

When deep acting is damaging: Emotional labour and negative emotions in contemporary debt collection

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James Brooks¹, Irena Grugulis² 
and Hugh Cook² 

Abstract

Emotional labour, the appropriation of workers' emotions for commercial gain, is central to our understanding of service work. This study focuses on the impact of deep acting, emotional labour and empathy through an in-depth analysis of a hard-to-reach and rarely studied occupation, debt collectors. It details the ways clients' traumas and emotional demands triggered workers' memories of their own traumatic life events such as bereavement or violence, prompting authentic feelings/deep acting that was damaging. These observations challenge the existing assumption that surface acting is more harmful than deep acting because surface acting entails faking emotions, creating dissonance between the way workers really feel and the way they are expected to act. Such conclusions have been drawn almost entirely from studies of positive emotions. Significantly, this research demonstrates that, when dealing with negative emotions, deep acting and authentic feeling can be more damaging to workers than surface acting.

Keywords

emotional labour, emotional demands, emotional context, emotional trigger points, negative emotions, mental health, wellbeing, deep acting, surface acting, debt collection, dirty work

¹Independent Researcher and HR Practitioner

²University of Leeds, UK

Corresponding author:

Irena Grugulis, Leeds University Business School, Maurice Keyworth Building, Clarendon Road, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.

Email: i.grugulis@leeds.ac.uk

Introduction

This study revisits Hochschild's (1983) seminal text *The Managed Heart*, which introduced the concept of emotional labour, and advances the debate in relation to negative emotions. Through an empirical analysis of flight attendants (all female) and debt collectors (all male), she explored how job-appropriate emotions were managed, controlled and commercialized as part of the capitalist labour process. Feelings became commodities, legitimately subject to managerial jurisdiction and workers were alienated from their own emotions. Hochschild distinguished between "surface" and "deep" acting as mechanisms for undertaking emotional labour. Faking the required emotions by smiling at recalcitrant and demanding passengers or soothing crying babies constituted surface acting. Surface acting can have a deleterious effect on employees' wellbeing because faking or suppressing emotion may lead to depersonalization and dissonance (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002); a disconnect between what workers truly feel and what they are expected to feel. Deep acting on the other hand, involves drawing upon authentic emotions to empathize with and relate to others. It is perceived as being less damaging than surface acting because it entails reduced levels of emotional dissonance (Biron and van Veldhoven, 2012; Grandey, 2000; Hülshager and Schewe, 2011).

This conception of surface acting as inauthentic and therefore stressful, and deep acting as authentic and aligned with workers' own emotions, is one that still dominates the emotional labour literature, often in the absence of research on, and critical engagement with, deep acting itself. There are both methodological and theoretical reasons for this neglect. Methodologically, researching deep acting with all of its complexity and inherent subjectivity is challenging. Theoretically, there may be objections that surface acting is related to work and employment while deep acting is somehow personal. Here, addressing that neglect and accepting the methodological challenge, we argue that emotions prompted by work and the workplace context are a legitimate part of emotional labour, whether explicitly demanded by employers or simply experienced as a result of workplace incidents (following Hochschild's, 1983 broad remit).

In this article we observe debt collectors, but in contrast to Hochschild's (1983) backstreet bullies, the workers in our study were regulated, courteous customer account advisers (CAAs). They did not threaten or intimidate, but they did come into regular contact with many clients who had suffered traumatic life events, including domestic violence, bereavement and illness. Managing these conversations and regulating their own emotions was a regular, and challenging, aspect of work. CAAs were expected to show sympathy with clients' situations. For workers who shared clients' experiences, hearing of debtors' difficulties could act as emotional trigger points (ETPs), rekindling feelings they had struggled to deal with. Their empathy (Duarte et al., 2020; Singer and Klimecki, 2014) had negative outcomes. These authentic, genuine feelings were more stressful than surface acting because the emotions being triggered were negative. This is significant because it is the missing piece of Hochschild's (1983) jigsaw and helps to provide the sort of rich analysis of workers involved with negative emotions that she offered for workers involved with positive emotions.

We also contribute to the growing literature on the dark side of emotional labour and the presence of antipathetic emotions in work (Hochschild, 1983; Mikkelsen, 2022;

Ward and McMurray, 2016; Ward et al., 2020). This focus allows us to challenge the existing literature's view of authenticity. Much of the emotional labour literature analyses surface acting, with workers simulating positive or neutral emotional states. The "have a nice day" positioning of flight attendants, fast food workers, call centre representatives and retail assistants (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner, 1993) and the "have a cool day" of the professional workers (Mann, 1999). When such positive or neutral states dominate, then it makes sense that authenticity, genuinely feeling the emotion, is less stressful than simulation, so authentic deep acting carries no negative consequences for workers' health and wellbeing (Hülshager and Schewe, 2011; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). We might conclude with "Steve," one of the McDonald's workers in Leidner's (1993) *Fast Food, Fast Talk* that "[i]t's just fun, the people are fun! . . . They make my day, they really do." However, as Hochschild (1979, 1983) observed, not all of the emotions workers come into contact with are positive; they may be dirty, unpleasant or negative (see also Ward and McMurray, 2016; Ward et al., 2020). Authentic deep acting when negative emotions are involved may have very different connotations or unwanted side effects to that experienced when deep acting positive emotions.

In summary, this article's contributions are threefold. Firstly, we challenge the assumption that surface acting is inherently more stressful than deep acting. This is a novel challenge. The existing literature establishes a clear link between surface acting and negative mental health outcomes, which are not apparent with deep acting. We contend that the reason for this is that authenticity is combined with positive emotions. Authenticity in negative emotions has very different connotations. Secondly, we add to the growing literature on the darker side of emotional labour and the presence of antipathetic emotions. Thirdly, and relatedly, we attempt to re-integrate the fragmented literature in this area. Hochschild's (1983) original study was rigorous in drawing out the context in which workers operated, the control systems they were subject to, the emotions they displayed, the way they felt and the impact of emotional labour both on the individual workers and between workers. Many qualitative studies have continued this integrated approach, but quantitative research has fragmented the field, often of necessity, to focus on specific aspects of emotion work. So, we have emotion work, emotional labour, emotional demands, emotional job resources, affective Capitalism and empathetic distress, among others (see, e.g. de Jonge et al., 2008; Duarte et al., 2020; Karl, 2020; Singer and Klimecki, 2014). This separation can provide clarity on important aspects of emotion work, but it can also distance researchers from each other so that informative discussions are missed. Yet all of these accounts focus on emotions in work and in the workplace. With Zapf et al. (2021), we seek to re-integrate a range of literatures back into core emotional labour and emotion work.

The article starts by reviewing the literature on emotional labour and emotional demands. It explores the use of antipathetic emotions and the ways these are managed and controlled in the labour process, before considering the current understanding of how surface acting, deep acting and their consequences impact mental health. Next, there is a discussion of the case study methods employed and the rich detail of data collected. The empirical sections demonstrate how deep acting could trigger emotional responses that led to adverse mental health consequences; how employees' previous experiences could make the effects of deep acting damaging; and finally what organizational mitigations

were in place and why they were ineffective. The article concludes by drawing out the theoretical contribution of these findings as well as the practical implications.

Literature review

The touchpoint for any exposition of emotional labour is Hochschild's (1979, 1983) work. She placed the study of emotion "firmly on to the sociological map" and galvanized interest in how emotions are controlled and managed as part of the capitalist labour process (Bolton, 2005: 50). Hochschild's analysis borrows from both Goffman and Marx. Goffman noted how verbal and physical cues given by social actors shaped the impressions they made on others. A "veneer of consensus" (1959: 21) exists as to how individuals are expected to feel and what physical actions might be acceptable in any given situation. Marx (1844) noted the inherent tension in the relationship between workers and commodities where the "worker is related to the product of labour as to an alien object" (p. 26). Just as workers can become alienated from the physical labour process, so too can they become alienated from their own emotions (Hochschild, 1983).

Hochschild's (1983) analysis has had wide-ranging implications for the study of emotions in wider sociology. The interactionist school, as exemplified by Frank's (2013) *Wounded Storyteller*, focuses on the individual and their emotional and physical responses, accounts which can be understood personally rather than systematically (Frank, 2000). The interactionists, including Hochschild (1983) herself, consider the interplay between mind, body and society. They seek to challenge the disembodied view of human beings in social science and theorize mind-body-society relationships (Freund, 1988, 2009; Peat and Ridge, 2023; see also Goffman, 1959 and Giddens, 1984). In the study of work, Hochschild (1983) is foundational for the way work is theorized and understood, and for what work itself is. When emotions are faked and private feeling is transmuted in line with organizational rules and procedures (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987) then the private emotional domain is no longer private; it is appropriated and monetized (Bolton, 2005; Grandey, 2000; Vincent, 2011). Specific emotions can legitimately be required by managers, and emotional regulation and display are crucial workplace tasks.

