



Emotional labour, burnout and work engagement amongst service centre employees in South Africa

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Orientation: Transforming public service delivery is crucial for the South African government. Emotional labour (EL), managing emotions during client interactions, is essential in service centres.

Research purpose: This study examined the relationship between EL, burnout and work engagement (WE) amongst service centre employees in a South African government organisation.

Motivation for the study: South African government organisations, as sole service providers, require employees to deliver 'service with a smile'. This increases mental workload and job stressors, leading to negative responses among service centre employees.

Research approach/design and method: Cross-sectional, correlational and nonexperimental quantitative research design was used. The sample consisted of service centre employees in a government organisation.

Main findings: The main findings indicated a positive correlation between EL and burnout, a negative correlation between burnout and work engagement and a negative correlation between EL and work engagement. These findings imply that higher EL leads to increased burnout, and reduces work engagement levels.

Practical/managerial implications: Training on emotional regulation techniques could assist employees with effective emotional management, thereby reducing the negative impact of surface acting on mental well-being. Additionally, it is recommended that the organisation should focus on person–environment fit and personality traits during recruitment to minimise emotional dissonance and burnout amongst employees.

Contribution/value-add: This study is the first of its kind in the South African government organisation and provides insight into the relationship between EL, burnout and work engagement of client service employees.

Keywords: emotional labour; burnout; work engagement; service centre; public service.

Introduction

The highly volatile and unstable economic and political climates in South Africa place pressure on government organisations to pay more attention to antecedents that could boost service delivery and increase customer satisfaction (Janse van Rensburg et al., 2013). To improve customer satisfaction through better service delivery the government organisation presented in this study introduced an inbound call centre that was supposed to minimise the need for face-to-face client service (Janse van Rensburg et al., 2013). Another remedy to service delivery problems was to focus intensely on information and communication technology (ICT) to allow customers to access self-help solutions on various platforms (Kanyemba, 2017). Regrettably, these implemented resolution avenues did not change the nature of government–public relationships – mainly because of obstacles, such as low levels of literacy, economic disparities and security concerns associated with customer-centric face-to-face encounters (Kanyemba, 2017). This is also why walk-in service centres are essential in achieving the Batho Pele principle of increasing access to information and services to empower citizens or government clients and to ensure quality service without incurring unnecessary expenditures (Maseko, 2023).

This South African government organisation's walk-in service centres, better known as branch offices, employ a range of personnel, from service agents who handle day-to-day queries to highly skilled service consultants who deal in-depth with more complex problems. In 2010, the government organisation introduced the branch queue management system (BQMS) to manage and measure the average service time and queue time of client visits. In addition to the strict BQMS measurements, service centre employees must display professionalism, enthusiasm and an enduring willingness to serve clients, regardless of how they feel, in keeping with employer display rules (Grandey et al., 2015).

Employees providing branch office services are expected to be effective listeners to recognise and anticipate the demands of their clients. They must make the client feel important and appreciated by displaying appropriate body language. Abramson et al. (2021) defined body language as a form of non-verbal communication that includes the movements and behaviours of the body, instead of words, to convey or express information. Branch office service employees must be well-trained to understand the organisation's systems; be sympathetic and apologetic when the client is feeling aggrieved and always put the clients' needs first by mobilising their emotional resources (Sabino & Bianchi, 2019). According to Hülshager and Schewe (2011) and Scott and Barnes (2011), this display of appropriate emotions is regarded as one of the most powerful predictors of customer satisfaction, service quality and the performance of the organisation.

This social exchange that takes place during interactive relationships between clients and employees in a service centre creates the social construct of emotional labour (EL). This produces both negative and positive outputs for the employee and the employer and is often subject to external forces, for example customer expectations and organisational policies (Hochschild, 2012). One of the characteristics of EL is the control of an individual's feelings to display or hide specific emotional responses during customer encounters (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). They must also regulate internal feelings to modify expressions (Winkler, 2018). Cheung et al. (2011) believe that altering emotional responses is very important in terms of obtaining positive feedback from clients and promotes a sense of accomplishment in employees. In contrast, Hochschild (2012) argues that inauthentic behaviour can be highly disruptive and harmful to employees' well-being (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

Although EL primarily focuses on employees' emotional regulation during customer interactions (Guy & Lee, 2015), it also indirectly influences how employees can organise and control their work input and output (Allen et al., 2005). For an employee to experience a sense of control, pride, enthusiasm and involvement, an affective-motivational work-related state of mind that is characterised by dedication, as described in the definition of work engagement by Bakker et al. (2003), is essential. Steger et al. (2013) defined work engagement as the emotional, cognitive and physical energy

that employees expend in their daily work. An affective-motivational work-related state of mind assists employees in facing and enduring difficult working conditions and allows them to submerge themselves in their daily work activities. Hochschild (2012) argues that if employees' emotions could mirror the expected emotions in the organisation, they would feel a greater sense of work engagement. Regulating displayed emotions to adhere to the prescribed display rules requires significant strenuous effort (Hochschild, 1983).

When service centre employees regulate their emotions during frequent and intense interpersonal interactions, they must maintain a neutral tone, show sympathy and concern and often suppress feelings of irritation and impatience, which could lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

Burnout is a state of exhaustion related to the workplace and is frequently characterised by a diminished capacity to effectively regulate emotional and cognitive processes that lead to extreme fatigue, mental distancing, fatigue, feelings of hopelessness, increased absenteeism, a decline in employee performance, a decline in organisational commitment, a decline in job satisfaction, a higher intention to leave and low levels of work engagement (Demerouti et al., 2015; Schaufeli et al., 2019).

This study aims to examine the relationship between EL, burnout and work engagement levels in a South African government organisation. Management can use this information to make informed decisions when determining key performance indicators relating to client service and professional emotional display.

