

**Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves?**

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Navigating emotion in HR work:

Caring for ourselves?

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand how Human Resource (HR) practitioners subjectively experience emotions in their working lives and how they navigate emotionally challenging work.

Design/Methodology/Approach - A narrative methodology and participant-led photo-elicitation methods were used with five HR practitioners from different sectors to uncover experiences of emotion in their work.

Findings – Participants describe themselves perceived by non-HR employees as non-emotional human beings, expected to ‘take’ emotional expression from others, but display little themselves. HR practitioners use emotion-focused coping strategies, both self and team-care, to cope with the emotionally challenging work inherent in their role.

Research limitations – As a pilot study of five participants, further research is needed to strengthen the findings, however the in-depth qualitative methods used provide rich insight into their working lives.

Practical implications – HR practitioners’ wellbeing should not be taken for granted or overlooked in organisations. Opportunities for informal networking with HR communities and training/coaching interventions could provide support on approaches to the emotional challenges faced.

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6 **Originality/Value** – This paper provides insight into how HR practitioners experience
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8 the challenges of their work, in contrast to mainstream research emphasising the
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10 impact of HRM policy and practices on employees and organisations. Attention is
11
12 drawn to the subjective experience of emotion, rather than the mainstream
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14 objectification, managerialisation and generalisation of emotion.
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19 **Introduction**

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21 Human Resource (HR) practitioners hold emotionally challenging roles in
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23 organisations. They are expected to handle difficult and sensitive people issues
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25 (Frost, 2003), yet little academic research considers the impact and influences of
26
27 performing the HR role on themselves or *how* they do this (O'Brien and Linehan,
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29 2014). This is surprising given the welfare roots of the role and increasing
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31 contemporary interest in organisational wellbeing (Kowalski and Loretto, 2017). In
32
33 addition, HR practitioners are not at the forefront of emotion research because they
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35 are not in 'front-facing' service roles nor deemed to face particularly intense
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37 emotional or life and death situations. Within the Human Resource Management
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39 (HRM) literature debates persist as to where HR is positioned in organisations,
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41 further complicated by a plethora of role typologies (Marchington and Wilkinson,
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43 2012), rather than considering the experiences of practitioners themselves. The
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45 contribution of this paper lies at the intersection of HRM and organization emotion
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47 literature, uncovering the emotional challenges HR practitioners face in their day-to-
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49 day working lives. The aim is to better understand participants' subjective
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51 experiences of emotions in HR work and how they navigate such work: an area
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53 under-explored to date.
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6 Legge (1978) was one of the first scholars to draw attention to the ambiguous nature
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8 of the 'Personnel' role over 40 years ago. She found personnel managers' work
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10 reactionary due to a lack of success criteria, duplication with line managers'
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12 responsibilities, and role holders viewed as representing both management and
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14 employees. The shift from what was an administrative 'Personnel' function to an
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16 increasing strategic HRM focus in the 1980s and 1990s, aligned HR practitioners'
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18 work with organisational goals, arguably at the expense of employee interests
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20 (Hope-Hailey *et al.*, 2005; Keegan and Francis, 2010). Contemporary academic
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22 research continues to debate the tension and challenges inherent in HR roles, such
23
24 as whether HR practitioners represent employee or organisational interests, what
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26 value they add as strategic business partners (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich and Brockbank,
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28 2005), and whether occupational tensions can be resolved (Cappelli, 2015;
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30 Sandholtz and Burrows, 2016; Sheehan *et al.*, 2016). More critical perspectives
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32 suggest being aligned to organisational goals has diminished the focus on 'the
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34 human' in HR work (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007; Johnsen and Gudmand-Høyer,
35
36 2010). Despite this, HRM theorizing is often in contrast to the reality of day-to-day
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38 working lives and few researchers consider HR practitioners' personal experiences,
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40 and even less their emotions. How does it feel to work as an HR practitioner? How
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42 do they subjectively experience and cope with the various emotional challenges they
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44 face?
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54 A narrative methodology underpinned the study and interviews based on a
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56 participant-led photo-elicitation method used to access emotional experiences. This
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58 is a participatory method, where photographs made by participants rather than the
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3 researcher stimulated discussion (Meyer *et al.*, 2013; Shortt and Warren, 2017) and
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5 generated narratives around participants' subjective experiences of emotions in HR
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7 work. Thematic narrative analysis was used to interpret discussions, uncovering
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9 unexpected narratives of self and team care, as participants acknowledged that
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11 apart from themselves, the only people they could rely on for support in the face of
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13 emotionally-draining work were HR peers or immediate family.
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19 This paper is structured as follows: Firstly literature is reviewed on organisational
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21 emotion and then connected with the HR role. Secondly, the methodology and
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23 methods used are justified, followed by an explanation of how the study was
24
25 conducted and interpreted. Findings are presented as three narrative themes of
26
27 difficult work, self-care and team care. The main implication is that, given the
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29 emotionally challenging nature of their work, those providing welfare/emotional
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31 support for others should not be overlooked.
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38 **Emotion perspectives**