The dark side of emotional labour

Much of the academic literature on emotional labour focuses upon empathy (Bolton, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), in which service sector encounters are punctuated with a smile and artificial bonhomie (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Van Maanen, 1991). This is understandable, since much service work involves pleasing the customer, but emotional labour also has a dark side (Linstead et al., 2014; McCabe, 2014). There is significant exchange value for employers who trade in antipathetic emotions and hire workers such as nightclub doormen or prison officers, yet the nature of this work is often "denied, unspoken and hidden" from both corporate and public view (Ward and McMurray, 2016: 32; see also Mikkelsen, 2022). This form of emotion work is often dark and deeply troubling for workers who perform it. More broadly, many service workers encounter toxic

emotions as part of their work, so that dealing with unpleasant customers and regulating their own emotions becomes central to their work (Eaton, 1996; Hochschild, 1983). Previous literature on emotional labour has captured the emotional regulation but tended to sidestep the dark and murky side, a gap recent scholarship is starting to address (Butler and Stoyanova Russell, 2018; Kessler et al., 2012; Korczynski, 2002; McCabe, 2014; McMurray and Ward, 2014; Mikkelsen, 2022; O'Donohoe and Turley, 2006).

Hochschild (1983) observed that capitalism has a “toe and heel” (p. 137). Flight attendants displayed sympathy and kindness while debt collectors used verbal aggression and threats of violence. However, her focus was predominantly on the more positive empathetic emotional displays anchored by the “service with a smile” persona (Kunda and Van Maanen, 1999; Leidner, 1993; Van Maanen, 1991). The study of debt collectors was a minor addition to the emotion work undertaken by flight attendants, spanning just 10 pages of a 297-page publication.

In many ways, this is a missed opportunity and one that is yet to be developed. Hochschild's analysis of the impact of emotional labour on flight attendants is incisive. We are shown their rebellions, resentments and the impact that selling their emotions has on their personal lives. With the debt collectors, this analysis is more limited. One certainly tells her that (p. 143):

I believe most people are honest and . . . they'll try to pay. Now if my boss heard me say that he'd fire me for sure because *I'm supposed to assume that all these people are out to get us*.
[Emphasis in original]

We are told that curbing their natural emotions impacted debt collectors, but we have little sense of the form that impact took and there is no attempt to discuss the differences for workers between simulating positive emotions and simulating negative ones. Instead, the analysis takes refuge in workers' choice, that debt collectors are naturally attracted to the work. They may be but, as with flight attendants, that is not the entire story of their emotional labour.

Just like security guards, prison officers and bouncers, debt collectors operate at the coal face of emotional work (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). Debt collection involves drawing upon significant antipathetic emotions such as fear, anxiety and distress. There is a paucity of studies in the literature on the emotional work of debt collection and the ways negative emotions like anger or aggression are managed or expressed (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991; Tracy, 2005; Tracy et al., 2006). The studies that do exist, focus on how these emotions are weaponized and used as catalysts to spur recalcitrant debtors into repayment (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991). Hochschild's (1983) bill collectors would degrade and humiliate debtors and use “status deflation” as a tactic to extract payment (p. 139). Debtors were dehumanized and perceived like Flaubert's Madame Bovary; profligate, irresponsible and living beyond their means. If degradation proved unsuccessful, then the *modus operandi* switched to fear and collection tactics that “may get rough” both physically and through coercion (Hochschild, 1983: 143). As we consider below, the dark side also exposes workers to antipathetic emotions, and that exposure can itself be damaging.

Emotional demands, empathy, deep acting and their consequences

Deep acting as less stressful

Hochschild describes the “put-on sneer, the posed shrug, the controlled sigh” as examples of surface acting (Hochschild, 1983: 35). In emotional labour, synthetic emotions are suppressed or induced to “sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of minds in others” (Hochschild, 1983: 7). The crabby bank clerk or put upon receptionist soothe and smile to appease demanding customers and maintain conviviality. Deep acting, by contrast, involves drawing upon authentic emotion; feeling sadness at funerals or elation at weddings (O’Donohoe and Turley, 2006). It may be socially conditioned so that we “feel what we sense we ought to feel or want to feel” (Hochschild, 1983, p. 45), but it is genuinely experienced (though see Guerrier and Adib, 2003; O’Brien and Linehan, 2019 for a challenge to the idea of a coherent, stable authentic self).

Emotionally intensive occupations often cause feelings of alienation and depersonalization, leading to burnout. This is well documented in the literature (Abraham, 1998; Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Morris and Feldman, 1996). In call centre work, these are exacerbated by key performance indicators (KPIs) and surveillance (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2001), often leading to mental exhaustion and poor mental and physical health (Woodcock, 2017). Hochschild was acutely aware of the consequences of the capitalist intrusion into workers’ feelings and their transmutation for commercial gain. There is a “cost to emotion work” in some instances damaging “our very capacity to feel” (Hochschild, 1983: 21), but that cost applied specifically to surface acting. Workers’ prolonged engagement in surface acting forces inauthentic emotional displays which cause dissonance and alienation (Hochschild, 1983; Sutton and Rafaeli, 1988).

Deep acting is seen as less problematic for workers as the emotions drawn upon are real. There is less dissonance between the emotions on display and what is actually felt (Bolton, 2005). This distinction between the negative effects of surface acting and deep acting has been explored in terms of discordance and congruence, where discordant emotional labour was associated with harmful health and attitudinal consequences. Congruent emotional labour, on the other hand, which incorporates deep acting, was less harmful (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Studies examining the effects of surface acting and deep acting across multiple sectors have found similar results: in hospitality deep acting was negatively related to stress, whereas surface acting was positively related to stress; similarly, a meta-analysis of three decades of research finds deep acting to show weak relationships with impaired wellbeing and attitudes at work, again in contrast to surface acting (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011; Lee and Madera, 2019). Zapf (2002) concurs with this, arguing that the only potential difficulty workers may experience with deep acting is the effort they put into adjusting their feelings, so deep acting as a natural, unconscious response is welcomed without reservation. Work on the psychological processes regarding recovery from emotional labour at the end of the working day also corroborates this position. Deep acting caused less exhaustion and required less recovery time than surface acting (Biron and van Veldhoven, 2012; Xanthopoulou et al., 2018).

Interestingly, despite the consensus on its positive effects, deep acting features far less in the emotional labour literature than surface acting. The nursing literature is an exception and notes heavy emotional demands of the caring professions (Bolton, 2005; James, 1993; Kessler et al., 2012; Vinson and Underman, 2025). The performance of clinical empathy towards patients is theorized as a form of emotional labour in its own right (Vinson and Underman, 2020). These studies acknowledged the negative emotions nurses and health care assistants dealt with, but also found deep acting to have a positive impact as a driver of perceptions of meaningfulness in work, which in turn improves pleasure from work and buffers the emotional demands of the job (Pace et al., 2022).

Deep acting and negative emotions in work

The analytical break with this consistently positive perception of deep acting came from a multilevel analysis that divided deep acting into subtypes, effectively moving on from its position as a uniform construct (Alabak et al., 2020; see also Hadley, 2014). In this study, varying emotional regulation strategies in deep acting were differentially aligned to either positive or negative employee outcomes. Intuitively, this analytical and theoretical shift makes sense. It is, after all, unlikely that any emotional state is positive under all circumstances. Research is now required to fill this gap and explain how and why deep acting or its side effects might vary.

Debt collection is well suited to this empirical challenge. It is emotionally intensive labour that draws heavily upon both empathetic and antipathetic emotion. In the early emotional labour literature, it was considered a foil for the “have a nice day” interactions of many customer-facing staff (Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli and Sutton, 1991), with the focus on debt collectors’ own deployment of antipathetic emotions. More recent research deals with regulated professionals required to be courteous; see, for example, Terry et al.’s (2022) study of sympathetic home credit agents. The links to antipathetic emotions are still strong but, for these workers, they take the form of exposure to clients’ experiences which are often traumatic and may prove triggering. This emotional exposure is central to the debt collectors’ work, and dealing with it is part of the emotional labour demanded by employers (see also Eaton, 1996; Hochschild, 1983).

