Conflicting demands and emotional labour

Balancing and swapping at the front line of the welfare state

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Abstract

This article combines insights from the sociology of emotional labour with works on conflicting demands facing employees to analyse how front-line staff conduct emotional labour in contexts marked by multifaceted demands facing them. It demonstrates the usefulness of this combination through an analysis of group interviews with front-line staff within Danish job centres, who are currently explicitly instructed to display sincere belief in the job prospects of clients, while also representing a disciplining activation system marked by conditionality. The article contributes to existing literature through an elaboration of two concepts – 'balancing' and 'swapping' – describing forms of emotional labor conducted by front-line staff in a work setting characterized by conflicting demands. The former is about striking a balance between the wants of the client and the wants of the system while sustaining clients' feelings of motivation. The latter is about enabling oneself to encounter clients in ways which are personalized and informal, within the contours of a system marked by bureaucratic logics and language.

Keywords

Conflicting demands, employment services, frontline workers, street-level bureaucracy, emotional labour

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Introduction

This article combines conceptual insights from the sociology of emotional labour on the one hand and recent works on the various normative demands facing street-level workers on the other. It demonstrates the usefulness of the combination through an empirical analysis of emotional labour conducted by front-

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line staff employed within employment services in Denmark as they face a novel initiative: they are explicitly encouraged to *believe* in the labour market prospects of their vulnerable unemployed clients.

The article is based on two key premises, the first being that street-level work is not just a matter of acting in certain ways. It is also a matter of managing emotions in certain ways: feeling certain things in certain situations and helping clients to feel certain things in certain situations. This is a well-established point from scholarly work focusing on emotional labour (Bolton, 2000a; e.g. Mortensen & Needham, 2022). Hochschild applied the term to stress how the requirements of a large range of different professionals – from cashiers and salespeople through doctors, lawyers and day-care providers to psychiatrists, social workers and ministers – are not only about accomplishing certain physical or technical tasks. Rather, such professions involve emotional labour, in the sense that they 'require one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (Hochschild, 2015, 20). The flight attendant ought to smile like she means it when approaching passengers. The bill collector sometimes needs to distrust the debtor. And doctors are trained to show kindly, trusting concern for the patient (Hochschild, 2015).

The second premise is that doing street-level work involves navigation within a plurality of demands. Michael Lipsky noticed that street-level bureaucrats play a 'dual role' as 'the highest reaches of the welfare state' *and* 'the furthest extension of social control' (Lipsky, 2010). More recently, Zacka (2017) described how street-level workers are expected to behave in ways that simultaneously live up to the various normative demands of efficiency, fairness, responsivity and respect. Such demands often conflict. For instance, the expectation to treat claimants respectfully and in responsive ways (being attentive to the particularities of the claimant (Zacka, 2017; 100)) can easily collide with the demand for efficiency in the processing of cases (Brodkin, 2011; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023; Trappenburg et al., 2022). Public sector reforms have escalated processes of hybridization (Klenk & Reiter, 2019; Osborne, 2006; Sønderskov et al., 2022) and introduced novel mixes of respectively classical public administration, new public management

and new public governance (Breit et al., 2018; Christensen & Lægreid, 2011). Front-line staff, thus, navigate in between multifaceted mixtures of rules, benchmarks and values (Larsen & Nielsen, 2021) which sometimes pull them in opposite directions (Hansen, M. P. et al., 2022a). Several recent studies investigate how front-line staff operate in between multiple conflicting demands (Gjersøe et al., 2020; Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022; Nielsen & Andersen, forthcoming).

Hitherto, there has been a lack of empirical investigations analysing the multiple demands facing front-line workers from a perspective concerned with emotional labor. Doing so advances our understanding of the current challenges faced by street-level workers as they are expected to conduct emotional labour in settings marked by several, frequently conflicting, demands surrounding them (Gjersøe, 2022).

The article develops concepts and suggests points of reference for future research to look for. It does so by drawing on examples from a specific empirical case: focus group interviews with public servants at the front line of employment service deliverance in Denmark. Employment services may seem like an odd choice for an investigation of emotional labour amongst public officials. Existing studies of emotional labour tend to focus on highly care-intensive public workplaces where the production of authentic care is of paramount importance for the job. For instance, existing studies investigate how nurses, gynaecologists, midwives or residential care workers handle demands for providing authentic care to service users (Jupp, 2017; O'Connell & Downe, 2009; Ropes & de Boer, 2021; Tanner, 2020).