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40 This section addresses three main threads: how emotions are theorized in the
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42 literature from a 'social perspective', the subjective experience of emotion, and
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44 approaches to navigating emotion.
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49 *A social approach to emotion in organisations*

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51 Emotions can be difficult to understand as "they are complex and intricate
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53 phenomena" (Burkitt, 2014, p. 15). Fineman (2003) groups emotion research into
54
55 four broad and differing perspectives - biological, psychodynamic, cognitive and
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57 social – which covers a range of disciplines, philosophical approaches and
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3 methodological applications. Studies taking essentialist perspectives, such as
4
5 psychodynamic approaches, are concerned with identifying, measuring and
6
7 investigating individual and biologically-set emotions (Fineman, 2005) where
8
9 emotions are distinct phenomena in themselves (Burkitt, 2014). Interpretive
10
11 perspectives, in which this study is located, are concerned with what sits 'outside'
12
13 individual emotion, for example generated through what is socially and/or
14
15 organisationally desired, (Fineman, 2005). Social perspectives foreground cultural
16
17 setting, feeling rules and scripts, language and social expectations (Fineman, 2003).
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19 Taking such an approach acknowledges that interactions with others cause emotions
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21 and the significance of emotion is evaluated in the context of relationships with
22
23 others and their cultural importance (Parkinson, 1996).
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31 In simple terms, the subjective experience of emotion can be explained as "how
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33 people say they feel", which is observable and becomes an objective indicator of
34
35 emotion (Scollon *et al.*, 2011, p. 854). However, from an interpretive perspective
36
37 experience is not detached, nor can it be studied as such. Experiencing emotion
38
39 "locates the person in the world of social action" i.e. emotion both "refers back to"
40
41 that person's experience and is experienced in relation to others and the specific
42
43 context of that experience (Denzin, 2007, p. 3). In addition, the subjective experience
44
45 of emotion varies between individuals and may be shared. This places importance
46
47 on the meanings individuals give to their experience, assuming that what we
48
49 experience as emotions are a sign of what is meaningful (Humphrey *et al.*, 2015).
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51 This study will not objectivise participants' emotions by categorising them into
52
53 universal groups like in psychological approaches to emotion (Turner, 2009),
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55 simplifying their meaning or experience. In adopting a subjectivist ontological
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3 positioning, meaning is located in everyday experiences and interactions between
4
5 people and their world (Cunliffe, 2011). It is not possible to generalize participants'
6
7 experiences and realities because they are situated in a context. Rather, the
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9 narratives shared by participants enable deeper understanding of their experiences,
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11 which can, and do, resonate with others.
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18 *Navigating emotion*

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20 Our experience of emotions can lead to efforts to alter the effects of that experience.
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22 Emotion regulation is defined as “the ways individuals influence the emotions they
23
24 have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions”
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26 (Gross, 1999, p. 557). Such a definition implies emotions need ‘managing’ (Burkitt,
27
28 2018). Alternatively, coping can be defined as, “an individual’s efforts to master
29
30 demands (conditions of harm, threat or challenge) that are appraised (or perceived)
31
32 as exceeding or taxing his or her resources” (Monat and Lazarus, 1991, p. 5). Such
33
34 efforts or coping mechanisms are suggested conscious acts, a way of protecting the
35
36 self from “the emotional consequences of adversity” (Cramer, 1998, p. 920). In other
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38 words not ‘regulating’ emotional expression or experience because an individual
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40 feels they should, but a means of coping with the stressor, or navigating that
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42 experience.
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50 Coping mechanisms tend to be grouped into two categories, problem-focused and
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52 emotion-focused. The former occurs where attempts are made to take constructive
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54 action in relation to a stressor, the latter is invoked where it is perceived the stressor
55
56 cannot be managed, and needs to be endured (Garnefski *et al.*, 2001). Problem-
57
58 focused strategies include; confronting the stressor, accepting responsibility and
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3 creating action plans, whereas emotion focused strategies include distancing and
4 avoidance, self-control such as by keeping feelings private, seeking social support
5 from others, and positive appraisal (Folkman *et al.*, 1986). Emotion-focused coping
6 therefore is a means of reducing emotional tension and/or 'managing' emotions
7 within the self rather than the external stressor (Carver *et al.*, 1989). This does not
8 however mean emotion-focused coping is always a solitary act. Seeking support
9 from others, such as sharing emotions with confidantes or with a team, might be
10 used for purposes such as "venting" or releasing emotions to others to gain their
11 empathy or moral support, or in a more practical way to gain advice (Carver *et al.*,
12 1989). Socially sharing negative emotions is suggested to lead to positive outcomes
13 for both individuals and team members, strengthening existing workplace
14 relationships (Yang and Kelly, 2015). Korczynski (2003) identified 'communities of
15 coping' where call centre workers collectively released workplace tensions, away
16 from the formality of management control.
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38 **Emotion in organisations and HR work**

