Human Relations
DOI: 10.1177/0018726706071648
Volume 59(10): 1429–1448

SAGE Publications
London, Thousand Oaks CA,
New Delhi
www.sagepublications.com

Compassion at the counter: Service providers and bereaved consumers

Stephanie O'Donohoe and Darach Turley

ABSTRACT

Although the emotional labour required of service providers has received considerable research attention, few studies have examined service workers' experiences of emotionally charged service encounters. In this article we review literature on emotion management and compassion in the workplace. We then describe a qualitative study which examined the service encounter occurring when bereaved Irish consumers contacted their local newspaper to place *In Memoriam* notices on the anniversary of a close family member's death. We suggest that these newspaper employees engaged in philanthropic emotion management when dealing with bereaved customers, and we locate this within the broader context of compassion as interpersonal work and as organizational accomplishment. We also suggest that compassion in organizations is not amenable to managerial systematization and control.

KEYWORDS

bereavement ▪ compassion ▪ emotional labour ▪ philanthropic emotion management ▪ service encounters

Bereaved people often have to deal with an array of health, funerary, religious and financial service providers, at a time when their decision-making and psychological resources are severely impaired or depleted (Gentry et al., 1994). Bereavement often erodes survivors' sense of self, shatters their 'assumptive world' (Parkes, 1986) and comports secondary losses related to social status, the family home, or financial security (Rando, 1993;

Rosenblatt, 1996). Hand in hand with this functional impairment comes a powerful urge to restore meaning and sense in the face of what is perceived to be a meaningless and senseless loss (Neimeyer, 2001). Such heightened sensibilities infuse interactions between bereaved consumers and service providers with a distinctive emotional charge and pathos. Undertakers, health and financial service providers are undoubtedly in the eye of this emotional storm. However, staff in a wide range of service contexts may find themselves facing distressed consumers, long beyond the immediate aftermath of a bereavement: despite the clichés concerning the healing powers of time, grief and trauma often endure (Hazen, 2003; Parkes, 1986).

Given the limited research on the complex and often distressing service encounters ensuing upon the demise of close relative or friend (Gabel et al., 1996), this article explores one particular instance of this phenomenon, occurring when bereaved Irish consumers visit local newspaper offices to insert *In Memoriams*, memorial notices for departed family members. Our aim is to show how the emotional intensity and grief often associated with this encounter is experienced and managed, individually and collectively, by service providers. We set the scene by reviewing literature on emotional labour and compassion in organizations. The study's methodology and some background information on *In Memoriam* notices are then presented, and findings from interviews with newspaper staff are discussed. The article concludes by considering implications for theories and practice surrounding emotional aspects of service encounters.

Emotional labour, compassion and service encounters

Hochschild (1983) placed emotions on the organizational agenda by asking what happens when the management of emotions shifts from a private act to one undertaken for commercial purposes. She examined the emotional labour undertaken when employees are required to induce or suppress certain feelings to produce a state of mind in customers to benefit an organization. This creates the potential for asymmetry of feelings in service encounters, not least because what is routine for service providers may be exceptional and extraordinary for consumers (Price et al., 1995). Service providers may be required to invest significant effort into managing this emotional divide. In this context, Price et al. (1995) discuss the distinction between boundary closed and boundary open transactions (Mars & Nicod, 1984). Boundary closed transactions take place without any expectations of friendship. Boundary open transactions, on the other hand, are like meetings between friends, and in this situation service providers are expected to be

actively involved and share feelings with customers in a manner that transcends commercial boundaries. Services high in affective content, which encourage self-revelation, are particularly conducive to the development of boundary open relationships. However, as Hochschild (1983) has observed, whilst service providers may be trained to treat customers as friends, customers are not required to reciprocate:

> Where the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal, and from the beginning, customer and client assume different rights to feeling and display. The ledger is supposedly evened by a wage.
>
> (p. 86)

Thus, Guerrier and Adib (2003) note that many of the tour reps they interviewed explicitly set out to befriend clients in order to make their job easier. However, one tour rep noted that in her conversations with clients, 'I try not to talk about myself too much with them 'cos you know they don't want to hear me talk about myself . . .' (p. 1407).

