



Her Majesty's  
Inspectorate of  
Probation

## Emotional Labour in Probation

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## Foreword

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HMI Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Jake Phillips, Chalen Westaby and Andrew Fowler, exploring the concept of 'emotional labour' and its application to the delivery of probation services. As shown, managing and displaying emotions is critical to effective practice, with practitioners using emotions to create better relationships with service users, encourage compliance, support desistance, and assess and manage risk more effectively. Jobs requiring high levels of emotional labour can be harmful to staff wellbeing and lead to burnout, and it is thus essential that sufficient attention is given to the emotional demands of probation work in policy, recruitment, training and staff supervision. This is of importance to the forthcoming probation reforms and also current delivery during the Coronavirus pandemic which is requiring new ways of working, placing additional emotional demands on practitioners.



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### Author's Profile

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**The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HMI Probation.**

# 1. Introduction

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Emotional labour, a term coined by Hochschild (1983) in her seminal work *A Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, is used to describe ways in which people are required to manage and display their emotions in order to achieve the goals of the organisation that they work for. Although initially developed in the context of the private sector, recent academic effort has focused attention on the ways in which professionals and those working in public services perform emotional labour as part of their work. Emotional labour brings to the fore the relational element of public service with a focus on trust and the 'encounter' between state and citizen (Guy et al., 2019).

This is important because once we acknowledge the emotions demanded by certain professions, organisations can support people more effectively through awareness raising, training and better systems of supervision and management. In the words of Professor Mary Guy in the Foreword to our forthcoming book *Emotional Labour in Criminal Justice and Criminology*,

*'Emotive competencies are as important as, if not more important than, cognitive and technical competencies in policing and criminal justice. Emotive skills, especially the ability to regulate one's own emotions, make the difference between those who are perceived to be empathic and those who come across as cold and uncaring.'* (Guy, 2020)

Yet, the emotional nature of probation work has been marginalised over recent years in favour of a focus on probation practitioners' abilities to 'manage cases' over working relationally with people under probation supervision (Fowler et al., 2020; Knight et al., 2016). Our research in recent years has sought to bring the emotion skills that are – in our view – inherent to probation back into view. Using, managing and displaying emotions when working with people on probation is critical to effective probation practice, yet it has – until recently – been neglected in policy, recruitment, training and staff supervision.

## 2. What is Emotional Labour?

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Emotional labour is 'the management of a way of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display...which is for a wage' (Hochschild, 1983: 7, fn). Emotional labour is performed during face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions between probation practitioners and service users. People perform emotional labour in order to manage *their* emotions *as well as* the emotions of the recipient of their emotional display. This might be done to hide an emotion which is considered inappropriate in the circumstances, or to invoke an emotional response in the person with whom someone is interacting. A distinction between appropriate and inappropriate emotions is important in understanding emotional labour and it is generally accepted that there are a range of factors – called display rules – which dictate what is and is not appropriate in a given circumstance.

Display rules can be organisational, generally conveyed to the worker through formal policies or training, but they can also be occupational or cultural, transmitted to workers through the shared ways of doing things and underpinning assumptions which exist in any occupational setting. Finally, display rules can be societal and are thus shaped by what society wants from that particular occupation (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Conflict between these rules can create tensions for practitioners who have to navigate the rules and – often very quickly – decide upon the most appropriate form of emotional display.

Display rules thus shape the performance of emotional labour but we also need to understand how practitioners perform emotional labour. Research has identified the ways in which emotional labour is performed:

1. By 'surface acting' which is where a worker simulates the emotions to be displayed in order to produce a desired emotional reaction in another person. This way of performing emotional labour results in the emotion that is being displayed differing to the one(s) being felt.
2. Through 'deep acting' whereby a worker engages in the emotional display either directly or indirectly through the alignment of inner feelings with emotional labour expectations. This can be achieved through either invoking those emotions through experience or through a trained imagination. In this way the worker regulates their emotions in order to harmonise them with those expected by the organisation.
3. Workers may also express 'genuine emotional responses'; an alignment between the worker's feelings and the emotional expectations of an organisation. Although such displays are more genuine, emotional labour is still required because the response will need regulating in order to be appropriately displayed.

### 2.1 What does emotional labour in probation look like?

Participants in our interview-based research provided many examples of how they perform emotional labour when working with service users. Displaying empathy was the most commonly cited example of emotion work done by our participants. It was clear in our interviews that, when examined through the lens of emotional labour, the complexity of probation work comes to the fore. In order to convey empathy, one often needs to suppress some emotions and emphasise others, all in order to achieve the aims of the job – be that

supporting someone on the journey towards desistance, managing risk or implementing a sentence handed down by the court.

