Elucidating the 'dark side' and unintended consequences of front-line worker high employee engagement practices in the hospitality sector.

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Abstract

While there has been a wealth of studies on Employee Engagement (EE) within HRM, a paucity of research exists about extreme EE and its potential for unintended consequences and darker side. The view of EE as positive often goes unchallenged, reproducing an engagement/disengagement binary that posits engagement as a normative standard by which other behaviours are found wanting. Hospitality front line workers (FLWs') participated in both focus groups and semi- structured interviews, with a sample of 32. This paper challenges the extreme EE that pervades hospitality and examines EE's unintended consequences and impact on employees in and beyond work, including upon team members, home life and the organisation. Drawing on dynamic systems theory and Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological systems theory, we present a holistic framework that focuses on the interconnected ripple effects of extreme EE and argue that a focus on unintended consequences can disrupt unhelpful EE initiatives and lead to more authentic and sustainable engagement. Globally, the hospitality sector employs over 334 million people. This study underscores the futility of attempts to pursue extreme EE and calls for increased research with FLWs' to uncover more responsible, sustainable responses to engagement.

Keywords: extreme Employee Engagement (EE), darker side, disengagement, Front Line Worker (FLW), hospitality, ripple effect

'Knowledge is derived from the understanding of the whole and not that of the single parts' (Aristotle's Holism)

Introduction

EE is a 'hot topic', yet despite a proliferation of studies, scant attention has been paid to its darker side. Instead, many scholars and organisations have focused on a managerialist perspective of EE, dominant within hospitality, where high EE levels and associated emotional labour are expected and sought after.

Global Hospitality Sector

A significant source of employment globally, hospitality accounted for 10.6% of all jobs (334 million) in 2019 (WTTC, 2021), is worth $4,699.57 billion globally in 2023, set to rise to $5,816.66 billion in 2027 (Hospitality Global Market Report, 2023).

UK hospitality sector

In the UK hospitality is the third largest employer, vital to the economy (Hutton, 2022), so labour shortage and turnover are crucial to address. Hospitality vacancies are increasingly difficult to fill, with a 72% increase in vacancies compared to pre-pandemic levels (ONS, 2023) and 43% of businesses operating without necessary staffing levels (Cumming, 2023; Independent 2023).

Research aims

Limited research exists about the dark side or extreme EE (Bakker et al., 2011), and better understanding of FLW experiences could create more sustainable EE, and bridge the gap between EE and its unintended consequences. We do this by posing four questions. First, what is the role of (hospitality) context on driving expectations for high EE and subsequent high EL within hospitality? Second, what are the unintended consequences of this on the individual? Third, what are the darker side and unintended consequences upon team members and homelife? Lastly, what are the unintended consequences of the darker side of EE on organisations?

Employee Engagement

EE seeks 'vigour and dedication towards work and absorption in work activity' (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p.74), widely pursued in many sectors but fundamental in hospitality due to its customer-facing focus (George, 2011). In hospitality, we posit certain features combine to shape extreme EE: Emotional Labour (EL), service culture display norms, surface acting, work intensification manifest in anti-social hours and few breaks, creating a perfect recipe for extreme EE, foisted onto FLWs'.

The roots of EE lie in the grounded theory studies of psychologist William Kahn (1990) who considered both engagement and disengagement as psychological states. Since then, the popularity of EE has waxed and waned, with renewed current interest (Shuck et al.,2017[a]) but there remain various scholarly and

practitioner interpretations of EE. Thus, there remains limited research which consider EE as a 'multi-faceted phenomenon' (Stirpe et al., 2022) or investigated through the lens of a holistic ecosystem and context-based perspective. An emphasis on performance constructs of EE (Bowen, 2016) endures within hospitality (Liu, 2022).

