demands of their occupation. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full.

Each of the named authors conducted interviews using a semi-structured interview topic guide. The research team is made up of one female and two male researchers. All are of white, middle-class demographic. All researchers interviewed a combination of male and female police officers and door staff. All elicited rich, meaningful and emotional accounts of the work undertaken and the impact it had on those individuals. The gender, age, class and status of the individual researchers will, of course, have impacted the recounting of life stories, experiences and emotions through the moderation of language (though our accounts include epithets) or positioning of self in relational dynamics (Roulston, 2010). However, the researchers’ status as outsiders meant we were able to ask what would seem like obvious questions to an insider, including 'how did it feel'.  Participants willingness to open up and share their private experiences is perhaps more a response to the professional researcher identity whose genuine interest and commitments to confidentiality and anonymity could be trusted (see Miller and Glassner, 2011), as opposed to any other social marker.

The data was analysed using an inductive thematic approach based on a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) with a view to examining and comparing the actions, experiences, processes, reactions and interpretations of those engaged in ‘edgework’. Our aim was to better understand what it meant to work in the spectre of violence from the perspective of those engaged in relevant occupations, in such a way that would allow the analysis to facilitate the emergence, and furthering our understanding, of the intersections between sex, emotional labour performances, and the gendering of those performances. Detailed reading and coding of the data by the authors individually was followed by discussions of emergent codes, themes and patterns before reanalysis (Johnson, 2008). This iterative process resulted in eight primary themes (see table 2) that were then collated under two meta-headings: the spectre of violence and emotional labour at the edge. Quotes from the data are used to illustrate the codes in the analysis provided below, while also giving voice to the respondents themselves. Quotes are representative of a wider class of issues/codes, with longer or multiple quotes being used from a single participant to build a narrative sense of the category, issues and lived experience of emotion labour at the edge.

[INSERT Table 2 HERE]

Appropriate institutional approvals were gained prior to commencement of the study. We did not set out to probe participants for these harrowing accounts of their work. The nature of the semi-structured interviews was such that we were interested in the day-to-day work that people do – both in the original study and the recruitment of the eight additional interviews. Participants voluntarily shared these experiences as they were resonant in their emotional memories, therefore no enhanced ethical approval was sought. That is not to say that participants were not offered support or advice post-interview. All were provided with contact details of Samaritans (a non-judgemental listening service) and were encouraged to contact the researchers if they wanted to discuss anything further. None of the participants followed up for support but three of the 16 made contact to thank the researchers for the chance to share their experiences. It was a process those three, at least, found cathartic. No names or identifying characteristics of respondent roles, locations or employment are presented in line with a commitment to anonymity. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

## Findings

While the jobs of our social control agents varied in terms of powers (e.g. to arrest or detain), working patterns (e.g. regularity and length of shifts, night work), tenure (e.g. full-time salaried verses gig-economy), location (e.g. prison, stations, streets, clubs, homes) and the myriad of other factors that distinguish one occupation from another, they shared an experience of living with the ever-present threat of violence. We frame this as a ‘spectre of violence’ and it pertained to direct threats to their own well-being as well the vicarious trauma of dealing with violence meted out to others.

### The Spectre of Violence – embodiment, emotion & othering

All of the people we interviewed had stories of being physically assaulted in the course of their work: choked, stabbed, kicked, wrestled, restrained, thrown, spat at or punched. For Doorman Allan this meant that ‘We are in fear all of the time, you never know what you are going to turn up to’ (Doorman, Allan). Within the context of a prison, physical threats and direct violence could arise unannounced:

‘I was on my own. And this con just flew off the bed and grabbed us round the throat and pushed us against the wall and said “I am not going [to the workshop]”. Ok fair enough. What can I do? I have got 136 prisoners here’.

(Prison Officer, Graeme)

The spectre of violence refers not only to the in-the-moment assault but also a sense in which the scale or depth of harm can escalate. This sense is heightened by the knowledge of past-harm visited upon other members of the occupation:

‘There has been three members of staff stabbed quite badly and one of them nearly died. So, there are a lot of people in there [prison] who are dangerous, and we haven’t got to lose sight of that fact’.