We also heard about how people would display emotions such as happiness when a client did well or made progress in their life. Importantly this involves a degree of suppression because there is a need to maintain professional boundaries at all times: an example of how emotional displays are shaped by both organisational and occupational display rules. Other participants talked to us about how they would have to suppress certain emotions such as frustration, anger or disappointment, particularly when they felt a service user had not done as well as they had expected. Sometimes these so-called 'negative' emotions would be wholly suppressed whilst at other times they would be displayed but not fully, with some participants describing how they would use anger or disappointment to convey disapproval of a service user's behaviour (Westaby et al., 2019).

What was particularly interesting in our discussions of emotional labour with practitioners was the purpose behind these emotional displays because they illustrated the ways in which emotions are used to achieve the aims of probation. For example, emotional displays of happiness and satisfaction are used to foster good working relationships, encourage people to comply with Orders and continue working to improve their lives. They are also used to demonstrate a belief in the ability of the service user to change.

More neutral displays were often framed in terms of having to glean information to assess and then manage risk: there was a perception that displaying an emotion such as disappointment or even disgust would shut down the chances of a service user being honest about the risks they may pose. Displays of emotions such as anger or frustration – whilst always suppressed to a degree – were discussed in terms of demonstrating one's humanity to the service user, to show that the officer was a person too. Thus, we can begin to see how emotional displays are used to achieve the broad aims of probation which encompass public protection, rehabilitation and risk management.

All of this points to the importance of emotional labour in understanding probation practice. Once we fully appreciate the way emotions are used in probation, we can start to see the way in which emotional labour is linked to effective probation practice.

## **2.2 What are the effects of performing emotional labour?**

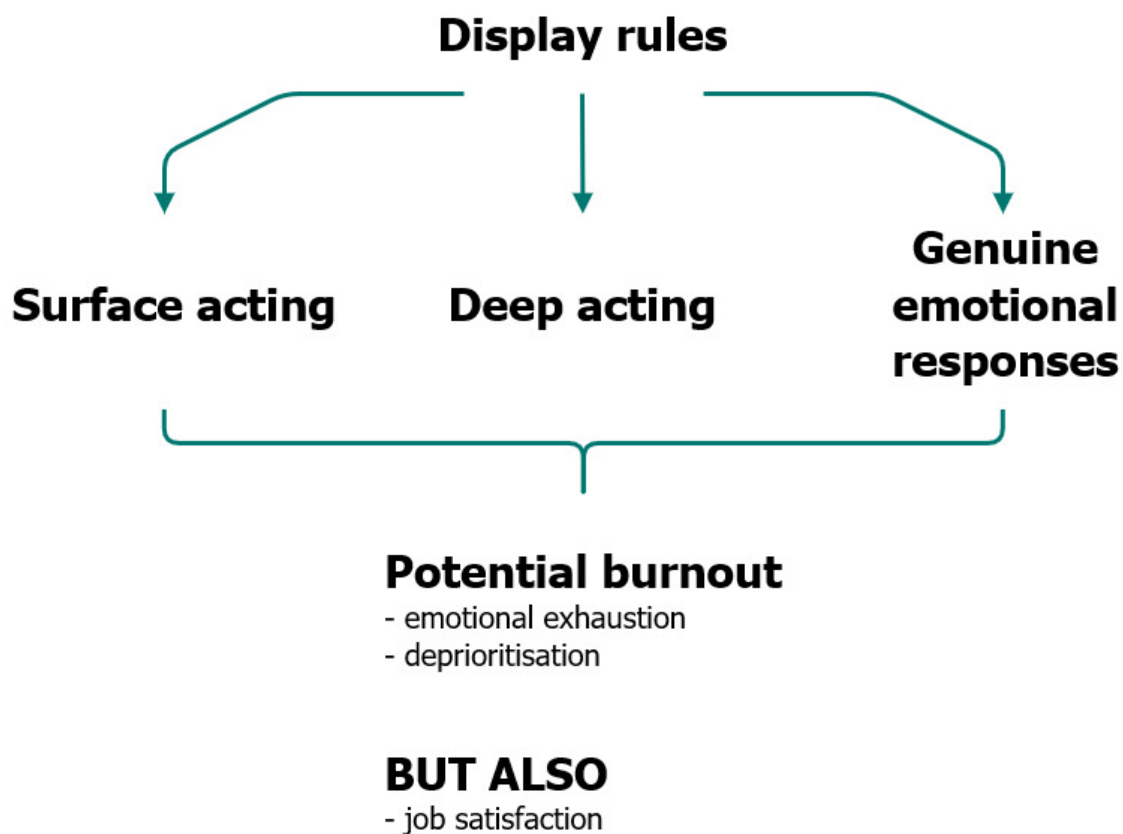
Probation workers have to perform emotional labour to do their job effectively because the use of emotions in their everyday work allows them to create better relationships with service users, assess and manage risk more effectively, encourage compliance and rehabilitate service users. However, there are some distinct consequences from the performance of emotional labour which need to be acknowledged, understood, responded to and prevented (Fowler et al., 2017). This is especially the case because a common theme across our interviews was the prevalence of emotional suppression – or surface acting.