The emotional labour literature stops short of exploring the effects of life traumas like bereavement, domestic violence or depression on workers (Burke and Greenglass, 1995; Grandey et al., 2013; Lee and Ashforth, 1993; Ward et al., 2020), but we know from the emotional demands literature how central the workplace emotional context is to worker wellbeing and that exposure to negative emotions is an antecedent to emotional exhaustion (Duarte et al., 2020). This is significant, since the impact of experiencing an emotion is likely to be influenced by what that emotion is. Previously, Zapf (2002) considered deep acting that has occurred naturally and spontaneously as effortless, and therefore unlikely to result in negative consequences. Later research (Zapf et al., 2021) is more nuanced, stressing the importance of context and the emotions actually felt by workers as well as the emotions displayed, as part of their emotional labour.

Since the stories that debtors narrate are typically negative, our debt collectors are exposed to emotional demands that are potentially damaging. Surface acting in this context requires significant emotional regulation in a way that is familiar in the literature

(Semmer et al., 2016). Deep acting and empathetic distress, when workers with similar experiences are triggered to remember them, are less familiar, but have negative health outcomes (Singer and Klimecki, 2014). As the emotional demands literature demonstrates, exposure to negative emotions, the deep acting of negative emotions and the emotional regulation required are stressful for employees. Employers can take action to mitigate this, but the (employment) situations themselves are inherently stressful (de Jonge et al., 2008; Duarte et al., 2020).

The emotional demands literature attempts to disaggregate both different emotions and the varying ways of expressing emotion to determine which is most stressful; but it is not clear that consensus exists on this fragmentation, nor that the component parts capture the way emotions work in real life. Kleineidam and Fischbach (2023) distinguish between empathy and compassion. Compassion involved noting others' suffering without succumbing to similar emotions, while empathy amplified the negative emotions and had a deleterious effect on those feeling it (though see Figley, 2002 for a different understanding of compassion). Empathy was the result of workers' "overinvolvement" and was damaging to them, while compassion amplified positive emotions and selflessness, though the evidence for this was limited. Intuitively, it makes sense that detached concern is less damaging to workers than engaged empathy, though that detachment may itself raise issues of alienation (Hochschild, 1983; see also Lampert and Glaser, 2018; Melloy et al., 2026). Disaggregating elements of emotions also helps researchers to categorize, classify and analyse.

It is less clear that this is an accurate description of emotional responses or that the reactions are always under workers' control. We are also concerned that Kleineidam and Fischbach's use of the term "overinvolvement" suggests at least an element of victim blaming, with the individual worker at fault for not detaching, rather than their employer, the workplace context or the client. Here we use the term empathy, because that is the word our informants used. Their reactions were not managed and controlled but authentic and spontaneous responses to suffering. Similarly, we have introduced the idea of emotional trigger because the workers who were most severely impacted were not over-involved in others' suffering; rather, they had suffered themselves. Workers who had experienced deep personal trauma, such as serious illness or the death of a close family member, were emotionally triggered by bereaved parents or dying clients.

While the literature on emotional demands has observed the impact of a negative emotional context on workers, its conclusions have not yet been linked to deep acting, which is still assumed to be less stressful than surface acting. This article addresses that gap. It extends the investigations of negative emotions to an environment in which they were not weaponized. In this study, the debt collectors were customer account advisers (CAAs), routinely recorded and monitored, subject to regulation and obliged to be polite. Their work exposed them to trauma and distress on a daily basis. We observe their reactions and consider the implications for our existing understanding of emotional labour.

Deep acting in and as work

The challenges to the study of deep acting identified above were both methodological, particularly the depth and duration of research demanded, and theoretical, whether

researchers who specialize in work would consider this part of their remit. We discuss our approach to the methodological issues in the next section. Here, it is worth reflecting briefly on the extent to which deep acting counts as work. There have been recent criticisms of the over-extension and blurring of Hochschild's (1983) analysis and particularly of its application to women's work in the home (Peat and Ridge, 2023). Are we guilty of similar conceptual stretch?

Hochschild's (1983) original boundary was that emotional labour occurred in work and for money, alienating workers from their own feelings by commercializing them and making them subject to dollar bills. We follow that boundary here. In the workplace, deep acting is unlikely to be explicitly demanded by employers, who may focus on observable behaviour and surface acting, but, as workplace researchers know, employer demands may also be implicit, and employees' experiences of work are shaped by the workplace context as well as by employer instruction.

Observing this boundary of in work and for money also helps with the lack of clarity over what deep acting is. It has been defined as "a means to attain the goal of organizationally desired emotions" (Zapf, 2002: 239), but is it conscious, deliberate and purposeful? Some is. Hochschild (1983: 19–20) writes about "[t]rying to feel what one wants, expects or thinks one ought to feel," while Grandey and Sayre (2019: 132) refer to deep acting as "changing their own thoughts and feelings to create a sincere performance." There are references in the literature to employers encouraging this sincere deep acting. Hochschild's (1983) flight attendants were told to imagine that unpleasant customers were vulnerable, while Eaton's (1996) clerical workers had to see themselves as "trash cans." But the literature also uses deep acting to describe authentic and unprompted reactions (using acting in the sense of action rather than performance) that meet employers' implicit, unstated demands. When Zapf (2002) describes a teacher feeling sorry for an injured child, the fact that the sorrow was spontaneous rather than manufactured does not prevent their reaction from being labelled deep acting; rather, Zapf celebrates the fact that this spontaneity means that the teacher did not need to put as much effort into their emotional work. Professional socialization involves an emotional alignment with clients (Mann, 1999) to the point that requirements are understood rather than codified. So, an authentic, unprompted response would count as deep acting, just as much as conscious, managed attempts to change feelings. For some commentators, deep acting is seen as more desirable, as doing the job properly (Zapf, 2002). The "goal of organizationally desired emotions" does not distinguish between explicit demands and implicit expectations. Exposure to negative emotions in work is part of work and the workplace context. Hochschild (1983) describes flight attendants and debt collectors subject to racism and abuse; Melloy et al. (2026) study workers dealing with children with behavioural difficulties; while Kleineidam and Fischbach (2026) observe employees investigating internet child exploitation. A variety of workers are exposed to the negative emotions of others as a quotidian part of their work including prison officers (Mikkelsen, 2022), debt collectors (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987; Terry et al., 2022), volunteers on suicide help lines (Ward and McMurray, 2016; Ward et al., 2020) and health care assistants dealing with death (Kessler et al., 2012). Workers may be impacted both physically and mentally (de Jonge et al., 2008; Duarte et al., 2020; Kleineidam and Fischbach, 2026), by exposure to client suffering (Duarte et al., 2020; Kleineidam and Fischbach, 2026; Vegchel et al.,

2004; Zapf, 2002) and emotional events may trigger them (Grandey, 2000; Totterdell and Homan, 2003). In these circumstances, genuine reactions such as deep acting and empathetic distress (Singer and Klimecki, 2014) are not personal acts separate from work but responses to work. This was the case here. CollectCo's debt collectors were regularly exposed to clients' negative emotions and their work involved dealing with those emotions as well as with their own reactions. Studying the deep acting and emotional responses these tasks provoked is not a diversion from emotional labour but an integral part of it.

Research context and methods

Case and context

The research was initiated by a desire to develop understanding of how emotional labour impacts on working conditions and mental health at work in contemporary call-centre-based debt collection. An interpretivist position was adopted (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011), which was essential to understand the social processes at work through the subjective experiences of our participants, and to interpret these phenomena through the meaning workers attributed to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994), such as their meaning-making around the emotive work involved in collecting debt from vulnerable people. Central to this was an exploration of the acting and personas adopted by workers taking calls, day in, day out. As discussed in the literature, much has been written about the effects of surface acting, but less about deep acting and associated effects; both depth of data and immersion in the workplace were required to explore this.

A single case study of CollectCo was conducted between April 2018 and March 2023. This included a knowledge transfer partnership between November 2019 and July 2020, which provided a full-time researcher to facilitate data collection. CollectCo is one of the UK's largest debt collection agencies, collecting debt owed to clients including utility and telecom providers, credit and store card lenders, HMRC and the Child Support Agency. Typically, collections are of distressed debt that has been written off by lenders as too costly to collect, and sold to CollectCo for pennies in the pound. An immersive qualitative and quasi-ethnographic approach was adopted to explore and understand the lived experiences of front-line CAAs (Stake, 1995). Inspiration was drawn from Orr's account of photocopier repair workers and Hobbs' observations of East End Detectives (Hobbs, 1988; Orr, 1996) to detail the working experiences and mental health of CAAs performing emotionally intensive work.

