

**Crisis Line Volunteers' Emotional Labour  
in Conversations with Chronic Problem versus Acute Crisis Callers**

**An event-sampling study at a German telephone helpline**

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*(excerpt with references)*

**ABSTRACT**

The concept of emotional labour was originally developed by Arlie Hochschild (1983/2012) to denote a person's conscious shaping of feelings and their display in social interaction to comply with the person's wishes and/or social rules. Emotional labour has traditionally been researched in the context of customer relationships and employee burnout, with increasing interest for its relevance in service relationships in general, including those in the mental health sector. An under-researched area is the emotional labour of volunteers in mental health services. Volunteers do not receive pay for their work but are not in a completely private relationship either and thus fall in-between the traditional distinction of paid service interactions versus private relationships. This study aims to fill the gap in current research by investigating the emotional labour of crisis line volunteers as it occurs in their conversations with callers to the service.

In a quantitative approach based on event-sampling, self-report questionnaire data from a convenience sample of 25 participants relating to a total of 1033 crisis line calls were collected over a period of six weeks. A novel questionnaire was developed that included emotional labour indicators such as the nature of emotions occurring, their intensity, and the degree to which shaping of emotions occurred. Questionnaire design was informed by findings from emotion research, the emotional labour paradigm, and psychoanalytical countertransference research.

The results from multiple repeated-measures analyses of variance support the idea that the concept of emotional labour is applicable to crisis line volunteer work. Furthermore, the data suggest that not only the type of call (chronic problem versus acute crisis), but also the so-called valence of emotions (positive or negative) have an effect on crisis line volunteers' emotional labour. It is argued that emotional labour of crisis line volunteers is shaped by perceptions of the caller and by social rules about appropriate display of emotions. Besides discussing the relevance of findings and methodological approach for emotional labour research, the practical implications for crisis line volunteer training will be outlined.

The study was conducted in Berlin, Germany. Thus, further use of the instrument and generalization of the findings to other countries will need to take cultural and contextual differences into account.

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## INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, crisis lines provide telephone support to people with a psychological problem, typically at no cost for the caller. They represent an important part of the mental health system due to their easy accessibility and often 24/7 availability. Some crisis lines have specialized into selected problem areas, for example on support concerning physical illness, rape, domestic violence, or child abuse, while others try to help in all problem domains. For their service, most crisis lines rely on volunteers whom they train in-house (Varah 1973; as cited in Hall & Schlosar, 1995).

Volunteer training and supervision thus represents a major area of crisis line organizations' internal activity, and volunteer turnover is a constant challenge for effective operation of the service. A major factor contributing to volunteers' decision to end their engagement is emotional burnout or 'compassion fatigue', an exhaustion of the ability to feel empathy with others. Consequently, an important task for volunteer training and supervision consists of preparing volunteers adequately for their role, helping them to develop counselling competence and to cope with the emotional demands of the crisis line volunteer role (Kinzel & Nanson, 2000; Beal 1994).

Emotional labour has been identified as an important factor contributing to burnout in "people work" job roles, and a broad field of research has developed around this concept (Mann, 2004; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). The term 'emotional labour' was originally coined by Arlie R. Hochschild (1983/2012) to denote the shaping of emotions and their display to make them comply to role expectations, for example when service workers remain friendly towards a loudly complaining customer. Hochschild reserved the term 'emotional labour' for emotion management in paid employment, whereas 'emotion work' denoted similar processes in a private context.

The analysis of emotional labour of volunteers in the mental health sector remains quite novel. Building on Hochschild's conceptual distinction, Thornton & Novak (2010) qualitatively explored 'emotion work' performed by volunteers in the mental health sector. They studied rape crisis counsellors' emotional responses to clients in distress and found that counsellors shaped their own emotions before, during and after their shift. In order to be more fully attentive to the emotional needs of the person seeking help, volunteers showed a tendency to defer their own emotions until after their service hours. These rape crisis counsellors entered into longer-term personal relationships with their callers, which is in contrast to typical crisis line volunteers who remain anonymous and engage with a client only for the duration of a call. Despite the difference, the concept of emotional labour was expected to be applicable to crisis line volunteers as well, because both types of volunteers act in a role on behalf of an organization to provide a personal service and thus perform "people work". But contrasting to Thornton & Novak (2010), this study uses the term 'emotional labour'

rather than 'emotion work' to emphasize that volunteers' performance is embedded in an organizational context and not private in nature, despite the lack of pay. To study crisis line volunteers' emotional labour, this research focused on volunteers' affective responses related to conversations with callers, and especially, whether the type of call (chronic problem or acute crisis) made a difference.

Theoretical interest in this particular aspect of the volunteer role was inspired by my personal experiences as a trainee crisis line volunteer. Regular callers, often called 'chronic callers', seem to be a widespread phenomenon in crisis line usage. These callers tend to use the crisis line several times per day and night over a period of months or even years (Kramer 1994). At the other end of a continuum are one-time callers who experience an acute moment of crisis during which they turn to the crisis line, but subsequently search support elsewhere. From a review of the literature on crisis helplines, I learned that many organizations impose strategies designed to limit chronic service use by restricting time and frequency of calls from any individual user (see for example Hall & Schlosar, 1995).

This and other research on crisis lines appeared to be dominated by an interest in caller characteristics and the effectiveness of the service, rather than the perspective of crisis line volunteers who interact with difficult callers. As part of a postgraduate course in ethnography, I conducted a qualitative pilot study to address this gap. I found that conversations with chronic callers who became abusive had the potential to cause intense negative affective responses including anger, humiliation and disgust. But my two interviewees had also developed an attitude of generosity towards people with chronic psychological problems, and had learned not to take insult as personally threatening.

Later as a volunteer, I experienced first-hand the variety of different conversational situations and a range of different affective responses to callers. Motivated by these experiences, I intended to build on the findings of my earlier qualitative research to assess in a more systematic way volunteers' emotional labour: The affective responses that occur during or after crisis line conversations, in how far these might be systematically related to the nature of the call (chronic problem or acute crisis), and the extent to which spontaneous affective responses are managed by volunteers in order to conform to role expectations. These aspects represent the focus of the research presented here. To this end, a quantitative research design based on an event-sampling approach was employed, asking crisis line volunteers to report their affective experiences pertaining to the emotional labour of each call on a structured questionnaire. The data were then analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics to capture the nature of crisis line volunteers' emotional labour and the impact of different call types.

The next chapter reviews relevant literature and discusses the sources that informed the conceptual and methodological approach of the current study. The subsequent chapter will discuss methodological details and procedure of the chosen approach, including ethical issues and how they were addressed, and the measures employed to assess volunteers' emotional labour. The results section presents the statistical findings which will subsequently be summarized and placed into the context of the existing body of knowledge on emotional labour. Concluding remarks summarize the scientific and practical significance of the research and its findings.

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