We adopt a critical lens to the prevalent normative prescription of EE, with highly engaged staff synonymous with organisational success (Macey & Schneider, 2008), where performance and engagement interact to produce beneficial organisational results (Erum, Abid & Contreras, 2020). HRM has sought to embed EE interventions (Bailey et al., 2017), to gain competitive advantage (Albrecht et al., 2015) and Truss (2014) captures this trend towards a practitioner perspective. Sparrow (2014) cautions against correlation of EE with increased performance, and Baethge, Junker and Rigotti, (2021) contest the view of EE as positive, raising the question who gains most from EE? Furthermore, the 'bending' of EE to managerialist perspectives (Truss, et., al 2013, p.2664) supported by large quantitative surveys (Lee et al., 2017), has been met by calls for more qualitative approaches (Sun & Bunchapattanasakda, 2019). For many FLWs', demands for EE are addressed by an annual survey (Burnett & Lisk, 2019) a measurement that assumes EE is static and non-situational (Byrne, Peters & Weston, 2016). In contrast, this study posits EE as dynamic, multi-faceted, and influenced by context and culture (Lockwood, 2007).

Indeed, current research has in part returned to the roots of Kahn (1990) and the significance of context and micro to macro levels of analysis. Sambrook's (2021) 'HR/pluralist framework for engagement' examines the life cycle of engagement through an employee based multilevel approach. Davis et al., (2023a) too considers the complexities of EE and the internal micro and external macro influences. We extend these through a focus on the significance of sector and organisations in driving EE norms and standards, the interplay and contextual nature of EE on FLWs' and stakeholders to elucidate the darker side, its unintended consequences and bidirectionality of impacts.

Emotional Labour and Surface Acting

High EE in turn drives emotional labour, through 'publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild (1983, p,7). Whilst extant literature has studied the prevalence of emotional labour within hospitality, it remains under researched (Ortiz-Bonnin and Garcia-Buades, 2023). EL arises from the need for employees to don the customer service-facing mask, repressing emotions to conform to the display norms defined by the hospitality sector. In doing so FLWs' adopt emotion regulation strategies exhibited through surface acting (SA) or deep acting (DA) (Correia et al, 2022). SA involves concealment and feigning felt emotions, whereas with DA, emotions are 'in line with the emotions required by the organization' (Lu et al., 2019 p.151.)

The ripple effects of high EE, EL and SA may extend beyond work for FLWs', too emotionally drained to participate in family time, leading to work family tension

(Sonnentag and Fritz, 2015.) Mauno et al's., (2023) review of literature, identified various adverse effects on physical and mental health, work-family tension and significantly, work engagement.

Theoretical Basis

Unintended consequences

Inspired by Merton's (1936) unintended consequences of organised action, represented below in figure 1, we posit increased awareness and anticipation of these in relation to high EE within hospitality will permit preventative actions and moderators. Walsh et al, (2019, p3419) reminds us, whilst unintended consequences are 'inevitable; the question is, what can we do to manage them responsibly?'.

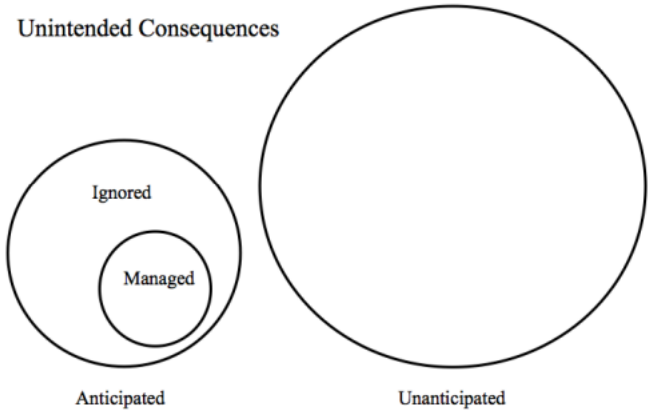

Figure 1. Unintended consequences can be either anticipated or unanticipated, and anticipated consequences can be either ignored or managed appropriately.

