

The problems and potential for emotional labour in occupational therapy

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The Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) Workforce Survey (2023) provided a worrisome snapshot of the professional challenges faced by over 2600 Occupational Therapists working in the United Kingdom. Organisational stressors such as staff shortages, increased caseloads, insufficient support from managers, as well as personal stressors such as burnout, poor work–life balance and a lack of fulfilment pose a threat to the career longevity and well-being of Occupational Therapists. Despite these troubling data, most survey respondents were positive about the profession itself in terms of feeling enthused about service delivery (79%) and rewarded by their career (93%). Hence, the overarching message is somewhat bittersweet; despite unrelenting working conditions, Occupational Therapists continue to be passionate about providing good-quality person-centred care to clients. This active expression of passion for the profession in this landscape could be explained by the concept of emotional labour, which refers to how employees manage their feelings and expressions during social interactions to meet job-based goals (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour has been found to be critical to

professional practice in a range of healthcare settings including clinical medicine, nursing and social care (Reily and Weiss, 2016). Nevertheless, emotional labour has received scant attention in Occupational Therapy. The purpose of this editorial is to highlight the main characteristics, issues and opportunities associated with emotional labour in Occupational Therapy research and practice.

What is emotional labour?

Emotional labour typically occurs when there is a mismatch between how one is feeling and what one is *required* to express emotionally when interacting with others at work. Grandey and Gabriel (2015) argued that emotional labour includes three main processes: (1) the implicit emotion norms that govern how employees are expected to act at work; (2) the internal emotion regulation processes that help control emotions and (3) the visible emotions that are expressed to others. It is also important to note that how an employee chooses to self-regulate emotions and perform emotional displays to others is influenced by workplace emotion norms (i.e. the culturally agreed upon ways of expressing specific emotions). The strategies individuals typically use to meet these emotion rules and norms include deliberately feigning emotional expressions (i.e. surface acting) or manufacturing the desired feelings (i.e. deep acting) needed to meet job demands. At the most recent RCOT Conference, Hings et al. (2023) shared preliminary findings that showcased how Occupational Therapists are required to enact emotional labour to meet professional standards (e.g. Health and Care Professions Council, 2023; RCOT, 2021a; WFOT, 2016). Yet, it is unclear what effect Occupational Therapists' emotional labour has on professional practice and practitioners' health and well-being.

The problem(s) with emotional labour

It is of great importance to consider how emotional labour might affect a practitioner's well-being and effectiveness in their role. Emotional labour is not explicitly remunerated in job contracts, despite its direct contribution to professional competence across the health and care professions. Therefore, this unremunerated additional job demand might lead to Occupational Therapists feeling undervalued and unsatisfied with their job. Moreover, there remains a notable gap in understanding the unique emotional demands placed on Occupational Therapists from marginalised backgrounds (Cottingham et al., 2018). For example, how race/ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, religion and language intersect and influence emotional labour demands is not yet understood which could have implications for well-being, job continuation and contribute to dropout rates within the profession. Indeed, plenty of research suggests that increased surface acting, a form of emotional labour where one fakes the expression of emotion, leads to increased emotional exhaustion, burnout, physical ill-health symptoms and a desire to change job (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011). Another factor to consider is the subjective nature of unwritten emotion norms, which could pose challenges for socialising Occupational Therapists into new and varied working environments. Although these potential issues are not exhaustive, further research on emotional labour is essential to better support the well-being and job satisfaction of Occupational Therapists.

The potential of emotional labour

Despite the potential issues associated with emotional labour, there are many potentially positive consequences for Occupational Therapists. The act of emotional labour could contribute to the professional artistry of *doing* occupational therapy; thereby, representing a valued skillset of strategies for managing the emotional vulnerabilities of clients in the context of the therapeutic relationship, which has been long shown to positively impact patient outcomes (Horton, Holman and Hebson, 2022). By acknowledging the inevitability of emotional labour, Occupational Therapists could engage in reflective practice and supervision discussions, thereby heightening awareness and preparedness for emotional labour as well as ensuring support for staff dealing with the emotional demands of their profession.

In response to calls from the RCOT (2021b) to prioritise research into (a) *how* Occupational Therapists ensure person-centred care is central to service delivery, (b) *how* Occupational Therapists can be more inclusive of both mental and physical health considerations and (c) *how* Occupational Therapists can work effectively in multidisciplinary teams, emotional labour can provide a useful theoretical framework in terms of understanding the strategies used to interpret, manage and express emotions in workplace interactions to meet the demands of their role. Future research could investigate the professional challenges associated with performing emotional labour in different Occupational Therapy practice areas. For example, the emotional labour demands of a practitioner specialising in paediatrics might differ to those operating in palliative care. Such knowledge could lead to the development of innovative methods of teaching emotional labour in education through clinical simulations, virtual reality spaces and storytelling as educational tools to equip

Occupational Therapists with skills to effectively enact emotional labour. Given the potentially challenging nature of interactions between Occupational Therapists and clients, deliberately practicing emotional labour skills in safe environments overcomes ethical challenges and reduces the emotional labour knowledge–practice gap. Furthermore, reflective accounts from practicing Occupational Therapists about their experiences of emotional labour in the field would enhance understanding of how social identities (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability) might influence emotional labour demands. There is also the potential to investigate the role of resilience building interventions acting as a buffer for emotional labour demands.

Conclusions

Occupational Therapists are all entitled to feel the same range of emotions as intensely as those in other professions, but what are we entitled to show in the workplace? The answer to this question is subjective; thus, highlighting the challenge for researchers to further understand how emotional labour is performed across practice areas, how managers and organisations can best support Occupational Therapists with their emotional labour demands and whether this can enhance job satisfaction and retention in the future.

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Consent

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Data availability statement

During the development, progress and reporting of the submitted research, patient and public involvement in the research was not included at any stage of the research.

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