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40 Though today emotions are seen to have a legitimate place in organisational life
41 (Lindgren *et al.*, 2014) they are still studied from a perspective of rationalisation and
42 control (Bolton, 2005). Hochschild's (1983) influential research highlighted how
43 organisations control emotions, where 'emotional labourers' display emotions on
44 demand, smile in customer interactions and demonstrate empathy towards angry
45 customers. Though her work challenged earlier thought privileging the rationalization
46 of emotion, it conversely demonstrated privileging the commodification of emotions
47 for commercial gain (McMurray and Ward, 2014). Researchers tended to then view
48 emotional expression in organisations as a phenomenon to be performed.
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3 Popularised theories such as emotional intelligence also suggest emotions can be
4 recognised and managed (Goleman, 1995), and positive organisational psychology
5 encourages a reframing of negative thinking to improve individual and organisational
6 performance (Fredrickson, 2003). Organisational actors face pressure to adhere to
7 organisational/cultural norms of emotional expression perceived 'organisationally
8 desirable' (Fineman, 2005). Therefore 'un-desirable' emotions are not acknowledged
9 or accepted as being part of day-to-day working lives.
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21 HR practitioners' work is emotionally-laden. They are expected to handle difficult
22 and sensitive people issues in an empathetic way (Frost, 2003), and be neutral fact-
23 finder when solving employee problems (Steers, 2009). They regularly engage in
24 emotionally challenging tasks impacting on employees' personal lives, such as
25 downsizing (Clair and Dufresne, 2004), disciplinaries (Jones and Saundry, 2012),
26 and bullying complaints (Cowan and Fox, 2015). They face emotions of employees
27 and line managers, the latter who may lack the skills to carry out disciplinary action,
28 requiring 'hand-holding' (Jones and Saundry, 2012) and extensive emotional
29 support. Although these studies consider the HR practitioner role in such tasks, their
30 emotional experience is not the focus.
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47 Academic research has considered the impact of handling emotions on other
48 occupations such as nursing (Bolton, 2000), healthcare professionals (Crego et al.,
49 2013), counsellors (Mann, 2004); notwithstanding the emotional labour literature
50 which extends into occupations beyond its service sector origins. Scholars taking an
51 emotional labour lens consider the commodification of emotions, i.e. their control by
52 organisations and the effects of such on 'emotional labourers' (Hochschild, 1983).
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3 Despite continuing popularity, some argue emotional labour has reached
4 methodological saturation (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015). In contrast to emotional
5 labour, this study highlights how HR practitioners subjectively experience emotion at
6 work. It will consider how HR practitioners feel about their work, what meanings they
7 give to that experience, what challenges they perceive in relation to their emotions,
8 and how they cope with them. This requires a reframing from the emotional labour
9 literature to uncover 'everyday' human emotions. In addition, empirical studies
10 exploring the emotional challenges of the HR role are sparse with a handful of
11 exceptions (see Hiillos, 2004; Kulik *et al.*, 2009; Metz *et al.*, 2014, O'Brien and
12 Linehan, 2014, 2018), which are summarized below.

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27 Hiillos (2004) identified five emotion-handling strategies used by HR managers, such
28 as adopting mediating and counselling roles, and/or distancing themselves from
29 employees' emotions. Her study restricts emotion to what HR managers considered
30 'crisis situations'. Two further studies focus specifically on the wellbeing effects on
31 HR practitioners as 'toxin handlers' taking a psychological framing, concluding that
32 'toxin handling' does not necessarily result in stress or emotional exhaustion (Kulik *et*
33 *al.*, 2009; Metz *et al.*, 2014). O'Brien and Linehan's (2014, 2018) empirical studies
34 investigate the emotional labour of HR managers using grounded theory
35 methodology. One significant finding is that HR managers are required to meet
36 emotion display rules to achieve tasks and support organisational relationships with
37 line managers. In contrast to 'front of house' employees they argue the management
38 of feeling is more complex due to the unscripted and autonomous nature of their
39 work. Though insightful in highlighting external expressions of emotions against the
40 emotional labour construct, their study emphasises how emotions are managed
41 through control of their external display/expression rather than how emotions are
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3 experienced. In doing so, they overlook the unconscious and relational dimensions
4 of emotion (Theodosius, 2006). HR practitioners' behaviours and emotional display
5 expectations are categorised into roles, objectivising their feelings. By contrast, the
6 present study provides a more in-depth, nuanced account of emotional experience
7 i.e. how participants subjectively experience emotions and the relationships between
8 people and the world around them. Having considered existing empirical work, the
9 next section explains the methodology used to better understand subjective
10 experience.
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24 **Methodology**