Government service centre environment

The primary purpose of government organisations is to create an avenue through which citizens can effectively connect with the government (Mhlongo, 2020). For this reason, government employees are expected to be proactive in their approach, be emotionally equipped to handle demanding customers and committed to high-performance standards (Bakker et al., 2008; Hsieh, 2014). In South Africa, government organisations face pressure to excel in delivering services and supplying public goods (Gumede et al., 2024). Nilsson (2010) argues that government service centres in South Africa find it extremely difficult to overcome service delivery challenges, mainly because of low institutional capacities, high levels of corruption, lack of demographic representation, lack of accountability, high rates of unemployment, rigid centralised control systems and severe socio-economic challenges.

These institutional weaknesses significantly impact the EL required from service centre employees. For instance, low institutional capacities and high levels of corruption can lead to increased frustration and emotional strain among employees, as they may feel unsupported and demotivated (Mazzucato et al., 2022). A rigid centralised control systems can create a high-pressure environment where employees

are expected to perform optimally despite limited resources and support (Aziz et al., 2018).

Employees at service centres have little authority over how they may engage with clients, making it common practice for them to express unauthentic emotions, such as cheerfulness and sympathy, or to suppress authentic emotions, such as irritation, frustration and anger – even when faced with customer abuse and hostility (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). This emotional dissonance can lead to increased burnout and decreased work engagement (Aziz et al., 2018).

The service centre environment, strict emotional display rules and employee well-being introduced an exciting and broad area of study that focused on micro issues, such as burnout, work engagement, psychological capital and organisational performance (Hsieh, 2014; Yoo & Arnold, 2014). Research has also been conducted regarding macro issues such as service delivery (Allen et al., 2010; Pugh et al., 2011), EL (Guy & Lee, 2015; Hochschild, 2012; Sabino & Bianchi, 2019) and recovery experiences in service centres (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011).

By acknowledging the interplay between institutional weaknesses and EL, this study highlights the need for targeted interventions to support employees in managing their EL. This can include providing training on emotional regulation techniques, offering resources for stress management and fostering a supportive work environment. Addressing these institutional challenges can help mitigate EL's detrimental effects on burnout and work engagement, ultimately leading to improved service delivery and employee well-being.

Emotional labour

One of the most important job requirements in any organisational environment, to encourage customer service satisfaction, is to 'serve with a smile' (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). In service centres, interactions with customers are usually scripted and repetitive, and organisations have clear expectations regarding employees' emotional display: They must be polite and friendly, and always put the customers' needs first (Diefendorff et al., 2006). Emotional regulation or emotional display rules have been researched in various occupational fields for example, retail, hospitality and education (Cheshin, 2020; Hsu et al., 2024; O'Neil & Gopal, 2021), and the overarching findings confirmed that the employee is usually expected to suppress negative emotions and express positive emotions (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). This results in employees maintaining an accommodating and friendly interaction with customers – even when they must tolerate abuse or verbal aggression (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

In 1979, the sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild labelled this social exchange between clients and employees, EL. According to Hochschild (1983), jobs that require intense EL share three important characteristics: Employees must interact with clients in person, elicit an emotional response from the client and, through strict display guidelines, training and monitoring, the

employer is permitted to exercise some degree of control over the employee's emotional behaviour. Emotional labour can be defined as 'the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 167), or the process when feelings and expressions are regulated as part of the work role (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) or 'the act of effortfully changing one's emotional experience to display certain expected or acceptable emotions' (Cotè, 2005, p. 512).

When service centre employees display regulated emotions towards customers, they can choose between two strategies, namely deep or surface acting, which differ in terms of their degree of authenticity (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

Surface acting

According to Steinberg and Figart (1999), surface acting entails masking your true emotional response, which means that the employee is not genuinely experiencing, or even attempting to experience, the emotions that they are displaying in the presence of the customer. For example, a government service centre agent may be feeling agitated and stressed. However, when a rude customer demands assistance regarding a problem, the employee may smile and say, 'No problem. How can I assist?', when in fact, the employee is feeling annoyed and frustrated with the customer. The government service centre employee may do this to adhere to the organisational display rule expectations or may regard this as professional behaviour. Conversely, a service centre employee may be content and happy but must pretend to be sympathetic or unhappy while interacting with a distressed client without making an effort to experience the distressing emotion. According to Groth et al. (2009), the problem with surface acting is that customers often notice the fake emotions displayed and interpret it as a sign of dishonesty or even a lack of interest in their problem on the part of the employee, which may elicit an adverse response.

Hochschild (2012) argues that besides the fact that surface acting is negatively correlated with quality service delivery and relationship building with clients, inauthentic behaviour can also be disruptive and harmful to the well-being of employees. Increased absenteeism, lower levels of work engagement, unwanted turnover, emotional exhaustion and even burnout are just some of the unintended consequences of faking genuine emotions. This finding is mentioned in international research that was predominantly conducted with regard to call centres, hospitality employees, teachers and health care workers (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Maslach et al., 2001).

To further understand the influence of surface acting on employee well-being, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Surface acting has a significant positive correlation with burnout levels.

H3: Surface acting significantly negatively affects work engagement levels.

By examining these hypotheses, the study aims to offer an in-depth understanding of how surface acting influences burnout and work engagement levels among service centre employees in a South African government organisation.