(Prison Officer, Graeme)

‘I’ve had, erm, a couple of friends die in the police. Brings home the fact that it’s one of those things where you can die at work. Erm, and that’s something I think about a lot, and erm, and the possibility of seeing people die at work’

(Police Officer, Peter)

All of the control agents interviewed knew someone who had been seriously harmed or killed in the course of their work. It was the need ‘not to lose sight of that fact’ (e.g. that you are dealing with dangerous people or situations) that ensured that the potential for violence was ever-present in such work - ‘something I think about a lot’. Added to this was the experience of being personally harmed in physical terms as a consequence of the violence that saturated their work. Jackie describes her immediate reaction to being stabbed following an altercation outside a nightlight club where she worked door:

‘By the time the argument and the fights had finished we were paddling about in an inch of blood… I actually got stabbed, but at the time I didn’t realise because I was wearing a stab vest and it’s a good job because I had felt three blows to my back and thought nothing of it. …I took my jacket off and there were blade marks in my coat. I was absolutely petrified… I hit the floor like a ton of bricks and just burst out crying. All I could think about were my two boys at home so that did actually scare me, scare me to death… that was a scary night. Scary as hell.’

(Door woman, Jackie)

Jackie describes the type of extreme violence that few of us have to experience at work. Being ‘stabbed’ and ‘paddling about in an inch of blood’ are not encountered in the most *extreme* of office environments. While Jackie did talk about getting a ‘buzz’ commonly associated with edgework (see Lyng, 2004 and Lois, 2001) in terms of being hooked on door work and really enjoying it as compared to her previous role as a ‘stay at home mum’ (Jackie) she was still ‘petrified’ by encounters that were ‘a clearly observable threat to one’s physical or mental well-being or one’s sense of an ordered existence’ (Lyng, 1990:857). This was edgework that threatened her physical well-being, emotional state (i.e. ‘burst out crying’) and existence as a mother (i.e. ‘all I could think about were my two boys’).

The spectre of violence is therefore rooted in an understanding of past violence, the unpredictability of the work environment and personal experience of physical harm. This experience leaves physical and emotional marks. Overtime it is embodied, a point made forcefully by Police officer Dawn:

‘I have had more bruises and broken bones and spat on so many times throughout 15 years of service that it actually sunk into my pores and infected me inside. For me, being punched in the face by a stranger, and waking up in the morning and seeing that I have a black eye, broken rib … For me that’s like they have gone into your body and pulled a little bit out. … and you get it over and over again…’

(Police Officer, Dawn)

Dawn feels as if the physical, verbal and emotional violence she has suffered in the course of her work has sunk into her and infected her. This is not work that you can leave at the door or in the staff room: it follows you home and is externalised as ocular insult. Not only is the immediate insult physical/external, the enduring effects are also embodied in a sense that an outsider has ‘gone into your body and pulled a little bit out’. There is a sense in which long-term exposure to violence leaves Dawn less than a whole person. The point is reinforced by Kate for whom the pain of such violence is exacerbated by insult and a lack of public recognition of the spectre of violence ‘Callings us bitch, a c-u-n-t, a pig and a mother fucker… That’s what you are facing every single day and it is not recognised anymore.… It is forgotten that we are human beings’ (Police officer, Kate).

There is then a felt need among respondents for an acknowledgement of the physical, verbal and emotional harm visited upon social control agents, in much the same way as our workers recognise the violence suffered by members of the public. Prison, police and door staff all bear witness to the violence inflicted by some sections of society on others. This role as witness contributes to the pervasive nature of work in the spectre of violence:

“You think of anyone else in the country that sees what we see. Who sees what we see? Who sees a woman so savagely beaten that her finger nails are stuck in the wall because she’s trying to get out of a window. Who sees a five-year-old’s head rolling down a motorway? Who? Who the fuck sees that?”