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26 Narratives are ways of communicating that enable us to know and interpret the world
27 (Cunliffe *et al.*, 2004) and therefore a narrative approach lends itself to an
28 interpretive perspective. In seeking to access and understand the emotional
29 experience of work, Boudens (2005) analysed narratives from secondary data
30 sources about experiences of work, resulting in rich pictures of what aspects of work
31 generate emotion. Intense emotional experiences were accessed indirectly through
32 figurative language (Boudens, 2005), like how stories expose our emotions, (Ulus
33 and Gabriel, 2016). This study aims to seek expressions of emotions in participants'
34 narratives that help account for how HR practitioners, as Fisher (1984) suggested,
35 justify, guide and make sense of their individual lives. A subjectivist positioning,
36 assumes those emotional experiences are subjectively constructed in an
37 organizational context. This means a focus on content - what is said, and its context,
38 in order to develop contextualised understandings of the narrative (O'Connor, 2000).
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3 Photo-elicitation, where a photograph is used as a prompt to elicit opinions in a
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5 research interview (Harper, 2002), is a method that can uncover otherwise hidden
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7 emotions (Höykinpuro and Ropo, 2014). Images can encourage talk when more
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9 than words are needed (Allen, 2015) as they, “mine deeper shafts into a different
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11 part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews” (Harper, 2002, p. 23).
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13 Acknowledged as enabling a more in-depth understanding of participants’ subjective
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15 experiences, participant-led photo-elicitation is based on photographs participants
16
17 themselves have generated that are then used to evoke discussion in an interview
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19 (Warren, 2018). There are challenges in encouraging participants to express ‘private’
20
21 emotional experiences through language alone (Sturdy, 2003; Wierzbicka, 2009).
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24 The words used to label emotions may not enable us to articulate the breadth of
25
26 emotions experienced. Photographs can overcome this by acting as visual prompts
27
28 that can extend the language and explanations available to participants, by surfacing
29
30 their taken-for-granted experiences: experiences that both participant and researcher
31
32 might otherwise overlook (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004). Exploring what might be perceived
33
34 as mundane encourages thinking beyond the image of the photograph (Slutskaia, *et*
35
36 *al.*, 2012; Shortt and Warren, 2012). Participants gain the distance necessary for
37
38 standing back and examining their own lives as they reflect on their experiences in a
39
40 way they have not done before (through discussion about photograph meaning).
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49 *The Study*

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51 The in-depth pilot study with five participants reported here was part of a larger
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53 research project on workplace emotional experience. The participants held
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55 organisational HR roles at different levels, ranging from HR Director, Manager and
56
57 Advisor, in a diverse range of sectors including Not-for-Profit (Hospice), Public
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3 (Further Education) and Private (Professional Services, Healthcare, and Transport).

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5 Participants volunteered through the researcher's personal network on LinkedIn.

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7 They were asked to bring up to 10 photographs which 'show how it feels to work in
8
9 HR'. Each participant took between 7-10 photographs. At interview the photographs
10
11 were discussed in the order taken by participants, to preserve any narrative
12
13 sequence. Interviews were unstructured, driven by the participant's explanation of
14
15 photograph meaning, each lasting between one to two hours. These in-depth
16
17 discussions about photograph meaning elicited rich data.
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24 *The interpretive process*

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26 On completion of the interviews, photographs and transcripts of interviews were
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28 interpreted together as one body of data by the sole researcher. The first stage of
29
30 analysis involved capturing image content or what the photograph was of (Edwards
31
32 and Hart, 2004). The photographs ranged from cups of tea, tissues, in-trays and
33
34 bins, to 'selfies', and photographs of hand drawings: stick people striking and an
35
36 island. However, what the photograph was of was very different to what the
37
38 photograph represented (Shortt and Warren, 2017). Participants stated the
39
40 photographs 'represented' their emotional experiences yet in isolation the objects
41
42 were meaningless (Edwards, 2002). As such, content-analysis of the photographs
43
44 was not conducted as doing so would abstract it from the context and personal
45
46 experience it represented. Photograph purpose was to elicit participants' views and
47
48 opinions about the topic; a dialogical approach (Meyer *et al.*, 2013). Secondly, the
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50 researcher noted how participants labelled the emotional experiences that the
51
52 images represented, then unpacked the subsequent narratives, highlighting quotes
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3 resonating with the topic of emotions in HR work followed by thematic narrative
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5 analysis.
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10 Thematic analysis enables identification of patterns in the narrative, what Smith
11 (2015, p. 216) suggests is a means of identifying, “the common theme(s) or thread(s)
12 in each story”. However, Smith cautions against further breaking down the narrative
13 into smaller codes to avoid fragmenting the narrative. The researcher therefore
14 aimed to “keep the ‘story’ intact” (Riessman, 2008). Within narrative, thematic
15 analysis prioritises content, ‘what’ is said, rather than analysing narrative structure or
16 ‘how’ the narrative is told (Maitlis, 2012). Theorizing occurs across the participants’
17 narratives, not solely in individual cases (Riessman, 2002).
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29 Common themes were identified in the content of each narrative and across the five
30 participants’ accounts. This interpretive process was not about quantifying the
31 number of occurrences of each theme, but highlighting “something important in
32 relation to the research question” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 82) and creating a
33 resonant narrative. Narratives of isolation and an inability to talk to others about their
34 work were important due to the confidential nature of the HR role. Participants faced
35 the difficult task of enacting work on behalf of the organisation, which had emotional
36 consequences for employees. Various coping strategies were deployed by the
37 participants to navigate their work. Across participants’ accounts, three common
38 themes were identified: 1. doing difficult emotionally-laden work which resulted in 2.
39 self-care and 3. team-care. Participants shared having to look after themselves as
40 no-one else would, using HR peers and/or their own line managers for support.
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57 Alongside generation of themes, the interpretive process demonstrated the
58 complexity of understanding emotional experience. Emotions were categorised in
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3 one way by the labels that participants gave each photograph. Yet when unpacked
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5 participants' narratives led to different emotions than those initially labelled, because
6
7 they were interwoven within lived experience. The labelling of the photograph with an
8
9 emotion was merely a 'way in' that revealed a more complex understanding of their
10
11 working lives. For example, one participant struggled to label an emotion when
12
13 describing his drawing of stick people on strike which represented 'conflict'. Unsure
14
15 of the emotion he stated 'frustration'. He elaborated, explaining how he and other
16
17 non-striking employees were required to cover for striking employees and he
18
19 experienced feelings of guilt, justifying his actions as, "the needs of the business so
20
21 I've kind of just put that front on really". In summary, emotions were not easily
22
23 labelled, and in line with the interpretivist stance of this study, have a multiplicity of
24
25 meanings.
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30 31 **Findings**