Hochschild's work has been the catalyst for a wealth of research on emotions in work and emotional dimensions of work (Fineman, 2002; Rumens, 2005). Recent studies have highlighted the need for a more nuanced understanding of emotional labour, however. It has been suggested, for example, that emotional *labour* is reduced when feeling rules are guided not by occupational identity, but by a person's needs or the relational context (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). Noting that even a single day's work can demand a wide range of emotion management performances from an employee, not all of which emanate from organizational rules, Bolton (2000a) proposes a four-fold typology that rejects simplistic divisions between the 'private' nature of emotion work and the 'public', commercialized domain of emotional labour. According to her framework, emotion management is *presentational* when it respects general social rules and *prescriptive* when it follows specific organizational or professional rules. It is *pecuniary* when it is undertaken for commercial gain, and *philanthropic* when it is offered as a gift: Lewis (2005: 568) suggests this last category is to be found in 'work behaviours that offer rapport, supportiveness, congeniality, nurturance and empathy above and beyond that required by a professional approach to the execution of emotion work'. Such work behaviours have been identified amongst nurses in a gynaecological ward and special care baby unit (Bolton, 2000b; Lewis, 2005).

Our understanding of emotional labour may also be enhanced by several recent studies on compassion in organizations, although these have focused on compassion between colleagues rather than between service

providers and customers. Arguing that compassion 'lies at the heart of what it means to be human', Kanov et al. (2004: 808) build on Clark's (1997) view of compassion as a dynamic, interactive process comprising three sequential subprocesses: noticing, feeling and responding to the pain of others. For Kanov et al., collective engagement in these subprocesses by members of a system constitutes organizational compassion.

Frost et al. (2005) develop this analysis by offering three lenses for studying compassion in organizations. The *interpersonal work* lens examines how compassion is refracted through 'the effortful handling of interpersonal interactions', whilst the *narrative* lens focuses on how compassion at work is (re)constructed in accounts offered by an organization's members. The final *organizational* lens examines how or whether collective processes and procedures foster compassion within an organization, by legitimizing, propagating and co-ordinating noticing, feeling and responding.

Methodology: Obtaining narratives of compassion at work

The specific service encounter we examined involves bereaved people interacting with newspaper staff when they placed *In Memoriam* (IM) notices in local newspapers. These are verses inserted in newspapers by relatives and friends on the anniversaries or birthdays of those who have died. As a feature of public grieving, IMs have been documented in various settings, including Britain, Nigeria, and Australia (Adams, 1997).

In Ireland, where this study took place, the *In Memoriam* tradition is well established, with notices placed by sons and daughters, husbands and wives, siblings, other relatives and friends. These notices take up considerable classified advertising space in newspapers and are priced accordingly. They usually include the name of the deceased, several lines of verse, and details of those inserting it. The following lines typify the style of verse involved:

> August comes with sad regret
> The day, the month, we will never forget
> One year has passed since that sad day
> You closed your eyes and went away.

Drawing on a wider interpretive study of IMs, this article focuses on findings from interviews with 10 Irish newspaper employees who had front-line responsibility for accepting IMs, in a range of urban and rural locations. The

sample was entirely female, reflecting the gender profile of this type of work. The women ranged in age from early 20s to late 40s, and their experience of IMs ranged from 18 months to over 20 years. Interviews were mostly conducted in the newspaper offices, at the staff member's desk.

The origins of this part of the study were opportunistic: the authors had conducted research with bereaved consumers to understand their experiences of placing IMs, and interviewed three newspaper employees to understand how these verses were put together. These initial interviews were transcribed, with part-to-whole analysis (Thompson et al., 1989) undertaken by each author before overarching themes and patterns were jointly identified and explored. Analysing these transcripts, it soon became clear that encounters between bereaved clients and newspaper employees could be highly sensitive and emotionally draining, and merited further research in their own right. This prompted a review of literature on emotional labour and a return to fieldwork. Although alternative research methods such as non-participant observation were considered at that stage, the existing transcripts gave us confidence that interviews would offer sufficiently rich, detailed and varied accounts. Our approach in these interviews was similar to that outlined by Hoch et al. (2003: 21), in that we considered each participant in the study to be 'a reflective being whose understanding allows for improvisation and adjustment to various situations instead of merely following prescriptive behaviours'. Using open-ended interviews, we asked newspaper employees to tell us about their work, to share their experiences and feelings about taking in IM notices from bereaved customers, and to recount instances of both routine and more memorable encounters. These interviews were also transcribed and analysed in an iterative manner, leading to more nuanced interpretations and further reading of literature on workplace emotions. As the analysis developed, compassion rather than emotional labour emerged as the central theme.