(Police Officer, Dawn)

Under such circumstances working at the edge means dealing with that which is beyond what anyone should be required to see (‘Who the fuck sees that?’). It is traumatic, harrowing and vivid, making its presence known through that which is left behind by the traumatic events inflicted upon others. For our workers this speaks to the vicarious trauma (Vaja, 2013) of dealing with the violence inflicted on other bodies. What we mean by this is that indirect exposure to violence changes the inner experience of the worker such that they are upset or traumatised. We see this in Dawn who was told by a counsellor that, as a police officer, ‘I should be solid, impenetrable. But I said, ‘I am not, I am weak, I am vulnerable, and it hurts physically and emotionally. It hurts me’’.

The above accounts of personal violence, insults and the exposure to the harm suffered by others all contribute to our understanding of what it means to work in the spectre of violence. They reveal an understandable vulnerability in agents who, regardless of gender, are expected to display a heteronormative performance of masculinity – to be ‘impenetrable’ in the face violence. Edgework of this kind is not undertaken voluntarily and there is little sense of a thrill seeking, machoistic framing of the violence. Instead, workers labour emotionally to maintain order in the face of violence.

### Emotion labour at the edge

Critical aspects of the work of social control agents are characterised by fear, pain, loss, violation and vulnerability and each worker labours emotionally to deal with it. But dealing with their own emotions with respect to coping is only part of the emotional labour required of such workers. Emotional labour performances are also drawn upon to manage others – victims, perpetrators, witnesses and colleagues. In what follows, we explore the emotional labour repertoires employed to navigate ‘the edge’, focusing on performances of empathetic, neutral and antipathetic emotional labour.

#### Empathetic Emotional Labour

For our agents of social control, empathy implied understanding the plight or position of those they faced, and acting accordingly. This might pertain to prisoners frustrated at being cell-bound for long hours, clubbers prevented from joining friends in a nightclub, or members of the public frustrated at what was perceived as the inadequate response of the police to upsetting life events.

‘I went to a home burglary the other day and I knew the minute that I got there that the fella come to the door and he was instantly pumped up, full of aggression. He just wanted to ‘have a go at me’ because we got there 6 ½ hours later … he ranted at me for an hour and three-quarters. I let him do it because I thought ‘this is how angry this man is and it was probably the one and only time he ever wanted help from the police’’

(Police officer, Kate)

Where others have observed antipathy in the face of public aggression (Korcznyski, 2003) our social control agent empathises with the anger at being let down by the police. She willingly suffers the aggression: letting a member of the public vent because she understands his frustration. In other contexts, empathy could result in more proactive performances couched in humour. Dawn describes the use of props during door work to diffuse the understandable frustration of those denied entry to a club:

‘What I used to do was carry a dummy [pacifier] in my pocket so when they started [to complain or act out] I’d chuck the dummy at them and say – who is spitting out their dummy –and they’d just stand there. By the time they’d seen what they’d caught it was all over and we were the best of friends again. It’s an ice breaker if nothing else … something daft. You’re not coming across intimidating, you’re not try to tell them what to do, you’re just trying to diffuse the situation as best you can without it escalating’

(Door woman, Jackie).

Jackie goes on to acknowledge that door staff can be seen as intimidating and that for some (men) this might invite aggression. Understanding this possibility, she employs humour to disarm the aggressor and prevent a situation escalating. Importantly, empathetic emotional labour was not only performed by women in these roles. John (Doorman) was sure that very traditional forms of empathetic emotional labour, such as that found in accounts of front-line service work, had value in doorwork:

‘I tend to smile and give customers that eye contact, right from the outset, because it shows that I am friendly, I am not aggressive. It is about giving a good impression. It also helps when customers are in a bad mood and brewing for trouble, if you are smiling and happy it can reverse the situation.’

(Doorman, John)

While humour and servility were used by both men and women in the face of violence, it was far more common for both sexes to employ emotional neutrality in their roles as social control agents.

#### Emotional Neutrality – staying calm

Emotional neutrality refers to the practice of suppressing felt emotions whilst displaying unemotional behaviour, wherein the suppression of the emotion is the performance itself (Ward & McMurray, 2011).