Data sampling and collection

Fieldwork was both extensive and immersive, involving all three authors conducting focus groups, meeting observations, semi-structured interviews, gatekeeper meetings, participant observation, call observations and documentary analysis. The aim was to explore as much of the context, reality and consequences of the work by asking questions about it, facilitating discussion around it and observing it first-hand. We were informed by Yin (2014) on case study design, helping us to identify units of analysis, such

as managers, mental health advisers and CAAs in different roles, for which purposive sampling was used (Palinkas et al., 2015). Snowball and convenience sampling were used (Noy, 2008), exploiting the opportunities afforded by having a regular presence on-site in the physical workplace (Silverman, 2009).

Phase one commenced with 16 focus groups covering over 100 employees (Table 1). The initial seven focus groups included two with Sensitive Case Collections (specialists in collecting from vulnerable debtors), one with line managers and four with both Sensitive Case Collections and general CAAs. The next tranche comprised nine focus groups with Sensitive Case Collectors, line managers and CAAs. Meetings were held with representatives of an in-house mental health steering group, which aimed to improve HR and managerial working practices around mental health at work. The intranet pages on mental health support provision; the training documents for on-boarding and recruitment; and CollectCo's existing HR policies and procedures on discipline, grievance and mental health were reviewed. Participant observation was conducted at an on-boarding and orientation process for new employees. Meetings were held with key managers from the employment relations team, employee assistance programme providers, recruitment and talent development to understand the commercial and regulatory environment of debt collection and CollectCo's organizational and group structures. In addition, 12 regular monthly meetings were held with the HR director, HR Coordinator and Operations manager to facilitate access during the 12 months the researcher was present in the company.

In situ observations of 11 CAAs handling calls ran between January and March 2020. This was a fundamental component of the research that facilitated a deep understanding of the emotional labour involved. Participants were observed in blocks of time ranging from 1 to 3 hours, with an average of 3 hours per event. Call volumes during observations varied, with CAAs taking an average of between three and 16 calls, with a total of 62 calls observed. The nature of calls was discussed to varying extents in snap interviews after each call. Snap interviews were typically short, entailing a discussion of notable aspects of the call, and were often cut short by the next incoming call. Calls that were especially difficult or challenging and which involved significant amounts of emotional labour were discussed in more detail, where possible, but discussions did not extend past the time of the next incoming call due to the risk of affecting CAAs' ability to meet KPIs.

Phase two comprised 8 semi-structured interviews and 13 video diaries (7 participants plus 6 repeated) to explore the experiences of debt collectors and the effects their work had on them individually. Video diaries were recorded between February 2020 and July 2020, with all participants consenting to being filmed during the process. The use of video diaries was chosen because the majority of participants were under 30 years of age and video diaries were a familiar medium culturally, something to which they were accustomed and which they were willing to fully engage with. The video diaries were restricted to 10 minutes in duration. Participants were asked a set series of questions replicated over the 6-month period with an attrition of one. These explored the types of calls being made or received, mental health challenges at work, and how participants would rate their mental health. Only February's video diaries were recorded on site at CollectCo. From March 2020 to July 2020 in response to Covid-19 and the pivot to remote home working, all repeat video diaries were conducted (and recorded) remotely

Table 1. Summary of data collected and analyzed.

Phase	Data type	Number of participants (description)	Utilization	Emergent or developed themes
1	2 Focus groups	13 (Sensitive cases CAAs)	Transcribed, coded. Data used in findings section 1	T1; T3; T5
1	4 Focus groups	25 (Standard and Sensitive case CAAs)	Transcribed, coded. Data used in findings section 1, 2	T1; T3; T4
1	1 Focus group	8 (Line managers)	Transcribed, coded. Data used in findings section 1, 3	T1; T4; T5
1	9 Focus groups	60 (Mixed employees)	Transcribed, coded. Data used throughout findings	T1; T2; T5
1	Meeting observation	4 (Mental health steering group)	Notes. Data used in findings section 1, 2 and 3	T3; T4; T5
1	Document analysis	(Recruitment, training, discipline, grievance)	Notes for context	T1
1	Participatory observation	(On-boarding/induction course attendance)	Notes for context	T1
1	Management meetings	4 (Employee relations, assistance, recruitment, training)	Notes for context	T1; T4
1 and 2	12 Gatekeeper meetings	3 (Monthly meetings with HR director, HR coordinator and Operations director)	Notes for context	T1; T3; T4
1	Call observations	11 (62 calls observed with snap interviews after each)	Notes, limited quotes instantly transcribed. Data used in findings section 1 and 2	T1; T2; T4
2	Video diaries	7 (13 recordings; 7 + 6 repeated)	Transcribed, coded. Data used throughout findings	T1; T4; T5
2	Semi-structured interviews	8 (CAAs who had accessed mental health support)	Transcribed, coded. Data used throughout findings	T3; T4; T5; T6
3	2 Focus groups	8 (5 + 3 CAAs, to explore post-COVID conditions)	Notes taken	Not used in this article
3	Semi-structured interviews	3 (HR manager, HR director, Operations director)	Notes taken	Not used in this article

via Zoom. Eight purposively sampled semi-structured “deep dive” interviews were undertaken with CAAs who had formally accessed mental health support at CollectCo, such as formal counselling and mental health guidance from line managers. These interviews were conducted in June 2020 (over Zoom due to Covid restrictions) and ranged from 29 to 50 minutes in duration. Participants in this stage of the research were all female and had reported a history of suffering from anxiety and/ or depression related to work. Considerable flexibility was built in so that participants could discuss and explore their own individual experience of accessing mental health support provision and its efficacy.

A third phase consisted of just two focus groups (with five and three participants respectively) lasting around 30 minutes each and three interviews with the HR director, HR manager and operations director, each lasting around 40 minutes. This phase was to determine what had changed in the firm’s post-Covid move to hybrid working. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Anonymity of participants and employers was guaranteed. Participants were aware of the sensitive nature of some of the topics and questions relating to these were only explored where explicit agreement was volunteered.

Data analysis and theme development

Table 1 shows each form of data, the number and description of participants, and how the data were utilized. All recorded data were transcribed, while notes were written up and were thematically analysed using several iterations of first and second round coding (Braun and Clark, 2006; Saldaña, 2016) to build the aggregate thematic dimensions discussed in the empirical sections. These are shown in Figures 1 to 3, which also detail the final stage of conceptual coding for the themes used in the analysis. The figures also show how the conceptual coding was informed by examples of in vivo data from different sources, omitting the first stages of open coding for diagrammatic simplicity (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Table 1 shows the themes that emerged or were augmented in each of the data-gathering episodes. The project set out to explore emotional labour, so we were able to start with theoretically informed research instruments to guide focus group discussions, interviews and documentary search criteria (Hochschild, 1983). Some themes were routinely present throughout the fieldwork, such as surface acting and emotional demands. As the focus groups progressed through phase one, newer themes emerged around deep acting, empathy loss and becoming emotionally triggered. Therefore, following the logic of analytic induction (Hammersley, 2004), the research instruments were revised and our focus was recalibrated to explore and develop these novel themes which form the contribution of the paper.