Compared to such contexts, the employment service is quite a different case. Disciplining the client plays a much more dominant role here (e.g. Fletcher & Wright, 2018). From the early 1990s and onwards, most welfare states have transformed public employment services in a direction towards activation and conditionality (Pultz et al., 2021). A new contract has been installed into social policy programmes, introducing different forms of activation requirements for recipients as a condition for receiving benefits (Lødemel & Trickey, 2001). However, some countries, one of which is Denmark, have recently witnessed a declared softening of such welfare conditionality – particularly for vulnerable groups of unemployed people

(Larsen & Caswell, 2022). Recent reforms and political discourses – well aligned with the ideals of new public governance (Torfing et al., 2019) - vouch for dignity in the processing of cases, trustful and empowering relations between caseworkers and clients, and increased co-creation where clients play an active role in the processing of cases (Nielsen & Monrad, 2023).

From a perspective concerned with emotional labour, one initiative in this apparent softening of welfare conditionality stands out as particularly interesting: caseworkers within Danish employment services are strongly encouraged to *believe* in the ability of their clients to find a job. This encouragement to have confidence in one's clients followed partly from the results of a longitudinal quantitative research project, which has made quite an impact on the Danish social policy agenda. One of the main findings of the research project was that the confidence of the caseworker in the job prospects of the vulnerable client is crucial for the client's chances of success (Rosholm et al., 2017; 2019).

Front-line workers are therefore strongly encouraged to display sincere confidence in the labour market chances of their vulnerable claimants, while processing their cases. In short, they must display sincere belief in vulnerable clients while they represent a system that is still based on quite strict conditionality thinking. For precisely these reasons, the case appears to be a proper choice for a further investigation of the intersection between emotional labour and multiple competing demands.

The article hints at what to look for in analyses of emotional labour in such ambiguous front-line settings. It develops a distinction between two important kinds of emotional labor, performed by frontline workers in ambiguous contexts: *balancing* and *swapping*. Balancing includes attempts to balance between the hopes and wishes of clients on one hand and the labor market-oriented ethos of the system on the other, while carefully sustaining clients' feelings of being motivated for pursuing the plan. *Swapping* includes attempts of the frontline worker to establish personalized and informal settings, characterized by a value of authenticity, when encountering clients (see Mortensen and Needham, 2022). Doing so in the context of an employment service system marked by bureaucratic logics and language, can prove quite a challenge.

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Part I. Emotional labour and conflicting normative demands

Numerous studies focusing on emotional labour have dug into the challenges, contradictions and dilemmas that arise, as employees are expected to produce authentic behaviour at the workplace. One of Hochschild's primary examples is flight attendants who are instructed to smile authentically (Hochschild, 2015). Tensions stemming from the attempted production of authentic behaviour in a variety of different workplaces have since been studied extensively (e.g. Fleming & Sturdy, 2009). Studies from the sex industry offer extreme case analyses of how workers strive to navigate between 'being one's true self' and maintaining forms of self-esteem (Benoit et al., 2018): escorts, offering a so-called 'authentic girlfriend experience' to clients, strive to produce authentic intimacy but run the risk of commodifying 'gestures, practices and forms of relationships previously pertaining to the private sphere' (Carbonero & Gómez Garrido, 2018). Turning to the world of street-level bureaucrats, requirements for authenticity have particularly been studied within care work. Numerous studies have depicted and discussed how, for instance, nurses, gynecologists, midwives and residential care workers handle demands for providing authentic care to service users (Jupp, 2017; O'Connell & Downe, 2009; Ropes & de Boer, 2021; Tanner, 2020). Being authentic or acting naturally, here, is often depicted as a demand for transferring competences from the private domestic sphere into the public world of work. Workers are to be loving and kind and possess a drive to care for people through the everyday routines of their work lives (Bolton, 2000b). A residential care home, for example, trains and encourages new recruits to behave towards residents 'as if they were family or close friends, stating that they must develop a genuinely close relationship with the resident' (Johnson, 2015).

Existing studies are full of skeptical remarks addressing attempts to produce authentic workplace behaviour. Some point out how the mere requirement for care risks leading to its instrumentalization: "standardized for mass consumption" (Herdman, 2004). In times of austerity and welfare state reductions, workers can be overwhelmed by heavy workloads and a normative pressure to provide equitable care for all (O'Connell & Downe, 2009). Some groups of employees break rules (Breslin & Wood, 2016) or manage

to withstand pressures and deliver more than what is professionally expected of them in order to empathize deeply with service users and help them through traumatizing situations (e.g. Bolton, 2000) . Deep emotional attachments between workers and service users can make it difficult for front-line workers to detach themselves from the care-giving role (Johnson, 2015) and empathetic concerns of front-line workers risk leading to compassion fatigue or instances of burnout (Ledoux, 2015; Ropes & de Boer, 2021; Zacka, 2017).