Systems theory

We view EE through a holistic approach (Capra, 1997) and initially draw on systems theory, originating from Katz & Kahn (1966) represented by an input-throughput-output model depicting interactions between an organisation and its environment, as shown in Figure 2 below.

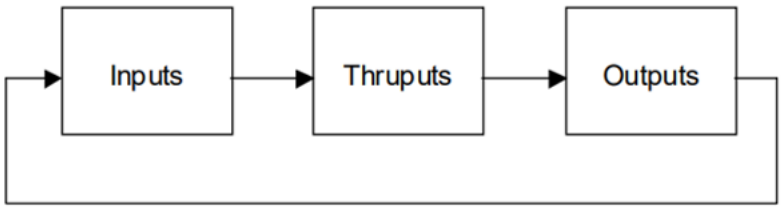

Figure 2: Organisational open systems theory (Katz & Kahn, 1966).

Inspired by the interconnectivity symbolised, we draw on contemporary system dynamics approach, useful to frame and model 'relationships between variables as well as simulation of behaviour' (Walsh, 2022, p3415), apt for elucidating the unintended consequences of high EE and possible moderating factors.

Ecological systems theory

In support of an approach that reflects systems as dynamic, lies Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, with its origins in Darwinian (1859) acknowledgment of interconnectedness between organisms and environment. Originally renowned for modelling child development, Bronfenbrenner's model, as shown in figure 3, consists of concentric circles with the individual in the centre. He identified five influences upon individuals: inner most or Micro (individual's immediate setting), encircled by the Meso (home and work), followed by Exosystems (social structures) and then Macrosystem (political, cultural and economic), later adding the chronosystem to represent the concept of time in the outer most circle. This creates a holistic model inclusive of Process, Person, Context and Time as depicted in figure 3.

We use Bronfenbrenner's theory with its emphasis on interconnectedness, bi-directionality and reciprocity as a loose framework to capture the multi-dimensional levels of EE and interrelationships between stakeholders and to highlight the significance of the hospitality context on EE, its unintended consequences and 'dark side'.