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33 Participants' narratives demonstrated a complex web of interconnecting emotions
34
35 and experiences. The three narrative themes also overlapped when discussing
36
37 photograph meaning. This is illustrated through narratives elicited from four
38
39 photographs; stress balls, a box of tissues, a drawing of an island and a team
40
41 photograph. The following four accounts were chosen from the rich data set as they
42
43 demonstrate thematically coherent examples of the narratives and resonated with
44
45 the researcher. All names are pseudonyms.
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50 51 *Account 1 – Feeling stressed and 'wonderful'*

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53 Alan is a sole HR Manager in the not-for-profit sector with 12 years' HR experience.
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55 One of his photographs was a bag of stress balls positioned on a copy of an HR
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57 magazine featuring a cover story about employment tribunal claims. Unlike the
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3 surface meaning of the image, a device to cope with a stressful situation, his
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5 narrative went deeper as he shared four separate narrative accounts, which stem
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7 from discussion about one photograph, expressing a range of emotion experiences.
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28 *Photograph 1 - "stress relief"*
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32 The first was triggered by explaining the meaning of the photograph. An employee
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34 had threatened an employment tribunal claim and he shared his recollected feelings
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36 in response,
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40 I think maybe we were looking at early conciliation stuff at the time and I
41 thought d'ya know actually I just need a stress ball, because I was so
42 frustrated with that [...] not with the early conciliation process but with the
43 potential claim. I think I took that quite personally... I am a little bit like that, it's
44 probably one of my faults, I'm, you're sort of, you do your best because you
45 try your best with people, to get the right outcome and do things in the right
46 way, when you get a knock back it can take you quite badly really, and I just,
47 yeah, that just hit a chord with me.
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51 He follows this with a second account of how he copes with such emotionally
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53 challenging work, articulating self-care,
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56 I've tried to rationalise things, logically and just sort of try and sort of have 5
57 minutes with myself, or I'll walk around the garden and just take a bit of time
58 just to compose and sometimes you come back from a particularly stressful
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3 meeting, you just need a minute...you just need to just blow off some steam
4 [...]. I've got very supportive colleagues you know, I'm quite close to the
5 Finance Manager because we deal with payroll a lot, so we quite often will
6 sort of use each other I suppose.
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9 The third account exposes the narrative theme of difficult work; illustrated through
10 implementing a sickness policy change, and the emotions expressed towards him,
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15 When I was here 3 months we started consultations to reduce sick pay. And
16 that I found really quite stressful because I'd never led on something like that
17 before, I'd always been part of the process, never the person that's done the
18 report, done the stats, told staff what was going to happen, gone through the
19 consultation period, took the venom that comes back to you.
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25 Alan is the recipient of employees' anger, experienced strongly as "venom" and
26 further described as "quite difficult to handle...it was definitely stressful". He ends
27 stating, "you just kind of pull through it and but I'm lucky I've got a supportive Director
28 and also very supportive CEO", a social means of coping (Carver *et al.*, 1989).
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35 His fourth account articulates positive experiences with employees, "getting people
36 back to work after things like mental health issues" stating, "the employees felt so
37 good they want to hug you". He describes his feelings in response, "that shows
38 you've done something right, through to supporting to getting things in place for
39 them. So that's wonderful".
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48 In summary, discussion about the meanings of the photograph elicited four separate
49 identifiable but interconnected experiences. All three narrative themes emerge from
50 explanation of photograph meaning, doing difficult work, both self and team-care.
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54 Self-care is illustrated elsewhere in his interview, when discussing a different
55 photograph's meaning, a cup of tea on his desk, where he describes the conscious
56 act of taking a break to "sit back and just have a minute [...]" and to be comforted by
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3 a cup of tea". He acknowledges the importance of looking after himself, "if I don't
4 look after myself there's no-one else that's gonna do that". Alan recalls a breadth of
5 emotional experiences, from feeling hurt, taking employee actions personally to,
6 "feeling wonderful". The complexity of emotional experience is illustrated through
7 their varying intensity, from experiencing "venom" to other "difficult to handle"
8 experiences. Different emotions are experienced simultaneously, for example feeling
9 both frustrated and hurt. These experiences and emotions were elicited through
10 discussion about a photograph of mundane objects.
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22 *Account 2 – Feeling unemotional*