‘It’s so important to keep calm, no matter how much inside you might be flapping, it’s really important to stay calm because people look to you… You can’t show your fear, you have to be calm because the bar staff, everyone is scared shitless and they look to you … somebody’s got to hold their ground. Somebody has to, there’s nobody else if you don’t, so you have to be calm’

(Doorman, Tommy)

To work as a social control agent is to recognise a responsibility to others (‘they look to you’) and to the maintenance of order (‘somebody’s got to hold their ground’). Often this is predicated on presenting a sense of calm you do not necessarily feel (‘you can’t show your fear’). In this sense Tommy labours to suppress his feelings of fear and panic to produce that which Hochschild (1983) would recognise as a contextually appropriate observable display. In the above case the performance is to reassure other employees that he is in control and there is no need to be ‘scared shitless’. At other times, such performances are directed at an aggressor:

‘I’ve had some guy come back with a knife and … you have to hide your fear and you have to sort of dismiss it. ‘Terry put the knife away mate, for god’s sake, I don’t want to see you get nicked … Rachel’s [bar owner] told me you’re not coming in tonight. You’re banned for another three weeks. Terry put that frigging knife away will you’. You’re hoping that he is going to put it away, because at the end of the day if he really wanted to kill you he wouldn’t be standing there with a knife in his hand, he would jump in a car and drive into you.’

(Doorman, Tommy)

Faced with a knife, Tommy’s emotional labour is directed at diffusing the situation. At one level there is evidence of empathy in the above performance in so far as Tommy acknowledges the ban on entrance and makes it clear that he does not want to see Terry arrested, effectively showing concern for the well-being of the latter. Tommy also offers an emotionally neutral performance in so far as he suppresses his own fears of confrontation with calm and unemotional behaviour. In similar vein, faced with the potential of prison violence, Graeme notes that:

‘I would be trying to keep my voice level and calm and trying to keep my voice at a stage where I am not raising it and escalating the situation.’

(Prison Officer, Graeme)

A vocal performance of emotional neutrality (‘trying to keep my voice calm’) is designed to prevent tense situations escalating. The performance masks the frustration and fear of the worker, a point reflected on by Graeme when he notes that if you were to look at him closely, in the moment, ‘I think you would see the frustration and I think you would see in my face that I wasn’t quite calm’. In this sense, the maintenance of order is predicated on the thin veneer of the social control agent’s emotional neutrality. While the suppression of fear and the use of vocal strategies to maintain order have been noted elsewhere (Hobbes, *et al.* 2002; Tracy, 2005), these tend to privilege the use of aggression rather than neutrality as a de-escalating tool. However, that is not to say that aggression was absent in the performances of those we interviewed.

#### Antipathetic Emotional Labour

Often the use of intimidation or aggression was described as a last resort. It is employed where it was deemed that neutrality would not be sufficient to control or cope with a situation. Here again, aggression was something that often had to be evoked intentionally.

‘It doesn’t matter what you are feeling inside, you’ve got to intimidate them. You have to condition your mind, be quite stern, got to be strong. Not take any messing’

(Doorman, Allan)

Whilst traditional masculine readings of edgework might position the exhibition of aggression in these situations as exciting, in that they are an opportunity to exercising strength and dominance, our focus on the emotional labour reveals a more subtle, nuanced experience.

‘That’s the only bit I don’t like … when I have to let my temper sort of step in because sometimes you need it to give you that… not confidence boost but … when some people lose their temper, they get that extra bit of strength to physically do it. Without losing my temper… sometimes because with me only being 5ft 3’’ I haven’t got physical strength to shift somebody so now and again to lose my temper is to help me move somebody out rather than to be aggressive.’

(Door woman, Jackie)

‘You can’t be your normal self, you’re a little bit tensed up, so you’re ready … your adrenaline … a little but like a coiled spring just in case it kicks off …’

(Doorman, Tommy)

The sense of a performance, of the need to employ emotion in return for a wage, is writ large in comments such as ‘it doesn’t matter what you feel inside’ and ‘you can’t be your normal self’ and ‘you have to condition your mind’. Faced with violence, the women and men who act as social control agents perceive a need to ‘intimidate them [those who threaten violence]’. This intimidation or antipathetic emotional labour requires that the worker is prepared for when things ‘kick off’ or for when they need that ‘extra bit of physical strength’. Importantly, these accounts move us beyond the gendered accounts of emotional labour (as servility and subservience) and instead attest to the ways in which both men and women purposefully control their emotions in a bid to maintain the sometimes thin line between order and chaos. That line is also internalised, as the struggle to stay in control of emotional performances in the face of violence drives agents to the edge. We see this in Peter’s account of the ‘red mist’ that descends during a physical encounter with burglar:

‘I just put my arms around him [burglar] and, he kicked out putting me knee out to the left. Really hurt! And instant red mist. So, I literally grabbed this guy and pushed him into the hedge and held him in the hedge. Stopped him doing anything else… it was red mist. And you know what? I could have got the baton out, and batoned him … or a spray or … All these things - all these things on you and you could have done. Because the red mist clouds it all. I was quite well restrained and only pushed him in the hedge’.

(Police Officer, Peter).

Peter’s description of the ‘red mist’ that descended when he was assaulted by an apprehended burglar is demonstrative of this embodied transcendence, of going ‘over the edge’ for just a moment as performances of controlled neutral/antipathetic labour slip. As Lyng (2004:362) notes in ‘situations of extreme danger, actors are forced to deal with the immediacy of the moment by responding ‘instinctively’ to the evolving circumstances. It is simply not possible to formulate, via the social mind, an effective response to a challenge that threatens to instantly overwhelm the actor’. The latter part of Peter’s account also reveals, what Lois’ (2001) refers to as the actively negotiated ‘emotional edge’. For thrill seekers this edge speaks to the search for transcendence that facilitates a buzz. We would argue that the intention is reversed in social control agents who are routinely required to negotiate the edge, as they work to prevent order and safety deteriorating into chaos, incivility and danger. Faced with the real threat of violence and the concomitant need to maintain order, our social control agents are required to master their own emotions so that they can create the publicly observable facial and bodily displays intended to produce the proper state of mind in others (Hochschild, 1983). This, we argue, requires attendance, not only to the emotions of the edge workers themselves, but also to the emotions of others. For all those interviewed, both women and men, the primary concern was to avoid, lessen or mitigate the potential for violence in respect of self and others.

Maintaining order, gaining compliance, and surviving the ever-present spectre of violence thus emerged as a complex mix of embodied self-regulation, performance, empathy, neutrality and a readiness to aggression that has not been analysed in this complex, intermeshed way before. The nature of such work is written on and in the bodies of many of those employed as social control agents. Physically it is embodied in the broken bones, bruises, stabs and wiping away of spit. It is felt in the sense of being repeatedly violated by word and deed and the constant readiness for violence. It is layered with the vicarious trauma that comes from witnessing the violence inflicted on others and in the need to suppress fear so as to deescalate through performances of neutrality or confronted via the measured evocation of unwanted aggression in the service of intimidation.

## Discussion

This article has presented a unique insight into the emotional labour repertoires of both men and women, employed as social control agents to work in the spectre of violence. Analysis of accounts of such work demonstrate the need for subtle, nuanced and dynamic performances of neutral, empathetic and antipathetic emotional labour in order to work and survive ‘at the edge’. This article positioned labour undertaken in such contexts as ‘edgework’; exploring how the boundary, or ‘edge’, between safety and danger is negotiated and managed ‘in the moment’ through embodied performances of emotional labour. Placing the concepts of edgework and emotional labour in dialogue opened up a space in which to explore gendered conceptualisations of emotional labour and offered a more feminist appreciation of edge work that moves us beyond narrow concerns with pleasure, to account for embodied experience and emotional performance that is complex, changing and varied in hue. As such this paper offers three contributions.

First, there is something implicitly concerning and uncomfortable about the trajectory of research on both ‘extreme work’ and ‘edgework’ (Lyng, 2004). Definitions of extreme work as long-hours and intense working norms implicitly connects the concept to masculine cultures and heroic narratives of resilience; thereby subtly framing it as a challenging and yet validating experience that leads to symbolic rewards often in the form of respect (Burrow, 2015; Turnbull & Wass, 2015), comradery and promotion. Similarly, the concept of edgework (Lyng, 2004) opens up the notion of ‘extreme’ to include the qualitative nature of the work itself, in particular when work poses a threat to life but is increasingly used to describe extreme sports, often engaged in by, one might argue, extreme workers, in search of an escape from the intensity of their working week. Such heroic, fantastical and masculine framings often serve to exclude ‘other’ or marginalise gendered conceptualisations. In response, this paper has presented edgework as routine work for social control agents such as police officers, door(wo)men and prison guards. While this work can be heroic and masculine, it can also be imposed, painful, unwanted, and challenging. Moreover, it can require nuanced performances of care often associated with feminine framings of emotional labour.