After the first two focus groups, each subsequent data-gathering event over which we had control (focus groups and semi-structured interviews) was targeted around these themes, so a large proportion of the data is focused on them, detailed in Table 1. The documentary analysis, management and gatekeeper meetings, participant and meeting observations were less useful in exploring the focal themes but proved valuable for understanding the wider context and the organization. The call observations were often mundane (c70%), but the other (c30%) corroborated emergent themes and two calls in

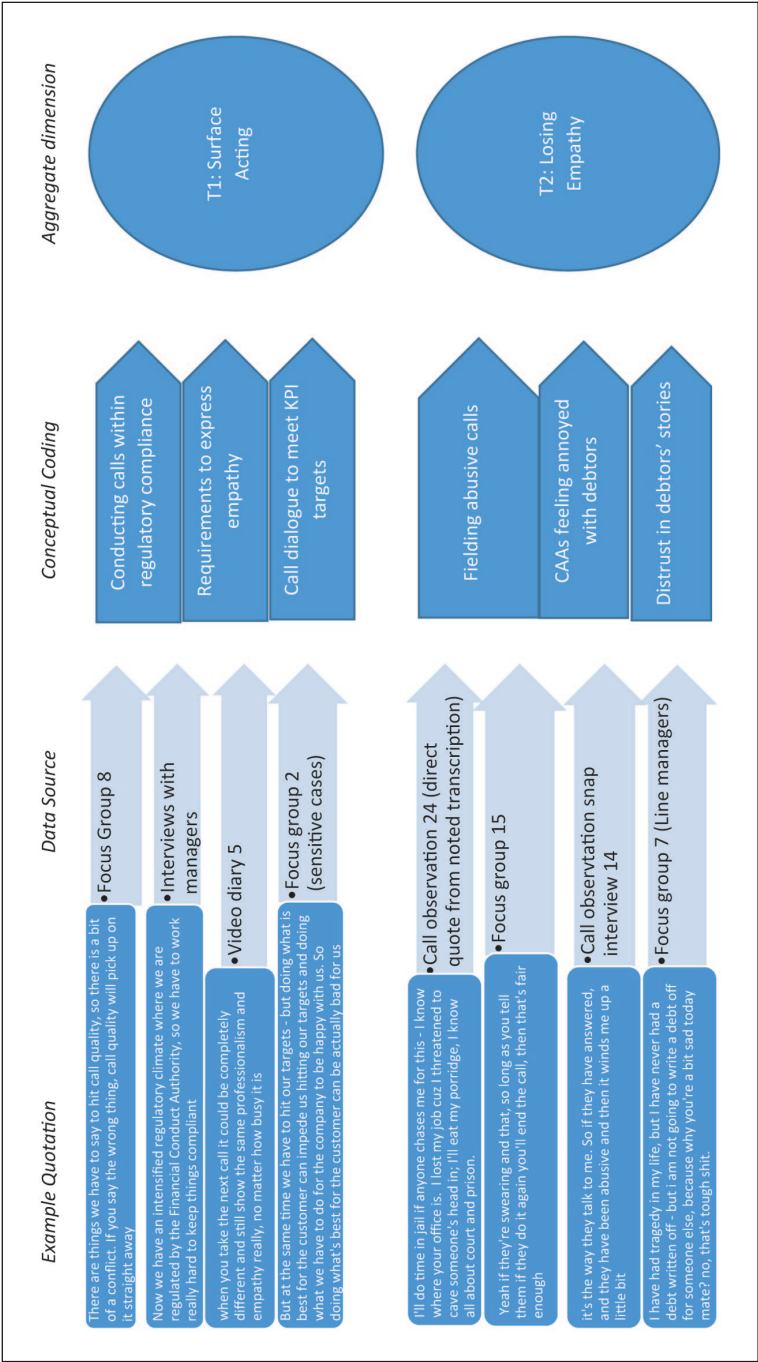


Figure 1. Overview of data structure for empirical section 1: Surface acting and losing empathy.

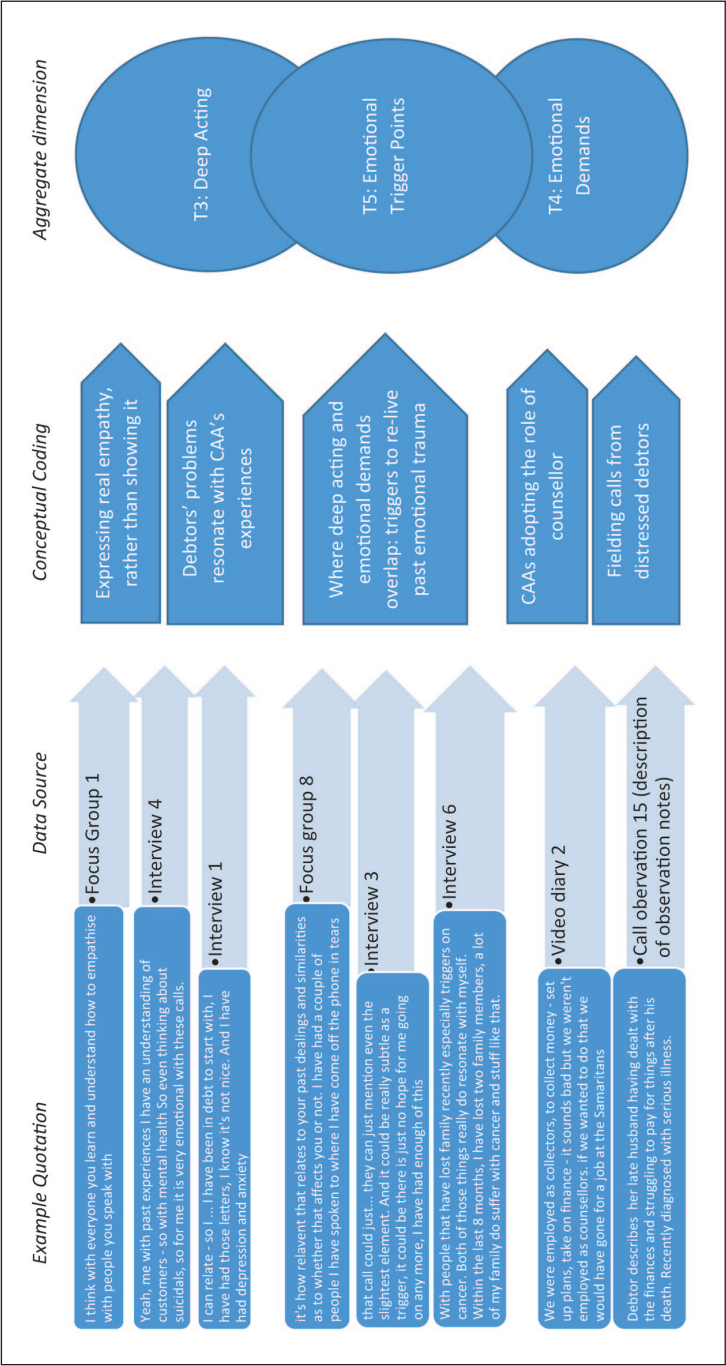


Figure 2. Overview of data structure for empirical section 2: Emotional demand, trigger points, deep acting and authenticity.

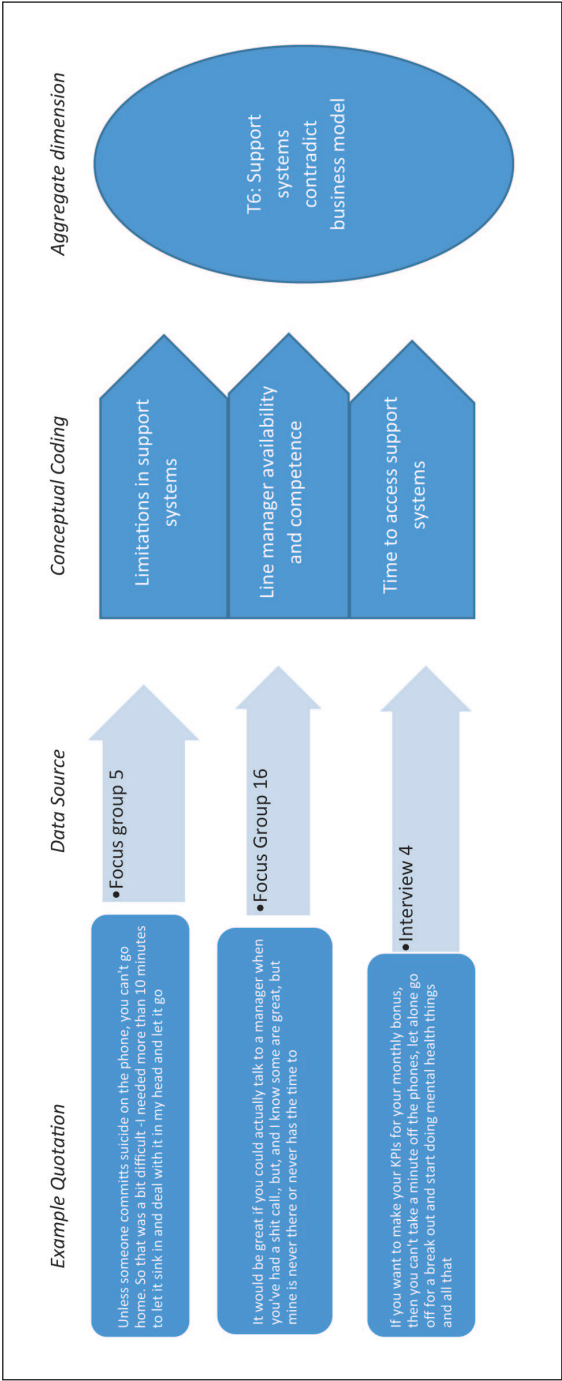


Figure 3. Overview of data structure for empirical section 3: Resources and mitigations.

particular were highly impactful. The second phase of data gathering adopted an axial coding approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to corroborate, explore and enrich the novel themes emerging from the larger phase one. The results of this analysis are discussed in the following empirical sections.