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25 Anna, an HR Advisor in Education with 5 years' HR experience, discussed the
26 meaning of a photograph of a box of tissues. She works in a small HR team
27 alongside the HR Manager. Though on the surface it might seem an obvious choice
28 of image, that tissues are used to comfort upset employees, her explanation of
29 image meaning was unexpected,
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53 [insert photograph 2 about here]
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53 *Photograph 2 – "sometimes you just feel like you need a tissue"*

57 Researcher: why did you take that photo?
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3 Anna: I think sometimes for two sides, cos obviously you're dealing with other
4 people's emotions and sometimes a lot of the situations that you come across
5 are quite upsetting, so it can be that side of it, being there to support an
6 employee going through something difficult to advise and to comfort. Also I
7 think quite often it feels like other people don't think you're a person, and you
8 don't have *any* emotions...at all. So they feel like they can speak to you how
9 they want and behave towards you however they want. I think sometimes you
10 just feel like *you* need a tissue.
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14 She illustrated further,

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16 Like today I've been shouted at by two people. I think sometimes people can
17 be so incredibly rude to you and you're just expected to take what they've said
18 to you and never are you expected to say, 'don't speak to me like that' or you
19 know, 'if you'd like to come back to me when you're in a better frame of mind'.
20 No, you just have to kind of deal with their barrage of abuse at you and then
21 try and like smooth it over.
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25 The photograph represents Anna's perception that others fail to see her as a human
26 being and express emotions towards her such as anger that she experiences as
27 hurtful (needing a tissue in response). She describes an expectation to 'take' others'
28 emotions, i.e. remain neutral and not challenge back, even to a "barrage of abuse"
29 but neutralise the emotion or "smooth it over". Like a tissue, she absorbs strong
30 negative emotions from others. Her earlier discussion about photograph meaning
31 suggests that privately she might express her 'true' feelings as the tissues are used
32 to wipe away her own tears, a visual reveal of her private self-care. She perceives
33 no-one else would think to care for her.
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47 *Account 3 – Feeling "like Switzerland"?*

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50 Anna also made a drawing of an island which she photographed, describing its
51 meaning as illustrative of the difficult position HR practitioners hold trying to be
52 'neutral' parties,
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57 I think me and my boss would describe how we try to be at work. It's not a
58 great depiction of this cos that's just an island, I drew an island, but like
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3 Switzerland. So well, we say that's how we're supposed to be but I thought an
4 island is a nicer drawing. Because you've got to be impartial on both sides.
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14 [insert photograph 3 about here]
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26 *Photograph 3 – “trying to be an island”*
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30 The role expectation to hold confidential information led to feelings of isolation,
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33 I think like from an emotional point of view as a person, I think...trying to be
34 an island and be so that people can come to you for advice, know that it's
35 going to be confidential, trust in you for giving good advice but also trusting
36 you to be confidential...it can be quite isolating that's why I drew a little island
37 [...] it can be quite lonely, particularly as we're such a small department.
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40 Using positive reappraisal with her boss illustrated team care/social coping (Folkman
41 *et al.*, 1986), but Anna's perception was that they had no friends at work due to the
42 confidential nature of their work,
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48 We want to be good at our jobs, we want to do a good job, we want to be
49 positive, so to try and keep doing that in an environment that doesn't really
50 want that, can be...so it can be both, it can be 'right come on we're gonna,
51 let's not let this get to us, let's not let it get us down' and it's like 'we've got a
52 good way of working, we're gonna be positive, we're gonna make a
53 difference, we're gonna change things'. But then it can be like 'ooh we're on
54 our little island; we've got no friends'.
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56 Despite having each other, her final sentence suggests loneliness. Her perception is
57 of being 'outsiders' despite being organisational members.
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Account 4 – The “mindfulness mantelpiece”

Sarah is an HR Director in Professional Services with 10 HR staff. Her “support network” was her HR team, who created an informal social space,

So we decided to make a fireplace out of boxes, cos we’ve got a lot of space and a lot of walls, and they were a really creative bunch my team, so they actually started making bricks, and sticking them on And we now have the sofas around it. So we’ve taken all the Christmas decorations down but we’ve kept it because it’s quite nice to go and sit there occasionally and have a debrief. Which is nice. Time to talk [...]. We did quite a lot of mental health last year, because mental illness was our charity of the year [...] I think since then we’re all very much more sort of open to say, ‘hey, how are you doing?’ and checking in with people and things like that, which is nice. But yeah generally the team are great. They’re very supportive of each other, they have to be, and of me.