Deep acting

The second EL strategy, namely deep acting, according to Hülsheger and Schewe (2011), is an effortful task in which an individual attempts to change their internal state to match the emotions that they are expressing during a client service interaction. Matching true emotions with the displayed emotions results in authentic interaction (Gross & John, 2003). For example, the service centre employee may feel overwhelmed and irritable. When approached by a rude customer demanding assistance with a problem, the employee may make an additional effort to focus on what the client needs, ignoring the rude, demanding tone of the client's voice. The employee may also choose to look at the problem from the client's perspective instead of focusing on their own distress. The attempt to feel authentic emotions results in less conflict between inner emotions and the perceived organisational rules and has different psychological consequences for the individual compared to surface acting (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

In the meta-analyses conducted by Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2013), deep acting had consistent and strong negative associations with depersonalisation, decreased job satisfaction, emotional exhaustion and psychological strain, and may be more beneficial to employees. Hülsheger and Schewe (2011) found that deep acting was interrelated with decreased psychological strain, emotional exhaustion and burnout, enhanced personal achievement, improved emotional performance and even better-quality customer service. According to Groth et al. (2009), customers perceive employees who apply deep acting during face-to-face interactions to be more customer-orientated. This results in customers treating employees more positively and with greater respect (Yagil & Medler-Liraz, 2017).

However, it is important to note that in a recent study conducted by Mann et al. (2024), they found that even deep acting can have its toll when required frequently. While deep acting may reduce emotional dissonance and burnout, it can still contribute to emotional exhaustion over time because of the continuous effort required to align internal emotions with external display (Mann et al., 2024). This highlights the need for organisations to provide support and resources to help employees manage the demands of deep acting effectively.

To further understand the impact of deep acting on employee well-being, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H2: Deep acting has a significant negative correlation with burnout levels.

H4: Deep acting has a significantly positive effect on work engagement levels.

By examining these hypotheses, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how deep acting influences burnout and work engagement levels among service centre employees in a South African government organisation.

Burnout

The burnout phenomenon has been extensively researched, and it was identified as early as 1947 (Khan et al., 2024). But it was not until the 1970s, that this phenomenon which has led to emotional, physical, behavioural and interpersonal problems affecting numerous individuals and organisations, was referred to as *burnout* (Maslach et al., 2001). Since the first publication on burnout by Freudenberger in 1974, literature on the subject has increased tremendously as researchers have never lost interest in this concept (Smit, 2011).

The three-component definition of burnout by Maslach et al. (2001) is the most widely accepted. It defines the burnout phenomenon as 'a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and diminished personal accomplishment', which is most evident in individuals working with people. Emotional exhaustion, which is a key aspect of the burnout phenomenon, entails feelings of being emotionally drained because of excessive contact with people (Maslach et al., 2001). Employees or individuals suffering from emotional exhaustion feel that they cannot contribute psychologically because their emotional resources have been depleted (Leiter & Maslach, 2005). According to Maslach et al. (2001), *depersonalisation*, which is also called *dehumanisation*, occurs when employees or individuals develop negative feelings and callous attitudes towards customers that they must serve. These employees or individuals distance themselves from customers by discarding qualities that make them unique (Maslach et al., 2001). *Diminished personal accomplishment* transpires when employees or individuals feel less competent and successful in their work and how they interact with customers (Maslach et al., 2001). Similarly, Schaufeli and De Witte (2023) discuss how four core symptoms can explain burnout. They refer to exhaustion, emotional impairment, cognitive impairment and mental distance.

But regardless of how burnout is defined, researchers agree that burnout is the prolonged response to interpersonal and chronic emotional stressors at work that are associated with various negative personal and organisational outcomes (Hillert et al., 2020; Smit, 2011). In the context of public sector jobs, burnout is particularly relevant because of the unique stressors faced by government employees. Public sector workers often deal with high job demands, limited resources and rigid bureaucratic structures, which can exacerbate feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Rahman et al., 2024).

The relationship between emotional labour and burnout

According to Jeung et al. (2018), burnout research has its roots in service centre industries where the entire focus of the

work environment revolves around the relationship between service centre employees and customers. In 1981, Maslach and Jackson defined burnout as a 'syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that frequently occurs among individuals who do "people-work" of some kind', which is of utmost importance to organisations because of the direct and indirect costs associated with burned-out employees (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004). The prolonged exposure to a stressful work environment causes a negative emotional reaction that leads to employee turnover, absenteeism, reduced job performance and eventually burnout (Maslach et al., 2001).

One of the major stressors in service centres is the extent to which service employees engage in the constant regulation of their emotions when dealing with customers, which causes stress-induced physiological arousal (Butler et al., 2003). Emotional labour plays a significant role as found in this context. Employees often have to display emotions that they do not genuinely feel, leading to emotional dissonance. This dissonance, or the conflict between felt and displayed emotions, can be a key factor contributing to burnout. According to Aziz et al. (2018), it is apparent that greater focus should be placed on the association between EL and burnout because burnout negatively impacts both the organisation's and the individual's productivity and efficiency. Emotional labour can lead to emotional exhaustion, a core component of burnout, as employees feel drained from the constant effort to manage their emotions (Maslach et al., 2001).

Although there is a growing amount of research evidence suggesting that EL could be stressful and could subsequently cause symptoms of burnout, research in a South African context and particularly in the government service centre environment has not been addressed sufficiently (O'Neil & Gopal, 2021).

Work engagement

Given that people spend over one-third of their lives performing some kind of work activity, they must be fully engaged while on-the-job (May et al., 2004). Work engagement is defined by Schaufeli et al. (2002, p. 74) as 'a positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is characterised by vigour, dedication, and absorption'. According to Noesgaard and Hansen (2018), this means that engaged employees tend to present high levels of persistence and energy, have pride in their work, demonstrate enthusiasm and feel that time at work passes quickly because they are entirely immersed in their job. Excellent performance levels tend to be a sign of engaged employees' positive attitudes because they are prepared to commit their mental, physical and emotional resources to their employer (Christian et al., 2011).

Work engagement research has been conducted in various occupational settings, and it has consistently been made clear that it is vital to understand and define the particular work setting before making conclusions regarding whether job demands are perceived as having a negative or positive

effect on work engagement (Bakker & Sanz-Vergel, 2013; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). This is also important in a government work setting. Lavigna (2015) argues that government organisations tend to have inherent characteristics that can promote barriers to work engagement. Less decision-making autonomy, political leadership interference, bureaucratic structures, and strict service display rules may be expected to negatively influence engagement in government organisations (Perry & Vandenabeele, 2015).