Thus, it is well-documented by existing research that performing authentic behavior in workplace settings is not an easy thing to do. Few studies, hitherto, focus on such emotional labor in contexts where frontline workers navigate in-between various normative expectations surrounding them: where they, e.g., are called upon to deliver authentic and informal behavior at one moment and to deliver depersonalized and formal behavior at the very next moment. An increasing number of studies, inspired particularly by street-level bureaucracy research, focus on such ambiguous dimensions of street-level work: the multiple demands facing front-line staff which tend to pull them in somewhat different directions (Hansen, M. P. et al., 2022a; Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022; Trappenburg et al., 2022; van Gestel et al., 2019). Zacka's work (2017) is of particular importance to this branch of research, particularly because of his emphasis on the *normative* and *multifaceted* nature of the expectations facing frontline workers: such expectations are not simply about *what* decisions frontline workers ought to make, but more profoundly about *how* they ought to inhabit their role (depicted by Zacka as a change of analytical focus from decisions towards dispositions): "how they think of themselves, how they understand their role, how they value different courses of action, how they perceive incoming clients, and how they interpret events" (Zacka 2017, 14). Even as front-line staff remain within the confines of a single role they might be surrounded by "various realms of expectations that promote different normative values and different rationales for action" (Zacka, 2017: 218). Recent empirical studies depict the implementation of policies as an ongoing puzzling work, as front-line staff strive to simultaneously realize a number of often conflicting demands. Some have shown how organizational factors – such as the prevailing form of managerialism – are decisive for the ways front-line

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workers inhabit their roles (Brodkin, 2011; McGann, 2023) while others emphasize how street-level bureaucrats de facto blend or balance care and enforcement in different ways when encountering clients (Gjersøe et al., 2020; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023; Trappenburg et al., 2022). Sometimes, front-line staff find themselves faced by contradictory double binds (Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022) and existing literatures depict a range of strategies pursued by front-line workers to deal with cross-pressures arising from conflicting demands (Breit et al., 2018; van Gestel et al., 2019). Two main forms of tensions are particularly evident in existing literature. First, a tension between service provision and regulation (Zacka, 2017): should the frontline worker first and foremost be a demanding, disciplining and strict enforcer of existing rules - or an enabling, helping and caring service provider (e.g. McGann, 2023; Nielsen et al., 2022; Trappenburg et al., 2022)? Second, a tension between bureaucratic distance to the client on one hand and personalized proximity on the other – e.g. depicted in the literature as tensions between standardization and individualization; between fairness and responsiveness; between formal and informal display rules or as a (de)coupling of the frontline worker and the bureaucratic organization (Hansen, L. S., 2021; Mortensen & Needham, 2022; Nordesjö et al., 2022; Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022).

Hitherto, few have sought to analyse the forms of emotional labour frontline workers are required to conduct as they strive to cope with those multifaceted demands. The added value of the article lies primarily in its attempt to combine insights from research on emotional labour with research on the multiple demands facing public officials to further our understanding of emotional labor in ambiguous work settings: What forms of emotional labor do frontline workers conduct as they cope with the cross-pressures stemming from multiple demands facing them?

Part II. Introducing the case: Have confidence in the labour market prospects of your clients!

During the spring of 2017, findings from a large quantitative longitudinal research project entered the social policy agenda in Denmark. The research project included data measuring almost 4,000 vulnerable claimants of social assistance and 300 caseworkers employed in job centres over a three-year period. The aim of the

project was to establish 'indicators for job readiness' and then measure the 'progress of vulnerable recipients during their unemployment period' according to those indicators[1].

One of the findings had a huge impact on the national employment and social policy agenda: that the confidence of a caseworker in a client's ability to acquire a job correlates with client chances of labour market integration. As depicted in an article headline from one of Denmark's largest newspapers: 'Caseworkers determine claimants' job chances. Pessimistic job centre caseworkers can destroy social assistance claimants' chances of getting a job[2].'