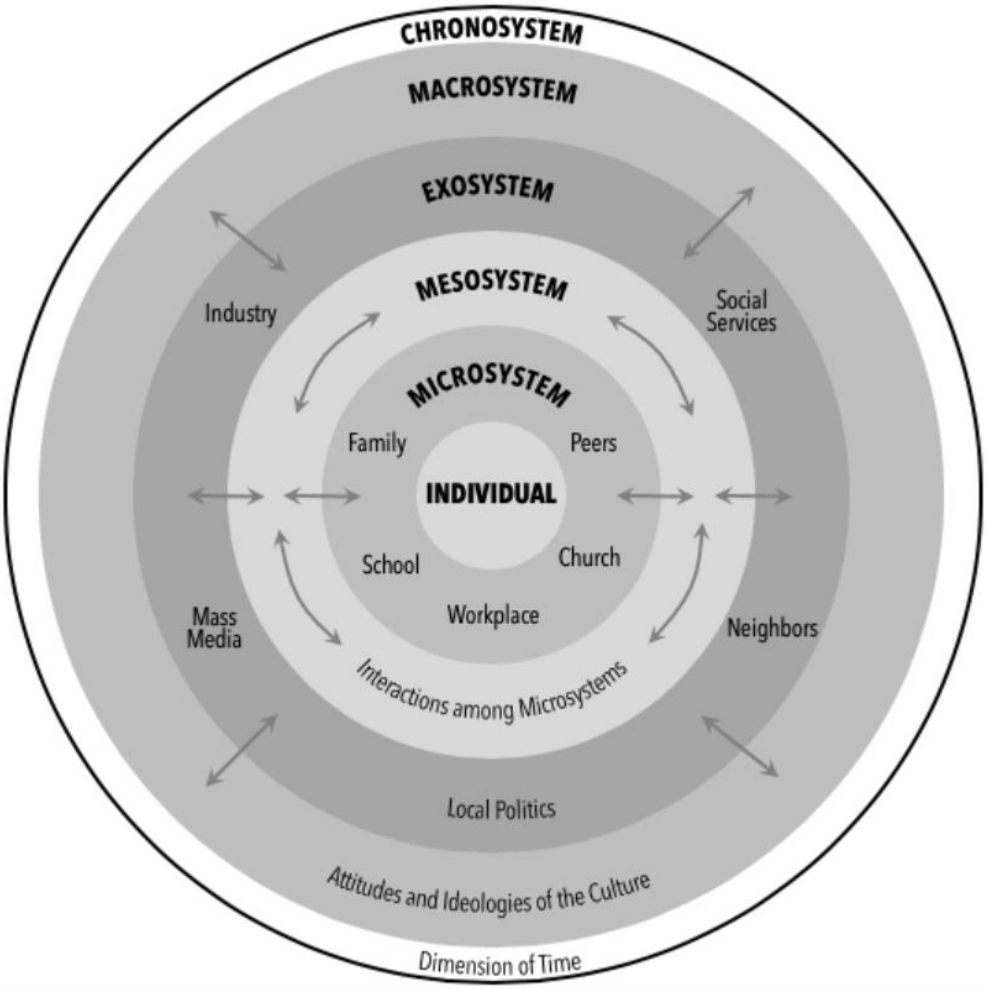

Figure 3 Bronfenbrenner's – Bio-ecological systems theory (Davis and Francis, 2023[b]).

Methodology

An interpretative lens was adopted, with the research strategy based on qualitative methods supported by the authors' ontological and epistemological stance (Hussey, 2020), to capture participants experiences of complex social processes such as EE (Padgett, 2017). Brandhorst et., al (2023) argue a contemporary grounded theory and Charmazian (2008) approach is suitable for a post covid, volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world of work to give a voice to the marginalised and for 'creating conceptual frameworks or theories through building inductive analysis from the data' (p.187).

Sampling

Interviews were based on purposeful, heterogeneous sampling as participants hold similar competences, experiences, and backgrounds (Creswell, 2016). All participants were FLWs' in hotels in one of three roles: receptionist, bar worker or room attendant and were between 20 – 30 years old, with a mix of nationalities, although predominantly white British females (24).

Data collection

Conducted prior to the Covid 19 pandemic and during the first lockdown, access to participants was achieved through the authors' professional networks. After a reminder email at one of the author's workplaces, a focus group consisting of 20 FLW's was conducted online via zoom, lasting two hours, designed as an informal participant-led conversation about experiences of EE. Following this, 14 one to one semi-structured interviews were conducted via zoom, lasting between 20 to 30 minutes. This snowballed into the referral of 6 new participants, who were interviewed on zoom for between 20-30 minutes.

All interviews were audio recorded to preserve all collected data, and since no visual recording took place, note taking of non-verbal reactions occurred. Participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and given pseudonyms for confidentiality (Gray et al., 2020). Data was collected until we reached data saturation (Saunders et al., 2016).

Data Analysis

Coding was conducted manually, with open coding used first to draw a bigger picture of the tendencies and dominant categories (Creswell, 2016) followed by axial coding (Hair et al., 2019). Data collected from the focus group transcript was scrutinised to identify commonalities and distinctions, analysed line by line, with key words and phrases pulled out and highlighted. Memoing occurred throughout with researcher questions, thoughts, and hunches about the data written by hand on post it notes, titled, and placed onto flip charts and notebooks. This provided an overarching picture and allowed us to reveal emergent concepts.

It is recognised that values impact the research process, therefore reflexivity has been used to avoid bias, and encouraged the authors' criticality about their preconceptions by recording field notes on personal feelings (Guba, 1981).