The relationship between emotional labour and work engagement

Increased customer expectations during employee-customer interactions require organisations to look differently at service centre employees and to realise their true value in promoting service quality and customer service satisfaction. Engaged employees possess high energy and resilience levels, are willing to work harder, display a sense of enthusiasm and inspiration and are deeply immersed in their work (Schaufeli et al., 2006). Therefore, when service employees must perform the EL strategy of surface acting during an interaction with a customer, they will experience emotional dissonance because of the difference between their true feelings and those that they are displaying (Wang & Groth, 2014). In a study conducted by Mróz and Kaleta (2016), it was confirmed that employees exposed to chronic dissonance will not feel integrated with their job roles and will also not find meaning in their work, which leads to diminished personal motivation.

In contrast with surface acting, deep acting reduces emotional disorder mainly because of the alignment of inner feelings with displayed feelings during employee-customer interactions (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015). This alignment and consistency of true feelings during deep acting motivate the individual to generate more vigour that enhances work engagement (Yoo & Arnold, 2014). High work engagement levels are beneficial to both the organisation and the employee. Benefits to the organisation include increased job satisfaction, improved work performance and lower turnover rates (Bakker et al., 2008). Benefits to the individual include increased proactive behaviour that results in less effort needed to accomplish tasks, increased feelings of attachment to the organisation and willingness to work hard to make working conditions satisfying for themselves (Demerouti et al., 2015; Mróz & Kaleta, 2016; Schaufeli et al., 2006).

The relationship between burnout and work engagement

The relationship between burnout and work engagement has been extensively researched (Bakker, 2022; Schaufeli & De Witte, 2023). Rollins et al. (2021) believe that work engagement and burnout must be viewed as opposite measures of occupational well-being; they contend that it is unlikely that an employee experiencing burnout would also exhibit high

levels of work engagement, and that employees with high levels of work engagement would not experience burnout. There are different views on whether work engagement and burnout should be regarded as independent or related constructs (Mäkikangas et al., 2012). Maslach and Jackson (1981), for example, found in their research that burnout is the polar opposite of work engagement, where work engagement is characterised by efficacy, energy and involvement as opposed to burnout that is characterised by cynicism, exhaustion and reduced professional efficacy (Gan & Gan, 2014).

Based upon the earlier discussion, the following hypotheses were formulated:

- H1:** Surface acting has a significant positive correlation with burnout levels.
- H2:** Deep acting has a significant negative correlation with burnout levels.
- H3:** Surface acting significantly negatively affects work engagement levels.
- H4:** Deep acting has a significantly positive effect on work engagement levels.
- H5:** Burnout has a significant negative effect on work engagement.

Research design

Research approach

To examine the potential relationships between two or more variables at a certain point and time, a cross-sectional, correlational and nonexperimental quantitative research design was used in this research. In the context of this study, the researcher aimed to gather information about a large population to explore the relationship between EL, burnout and work engagement by surveying a representative sample of this population.

While cross-sectional designs are suitable for examining correlations, they are often criticised for their inability to establish causality. This limitation is acknowledged in this study, as the design only allows for the identification of associations between variables at a single point in time. Consequently, it is not possible to determine the directionality or causality of the observed relationships.

Despite this limitation, a cross-sectional design was selected for the following reasons. Firstly, it allows for the collection of data from a large sample within a relatively short period, making it feasible for studies with time and resource constraints. Secondly, it provides a snapshot of the current state of the variables of interest, which is valuable for identifying patterns and associations that can inform future research. Lastly, while longitudinal studies might better capture the dynamics between EL, burnout and work engagement over time, they require more extensive resources and time commitments, which were not available for this study.

Research method

Participants

The participants constituted a probability random sampling of service centre agents working in a South African government organisation. The random sampling method involved selecting service centre agents from the 16 Region 1 branch offices in a government organisation. Each branch office was given an equal opportunity to participate in the study, ensuring that the sample was representative of the entire population. In this study, the distribution of respondents across the branches was monitored to ensure proportional representation, and any deviations were addressed to maintain the integrity of the sampling process.

A total population of 348 employees was targeted. Of the total number of questionnaires distributed, 201 (58%) were returned. While the study uses probability random sampling targeting service centre agents, it is important to acknowledge the potential impact of non-response bias. A 58% response rate could introduce response bias, as it is unclear whether the remaining 42% who did not respond differ from the respondents. Non-response bias occurs when the characteristics of non-respondents differ from those of respondents, potentially affecting the generalisability of the findings. To mitigate this, future research could employ follow-up strategies to increase the response rate or compare the characteristics of respondents and non-respondents to assess the extent of any bias.

Descriptive information of the sample is given in Table 1.

The sample consisted of the 16 Region 1 branch offices in a government organisation with 81.6% females and only 18.4% males. More than half (53.7%) of the sample was aged between 41 years and 50 years. Most of the participants were African people (48.2%), with 9.0% mixed race people, 2.0% Indian people and 40.8% white people.

TABLE 1: Characteristics of the participants.

Item	Category	Frequency	%
Gender	Male	37	18.4
	Female	164	81.6
Age (years)	< 30	4	2.0
	31–40	30	14.9
	41–50	108	53.7
	> 50	59	29.4
Ethnic group	African people	97	48.2
	Indian people	4	2.0
	Mixed race people	18	9.0
	White people	82	40.8
Educational level	Higher certificate (Grade 12)	107	53.2
	Diploma	58	28.8
	Degree	18	9.0
	Postgraduate degree	8	4.0
	Technical qualification	10	5.0
Occupational status	Manager	34	16.9
	Agent	121	60.2
	Consultant	36	17.9
	Other	10	5.0

More than half of the participants (53.2%) had an educational level of Grade 12, with 28.8% having diplomas, 9.0% degrees, 5.0% technical qualifications and 4.0% postgraduate degrees making up the other 46.8%. Most of the respondents (60.2%) were employed as agents, with 16.9% managers, 17.9% consultants and 5.0% in other positions.