As Gilbert (2002: 224) notes, 'we make meaning by creating and exploring our stories in concert with other interested parties'. Frost et al. (2005: 19) suggest that exploring compassion in organizations through a narrative lens allows researchers to explore 'the micro-moves that happen as people, individually and collectively, "work the context" to create a compassionate response'. Certainly, the newspaper employees in this study offered rich accounts of their experiences and emotions in dealing with bereaved customers. We do not claim to have undertaken a formal narrative analysis here, however, since our focus was more on common thematic elements than the specific structure, elements or sequence of the stories themselves (Riessman, 1993).

The IM service encounter

Employees dealing with IMs were responsible for taking in, pricing and typing up all classified ads. In some cases their duties also included general reception work. Customers could place IMs in person, by telephone, letter, fax, or email. In many cases they approached the newspaper staff with a complete notice to be inserted, but it was not uncommon for bereaved customers to ask for help in choosing an appropriate verse, and all newspaper offices had samples available for consultation in such cases. Face-to-face encounters at the newspaper office were the most common. Customers and newspaper staff interacted in a public space that was often quite cramped, spartan and clearly geared towards business transactions. One office had staff and customers sitting across a typical office desk from each other, but many had traditional counters, with or without service hatches and seats for waiting customers. Some employees worked behind a counter that they could leave to sit with customers in a reception area furnished with armchairs.

As Price et al. (1995) note, the emotional content of a service encounter is heightened when it is surrounded by narrative and ritualistic meanings. The process of placing IMs may be interpreted in this light: as one employee put it, 'it seems to be part of the ritual every year, part of the whole grieving process'. This may explain why this particular service encounter, taking place months or years after a bereavement, could still be so highly charged. In fact, accounts of the IM service encounter from both providers and customers indicated that its emotional tenor ranged from the relatively routine to the highly charged and traumatic. At the lower end of this emotional spectrum tended to be those placing IMs many years after a death, often that of an elderly parent. All the newspaper staff, however, had experiences of dealing with people who were upset, 'torn apart', and crying as they placed their notice. This was most likely when the death was recent and people were still 'very raw', when the death was sudden and traumatic (such as murder, road accidents or suicide) or when the person who died was young. The death of a child is uniquely traumatic (Hazen, 2003; Riches & Dawson, 1996), and this heightened levels of distress when placing IMs. Indeed, most staff singled out encounters with bereaved parents as the most highly charged and memorable of their experiences with customers. Such overtly distressing encounters were seen as the exception rather than the rule, however; most customers maintained their composure during the service encounter, even if the front they presented was fragile. Another indicator of the emotional intensity of placing notices was customers' sensitivity to errors appearing in published notices: all staff had stories to tell of people telephoning or coming back in to the office extremely angry or upset because something had gone wrong.

Emotional dimensions of this service encounter will now be analysed, through the lenses of compassion as interpersonal work and organizational accomplishment (Frost et al., 2005).

Compassion as interpersonal work

Staff generally felt they had a therapeutic role to play in their encounters with bereaved customers, seeking to 'kind of help them and try and make them feel better'. In the following analysis, we draw on compassion's three constituent subprocesses: noticing, feeling and responding (Frost et al., 2005; Kanov et al., 2004).

Noticing

Being 'good at reading people' and being able to 'pick up signals' were considered vital aspects of this work. Staff paid close attention at the start of encounters to the need of customers to talk about their loss. The importance of listening to the death narrative has been noted elsewhere (Turley, 1995), but staff did not presume that customers always wished to share these stories. Employees used a range of cues to guide their actions in this context. Some customers, for example, 'just keep their head down. And you know not to, you know not to enter into conversation with them'. Similarly,

> I mean some people come in and they're upset in their own way and you're as well off to leave them alone. They're trying to hold back the tears and if you start they're going to start bawling, so – and they don't want that because they're trying so hard not to.
>
> (Pat)

> Oh, I think their energy coming through the door speaks volumes you know. Like if somebody is still very much in the throes of grief you can sense it when they come in . . . you can tell even just by the way they even fumble in their bag or whatever or dig in their pockets to get what they need.
>
> (Maeve)

Feeling

Asked what skills and qualities were important for their work, all staff framed their responses in human, empathetic terms: it was important to be 'soft with the people and understand where they are coming from'. Only one

employee prioritized her own feelings, expressing relief that people did not cry too often, ''cos it can be quite depressing sometimes'.