Secondly, inchallenging the masculine rhetoric that surrounds the concepts of extreme and edgework, we presented intimate and yet harrowing accounts of the emotional and physical pain associated with the edgework undertaken by social control agents. Adopting an emotions lens allowed the embodied nature of the emotional labour required to navigate ‘the edge’ to come to the fore. In so doing, we present edgework as more than voluntary agentic masculine thrill seeking but instead evidence the complex emotional repertoire adopted by social control agents in their bid to navigate the edge when undertaking work in the spectre of violence. This stands in stark contrast to the focus on the pleasures evoked by the thrill and risk of edgework described elsewhere.

Finally, our contribution disrupts the binaries associated with gendered constructions of certain occupations, tasks, performances and indeed accounts of emotional labour.While the various social control occupations may exhibit or require more of one type of performance than another, on closer observation they all expose the worker to, or require, the performance of a diverse range of emotions. As we have shown, while the violence of policing, door and prison work involve antipathetic emotional labour, such work does not exclude the possibility of empathetic encounters. Indeed, our accounts suggest that empathy and neutrality may be more important than antipathetic labour in the maintenance of social control. Categorising occupations in terms of singular emotions / emotional performances obscures the complexity of the lived experience of work roles and encourages the gender stereotyping of particular types of work (our suspicion is that amidst the empathetic work of the nurse, teacher or cabin crew you will also find neutrality and antipathetic labour in the form of masked silences, harsh word and physical restraint – see Ward & McMurray, 2016). Roles per se are not gendered. Door work is no more the natural domain of men than nursing is of women. Moreover, what this study shows is that the sex of the worker does not preclude their performance or experience of particular emotions in response to specific tasks, relational moments and contexts. The men and women interviewed were equally capable of employing empathy, humour, neutrality or aggression as part of a situational enactment of their role. There is a need for more research exploring the complex repertoires of emotional labour particularly when employed as edgework. This includes further deconstruction of dualistic heteronormative assumptions (see McMurray & Pullen, 2019) that promote simplified accounts of emotion, role and sex (e.g. empathy, cabin crew women; antipathetic, police, men) in favour of more nuanced writing that engages with the processual, emergent and often transgressive nature of emotional labour as performed in daily practices . For example, drawing on the writing of Juila Kristeva and Simon de Beauvoir (see Fotaki, 2019 and Hancock and Tyler, 2019 respectively) such research might enhance our understanding of the ways in which particular concepts become gendered or negated as part of more phallocentric accounts of rational organising. Edgework is a case in point in so far as much of the writing in this area negates women while, traditionally, much of the work undertaken on emotional labour has ignored the potential for antipathetic labour in women’s work – trends we hope to have begun to address.

## Conclusion

Opening up extreme work and edgework through the lens of emotional labour has the potential to offer rich opportunities for future research that might usefully attend to a number of key social issues. For example, if extreme work and edge work can present as unavoidable characteristics of everyday occupations such as social control work, what are the long-term implications of dealing with the intersection of physical and emotional pain that arises from such work? What if any formal and informal mechanisms are there at work to ameliorate the effects of such pain? Where, as suggested above, the challenges of working in the spectre of violence are not recognised by publics or employers, what are the personal/organisational/ societal costs of living with the resulting trauma? Indeed if, as in the case of Dawn (above), workers are meant to present as ‘impenetrable’ in emotional terms, what are the effects, for both men and women, of being expected to display heteronormative performances of masculinity in the face of violence? In conclusion, emotional labour is employed in navigating the ‘edge’ between order and chaos. This is routine work for many and necessary work for society to function. Conceptualising emotional labour as a complex and yet routine form of edgework requires us to revisit the politics and ethics of organisation as part of more nuanced and inclusive gendered occupational analyses of emotional labour.

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