Emotions in work at CollectCo

Surface acting and losing empathy

The working lives of CAAs at CollectCo were tightly regulated (Taylor and Bain, 1999, 2001; Woodcock, 2017). CollectCo prescribed “feeling rules,” agents were mandated to follow scripts and prompts on their computer screens; calls were monitored, and KPIs were set for call numbers and quality (generally these focused on the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) and company guidelines) to secure bonuses. Bonuses could be substantial and depended on both meeting financial targets for debt collection and not breaching company compliance rules.

Emotional labour was an important part of this work. All CAAs were required to undertake a 2-week induction followed by 3 months of academy training before starting work. These emphasized the importance of empathy, where calls were scored against how the call “felt” and “looked” from the debtors’ perspective. Abuse of clients during calls was not permitted. Instead CAAs were trained to use verbal cues like “I am afraid this repayment plan is not realistic”; to remind the client of the negative effects of a County Court Judgment on their ability to obtain future credit; to cross-examine them on income and expenditure; to point out, politely but firmly, that the account would be passed to the legal collections department; or simply to stay silent. Debtors were not openly belittled; rather, they were broken down by CAAs’ probing of income and expenditure together with forensic questioning on the minutiae of their private lives. All were effective tools in the debt collection process.

Calls were conducted with courtesy. The CAA would simulate empathy, address whatever queries had arisen on the client’s file, then disengage. For many, this involved only surface acting. Call observations of CAA 47, a 25-year-old with 7 years’ experience, revealed an acceptance of the realities of the job. CollectCo’s commission structure meant that CAA 47 had earned substantial quarterly bonus payments which gave him and his partner a comfortable lifestyle. He had not personally experienced illness, bereavement or financial difficulties and the effect of the emotional labour of dealing with debtors who faced these challenges was minimal:

[CAA 47] explained that he had taken three or four suicide calls in his seven years with CollectCo. He had just moved in with his partner and they had bought a puppy. Life was good and they were planning their next holiday. It did not really affect him and the conversation is stopped by an incoming call. Debtor has two accounts with CollectCo’s legal department and has already been through security clearance. Debtor is in receipt of benefits and is £19,000 in debt with £2 disposable income left each month. This needs to be contributed to child maintenance arrears. The debtor is getting emotional and crying; [CAA 47] agrees that the account will be placed on hold for four weeks subject to review. [CAA 47] is calm, professional and

understanding and then closes off the call and starts to write up additional notes on the debtor's file before the next call dials in. (Observation Notes, Inbound calls (am), 15 January 2020)

The call was distressing for the client but had little impact on CAA 47. Other calls were more abusive. While CAAs' speech was regulated by CollectCo and the FCA, clients were not bound by any rules and frequently resorted to threats, intimidation and abuse ("I know where you work and will wait for you outside"). No matter how abusive or threatening clients were, CAAs could not retaliate, nor could they respond to threats against their own safety. Verbal retorts amounted to gross misconduct and could result in dismissal or a stage one disciplinary. CAAs' task was to soothe irascible or aggressive debtors, often by showing empathy with their financial situation. Their defence against abusive debtors was to place the call temporarily on hold and then return to the conversation in the hope, rather than the expectation, that the caller had calmed down.

Surface acting could be stressful. CAAs' own negative emotions; anger, frustration or despair, were masked. They were met with aggression, verbal retaliation and threats of litigation. One consequence of this, in common with Hochschild's (1983) flight attendants, was that many CAAs became desensitized, losing empathy for their clients, and occasionally for others. Daily exposure to the emotionally intensive labour involved in the call handling process resulted in an erosion of empathy with customers (see Figure 4).

I think I have lost empathy for people. I hear it so much I have become so cold – I'm like is that not normal. You have to show empathy to people – we have to show the same emotions that our staff are showing to the customers, because a lot of the time whatever is going on with the customers that's how it reflects on them as well – so we have to show empathy. (CAA 10, Female)

This loss of empathy with customers was more prevalent among those with longer service. New CAAs fresh from their training, felt more able to engage emotionally. Those with two or more years' experience tended to resent debtors more and viewed them as profligate, irresponsible or just plain annoying. There was a high degree of self-awareness and reflection around this erosion of empathy. Both CAAs and line managers realized that their feelings towards customers had changed:

I am then losing empathy and trust, that is changing who I am as a person, so I am feeling disappointed in myself. So, I do a lot for my team – so for somebody to turn around and lie and not have any conscience about it whatsoever, I struggle with my view on that of not being empathetic – I wish I could be more empathetic. (Manager 3 Female)

There was a conscious effort on the part of some CAAs and managers to maintain empathy and build rapport. This was counter-balanced by a realistic expectation of the help that could actually be given to customers:

We're not here to make people's problems go away and make things better, but we're here to direct people and we can give them a bit of guidance with that – but we're not all counsellors, we're not doctors – we're not here to give them medical advice – so we need to direct them to that support but not give it ourselves, and I think that's where people get caught up in trying too

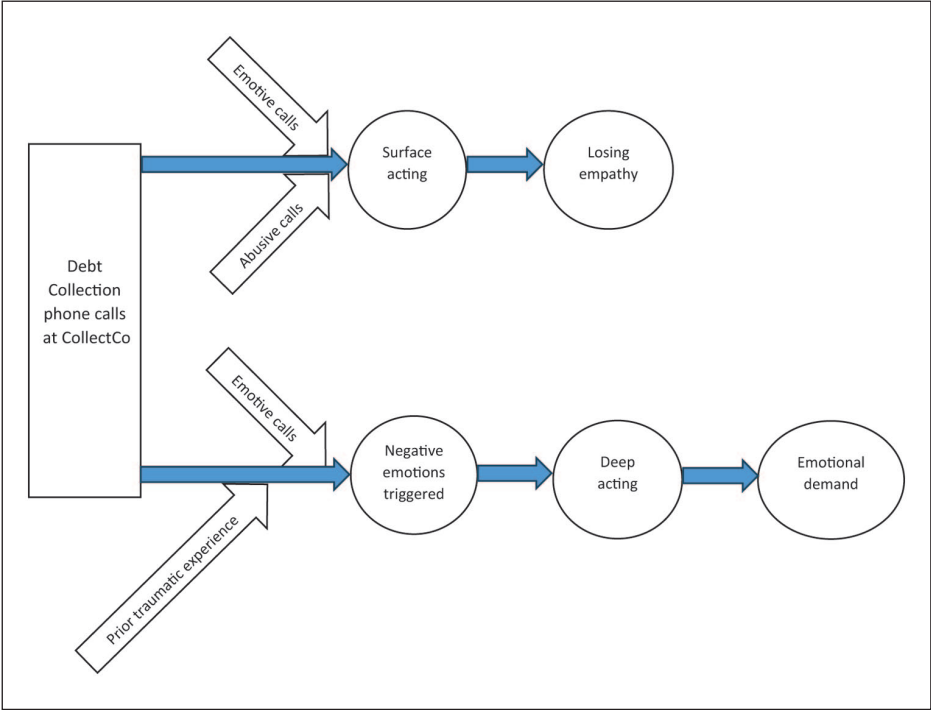


Figure 4. Causal process diagram.

hard to help someone – we’re not going to stop whatever is going on in your life, we’re not going to fix it – you will have to fix it yourself. (Manager 2 Male)

These observations of surface acting are familiar in the existing literature: front-line customer service workers sublimate their own emotional needs to those of their clients; the courtesy rules impose far more stringent standards on CAAs than they do on the clients; and the surface acting of empathy and the commodification of this to assist the employer alienates CAAs from their emotions. The environment and the CAAs’ script differs from that of the standard call centre, but the impact of commodifying emotions mirrored studies of the experiences of the flight attendants, nurses and call centre workers (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 1983). The next section moves beyond this, to consider the genuine emotional reactions some traumatic revelations prompted, and the effect this had on the workers concerned.