One aspect of emotional labour discussed in the literature has been the suppression of emotions, which Lewis (2005) considers an example of 'professional' emotion management. The motivation in this study often seemed different however. Asked if dealings with customers ever triggered any personal experiences of bereavement, one employee said that although her own mother died relatively young,

> . . . I'd try not to think of that to be honest with you. Because I'm not really, I'm there to sort of more or less help people at the counter, not to help myself.
>
> (Jo)

Such prioritizing did not seem to be at the behest of managers (pecuniary emotional labour) or to arise from a sense of being 'professional' in suppressing emotions, but rather 'a human thing', arising from socially embedded interactions in which staff saw themselves as dealing with customers on a person-to-person rather than an employee–customer basis (Korczynski, 2002). In this sense, the newspaper employees seemed to be engaged in a philanthropic form of emotion management, 'paying respect with feeling' (Bolton, 2000a), and offering the management of their emotions purely and simply as a gift. This may also been interpreted as bounded emotionality (Mumby & Putnam, 1992), since employees' emotions were voluntarily constrained out of sensitivity to the emotional needs of others. Consistent with this, a strong sense of empathy was evident in the way staff dealt with customers who were 'upset', 'distressed' or 'angry' when they noticed mistakes in the published IMs. Marion, for example, commented that:

> No matter how much you apologise it's not, it's going to mean absolutely nothing to them, you know, they're just so upset they'd tear strips off you.

She accepted this, claiming that all she had to do was put herself in their position to understand that 'they've every right' to be angry. This empathetic ability to 'take the role of the other' (Mead, 1934), and forgive customer outbursts was evident in all accounts relating to mistakes. As Mona put it,

> . . . when something has gone wrong in the paper, you don't have one mistake, you have 20,000 copies of a mistake. The thing with the papers is that it's there and it's in print and it's there forever and it's on file and it's wrong, and it's wrong, and it's wrong and it's wrong!

Although the staff could cope with angry customers, dealing with traumatized, grieving individuals took its toll, especially when the deaths were of young children or they themselves were under emotional strain.

> . . . one of the girls who works with me, her brother was killed tragically 30 years ago and his 30th anniversary was this week as well, OK? So she went to the counter and when she was going through it, she just burst out crying . . . And the lady who was putting it in was already crying and it was very, that was an awkward situation, you know . . . because she had no idea why one of the staff members would be crying for her daughter, you know. She didn't realize the staff member's situation, that she was actually crying for herself, you know.
>
> (Marion)

The strain was not only felt when interacting with customers; employees talked about being affected as they typed up the verses after taking them in at the counter:

> Especially when it's kids, it takes me ages. I'm dwelling on it in my head, you know the way you'd just be thinking about it . . . When you're proofreading them now and you're hearing all those little rhymes and things like that, they can be hard . . .
>
> (Tina)

To cope with this, some employees talked about having trained themselves to type the verses without reading them 'for meaning'.

Responding

Hochschild (1983: x) asks 'How does a person act on feeling, or stop acting on it, or even stop feeling?'.These questions appeared to be particularly salient for the newspaper staff who sought to strike an appropriate emotional balance in responding to customers.

> I think you need to come across as like you can actually feel for them . . . you don't need to be showing your emotion all the time but I think you need to come across like that you can feel for these people, that you, that you care, rather than be just totally you know clinical and efficient . . .
>
> (Maura)

> . . . you have to be tough as well not to start crying at the counter too, that's not going to help the person. But you can't be hard either, 'come in and get the ad over with' and then on to the next person.
>
> (Tricia)

Services with a high affective content lend themselves to boundary open relationships between employees and customers as they motivate self-revelation (Price et al., 1995). In this case, however, staff did not frame their emotional labour in terms of self-disclosure or positioning themselves as friends of the customer. This may in part reflect their understanding of the unequal emotional relationships involved in commercial encounters (Hochschild, 1983). However, in keeping with Bolton's (2000a, 2000b) philanthropic category of emotional labour, it seemed to be driven primarily by consideration for bereaved customers: as one employee put it, 'It's their moment, and they're doing something for their loved one, you know?'. This may explain why, if mistakes were made, it was standard practice to apologise profusely and ensure that a refund was given or that the correct version of the notice was printed as soon as possible.