Resulting from those findings, and the social and employment policy debates that arose from them, caseworkers at the front line of welfare service deliverance have been strongly encouraged to develop *confident attitudes* and to *believe* that their vulnerable clients are able to get a job. They ought to have confidence in the job chances of claimants. The governmental Danish Agency for Labour Market and Recruitment (STAR) offers advice to municipalities on how to facilitate belief in clients' labour market future and consultancies facilitate workshops and produce teaching resources, all aimed at providing reflective tools that can heighten caseworkers' confidence in clients' job prospects[3].

The imperative of having confidence in claimants' job prospects can be said to represent a wider trend within public sector governance. As depicted in the preceding sections, recent reform waves have oriented themselves towards a softening of conditionality, often stressing values associated with the paradigm of new public governance: the aim is to produce relationships between front-line staff and claimants based on client participation, co-production and empowerment rather than on 'cold' encounters between impersonal bureaucrats on the one hand and clients on the other (Caswell & Larsen, 2021; Klenk & Reiter, 2019; Torfing et al., 2019).

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[1] What-affects-job-prospects.pdf (vaeksthusets-forskningscenter.dk)
[2] Headline and article from Jyllands-Posten 15.03.2017. It is translated from the original Danish headline: "Sagsbehandlere afgør lediges jobchancer. Negative sagsbehandlere på jobcentrene kan ødelægge kontanthjælpsmodtageres chancer for at få et arbejde."
[3] Sådan skaber du tillid til borgerens jobchance (vaeksthusets-kompetencecenter.dk)

The 'confidence turn' within Danish activation policies, encouraging front-line workers to cultivate their abilities to believe in the job prospects of vulnerable unemployed claimants, thereby seems to represent a more general phenomenon: numerous attempts have been made to soften conditionality by focusing more on empowerment and participation of claimants (Caswell & Larsen, 2021; Nielsen & Monrad, 2023). Complex law-stipulated demands and harsh conditionality are still operative. Clients must still be financially sanctioned if they do not comply with the demands facing them. But conditionality is supplemented by a range of novel initiatives, aiming for a heightening of client participation in the processing of their cases and for more informal worker-client encounters (Nielsen & Andersen, forthcoming). The case therefore stands out as a particularly fruitful opportunity to investigate emotional labor in ambiguous or hybrid work settings (Breit et al., 2018): How do front-line staff manage to *believe* in the job prospects of clients in an organization which bears the marks of disciplining policies and bureaucratic decisions making?

Part III

Data

The empirical material consists of transcripts from 9 group interviews with a total of 78 informants in five municipal job centres in Denmark (two interviews in four municipalities and one interview in the fifth municipality). The group interviews are a part of a much larger research project called LISES (Local Innovation in Social and Employment Services) made in a partnership between Aalborg University and job centres in several Danish municipalities. Participating job centres were determined through this already ongoing collaboration between researchers and practitioners. All focus group sessions were facilitated by the author and a fellow researcher.

A total of 76 of the 78 informants were street-level bureaucrats – who had considerable discretion and experienced frequent encounters with clients as part of their job description (Lipsky, 2010) – and functioned as caseworkers, mentors for clients or counsellors. The remaining two were team managers, who both participated in the same interview. Focus groups function particularly well as a research tool for

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understanding shared perceptions of the normative expectations informants encounter, the dilemmas they face and different ways they think they *ought* to handle such dilemmas (see Halkier, 2015). In contrast, experiences that are believed to differ in a negative way from the norms of the group or that are deemed to be intimate or taboo are likely to be excluded from the focus group conversations. The material is therefore likely to suffer from social desirability bias, causing a potential under-reporting of narratives perceived by colleagues as unprofessional (e.g. descriptions of inappropriate treatment of clients or non-compliance with rules) as well as an under-reporting of narratives that would undermine informants' professional ethos in front of colleagues (e.g. very personal descriptions of despair and anger). I followed "standard" techniques to limit such forms of bias (Bergen & Labonté, 2020) thus striving to establish a rapport with the participants (many of whom have had several encounters with the research team). Yet still, the empirical material is first and foremost used to capture widely shared and accepted perceptions, dilemmas and action strategies amongst the interviewed front-line employees.

All participants were provided with information on the main topics of the conversation and on data protection and their rights in this regard. All participants gave consent to participate in the study, and the data collection and analysis followed national and university guidelines on ethics and data protection.

The interviews all lasted for around two hours in total and followed a similar structure. Facilitators would present two topics to be discussed and for each interview one of those two was 'how to display confidence in the labour market prospects of vulnerable clients'. When introducing the topic, we would begin with a short (around five minutes long) presentation performed by the research team. During this, we would briefly go through the results from the longitudinal research project (described in Part II) and ask informants when they experience successes and failures as they strive to believe in the prospects of their vulnerable clients. We would ask follow-up questions related to the experiences provided by participants, particularly about dilemmas faced by informants and ways to navigate such dilemmas.