Emotional demands, trigger points, deep acting and authenticity

Employees engaged in deep acting when the debtor’s reasons for being unable to pay included experiences they were familiar with, because the call prompted an emotional

response. This genuine fellow feeling could be unproblematic, such as talking about being unemployed, but there were frequent occasions when the shared experience was traumatic and negative emotions were “triggered.” This exposure to ETPs and the feelings they provoked was the most challenging aspect of the job for many of our participants and significantly more stressful than the simulations involved in surface acting. ETP’s exacerbated the psychological demands of emotional labour and, for some, acted as a trigger for mental health issues such as depression, neurosis or anxiety. Shared experience of bereavement, particularly the loss of a child, featured in several informants’ accounts.

Yeah, your strength kind of goes out the window. You kind of – it drains you, it does drain you straight away, Everybody has been affected by certain things in your life – whether it’s a loved one who has had cancer, I myself have lost a child, I have lost someone to suicide as well. So, these kind of things do affect me and really do hit you in the face. And I am generally quite a strong, firm person – but when it’s something like this person said and it hits home, it really does smack you in the face basically. To the point when I had an instance where somebody had lost a child and it really hit home for me, and I had to be taken off the phones for half an hour. I was quite upset – and I’m a bloke and I was in tears myself. (CAA 1, Male)

ETP’s acted as a flashpoint in which difficult personal circumstances were relived. CollectCo insisted that CAAs triaged calls and provided additional signposting for mental health support or debt counselling. This resulted in CAAs giving additional pastoral and emotional support during calls and engaging in intensive emotional labour:

If you get a really bad call. I will give you an example – I had one last week where the customer told me she had just been diagnosed with terminal cancer, she had between three and six months to live. She wasn’t coping personally because she had no friends or relatives she could speak to, so she was airing everything to me. So I felt like I was like her mum, her dad, her psychiatrist, her best friend. She was asking me advice – I can’t give her advice, like asking what types of treatment I suggest – I’m not a doctor. So it puts you in a really really bad situation, because she was crying on the phone, so you certainly don’t want to let her go, trying to keep her on the phone – trying to reassure her. In your mind you’re thinking, “don’t give her the wrong advice.” After that call I was in floods of tears myself. On a personal level, I lost quite a few members of family with cancer – things she was telling me I could relate to. I think, “oh God I remember that happening to so-and-so” and then remember the next stage. So, I might remember everything in my mind, and then try to stay calm to the customer – try to do the best for her. So, when the call ended, I was mentally drained. And when I went home I went to see my mother in law, and I was heartbroken – absolutely heartbroken. (CAA 2, Female)

ETP’s were mainly life-changing events such as illness, bereavement or trauma, but they could also arise from what appeared to be less serious matters. Crucially, the ETP was unique to the discussion between debtor and employee, how the employee reacted to the problem and how the employee drew on their own experiences (deep acted) to engage in the discussion and complete the call.

It all depends on the individual person though – they might have dealt with the exact same thing that was on the phone, but other people might not know what they have been going through in

the personal life – it might just be something really small, it might be some severe illness – but it triggers something, I think it is nothing to do with the sense of who is on the phone – it's down to the individual. (CAA 3, Male)

When the lived experience of the CAA resonated sharply with that of the client, there was a longer lasting effect. CAAs found it more difficult to cope with calls and took longer to recover and regain equanimity:

Because the young lass I spoke to who had lost a child, she was probably about 23 or something like that – and she was absolutely distraught over the phone. I could hear it in her voice, it was absolutely awful to listen to over the phone. Needless to say I did the right thing for her – and she had nothing left with us, let's put it that way. But it did affect me for – I think it was maybe the Tuesday and the Wednesday, and I think that weekend I spoke about it to my partner – that weekend I was feeling a little bit down because it had obviously – I had brought it all back – I lost my little one in 2002, so that's going quite far back but it still brought it all back to the surface, big time – and it did affect me for a bit. (CAA 7, Female)

In many instances, CAAs would take a long time to recover from calls involving ETPs. They would take the call home with them and discuss it with family or close friends. The most challenging interactions were suicide calls where debtors would threaten to take their own lives. These could be traumatic. Some CAAs simply could not continue with the calls; others were anxious about the debtors' welfare afterwards. These calls stood out. Even the relaxed and cheerful CAA 47 observed above volunteered the number of suicide calls he had taken over the years, whilst many CAAs struggled to deal with the issues these calls raised for them. Informants in multiple focus groups revealed that this deep acting and empathy with the clients often exacerbated pre-existing mental health difficulties:

I mean I still have it in my mind now. It was just so sad, do you know what I mean. It's still there now – I can still hear her voice and everything she was going through, she said to me – “oh you have been lovely, I am going to keep you updated and let you know how my treatment is going on.” In my mind I am thinking, “oh please don't – please don't because I can't cope.” But obviously you can't say that – so you're like, “oh no, that's ok I am here you can speak to me.” But when I went home, I said to my step mum “I hope to god she doesn't ring me – I can't cope with this again.” (CAA 5, Female)

This form of deep acting linked directly to CAAs' own experiences of loss, grief and illness (Figure 4). Many of the younger workers escaped this fellow feeling because they had not yet experienced such life-changing events and could listen courteously without being triggered. When there was no shared experience to identify with, surface acting rather than deep acting was deployed and the psychological impact was limited. CAAs might find their empathy diminished, but they were rarely traumatized. It was different for the generally older colleagues with more life experience, who were more likely to have suffered loss or distressing life events. They were triggered when clients' difficulties resonated with their own. The acting they engaged in was deep acting, rather than surface acting, and its effects were damaging.

These feelings were exacerbated by the fact that many CAAs felt overwhelmed by the serious nature of the emotions and events the clients were revealing. Many expressed the view that they were not qualified counsellors, psychiatrists or mental health practitioners. They did not feel able to help deal with complex emotional needs. The sheer volume of calls during busy periods was also an issue; time taken varied from around 10 minutes for normal calls to over half an hour where the debtor narrated all their difficulties and frustrations.

Not only were CAAs not qualified to deal with the serious problems their clients experienced, but the way their work and their KPIs were designed penalized any attempts to do so. CAAs were on a salary and also received regular bonuses based on performance. KPIs included quality and regulatory measures (courteous calls, following FCA regulations) but were primarily based on payments secured from clients. This meant that it was in CAAs' interest to take many straightforward calls, deal with them quickly and impose high repayment plans or initiate formal legal recovery. Long calls, minimal repayments and "doing the right thing" by distressed clients by writing off debt damaged CAAs' own earning potential.

Resources and mitigations

The call centre work exposed CAAs to a regular stream of negative, and often traumatic emotions. Some were able to show compassion and remain emotionally detached, while others were emotionally overwhelmed. When CAAs responded with deep acting, genuinely feeling the emotion they were required to demonstrate, it was not the effortless display claimed in the literature (Hacker, 1998 in Zapf, 2002) but empathetic distress (Singer and Klimecki, 2014) that could be profoundly wounding (Semmer et al., 2016). This emotional overwhelm was triggered by exposure to clients' traumas.

CollectCo were aware of the level of the problem. According to the HR business partner, the main cause of sickness absence was stress and other mental health difficulties. Despite this, CAA training emphasized empathy with the client but failed to cover emotional responses or dealing with stressful situations, with the result that many CAAs reported being unprepared for the emotional demands of the job:

But when I was taking calls I didn't feel I was trained enough to actually take the calls, and I was actually stressed out – and I didn't know what they were saying, so I hate taking calls because I didn't feel I was trained enough to do them. And there were times when the customers were getting angry with me and being nasty to me, and I did cry a few times actually – because they were just nasty, because obviously they think you just basically don't know how to do your job, but it's true – you just don't know. So, I had to put a customer on hold, and ask for some advice – but for example my manager was not at [their] desk, and the senior was not there – so I was just basically running round, the office trying to find someone to help me, it was terrible. (CAA 88, Female)

The first point of call for CAAs, and the form of assistance that most preferred, was support from line managers, but line managers were not always at their desks and line managers' own experience of dealing with mental health issues at work varied

significantly. Informants reported that some were very good at offering pastoral support, others significantly less so. In common with the CAAs, line managers received no training on complex mental health issues nor in dealing with the emotional demands of clients, staff or themselves:

The bad thing is, again, there's a lack of training for line managers, additional support itself. We were employed originally as collectors, to collect money – set up plans, take on finance – it sounds bad, but we weren't employed as counsellors. If we wanted to do that we would have gone for a job at Samaritans or something like that. (CAA 89, Female)

There were no formal mechanisms to make line managers aware of issues; CAAs had to seek them out and let them know. Nor, despite the many guidelines for every other aspect of work, were there any standards of care for line managers to follow when staff were in emotional difficulties.