Results

<u>EE and hospitality organisational expectations, culture, and norms</u>

RQ1: Firstly, what is the role of (hospitality) context on driving expectations for high EE and subsequent high EL within hospitality organisations?

Sectoral and cultural norms of expectancy for high EE in hospitality, with customer facing interactions and quality of service interactions were viewed to garner competitive advantage was evident. For example, *'it's all about the company reputation … smile, smile, smile'[P8], and this* focus on expectancy to sustain the quality of impression projected, manifest in emotional labour.

<u>Emotional labour, surface acting and EE wellbeing as unintended consequences of high EE</u>

Social and emotional effects of *'forced'* [2] and *'relentless'* [8]expectations around EE dominated findings, and the negative ripple effects to FLWs' described as

'exhausting'. This gave rise to emotional labour and surface acting, with FLWs' feeling like they were '*overworked'* [13] by '*never ending'* [13]demands, combined with the toll of acting the part, described as, '*playing the game' [1, 7, 10]*, '*being fake'* [13]and '*phoney*' [1].

High EE expectations around service display norms of behaviour and appearance fostered surface acting for many, perhaps as a coping mechanism. This recurred frequently in the focus group and subsequent interviews, highlighted by P19.

> *'acting the part is key, the customer is the most important thing - it's not sustainable. You're always on show Mrs/Mr happy.'*

<u>FLW's - adverse physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing as unintended consequences of high EE</u>

RQ2: Second what are the unintended consequences of this and darker side effects of high EE on the individual?

The impact of extreme EE on wellbeing was mentioned frequently, with FLWs' left feeling '*stressed*' and '*hopeless*' [24]. High emotional labour and EE required of client facing roles depleted participants' energy levels with many stating they were '*exhausted*'[2, 13], '*knackered*' [24, 13] and '*battered*' [23]. Some reported feeling '*permanently anxious'* stating, '*I can't switch off' [multiple participants]*.

<u>Team relations – contagious dis-engagement as an unintended consequence of high EE</u>

RQ3: Third, what are the darker side and unintended consequences of high EE beyond the individual, upon team members and homelife?

The unintended consequences of high EE spread between team members and raised the issue of 'contagious disengagement'. This was discussed by P2, referring to other team members and in circumstances when they were, *'less engaged, I would find out that the more I surround myself by those people, the less engaged I am'.* Whilst others commented on team members propensity to feign engagement for example P21 stated,

> *'They play along … don't do the work but they are praised for it!! Instantly disengages me. Looking the part rather than doing the job'.*

<u>Work-home- life tension as an unintended consequence of high EE</u>

FLWs' interviewed through both the focus group and interviews perceived their organisations viewed them unfavourably if they did not meet staffing needs due to shortages, reflected in this quote by P5:

'You are seen as bad employee when you don't agree to, yet another night off cancelled.'

This results in several dark side unintended consequences. Firstly, FLWs' cancelling personal plans at short notice, '*your plans would be like completely*

destroyed.' [P5], reducing their opportunity to recover adequately, physically, and mentally from the demands of the job. Work- home life tension arising due to a lack of recovery time, provided many FLWs' with little energy to honour family or leisure-based pastimes, *'after many shifts I am too tired to do anything on my days off' [P8],* further emphasised by P14:

> *'It doesn't stop here you know - it's not good for your home life. More shifts, need the money, need family cover, stress!'*

Organisational resentment, reduced performance, poor retention and intention to leave as unintended consequences of high EE

RQ4: Lastly, what are the unintended consequences of the darker side of EE on organisations?