Methods

In a prior publication (Nielsen & Monrad, 2023) I analyzed the same data material with a co-author, from a perspective focusing on frontline workers' experiences of cross-pressures as they strive for further involvement of claimants. We concluded that informants particularly face two major cross-pressures: the first between a demand for legality -they *must* adhere to detailed rules- and a demand for authenticity. The second arises between realism –clients' plans for their future ought to be plausible from the perspective of the employee– and resonance in the sense that future plans ought to resonate with clients. The analysis presented in this article builds on this foregoing work, as it unfolds and conceptualizes main forms of emotional labor conducted by frontline workers to cope with such cross-pressures. I systematically re-coded the material in NVivo. In an initial coding round, I highlighted all depictions of how informants perform emotional labor to cope with multiple (sometimes conflicting) demands facing them.

This process led me to form the two main codes, depicting two different forms of emotional labor conducted by frontline workers as they strive to express confidence in the labor market prospects of clients in ambiguous settings: what I term balancing and swapping. Balancing is about keeping one's balance: authentic beliefs in the prospects of claimants must strike a balance between the wants of the client on one hand and the active labor market ethos of the system (valorizing labor market inclusion) on the other. Displaying authentic and motivational confidence in a claimant's dream of becoming, for instance, an astronaut most likely does not live up to such systemic demands for feasibility. Emotional labour, here, is about establishing plans which are labour market oriented and doable, while carefully maintaining clients' feelings of motivation. I coded all instances – where employees reflect upon how to maintain clients' feelings of motivation through compromises between clients' hopes and the job centre ethos – as *balancing*. The second form of emotional labor is what I term *swapping.* It refers to the work done by employees to regulate their 'level of involvement' (Zacka, 2017) in order to meet clients in ways which are depersonalized and informal. Through various forms of actions frontline workers attempt to swap from a depersonalized position marked by bureaucratic distance to clients to more informal and personalized

positions, marked by ease and closeness (Thévenot, 2014). Establishing such informal settings, marked by a value of authenticity (Mortensen and Needham, 2022), are paramount for caseworkers, as they strive to show confidence in the resources of clients: confidence in client resources can only have a positive effect *if* clients find such confidence to be trustworthy.

Thus, balancing work is about maintaining clients' feelings of motivation while establishing plans which (preferably) point towards labor market inclusion *and* are deemed to be feasible from the perspective of the system. Swapping work is about enabling oneself to encounter clients in ways, which are marked by proximity and informality, even if the organizational context is bureaucratic. The former, thus, is about balancing between the wants of the client and the ethos of the system, while the latter covers attempts to lean forward and establish settings marked by informality against a bureaucratic background.

Part IV. Balancing and swapping at the front line of the job centre

Balancing

As caseworkers display confidence in the future plans of a client, they are guided by the labour market-oriented ethos of the activation system: they cannot believe in just any future plans suggested by clients but only in plans they deem to be realistic from a systemic perspective – that is, plans that move the client towards labour market integration, if that is at all considered to be possible (Nielsen & Monrad, 2023). Numerous informants concurrently describe this as simply a concern for 'realism' when discussing future plans with clients: some clients' wishes for the future are denounced as 'unrealistic'. Importantly, their use of the word covers more than just the everyday understanding of whether or not a given plan is feasible for the client as such: it reflects a certain perspective on 'realism', defining it vis-à-vis labour market participation. From this perspective, realistic whishes for the future are feasible *and* labour market oriented, unrealistic ones are not. The challenge hereby faced by job centre employees resembles a reversed version of the challenge faced by the flight attendants portrayed by Hochschild (2015), who are taught to smile unconditionally. The challenge encountering job centre employees has to do with

conditioning their enthusiasm, rather than with expressing unconditional enthusiasm: they are not to believe in any hopes for the future clients might have, but to help clients establish plans that are deemed to be realistic and directed towards labor market inclusion, while maintaining clients' feelings of motivation for pursuing those plans:

> Everyone dreams of something or wants to be somewhere, so our task is to stay curious and ask about it, and to be realistic and clarify it with the client. If we make a sustainable plan it might succeed [informant, group 5]