She brought to interview a photograph of a photograph which sits on the makeshift fireplace her team call “the mindfulness mantelpiece” (not reproduced here for reasons of anonymity). The photograph shows Sarah with her smiling team, wearing Christmas jumpers. Initially describing photograph meaning as pride in her team, her narrative is one of team-care where the HR team use this space as respite from difficult work because “they have to”. These last two accounts contrast emotional experience: the homeliness of the hearth and relating support versus the isolation represented by the island. This demonstrates the relational and contextual nature of the subjective experience of emotion.

Discussion and conclusion

This section sets out the relevance of the findings in relation to the emotional experiences of HR work, before concluding with some implications for organisations.

Participants selected photographs which elicited narratives surrounding their emotional experiences, signalling what is meaningful for them (Humphrey *et al.*,

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3 2015). Photographs of mundane objects visually revealed their personal feelings
4 about their experiences of work, and discussions about their meaning highlighted the
5 unconscious and relational dimensions of emotion (Theodosius, 2006). These
6 experiences are constructed in relation to the social and cultural context in which
7 they found themselves. For example, as HR manager leading consultations to
8 reduce 'sick pay', Alan found himself in unfamiliar territory, solely responsible for
9 implementation. He perceived himself, not the Directors that asked him to make the
10 changes, as the target of employees' angry responses, because they were not
11 present in employee consultations. Rather than assuming that HR tasks are
12 devolved to line managers, thereby removing emotional encounters from HR
13 practitioners' work (Renwick, 2003), in a small organisation this was his
14 responsibility. He accepted the task as something he had to "just kind of pull
15 through", failing to acknowledge that he sought emotional support from the
16 organisation's Directors who had set him the difficult task.

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36 In contrast to critical HRM scholars accusations that HR practitioners' alignment to
37 organisational goals has diminished their focus on the human (Bolton and Houlihan,
38 2007), participants' perceived other employees as treating them as non-emotional
39 human beings. They perceived themselves a face-less HR function, expected to
40 'take' emotional expression from others, but display little emotion themselves. Non-
41 HR employees were less conscious of expressing their feelings. Participants
42 articulated emotion-focused coping strategies, a sense of having to 'endure' the
43 stressor rather than take action to change the situation they found themselves in
44 (Garnefski *et al.*, 2001). For example, conscious self-care where they acknowledged
45 the need to "have five minutes with myself", or have a cup of tea, signalling a need
46 for individual or social respite (Stroebeak, 2013). These coping strategies are
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3 examples of 'escape - avoidance' where people make "behaviour efforts to escape
4 or avoid" and of self-control, by keeping their feelings private (Folkman *et al.*, 1986,
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6 p. 995).
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11 Of course, they are not the only employees who might use such strategies but
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13 participants articulated specific organisational conditions more difficult to navigate
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15 due to the expectations of their role. For example, the confidential nature of their
16
17 work resulted in being able to 'vent' or makes friends with few people outside of HR
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19 teams. Being the person to whom others felt they could express their anger towards,
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21 participants felt they could not express their 'true' feelings back in response.
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23 However, they relied on social support as a further emotion-focused coping strategy
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25 (Folkman *et al.*, 1986). In smaller teams, this was with one or two HR colleagues or
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27 confidantes outside the HR function. Where the context was a larger HR team this
28
29 was easier, and in Sarah's case physical space was created for social and emotional
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31 support amongst HR peers. Fineman (2003) refers to such informal spaces as
32
33 'emotionalized zones' to share and express emotions, rather than deliberately
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35 designed break-out spaces. In these spaces HR peers came together like
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37 Korczynski's (2003) 'communities of coping', to socially share negative emotions
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39 (Yang and Kelly, 2015) and experiences. When they remembered they took time out
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41 for themselves, either individually or in peer groups, using devices to protect the self
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43 from harmful emotions (Cramer, 1998). Though academic research argues emotions
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45 are now legitimised (McMurray and Ward, 2014), this study highlights use of
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47 techniques that rationalise the expression of negatively perceived emotions;
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49 compartmentalised to 'safe' physical spaces or reframed through 'positive appraisal'
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51 (Folkman *et al.*, 1986) where they "put on a front", or "tell themselves to be positive".
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3 Given that the study's aim was to understand participants' subjective experiences of
4 emotion, from an interpretivist epistemological positioning, possible interpretations
5 are offered with a multiplicity of meanings. As Denzin (2007, p. 5) states, "the labels
6 applied to emotional experience are always shifting and are subject to new or
7 different interpretation". It is therefore not possible, nor was it intended, to generalise
8 their experiences. However, expressions of emotions in participants' narratives were
9 identified that help account for how HR practitioners in this study justify, guide and
10 make sense of their individual lives. In communicating details of how they do and
11 make sense of their work, they exposed the complexity of emotional experience.
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24 This paper contributes to HR research by furthering understanding of how HR
25 practitioners experience and deal with their emotions, thus 'humanizing' them. It fills
26 a gap in HR research, which tends to be objectivist and focused on roles and
27 practices. Previous research into how HR practitioners do their work is limited
28 (O'Brien and Linehan, 2014). The study's findings are significant in highlighting how
29 HR practitioners engage in emotion-focused coping strategies of self and social
30 support to deal with the emotional stress they face in their work. In addition, as
31 studies using participatory photo-elicitation methods are sparse (Warren, 2018) this
32 paper highlights a means of accessing emotional experience, bringing the visual into
33 discursive narratives.
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48 The unique nature of HR practitioners' roles in terms of dealing with a range of
49 emotionally-laden activities sets them apart from other employees. As a result of the
50 study findings, it is proposed that organizations should acknowledge the challenges
51 that HR practitioners face in taking steps to address their own welfare without
52 affecting their organisational credibility. Managers of HR teams should consider their
53 welfare, rather than only ensuring they attend to the welfare of others in
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3 organisations. Training and coaching interventions could help in handling emotionally
4
5 demanding situations (Richter *et al.*, 2016). For example, how to address emotional
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7 challenges and the isolation HR practitioners may feel through professional support
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9 networks that could provide a forum for discussion, to not only 'vent' but also gain
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11 advice and socially share experiences.
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Personnel Review