Prioritizing customers' feelings often meant allowing their needs to dictate the rhythm and pace of the encounter. The need to give IM customers time was a recurrent theme, so that their stories of loss could be listened to empathetically or that they could be helped to choose the right verse:

> . . . you talk people through it and you listen and you keep going through it with them until they have what's right for them, you know . . . you say 'Now we'll sit down and we'll do this and we'll go through it and we can change it all if it's not right and we can do it all again . . .'
>
> (Mona)

Such gifts of time could be costly to the service providers, who were also mindful of other customers waiting to be served, ringing telephones and other pressing tasks:

> You can't rush them or you know be short with them, you have to spend time and talk to them and go through things with them and you know, even though on a Monday morning out there you'd be so busy out there you can hardly think, you still have to take time . . .
>
> (Jo)

In cases where customers were particularly distressed, however, giving time was seen as an insufficient response, and more personal responses were called for – a glass of water, a cup of tea, or even some privacy to gather themselves together:

> Sometimes people are very upset, you have to take them aside and make them a cup of tea but that's a rarity. Sometimes people . . . you couldn't just leave them there. I mean this is very public, this office . . .
>
> (Pat)

Such responses resonate with the creation of a 'holding space for pain' (Frost et al., 2005), in which those who are suffering are given the emotional or physical space to grieve and regroup.

On rare occasions, newspaper staff felt that the situation called for a physical connection. For example, faced with a bereaved mother who was too distraught to communicate, Maeve came out from behind the counter, and 'really just sort of . . . I put my hand on hers and said "take your time", you know'. Similarly, Pat remarked that when faced with an 'inconsolable' customer, '. . . there's no point in talking to them. All you can do is rub their back and say "there you go, there, there", that type of thing'. For her, such a response was 'a human thing', and undertaken with great sensitivity:

> I wouldn't do it in a public place because they might feel uncomfortable or if they shrank back obviously you'd know better than to touch them again. But I think people, when they are upset, sometimes it's nice to touch because you feel as if, you know, it might help you in some way, I dunno, that you connect with somebody else.

The challenges of responding spontaneously and compassionately to distraught customers were evident in several employees' accounts. Such responses had to be improvised and customised, with the associated uncertainties a source of some anxiety:

> It's the silence for those few seconds where you don't know what to say to that person that's difficult, you know. Sometimes I say 'I'll give you a moment'.
>
> (Maeve)

There was also evidence of reflexive awareness that, despite their best intentions, they did not always manage to respond appropriately:

> . . . I know there were times when you'd go 'God – did I say that?', you know. And you know somebody might say 'Oh God, my life is just like there's a big gaping hole, destroyed since someone died', and you go 'Ah, sure – ' [in a jaunty tone, then laughs]. I dunno, what do you say to that, how do you continue on the conversation when you know nothing about the person? So yeah, there were times you came away cringing.
>
> (Lisa)

Organizing compassion

In this section we draw on Frost et al. (2005) to explore the collective processes and procedures (legitimizing, propagating and co-ordinating) fostering noticing, feeling and responding compassionately.

Legitimizing and propagating compassion

As Kanov et al. (2004: 818) note, 'collective feeling is most likely to be found in organizations whose members openly express their emotions, commonly talk about how they are feeling, and exchange emotionally laden stories about their work and home life'. The working environment for the newspaper staff in this study may be seen in such a light. Emotional dimensions of their experience, and indeed a compassionate ethos, appeared to be legitimated and propagated within the workplace discourse, not least during informal interactions and discussions with colleagues. For example, staff appeared to have created 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2003), talking to colleagues about traumatic incidents or stories. Some discussions revisited the sad events recounted by bereaved customers. On other occasions, the focus was on the strain of dealing with them. In this context, the fact that this was largely women's work seemed to add another dimension to this particular community of coping. For example, Tricia talked about how it helped after a traumatic encounter:

> . . . just to say that 'I don't feel great after that, I think I'll go upstairs and get a cup of tea. That person was very upset'. The girls are great, we all help each other, it's part of the job.

Similarly, Lisa noted that after taking an IM over the telephone that would 'bring tears to a stone', the first thing she would do was 'turn around . . . and get it off your chest':

> There was a bunch of 30 women in the place. I mean there was a lot of talking about everything. I mean if you had somebody who was horrible or somebody who was really upset, kind of thing, you'd go . . . 'That was a really awful call, it was really, really sad. My heart went out to the guy'. Yes, definitely, that's the first thing you'd do is to turn around.
>
> (Lisa)

As Frost et al. (2005) have noted, there can be a recursive relationship between propagation and legitimation: discussing compassion can help legitimize it.