Whereas a majority of clients tend to have plans for the future which are deemed to be both feasible and labor market-oriented, most informants have occasionally experienced situations where the hopes of clients did not match the ethos of the system. The difficult task in such cases is to guide clients towards altering their plans so that they become labour market-oriented and feasible, without losing clients' feelings of motivation for pursuing those plans on the way. In numerous passages, informants depict this challenge and how they strive to solve it:

> What I usually do is that I ask [the client]: 'what do you like about the job you fancy?' Then I try to divide that particular job into the different elements it contains and I tell them: 'Okay, this job you wish for will be difficult to achieve, but what elements of the job do you like in particular?' Then, you might be able to find some of those elements in another job function which the client had not considered [informant, group 1]

Informants emphasize the importance of not simply turning down clients' hopes and dreams for the future, even if they are not at all realistic. Doing so would instigate clients' feelings of insecurity:

> You cannot just turn down what they hope for and say: 'That is *so* unrealistic!' Because if you do so you alienate the client and the client loses his faith in himself [informant, group 1]

Thus, balancing between clients' feelings of motivation on one hand and demands for feasible plans with a clear labor market perspective on the other, can be a demanding form of emotional labor, where frontline workers must be constantly aware of clients' feelings of motivation. One strategy, described by some, is to provide the client ownership of the altered plan, by letting him or herself formulate a number of alternative ideas for future plans:

> Often, someone comes here and wishes to work as a dog walker or something like that. In such cases we have to say: 'Listen, (…) this is not really realistic.' But then they might mention something else, where we might tell them: 'Well that sounds like a really, really nice idea, because here there's lots of potential and I believe that you can succeed.' [informant, group 9]

Some clients, for example, having suffered mental or physical breakdowns, dream of returning to the routines of their former work lives and have a hard time accepting that it might not be quite realistic from a systemic point of view. Others do not see themselves on the labour market in the future but might not quality for a disability pension either. In all such cases, the front worker takes on a task of balancing, that is, of bringing the wants of the client and the wants of the system closer together without impeding client motivation for pursuing the established plans. In the following quote a caseworker describes what this task is about according to her:

> It is about offering them a different perspective. When we discuss labor market integration, it is about discussing what provides a realistic future development. If claimants initially cannot think of themselves as anything else than a future disability pensioner, applying for a job is a success, even if the job is just for a few hours per week! [informant, group 5]

Displaying authentic and motivational, yet conditional and goal-oriented, confidence in the prospects of clients bears with it the inherent risk of alienating clients from the plans that are established on their behalf. Informants recurrently emphasize the risk of discouraging and demotivating clients as they attempt

to help them making more feasible plans. One informant summarizes this problem and states that 'it is a huge dilemma, because we are trained to look at the claimant with glasses made out of employment service professionalism'. Some discuss how to balance gently between client feelings of enthusiasm and motivation on the one hand while retaining feasibility and a clear labour market-orientation on the other:

> For most of us, we don't want to kill a client's dream. But I think that we can help the client with becoming a bit more realistic, for instance by taking smaller steps and telling them how to move towards the goal. Hopefully, they realize at some point that they are unable to climb the ladder any further and then they must find another way or be content with where they are. Maybe they won't become a pedagogue but maybe they can become a childcare assistant instead [informant, group 2]

A range of similar examples occur in the transcripts (see Nielsen & Monrad, 2023). The dictum of 'believing in claimants' resources' thereby leads front-line workers to walk a tightrope as they strive to reconcile clients' hopes and wishes for the future with 'systemic' demands for feasibility and labor market orientation while carefully sustaining clients' feelings of motivation for pursuing the plan.

Swapping

Requirements for a different form of emotional labour arise as caseworkers strive to encounter clients in ways, which are somehow depersonalized and informal. Establishing such informal settings, marked by a value of authenticity, are paramount for caseworkers, as they strive to show confidence in the resources of clients. However, swapping to a position of informality in an employment service system marked by bureaucratic logics and language, is not an easy thing to do. A recurrent theme in the transcripts is with the challenges associated with enabling oneself to swap to such a position of informality.