Measuring instruments

To determine the demographics of the research participants and to provide a detailed description of the sample, a biographical questionnaire was used in this study. The questionnaire included gender, age, ethnic group, educational level and occupational status.

Emotional Labour Scale (ELS) (Lee & Brotheridge, 2011): This scale was used because it is the most recent and updated ELS. It consists of a 17-item self-reported questionnaire. The ELS measured five facets of workplace emotional display. These included frequency (three items; e.g., 'Display specific emotions required by your job as a service agent'), intensity (two items; e.g., 'Show emotions that you don't feel') and variety (three items; e.g., 'Express many different emotions in a single workday') of emotional display. The ELS also measured the EL facets of deep acting (three items; e.g., 'Try to actually experience the emotions that you must show in front of clients') and surface acting (six items; e.g., 'Pretend to have emotions that you don't really have'). The five facets, mentioned earlier in the text, were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The duration of a typical interaction was measured in minutes. Acceptable reliability of 0.90 for deep acting and 0.76 for surface acting was reported during previous studies using the ELS (Lee & Brotheridge, 2011). Vermaak et al. (2017) found acceptable reliability for the ELS in a South African context, except the Surface acting construct was lower than the other factors at 0.43.

Burnout Assessment Tool (BAT) (Schaufeli et al., 2019): This tool was used to measure the nature of burnout and distinguished between core symptoms and secondary and/or atypical symptoms. The core symptoms include exhaustion (eight items; e.g., 'When I get up in the morning, I lack the energy to start a new day at work'), emotional impairment (five items; e.g., 'At work, I feel unable to control my emotions'), cognitive impairment (five items; e.g., 'I am forgetful and distracted at work') and mental distance (five items; e.g., 'I feel indifferent in my job'). The secondary and/or atypical symptoms include psychological complaints (five items; e.g., 'I feel anxious and/or suffer from panic attacks'), and psychosomatic complaints (five items; e.g., 'I suffer from muscle pain, for example in the neck, shoulder, or back'). Response options ranged from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). This scale was reliable, with Cronbach alpha coefficients of 0.82 and 0.95 (Schaufeli et al., 2019). De Beer et al. (2022) found all scales to be reliable in a South African study.

Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) (Schaufeli et al., 2002) scale was used to measure work engagement. It has 17

items that measure vigour (six items; e.g., 'When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work'), dedication (five items; e.g., 'I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose') and absorption (six items; e.g., 'When I am working, I forget everything else around me'). Items are arranged along a Likert scale varying from 1 (*never*) to 6 (*always*). Storm and Rothmann (2003) found alpha coefficients for reliability and internal consistency of between 0.78 and 0.89 for the three subscales in a South African context.

Research procedure

Service centre employees ($N = 348$) in the Region 1 branch offices of a government organisation in South Africa were approached using a probability random sample. Permission for the study was obtained from the government organisation's research committee, group executive and branch managers responsible for the 16 Region 1 branch offices. Participation in this study was voluntary, and the service centre employees confirmed their willingness to participate by returning a signed consent form before research commenced. The researcher's assistant distributed hard copy questionnaires to all participating service employees.

Participants were requested to return their completed questionnaires to a sealed box provided by the researcher. Sealed boxes were collected from the 16 branch offices, and all data were captured on an Excel spreadsheet. Strict ethical guidelines were followed, and all information collected was treated with absolute confidentiality.

Statistical analysis

Statistical analysis was performed using the SPSS 27 (IBM Corporation, 2020) and Mplus 8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2020) software programs and estimation of descriptive statistics was done to describe the data. The function of descriptive statistics is defined as the transformation of a set of observations or numbers into indices that characterise or describe the data (Maree, 2020). The suggestion of Steyn and Ellis (2003) to use effect sizes to determine practical significance was used in this study, and cut-off points of 0.30 for a medium effect and 0.50 for a large effect were applied. The reliability of scales was tested using McDonald's omega coefficients (ω) as recommended by Foxcroft and Roodt (2013) as they were found to provide a more accurate degree of confidence in the consistency of the regulating scales. The confidence interval levels were set at a value of 95% ($p < 0.05$) for statistical significance. Structural equation modelling (SEM) was performed using the Mplus 8.6 software program. Structural equation modelling allows the simultaneous analysis of multiple relationships between latent and observed variables (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2020). According to Gefen et al. (2000), these multiple relationships can be modelled pictorially to get a better understanding of the theory being studied. Byrne (2010) found structural equation modelling more appropriate when estimating indirect effects in larger sample sizes, as was the case in this study.

To account for skewness and kurtosis of the data distribution, the maximum likelihood robust (MLR) estimator was used (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2020; Satorra & Bentler, 2010). As the basis for the structural model, the measurement model showing the best fit was used (Iacobucci, 2009). The next step was to test two competing structural models against the original model. The Satorra–Bentler Chi-square difference test was performed again to confirm which hypothesised structural model showed the better fit (Satorra & Bentler, 2010).

To assess the goodness-of-fit indices, the Chi-square (χ^2) and its associated degrees of freedom (df), the comparative fit index (CFI), the standardised root mean square residual (SRMR), the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) and the Tucker–Lewis index (TLI) were evaluated (Hu & Bentler, 1999). According to Iacobucci (2010), a non-significant Chi-square statistic indicates a good fit with the sample data. Although values higher than 0.95 for TLI and CFI are preferred (Iacobucci, 2010), values higher than 0.90 are generally accepted in practice (Wang & Wang, 2012). According to Hu and Bentler (1999), values lower than 0.05 and 0.08 indicate a good fit between the model and the SRMR and RMSEA data indicators, respectively. Alternative models were compared to other fit statistics using the Bayes information criteria (BIC) and the Akaike information criteria (AIC). Kline (2015) found that the lower the value, the better the model is, as the BIC and AIC values serve as an index for model parsimony.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from North-West University Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences Research Ethics Committee (NWU-01308-21-A4).