Ripple effects stemming from high EE created negative impacts for organisations, attributed to: pressure to perform, demanding customers and management, expectancy to '*achieve more'* (participant 2, 22, 34) and go '*above and beyond'* (Participant 17, 29, 33), and to emotional labour, as expressed by P4: *'I want an easier job that doesn't involve so much emotion'.* The culminated demands of the job created discontent in FLWs', as expressed by P24,

> *'Some days I feel like a human doing not a human being, and it makes me resentful'.*

Collectively, this increased FLWs' intention to leave, with P4 expressing, 'It's not good for... wanting to stay in the job' and P6, stating, *'never a quiet minute, waiting for the next unplanned thing, would love to quit'.* Corroborated by the comments of P22, referring to the expectations to take on and do more, *'retention is awful - put two and two together?'.*

These outcomes associated with reduced performance and increased readiness to quit negatively affect the organisation and exacerbate existing labour shortage issues.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study fills the gap in existing literature by further elucidating the dark side of EE. Findings extend prior conceptualisations of EE through a FLW perspective and identify unintended consequences of high EE, prevalent in hospitality and the bi-directional ripple effects of these and their impact on individuals, teams, home and organisations. Inspired by dynamic—systems theory, Merton's (1936) unintended consequences and the works of Bronfenbrenner's ecological (1979, 1988) and bio-ecological systems theory (1995, 2005, 2006) our holistic framework encompasses this dynamic nature of high EE in relation to multiple layers of context as depicted in figure 4 below.

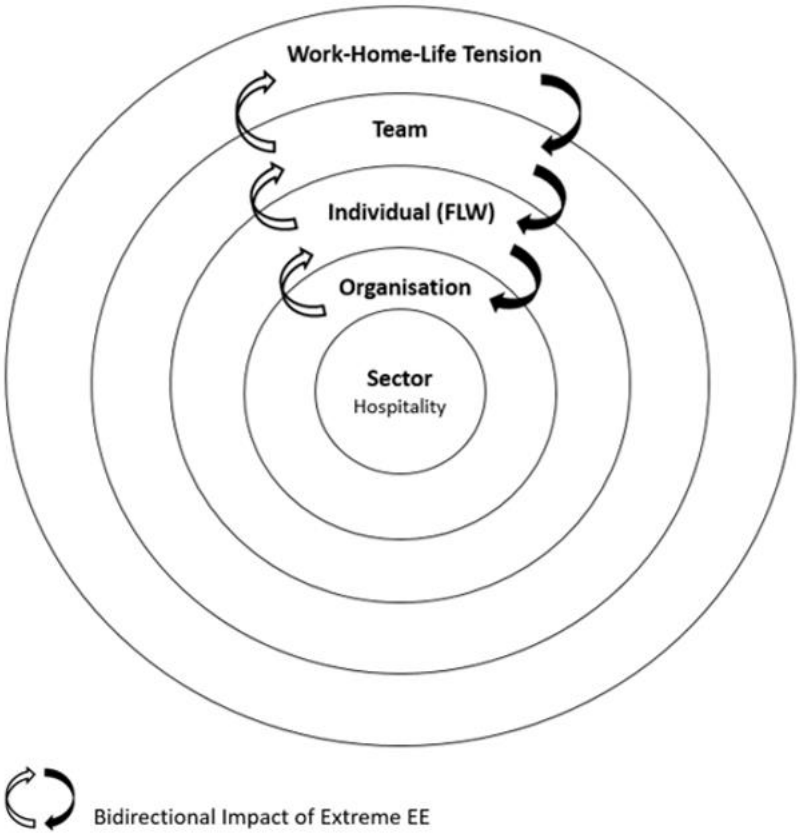

Figure 4: Ripple effect and bi-directional impact of extreme employee engagement

Sector

RQ1: Firstly, what is the role of (hospitality) context on driving expectations for high EE and subsequent high EL within hospitality organisations?

Our research identified influences originating from the sector, function as an 'input driver', (Katz and Kahn, 1966). Evident in our participants' perception, 'it's all about the company' and 'image' that create ripple effects that influence standards and expectations for high EE (Levene, 2015). This chimed with extant literature asserting the service sector has normed 'certain attitudes, appearance and cultural rules to elicit increased customer satisfaction' (Good & Cooper, 2016, p.450). Hospitality cultural norms are core to instigating organisational approach to EE, so sector is located centrally in our framework.