Some explicitly mention how 'systemic language and logics' sometimes establish distances between them and claimants, which make it difficult for informants to engage with clients in informal and depersonalized ways. In the following quote, a caseworker working with claimants below the age of 30, describes a

potential conflict between formal bureaucratic rhetoric on one hand and the establishment of trustful

relations to clients on the other:

> With the formal categories and that stuff, we get caught in systemic rhetoric. Because they
> [clients] are called 'ready for education' but that's the only thing that they are definitely *not*
> – ready for education. We believe that they can become so but there is something in the
> formal names that trips us up [informant, group 2]

Part of their job is to act as loyal bureaucrats, who explain pertaining rules to clients and make sure such

rules are observed. However, it can prove quite a challenge to swap from the person-neutral position of a

bureaucrat to the more informal position required to display sincere confidence in the prospects of

claimants:

> First time you meet the client, you have to tell him or her that 'you must do this and that and
> you might be sanctioned financially and you also have this requirement to go to school'. And
> you just sit here with a young person who thinks that 'this is the last thing I think about right
> now, I don't even have a place to stay.' There is quite a distance between those things…
> [informant, group 3]

One particular challenge, associated with swapping from highly formal and de-personalized ways of

approaching the client towards informal and personalized ways of approaching the client, is that the latter

risks compromising the credibility of the former: clients might doubt the motives of a representative of a

rule-focused bureaucracy who act as if s/he want to befriend them. A manager, in the following quote,

describes this challenge, as clients walk out of personalized meetings with caseworkers but might be

confronted with the bureaucratic logics and language of 'the system' as soon as they open their mailboxes:

> There are inherent structural challenges built into the system (…) my colleague believes in
> these young persons, *really* makes them feel her belief in them, but then as they [the clients]
> are on their way out of the office, they can check their mail and find hundreds of pages sent

to them by us stating that 'yes, yes, we believe in you but if you don't do as you're told, then

the hammer drops. And by the way, you also have to work for 225 hours [referring to a rule

meaning that clients who do not work 225 hours within one year will be financially

sanctioned] and if you don't make that resumé and upload it to blah blah blah'. So, the

sincerity, credibility and authenticity can easily be destroyed by the system itself [informant,

group 6]

According to her, the formal bureaucratic rhetoric of the system can obstruct employees from convincingly

swapping to a position of informality. Expressed confidence in client resources might even – from the

viewpoint of claimants – come across as mere smokescreens designed to conceal extensive systemic

discipline (Nielsen et al., 2022).

Hochschild's distinction between "surface acting" and "deep acting" is useful at this point (Hochschild,

2015): Surface acting is about controlling one's appearance in order to produce the emotional state

demanded by the situation. Deep acting is about deeply altering one's inner feelings to genuinely

experience the emotions required by the situation (Hochschild, 2015). On the one hand, several

interviewed caseworkers describe how they *deeply* associate with the parts of their job, which require

them to believe in the future prospects of clients:

I know that [having confidence in the future prospects of other persons] is part of my job

description. But it is much easier if that is also who you are, as a person [informant, group 3]

They describe confidence in the prospect of claimants as something that actually grows within them. Some

even describe it as something which is shared by all co-workers:

I think it is really apparent at our office that we have this belief that there is room for

everyone on the labor market (…) We believe in the claimants that are assigned to us

[informant, group 4]

On the other hand, their expressions of confidence can easily be dismissed by clients as mere surface acting – a play to the gallery performed because they are required to do so. To prevent that from happening, some informants strive hard to enable themselves to encounter clients in highly proximate and informal ways: stripped of all things resembling a conventional bureaucracy. They put away pen and paper, 'never write anything down during the first 20 minutes of the meeting', 'throw away the manuscript' and speak naturally instead of using 'a professional accent that they [the client] would see through'. One says that 'they [clients] will resist it if they think that I just learned talking like this at a training course' and another states how you should avoid saying things in a 'mechanical way'; others speak of the importance of 'putting the system aside for a while': you ought to act as yourself and throw away 'the job centre dress'. In such cases, attempts of employees to swap to a position of informality has an affinity with what Hansen defines as 'decoupling' (Hansen, L. S., 2021): processes through which frontline workers strive to be decoupled from their bureaucratic role as decisions-makers and associated instead with an individual identity. One informant summarizes this aspiration for decoupling in the following manner:

> There are so many things we *have* to talk about, during every single meeting, where sometimes – now, I don't speak of every client now, I speak only of those who suffer from a lack of faith in themselves – it could be nice if you had a button you could push in order to say: 'We don't have to talk about anything specific, we can just talk in order to get to know each other.' Because, at the end of the day, I think that is what matters (…) Then 'the system' is sort of pushed to the side [informant, group 7]

All the examples above show how front-line workers strive hard to establish a temporary position of informal sincerity, rinsed of things resembling a conventional bureaucracy, from where they can display authentic confidence in clients. A position marked by informal behaviour rather than formal behaviour and personal involvement rather than withdrawal. By doing so, they attempt to swap, even if only temporarily, to a position of sincere emotional closeness. This is what I term *swapping*: the challenging work of enabling

oneself to lean forward and swap to positions of closeness and informality within the contours of a system marked by bureaucratic logics and language.