Photographs for paper titled 'Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves?'

Photograph 1



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Photographs for paper titled 'Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves?'

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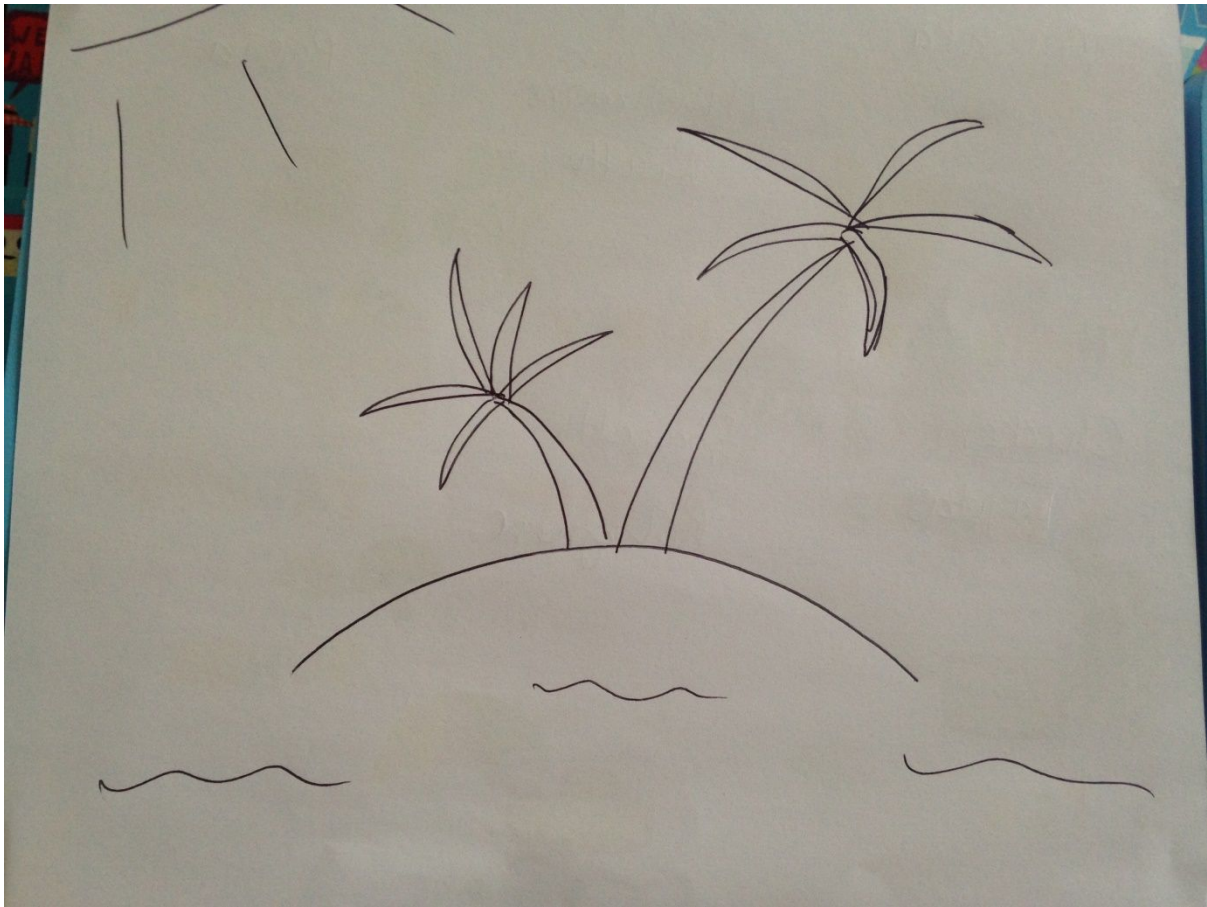
Photograph 2



Review

Photographs for paper titled 'Navigating emotion in HR work: Caring for ourselves?'

Photograph 3



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