Organisation

Our findings attest to organisational expectancy for high EE as key to 'reputation' and the pre-requisite to 'smile, smile, smile', demonstrative of the felt need to continually display an outwardly happy disposition. This is in keeping with existing literature, stating sector and cultural dimensions of hospitality intensify pressures for FLWs' to be engaged physically and psychologically, with such pressures described as harsh (Shuck et., al 2017$_b$).

EE and effects on the individual FLW

RQ2: Second what are the unintended consequences of this and darker side effects of high EE on the individual?

Our participants referred to their behaviour in response to consistently high EE expectation as 'relentless' and 'acting the part' as being 'key'. This chimes with existing research related to high customer facing environments dependant on EE (Kang & Busser, 2018), to maintain the aesthetics of the 'smile factory' (Zhao & Ghilselli, 2016). High levels of EL, (Hochschild, 1983), serve to amplify "aesthetic labour" (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2005, pp.97-98) resulting in employees resorting to surface acting (Lewig & Dollard, 2003), emotion suppression (Jeung, Kim & Chang, 2018), portraying inauthentic behaviour and dissonance (Westaby et al., 2020), associated with negative outcomes for individuals and organisations (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017).

EE and effects on team

RQ3: Third, what are the darker side and unintended consequences of high EE beyond the individual, upon team members and homelife?

Moreover, our research also supported the presence of factors contributing to disengagement such as inequity, repetitive poorly paid work, physical work and long anti-social hours (Gongxing et al., 2023). Our results highlighted FLWs' were negatively impacted by team members who did little to contribute to work but instead were perceived as 'playing along', by looking highly engaged to superiors. This aligns with negative repercussions of EE impacting team members as disengaged employees transfer their emotions to others (Branham, 2005), described as emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo & Rapson, 1994).

EE and relationship to Homelife tension

Our research findings indicated the darker side segues into family life to create tension due to long hours and with participants expressing anger at last minute changes to work rotas disrupting plans outside work, 'your plans would like be completely destroyed' and of the spillover outside of work, 'It doesn't stop here...it's not good for your homelife'. Compounded by contextual influences on FLWs, seen as impacting home due to insufficient emotional and physical resources because they were, 'knackered' or 'exhausted' or 'unable to switch off' (Cottingham, Chapman & Erickson, 2020). As such work-home life tension stems from high engagement practices (Opie & Henn 2013).

EE and reciprocal effects on the organisation and sector

RQ4: Lastly, what are the unintended consequences of the darker side of EE on organisations?

Unintended consequences may trickle back to the organisation and findings confirm they negatively affect FLWs' home life that generate reciprocal detrimental impacts, reflected by participants declaring they 'would love to quit' and wanted an 'easier job,' associated with increased intention to leave. These negative rebound impacts of extreme EE led Masson et al., (2008) to question if they outweighed the benefits, and George (2011, p1) to warn that EE is not always 'a win-win'. These factors may signal a tipping point in the balance of power in favour of FLWs.

Moderators

Inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (2005) proximal processes and chronosystem, and in contrast to views of EE as one-off interventions, we suggest that EE interventions should occur regularly, as depicted by time in Figure 5 and includes moderators of a re-occurring nature that mediate the ripple effects of EE.