To a certain extent, line managers' inexperience or lack of availability was compensated for by the firm's system of "mental health ambassadors", all of whom were CAAs who had had mental health first aid training. These were assigned to each floor to help employees who were struggling. Mental health ambassadors actively promoted wellbeing and mental health at work by posting information on support around the building, encouraging talking about ongoing problems, and running group talking sessions.

Opportunities to speak to line managers or mental health ambassadors were valued by the CAAs and informants felt that this was the best internal mechanism to improve their mental health. Other support systems were in place and CollectCo did make significant investments in interventions to improve mental health and wellbeing. Free counselling was offered on site together with physical health initiatives like an on-site gym, yoga classes and lunchtime fruit drops. The staff intranet included a suite of formal mental health policies and procedures.

This range of provision looked impressive, but take-up was limited and staff were far less enthusiastic about them than they were about support from line managers. More fundamentally, no attempt was made to adjust KPIs so that engaging meant that staff lost bonuses. CAAs might be offered a minute or two away from their desks to recover from a particularly disturbing call, but in general staff were expected to access the additional facilities during their lunch break or in their own time after work. There was also a significant social stigma around seeking out formal mental health support.

Because even though, and I know we have all made leaps and bounds more recently with mental health, but I think there is still a stigma and taboo about it. So, I think that does very much affect your confidence in being able to approach and say – "I need that help." (CAA 4, Female)

On paper, CollectCo's mitigations looked good, and many were well-intentioned. In practice, the form of support that CAAs valued, time with line managers, was either not available or ineffective, and the enduring focus on KPIs meant that mitigations were always limited, with financial, numerical and quality targets taking precedence.

Discussion and conclusions

Through detailed qualitative research, this paper has observed the emotions in and around the work of call centre debt collectors in CollectCo. It noted, with the wider literature, the stresses of surface acting, of workers being obliged to be courteous and bite back challenging replies when no courtesy was being shown to them. It also went further and examined the deep acting these CAAs engaged in and the emotions this particular deep acting triggered. Theoretically and empirically this is novel. Alabak et al. (2020) have already argued that deep acting could take a range of forms (cognitive change and attentional deployment) or affect deep actors in different ways (rewarding interactions or mental fatigue), but no previous study has examined this empirically or linked the emotional context and emotional demands literature (de Jonge et al., 2008; Duarte et al., 2020) to deep acting.

As their training and KPIs stressed, these debt collectors were expected to show empathy to clients, and that empathy could and did take the form of deep acting; authentic fellow feeling around shared traumas, which triggered unwanted emotions. Workers suffering from empathetic distress (Singer and Klimecki, 2014) found themselves impacted for some time after.

Theoretically, this is a significant step forward. The treatment of deep acting as always and in every case positive, or as only to be criticized when effortful (Zapf, 2002), is neither convincing nor helpful. It leaves us without analytical tools to describe, explain and analyse the employer-mandated empathy that triggered negative emotional demand in these CAAs. Similarly, the exclusive focus on authenticity and dissonance to explain the stress caused by surface acting but not by deep acting (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012) has little explanatory power here. The argument in this paper that the effects of deep acting can be stressful when the feelings involved are negative provides us with a powerful analytical lens with which to examine the world of work. It is not authenticity that has the protective effect, but the nature of the emotion being experienced. The applicability of this extends beyond the occupations on the dark side of emotional labour, though it does have particular resonance here. Any front-line service worker could, at some stage, come into contact with customers and clients whose experiences trigger memories of their own traumas. Empathy is an important part of the labour process and readily co-opted by employers, but it is also difficult to control, and the emotions it triggers may not be easily regulated.

Re-theorizing deep acting was made possible by researching the dark side of emotional work. Engaging with antipathetic emotions can demand very different actions and emotions from the workers involved than those required when service is with a smile (Bolton, 2000; Linstead et al., 2014; McCabe, 2014; Terry et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2020). We observed above that this is the missing piece in Hochschild's (1983) jigsaw. Her detailed study of flight attendants enabled her to theorize emotional labour based on the emotions they simulated, the instructions they were given, the emotional context they worked in, the support their co-workers offered, the jokes they told and the impact their work had on their homes and lives. The brief comparison with debt collectors suggests only that debt collectors were naturally drawn to the work. In company with the growing

number of researchers in this area, we show the impact that negative emotions had and the ways these workers negotiated their daily tasks. This dark side literature extends Hochschild's findings on commodification and alienation.

Our third contribution has been to re-integrate the literature on emotional labour and emotional work that had started to fragment. A range of terms have been developed, including emotion work, emotional labour, emotional demands, emotional job resources, affective Capitalism and empathetic distress, among others (de Jonge et al., 2008; Duarte et al., 2020; Karl, 2020; Singer and Klimecki, 2014). Analytically, this can be helpful, in the sense that it allows the researchers to focus on one aspect of emotion work, but there are dangers when this disaggregation is not followed by a subsequent reintegration. With Zapf et al. (2021), we aim for that reintegration. Emotional labour, in its broadest sense, is the use of workers' feelings in work and for money. Those feelings are intertwined with workers' past histories, as well as the work they do and the ways they are controlled. By including those and bringing both the worker as a full human being and their workplace back into emotional labour, we can challenge Kleineidam and Fischbach's (2023) criticism of "overinvolved" service workers. Here it was workers who had experienced the same emotions as their clients who were triggered by the clients' sufferings, not those who were overinvolved in clients' lives.

The study has its limitations. As with all qualitative research, the fieldwork is specific to time, place and personalities. It is an examination of one organization, engaged in one type of work and following requirements set by one group of managers. Our confidence in its wider applicability stems from the focus on *why*, on causality. We claim analytic rather than statistical generalizability (Eisenhardt, 1989). The literature examining the dark side of emotional labour shows that occupations dealing with antipathetic emotions are not uncommon (Bolton, 2000; Linstead et al., 2014; McCabe, 2014; Terry et al., 2022; Ward et al., 2020), and the wider emotional work literature reveals how frequently service sector workers are exposed to toxic emotions (Eaton, 1996; Hochschild, 1983). There is certainly a need for further research, both into deep acting, its potential negative effects, and into dark side occupations and we hope that future studies will continue to develop this area.

These findings also have practical implications. Working with emotions exposes workers to potential dangers: compromising their own capacity to feel, alienating them from their emotions, making them vulnerable to emotional exhaustion or burnout and triggering their own traumatic memories, among others. This not only has implications for work design, it should also be of relevance to policymakers developing Health and Safety legislation and to trade unions. In manufacturing, construction and agriculture workplace health and safety is an area that unions have campaigned on successfully, dramatically improving working conditions and reducing the likelihood of accident, injury or death. Working with emotions can also be damaging with illness and emotional trauma expressed through absenteeism and high levels of turnover. In the service sector, with low levels of union membership and recognition, and high levels of working women, it is unlikely that campaigners will seek to address the impact of emotion work. Our findings suggest that perhaps they should.

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ORCID iDs

Irena Grugulis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7101-4299>

Hugh Cook  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5580-7501>

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Author biographies

James Brooks is an Independent Researcher and an HR Practitioner. He was previously an Assistant Professor and a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at Leeds University Business School. His research interests focus upon organizational learning and memory situated within communities of practice and has been funded by the UKRI/ESRC Innovate UK. He has published in *Human Relations* and *Work, Employment and Society*. [Email: james@pro-rata.co.uk]

Irena Grugulis is the Professor of Work and Skills at Leeds University Business School. Her work focuses on learning and skills, particularly the partial coincidence of interest between employers and employees. Research has been funded by the ESRC, EPSRC, AHRC and EU. She has published in *Human Relations*, *Organization Studies*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Journal of Management Studies* and *Human Resource Management Journal*. [Email: I.Grugulis@leeds.ac.uk]

Hugh Cook is Associate Professor in Employment Relations and Human Resource Management at Leeds University Business School. His research interests focus on the implementation of strategic HRM practices and their effect on employee outcomes, and on systems of education, training and knowledge transfer at work. His work has been funded by Innovate UK, the TUC and the Institute for Employment Rights. He has published in journals including the *Human Resource Management Journal*, *Work, Employment and Society*, *The International Journal of HRM* and *Economic and Industrial Democracy*. [Email: H.S.T.Cook@leeds.ac.uk]