Part V: Conclusions

This article makes a number of contributions to existing literatures that strive to understand emotional labour *or* current dilemmas and coping strategies amongst public sector employees. *First*, analysing the intersection between numerous conflicting demands and emotional labour brings emotional labour to the fore of street-level analysis. Several studies have investigated complexity, but few have focused specifically on the emotional dimension of such complexity. Thus, numerous studies depict front-line workers who navigate conflicting demands – often depicted as demands for being both caring and enforcing (Gjersøe, 2022) and for delivering standardized and specialized services (Røhnebæk & Breit, 2022) – and document how a range of quite different street-level workers manage to do so. This article emphasizes the demanding *emotional* dimensions inherent in such practices: front-line workers are required to establish norms of emotional closeness with service users to realize current demands for co-created services but work in ambiguous contexts that might make the establishment of such emotional closeness very challenging (Hansen, M. P. et al., 2022b; Mortensen & Needham, 2022). The article demonstrates that demands facing public sector employees are not 'just' difficult to navigate since they require public officials to *do* things that seem mutually exclusive. Sometimes, public officials are required to induce feelings that seem mutually exclusive (or somewhat close to it) as well: as they are expected to alter the plans of clients while supporting clients' motivation for pursuing those plans or as they are expected to establish a relationship with the service user that is informal in an organization marked by formality.

Second, the article develops concepts that can work as fixpoints for future research. Specifically, it conceptualizes two forms of work, conducted by front-line workers in employment services, to cope with hardly compatible emotional demands facing them: work of *balancing* and work of *swapping*. Balancing is about helping clients to establish future plans, which live up to systemic demands for feasibility and labor

market integration, without losing clients' motivation for pursuing the plan. The challenge it poses to front-line workers resembles that of an egg-and-spoon race: you must hold your balance while carefully protecting something fragile (clients' feelings of motivation) from falling to the ground. Other groups of street-level bureaucrats might deal with related, yet different, forms of balancing work as they implement new ideas of co-creation and client participation. As also noted by van Gestel et al. as they analyse experiences of schoolteachers, medical doctors and local welfare office professionals, some front-line workers experience a tension between client involvement on one hand and "their traditional professional role of bearing a broader, collective responsibility for the public good" on the other (van Gestel et al., 2019). Thus, front-line workers of the welfare state, implementing ideas like co-creation, sometimes face a challenging task of reconciling the wants of the service user and the wants of the system without impeding service users' feelings of motivation.

Swapping refers to emotional labor conducted by informants as they strive to encounter clients in ways, which are somehow depersonalized and informal. In an organizational setting, marked by bureaucratic language and logics, doing so can be a demanding task. The concept of swapping bears an affinity to other concepts, describing attempts of frontline workers to relocate themselves on continuums ranging from emotional distance (formal and depersonalized behaviour) at one end to emotional closeness (informal and personalized behaviour) at the other (Mortensen & Needham, 2022). Zacka (2017), e.g., describes how frontline workers engage in different exercises of 'calibration' to regulate their level of involvement in client cases. Others note how clients sometimes draw very sharp distinctions between the system on the one hand and the individuals working for the system on the other – facilitating informal worker-client relationships even within the contours of a highly formal and bureaucratic system (Hansen, L. S., 2021; Nielsen et al., 2022). The added value of the present analysis comes with its distinct focus on the demanding emotional labour conducted by front-line workers as they strive to establish informality: the risk of being exposed as an imposter, who just believes in the human resources of clients since it is part of

the job, and the attempts of employees - through various detailed strategies – to establish a space for an informal worker-client meeting.

Lastly, it should be noted, that the article focuses strictly on ways in which front-line staff strive to believe in their clients in a bureaucratic setting. We know from existing studies on client experiences, that strategies and actions of frontline workers might come across in a very different light when viewed from the perspective of clients (Danneris & Herup Nielsen, 2018; Gjersøe & Leseth, 2021). Thus, important questions of how clients experience and evaluate the actions of their caseworkers are left unanswered by this article. Still, I hope to inspire other researchers to analyse the demanding emotional labour conducted at the front-line of the welfare state as employees strive to co-create with clients in an era of conditionality (Larsen & Caswell, 2022).

[Insert Figure 1 here]

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