Results

Firstly, the internal consistency reliability coefficients for the scales used in the study were calculated. Secondly, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), which, according to Brown (2015), determines the best-fitting measurement model for the available data, was conducted. The initial attempt at a CFA model of the EL measuring instrument was unsuccessful. The factors were too highly correlated or resulted in a non-positive definite matrix. Therefore, it was decided to conduct exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on the EL items to investigate any potential challenges in the current sample. Next, a correlation matrix was considered to explore the relationship between variables. The correlation matrix was interpreted based on Cohen's (1992) guidelines. Values of 0.30 and above are considered medium effect sizes, and those of 0.50 and above are considered a large effect. Lastly, a structural model was specified during a follow-up analysis by adding structural paths according to the research hypotheses. To reject or support the hypotheses, statistical significance ($p < 0.05$), direction and size of the standardised estimates were considered.

Reliability

McDonald's omega (Ω) internal consistency reliability coefficients were calculated for each of the ELS, UWES and BAT scales. The results are shown in Table 2.

Testing the measurement models

The Mplus 8.6 software program was used to analyse different permutations of possible factor structures to verify the best-fitting measurement model between EL with its five composites (frequency, intensity, variety, deep acting and surface acting), burnout with its six composites (exhaustion, mental distance, cognitive impairment, emotional impairment, psychological complaints and psychosomatic complaints) and work engagement with its three composites (absorption, dedication and vigour) (Lee & Brotheridge, 2011; Schaufeli et al., 2019, 2002).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis was conducted for each measurement instrument used in this study, using the *R*-statistical framework (R Development Core Team, 2015). A series of models were tested to investigate the factor structures of the ELS, UWES and BAT measures using the maximum likelihood (ML) estimator.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis conducted on the BAT questionnaire indicated that all items loaded successfully onto their respective factors and were suitable for use. Attempts at various CFA models regarding the ELS measurement were unsuccessful as the modelling of the EL factors was either too highly correlated or resulted in a non-positive definite matrix. To remedy the situation, it was decided to conduct exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to investigate the potential challenges with the model in the current sample. The exploratory factor analysis at the end revealed a three-factor model for EL (frequency and deep acting; Intensity and variety; surface acting) instead of the hypothesised five-factor model. All the ELS items loaded successfully on the three factors, resulting in no items being excluded. Confirmatory factor analyses were run to test the factor structure of the UWES-17 measure as initially hypothesised by the scale authors. The three-factor model tested raised some concerns because of the high intercorrelations between vigour, dedication and absorption. Therefore, it was decided to test work engagement as a one-factor model, which was found reliable by Schaufeli et al. (2006).

TABLE 2: Internal consistency reliability of the emotional labour scale, Utrecht work engagement scale and burnout assessment tool.

No.	Variable	McDonald's (Ω)
1	EL – Frequency and deep acting (1–5)	0.82
2	EL – Intensity and variety (1–5)	0.85
3	EL – Surface acting (1–5)	0.81
4	Burnout (1–5)	0.92
5	Work engagement (0–6)	0.80

EL, emotional labour.

$\Omega \geq 0.70$ – satisfactory

Values of ≥ 0.70 on McDonald's omega (Ω) are considered satisfactory for use in individual decision-making (Foxcroft & Roodt, 2013). As shown in Table 2, all the scales in this study met this criterion and can be interpreted.

The one-factor solution was a better fit than the three-factor solution in this study.

The various adjusted CFA models were combined into an initial measurement model. It was found that all factors loaded above 0.35 resulted in no exclusions of items. The modification indices reported a high error variance correlation between the psychological complaint and psychosomatic complaint factors in the BAT measuring instrument (MI = 40.281). The error variances were allowed to correlate, which resulted in a better fit. Upon assessing the residual variances, it was found that Item 5 in the ELS measuring instrument had four problematic values. It was subsequently removed, resulting in measurement Model 1, which was found to be the best

acceptable fit to the data. The results are reported in Table 3.

Testing the structural model

Firstly, Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated between each of the measurements included in this study. The Pearson correlation coefficient (r), according to Maree (2020), is a measure of the strength of a linear association between two quantitative variables measured on a continuous scale. Correlations were made to identify possible links, and these are reported in Table 4.

Based on the results summarised in Table 4, it can be confirmed that burnout is practically and statistically

TABLE 3: Fit statistics of final and competing measurement models.

Model	χ^2	df	AIC	BIC	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
Model 1	1272.49	887	24237.51	24260.72	0.91	0.90	0.05	0.06
Model 2	Non-positive definite latent variable covariance matrix – results not trustworthy							
Model 3	1375.63	920	24283.34	24302.58	0.90	0.89	0.05	0.08
Model 4	1343.94	909	24265.77	24286.33	0.90	0.89	0.05	0.08
Model 5	1328.40	903	24265.13	24286.42	0.90	0.90	0.05	0.07
Model 6	Non-positive definite latent variable covariance matrix – results not trustworthy							
Model 7	1331.10	910	24256.19	24276.64	0.91	0.90	0.05	0.07
Model 8	1293.57	895	24239.27	24261.52	0.91	0.90	0.05	0.06

χ^2 , Chi-square; df , degrees of freedom; AIC, Akaike information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual.

TABLE 4: Correlation coefficients of measuring instruments.