There is a body of evidence which shows that surface acting is correlated with a greater risk of burnout and comprises both emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Jeung et al., 2018; Wharton and Erickson, 1993). There is some evidence to suggest that deep acting results in less burnout, but still presents a risk. Other factors linked to burnout are: working long hours, working shifts, having less sleep and feeling undervalued by one's organisation. Whilst most probation workers do not work shifts, some do (for example, those working in Approved Premises) and many work long hours. To date

there has been no systematic study of the link between surface/deep acting or other work conditions and burnout in probation but we are currently undertaking research which seeks to do that.

Nonetheless, the data from our original study suggests that surface acting is prevalent in probation work. Thus, when practitioners spoke to us about probation work being 'relentless', how probation work spills over in to their personal lives leading to them becoming more suspicious, parenting in different ways and changing their personal routines, it is possible that we were actually being told that they were suffering from some form of burnout (Phillips et al., 2016; Westaby et al., 2016)

We should remember that things are not all bad. Whilst jobs requiring high levels of emotional labour can be harmful to staff wellbeing, they can also bring high levels of job satisfaction. It is probably no coincidence that popular vocations such as nursing, medicine, teaching and social work all require high levels of emotional labour: people are willing to take the risk of burnout because these jobs are considered worth it.



### 2.3 How should organisations support staff?

Although there is – as yet – no definitive evidence about the strength of the relationship between probation work, emotional labour and burnout, it is reasonable to assume that such a relationship does exist. Considering emotional labour plays a part in effective practice, it is incumbent upon employers to look after their staff in the course of their day to day work. If we look beyond the field of probation, there are certain activities which employers can undertake to ameliorate the risk of emotional labour related burnout and low staff wellbeing. There is a role for individualistic approaches such as encouraging staff to practise mindfulness and making the workforce more 'resilient' so that they can cope with the immediate day-to-day pressures of probation work.

However, the most effective measures will be ones which change the conditions under which probation practitioners work. Much of this will come down to resources: more staff would result in lower caseloads and so fewer hours worked. Lower caseloads would enable staff to build more genuine relationships with their service users which, in turn, would lead to greater potential for deep acting over surface acting.

When organisations make the emotional demands of a job more explicit, people can cope better. Not knowing what emotional displays are appropriate adds stress and increases the risk of 'getting it wrong'. By providing better training in dealing with emotional labour and having more open conversations about what emotion skills are needed, staff will be able to perform emotional labour in less harmful ways. Probation providers might also work on recognising emotional labour as a productive endeavour rather than simply an ordinary and expected feature of the job. The National Probation Service is currently rolling out a new supervision and line management framework under the umbrella of SEEDS2. This includes a much greater focus on the emotional demands of probation work and includes provisions for line managers to support staff with this side of their work.



### 3. Conclusion

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Emotional labour is an inherent element of probation work. Moreover, effective probation work is dependent on the performance of emotional labour. However, with that comes potential adverse effects for probation staff. This is problematic because emotions have been neglected in policy, training and supervision arrangements for many years. It is positive to note that the NPS is developing a new framework for staff supervision which *should* reduce the risk of burnout amongst staff and make them more able to practice effectively. That said, resourcing, workloads and long hours remain pertinent issues which still need addressing.

We write this in the midst of the Coronavirus pandemic which will impact on the emotional labour demanded by probation officers. Emotional labour occurs in the context of face-to-face as well as voice-to-voice interactions. Many probation workers will be experienced in the performance of emotional labour in face-to-face contact to a much greater extent than voice-to-voice interactions which place different demands on workers. Probation providers need to bear this in mind and support staff with these new ways of working. The challenges are not only technical ones about how to supervise people, manage risk and build good relationships over the phone/at a distance. Such work will require new emotional skills and new ways of performing emotional labour in order to be effective. These new ways of working will place additional emotional demands on practitioners which will impact on their wellbeing. Emotional labour provides a useful analytic lens through which to identify and resolve such issues.

When we return to more normal times, our research will seek to identify what impact the new supervision and line management framework is having on staff wellbeing and the performance of emotional labour in probation. We will also identify which aspects of probation work – be that emotional labour, long hours, less sleep, high caseloads or length of time in the job – are most strongly correlated with burnout. What is clear is that the emotional demands of probation work need to be taken seriously because they are key to good probation work, supporting people subject to probation supervision and protecting victims.

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