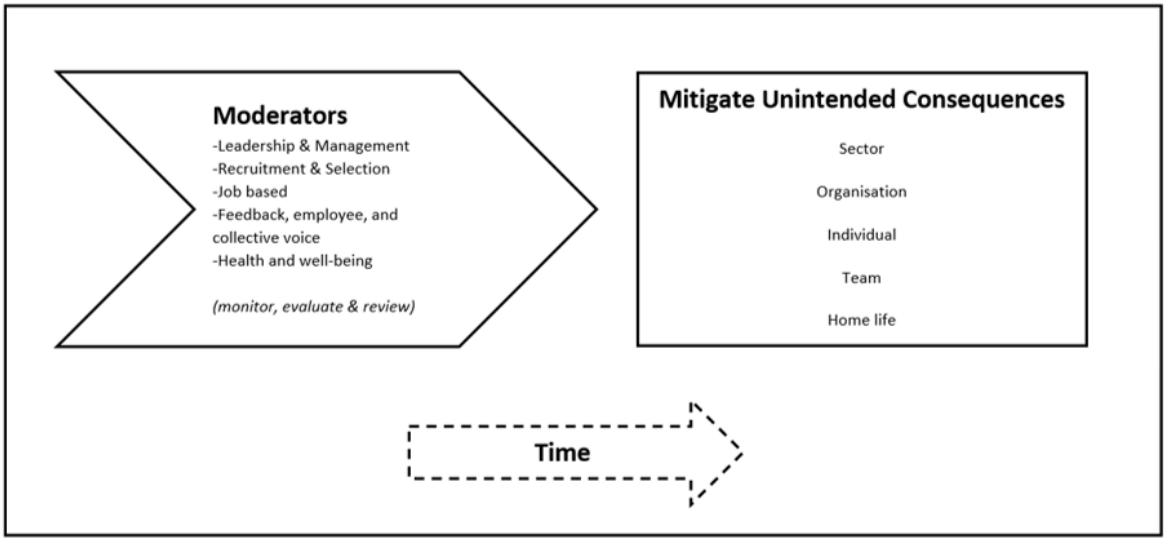

Figure 5: Moderators to mitigate extreme EE

To maximise the effectiveness of moderators, they need to be authentic and respectful of employees' boundaries. FLWs' need effective onboarding and training coupled with adequate resources to do their jobs (Putra et al., 2017). Qualitative monitoring processes embedded in a climate of psychological safety that support employee voice are useful (Bond, Tuckey & Dollard, 2010). Learning from FLW practice in call centres, embedding EE wellbeing tools and flexibility for decompression breaks built into daily workflow, (Johnson & Park, 2020), and family friendly policies may stimulate a more emotionally intelligent approach to EE (Grzywacz et al., 2007). Leaders trained to recognise employees' responses to high EE might intervene to alleviate negative consequences Rajah et al., (2011), with new approaches not merely embedded in policy but lived out in daily practice (Albrecht et al., 2015).

Theoretical contributions

This study discredits the traditionally accepted mutual gains construct of EE as beneficial for organisations and employees (Barik & Kochar, 2017; Jo et al.,2020) but often. Findings confirm that expectancy for highly engaged FLWs' often propagates feigned engagement leading to adverse physical and mental health, contagious disengagement among team members and spillover to homelife, as well as detrimental bi-directional impacts for the organisation and sector, the opposite of intended outcomes (De Zwart, 2015). In other words, expectation around EE is self-defeating, affirming prior assertions (Masson et al., 2008). Our framework and moderators extend current conceptualisations of EE and demonstrate the pervasiveness of extreme EE and posit how organisational problems of retention and labour shortages and individual problems of physical, emotional, and work-life tension be reduced.

Future research and limitations

To avoid problems associated with the dark side of EE, more research with FLWs should inform EE interventions. The imposition of EE interventions is unsustainable, leading to unintended negative consequences so more research into Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes within HRM interventions is called for. Future research must evolve and redirect the conversation about extreme EE to organisational culture, HRM practices and leadership.

The study, like all studies, has limitations. Concomitantly, it advances evidence that can nurture future research. A limited (and largely female) sample in one industry makes presenting general observations about the impact of EE interventions difficult. Further, the study does not consider distinctions between demographics, personality, cross culture, longevity of service, education level and nationality, just some of the characteristics that might influence exposure to and acceptance of EE. Notwithstanding these limitations, we attest that this study has significant implications for EE scholarship and practice.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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