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1	EL – Frequency and deep acting (1–5)	-	-	-	-	-
2	EL – Intensity and variety (1–5)	0.63 \ddagger ,**	-	-	-	-
3	EL – Surface acting (1–5)	0.53 \ddagger ,**	0.56 \ddagger ,**	-	-	-
4	Burnout (1–5)	0.21*	0.45 \ddagger ,**	0.59 \ddagger ,**	-	-
5	Work engagement (0–6)	0.06	-0.12	-0.28**	-0.55 \ddagger ,**	-

EL, emotional labour.

*, $p < 0.05$ – Statistically significant; **, $p < 0.01$ – Statistically significant; \ddagger , $r > 0.30$ – Practically significant (medium effect); \ddagger , $r > 0.50$ – Practically significant (large effect).

TABLE 5: Initial framework fit indices and standardised path coefficients.

Measures	Direct and indirect pathways	Direct pathways	Indirect pathways
Fit indices			
χ^2	1282.96	1450.64	1405.01
df	895.00	922.00	904.00
AIC	24232.60	2431.98	24325.72
BIC	24254.85	24380.98	24346.88
CFI	0.91	0.88	0.89
TLI	0.90	0.87	0.88
RMSEA	0.05	0.05	0.05
MLR – adjusted χ^2	1386.24	1569.59	1497.32
SRMR	0.06	0.11	0.07
Direct pathway to burnout			
EL – Frequency and deep acting	-0.20	-0.10	-
EL – Intensity and variety	0.40**	0.31**	-
EL – Surface acting	0.18	0.31**	-
Work engagement	0.13	-0.10	0.03
Direct pathways to work engagement			
EL – Frequency and deep acting	0.11	-	0.63
EL – Intensity and variety	-0.05	-	-0.26
EL – Surface acting	-0.06	-	-0.55**

χ^2 , Chi-square; df , degrees of freedom; AIC, Akaike information criteria; BIC, Bayesian information criteria; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation; SRMR, standardised root mean square residual; EL, Emotional labour; MLR, maximum likelihood robust.

*, $p < 0.05$; **, $p < 0.01$.

significantly related to EL – Surface acting (large effect) and EL – Intensity/variety (medium effect) but only statistically significantly related to EL – Frequency/deep acting (small effect). Work engagement was found to be statistically significantly negatively related to surface acting (small effect), while both EL – Frequency /deep acting (positively) and EL – Intensity/variety (negatively) were found to have no significant relationship with work engagement. Work engagement correlated negatively with burnout, largely from a practical and statistically significant point of view.

Next, a regression pathway analysis reported in Table 5 was conducted between the different constructs in the structural model. In the first model (also the proposed model), all the direct and indirect pathways were estimated simultaneously. The second model estimated only direct pathways from EL – Frequency /deep acting, EL – Intensity/variety, EL – Surface acting and work engagement directly to burnout. The paths from EL – Frequency /deep acting, EL – Intensity/variety, EL – Surface acting to work engagement were constrained to zero. The third model estimated only indirect pathways from EL – Frequency /deep acting, EL – Intensity/variety, EL – Surface acting via work engagement to burnout.

Figure 1 contains the standardised path coefficients that were estimated by using Mplus 8.6 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998–2020).

Discussion

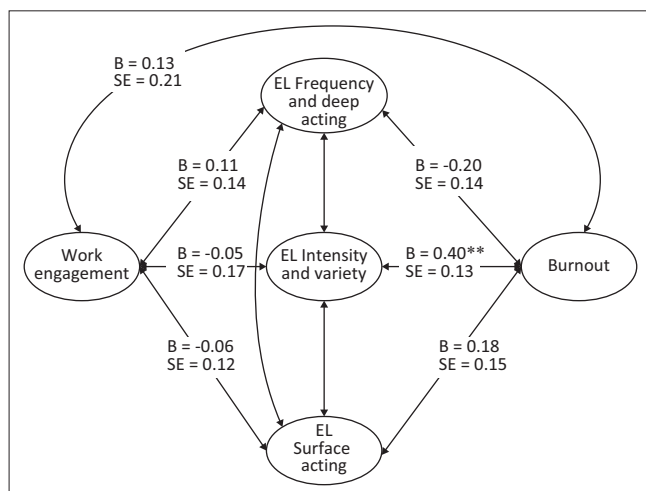
The motivation for this study was the need to establish the relationship between EL, burnout, and work engagement, keeping in mind that the organisation under research renders a one of a kind service mandated to them by the South African government.

Results obtained support H1. It was evident that a positive, practical and statistically significant relationship exists between burnout and EL – Surface acting. Looking at the

surface acting results, there is reason for the organisation to feel apprehensive. The mean of surface acting was 3.33 with a standard deviation of 0.85. Considering that a 5-point scale was used, it is evident that the surface acting levels in these government service centres are high. An explanation for this phenomenon can be the consistent positive emotional and bodily display that the organisation expects employees to portray to clients.

The second hypothesis of this study was to determine the relationship between EL – Deep acting and burnout – and it was assumed that there would be a negative correlation between these two constructs in the government service centres under research. This assumption was made because deep acting, in contrast to surface acting, refers to the process that individuals employ when they try to alter their internal emotions before the actual interaction to adhere to the organisation's display rules, which has a negative effect on burnout levels (Hochschild, 2012). Hypothesis 2 corroborated the research conducted by Cheung et al. (2011), Hülshager and Schewe (2011), and Scott and Barnes (2011) who found that deep acting was undeniably negatively related to burnout. However, the results obtained in this study proved H2 not to be true for the government service centres under research. This study found a positive statistically significant (small effect) relationship between EL – Deep acting and burnout. The mean of EL – Frequency and deep acting was 3.60 with a standard deviation of 0.82, which, keeping in mind that a 5-point scale was used, confirms high levels of deep acting amongst the service centre agents under research. A possible explanation for this positive relationship is found in research conducted by Grandey and Gabriel (2015) that suggests that although deep acting generates lower levels of inconsistency between outer and inner feelings than surface acting, a small degree of effort is still required to alter authentic feelings, expressions and thoughts that require a small amount of deliberate psychological effort, which could cause stress, emotional exhaustion, depletion of energy and reduced personal accomplishment, which could result in possible burnout (Lee, 2018). Another possible explanation is found in research conducted by Keefer et al. (2018) who found a correlation between emotional intelligence and deep acting. They suggest that emotional intelligence varies from individual to individual, which highlights the importance of considering context when conducting research. Despite the positive relationship with burnout, according to Rogers et al. (2014), deep acting also illustrates positive correlations with increased job satisfaction and work engagement and should therefore be encouraged in service jobs.

The results obtained in this study confirmed that a statistically significant negative relationship exists between work engagement and EL – Surface acting, which supports the third hypothesis in this study. This statistical outcome is also supported by various previous research outcomes that have confirmed that surface acting constantly leads to adverse outcomes, such as poor health, burned-out employees, job dissatisfaction, low commitment levels and disengaged



EL, emotional labour; SE, standard error.

FIGURE 1: Structural model for emotional labour, burnout and work engagement.

employees (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Pugh et al., 2011). Unfortunately, feeling one emotion and attempting to express another is part of every employee's life and is often influenced from the moment an individual wakes up in the morning. Like all other individuals, service centre agents must deal with family and financial issues and, in most cases, a frustrating commute to work. When arriving at work, there are explicit norms for engagement that impel employees to find ways to maintain a positive relationship with clients and colleagues despite not necessarily experiencing particularly positive feelings.

The hypothesised (H4) significant positive relationship between deep acting and work engagement was found not to exist in the government service centre under research. Instead, no significant relationship was found between deep acting and work engagement. This deviates from previous research and propositions that found a strong positive relationship between the two constructs (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Pugh et al., 2011). A possible explanation for this could be the positive relationship found in this study between deep acting and burnout. Maslach and Leiter (2016) confirmed that burnout is the opposite of work engagement, which means that it is unlikely that employees who show high levels of burnout would show a high degree of work engagement.

Burnout showed a practical and statistically significant negative relationship with work engagement (supporting H5). This means that government service centre agents who display high levels of burnout experience low levels of work engagement. Looking at the work engagement and burnout results from this study, there is reason for the government organisation to be concerned. The mean of burnout was 2.78, with a standard deviation of 0.82. Measured on a 5-point scale, it is evident that the burnout levels in this organisation are leaning towards the higher end of the scale. The mean of work engagement was 3.59 with a standard deviation of 1.09, measured on a 7-point scale, which indicates that work engagement levels in the government service centres are not very high.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested to ensure that the organisation manages EL more effectively to enhance employee engagement and reduce burnout leading to a more motivated and productive workforce.

A recommendation for the organisation is to provide training on emotional regulation techniques to equip service agents with the skills needed to manage their emotions more effectively. This training can help reduce the negative impact of surface acting on their mental health. Additionally, aligning with the research by Diestel and Schmidt (2011), it is crucial for the organisation to focus on person-job fit when establishing EL levels among employees. By paying attention to person-environment fit and considering personality traits during recruitment, the organisation can reduce emotional dissonance.

This alignment will result in employees experiencing less burnout, as their personality traits will be more in sync with the job requirements. Therefore, implementing these strategies can enhance the emotional well-being and overall job satisfaction of service agents.

To further support emotional well-being, it is recommended that the government organisation implements classroom and on-the-job training interventions to enhance EL – Deep acting skills. These interventions should focus on increasing job responsibilities and task significance, as suggested by Pugh et al. (2011). Additionally, managers in the government service centres should provide on-the-job autonomy support by offering clear rationales for specific display rules and emphasising the choice of emotional display rather than enforcing absolute organisational control. This approach can help employees better manage their emotions and improve their overall job satisfaction.

To minimise high surface acting levels in government service centres, it is recommended that service centre management becomes actively involved. Managers should be trained to become strengths-based training facilitators, ensuring they understand the strengths and weaknesses of their service agents. This knowledge will enable managers to provide meaningful, appropriate and supportive feedback regarding the emotional display between service agents and clients, as suggested by De Villiers (2015). Positive and supportive observations from managers during service delivery can enhance employees' self-efficacy and morale, as noted by Lloyd et al. (2013).

Additionally, interactive training interventions that suggest techniques for coping with unauthentic emotions and stress should be made available to service centre employees via their cell phones and computers. This approach ensures a quick, hands-on method for employees to access support when dealing with surface acting. Given the stressful environment of government service centres, employing suitable, supportive and psychologically strong managers should be a priority to help manage EL effectively.

To promote work engagement and reduce burnout in government service centres, the organisation should consider implementing several interventions. According to research by Maslach et al. (2001), these interventions include guarding against work overload, implementing fair and consistent recognition and reward programmes, and creating a supportive work environment through specific and continuous feedback. Additionally, setting clear company objectives and role profiles, and providing appropriate resources and support during peak hours are essential measures. Gómez-Gascón et al. (2013) also recommend continuous career development interventions to ensure that service centre jobs remain exciting and challenging. By adopting these strategies, the organisation can enhance employee engagement and reduce burnout, leading to a more motivated and productive workforce.

Conclusion

The intricate connection between EL, burnout and work engagement in South African government service centres is highlighted by this study. While surface acting has a detrimental effect on work engagement, high levels of both surface and deep acting are linked to greater burnout. These results highlight the necessity of focused interventions to control EL and advance worker well-being.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

A.E. and E.O. contributed to the conceptualisation and designing of the research project. A.E. was involved in the original data gathering, analysis and write-up. E.O. was involved in reviewing and editing of the content and analysis.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, E.O. upon reasonable request.

Disclaimer

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