Accounts of compassion in dealings with customers did not seem to be denigrated by other shared stories of a more humorous variety, often at the expense of customers. In some cases, for example, newspaper employees found the IM verses themselves so badly put together that 'you'd just have to laugh at some of the things they'd come out with'. There were some indications of gallows humour as well. According to Pat, who showed great sensitivity in dealing with distressed customers,

> We make a laugh of it half the time. We say 'Oh great, December. A lot of people die in winter, we'll have a full page of *In Memoriams*'. We sound very callous, but it's just a thing we joke about here.

Apart from their entertainment value it is also possible that such anecdotes served as a collective means of diffusing some of the emotional strain attendant on dealing with distraught and emotionally demanding customers. Indeed, Bolton (2000b) refers to nurses' use of humour in similar terms.

In most cases, more than one employee dealt with IMs. Thus, in situations where a staff member felt unable to cope, for example during a bereavement of her own, she could ask a colleague to take her place:

> If I felt that I couldn't deal with it when I was going through my bereavement, I just walked away . . . I wouldn't put myself in that position or the person at the counter in that position.
>
> (Marion)

This may be construed as both legitimizing and co-ordinating organizational compassion; the employee felt able to tell her colleagues she felt overwhelmed, and simultaneously benefited from an informal system of substitution. In this organic way, the needs of both employee and customer were addressed compassionately. Issues of co-ordination are addressed in more detail below.

Coordinating compassion

As described by Frost et al. (2005: 31) coordination refers to the 'process by which people arrange interdependent interactions in ways that they believe will enable them to accomplish their goals'. Formal structures and systems in the newspaper offices were underpinned primarily by management goals such as efficiency and profit generation. Front-line staff, however, pursued a more compassionate agenda with its own rules of engagement. One such example involved submission deadlines. Although the newspapers had strict deadlines for the receipt of IMs, there were many tales of desperate customers pleading with staff to accommodate a late notice, and their own efforts to help by 'breaking the rules'.

> We get some people and they're in an early grave like, so we're like trying to hold up the paper maybe to try and get it in for them . . . they'd start to cry and they'd be 'oh, I have to get it in, I have to get it in'.
>
> (Tina)

There were other instances of staff clearly prioritizing the philanthropic over the pecuniary aspects of their work. For example:

> . . . if they were upset you were as sympathetic as possible. Just make it as easy for them as possible and just not rush them at all. It had kind of conflicting objectives with the rest of your job really, because you know time is money in sales . . .
>
> (Lisa)

Hochschild (1983) argues that emotional labour is subject to a degree of employer control through training and supervision, although professionals such as doctors or social workers often supervise their own emotional labour. Significant autonomy and agency have also been identified in other occupational groups (Bolton, 2000b; Guerrier & Adib, 2003; Lewis, 2005). In this case, it was clear that newspaper staff had considerable autonomy in managing their interpersonal work. This seemed less a case of managers empowering their staff than of failing to appreciate this aspect of the work, however: there was little evidence of emotions or compassion having been addressed in recruitment, training or supervision. Several employees had been recruited to other jobs within the newspaper and had eventually wound up dealing with IMs. Others recalled their formal training as non-existent or simply covering the mechanics of a business transaction:

> We'd never have been told how to deal with people, no. Just came into the job and started taking *In Memoriams*.
>
> (Maeve)

> . . . when I started here first I was told 'count the words properly and make sure you're getting enough money off them', basically [laughs].
>
> (Pat)

Training, then, was a matter of 'learning as you go along', through experience of dealing with customers and also by watching how colleagues dealt with situations:

> . . . you learn after a while what works, what doesn't work. You learn to listen, you learn never to argue with anybody, you learn to weigh up a situation I suppose to some degree.
>
> (Mona)

In summary, the legitimation, propagation and coordination of compassion were effected primarily through informal observational learning, conversation and negotiation. Formal training was very much the exception. One employee who worked exclusively on the telephone had attended an extensive training programme that incorporated aspects of emotional labour, without going 'overboard'. Her training addressed the fine balance to be struck in terms of the length and nature of conversations with customers placing IMs. While she was encouraged to be as sympathetic as possible and not to rush customers, she was also told:

> Don't start questioning them too much because you can get yourself into – you know, at the end of the day the objectives are commercial so you know, you don't want to make it any longer than it has to be. And you know it can be quite upsetting for you so you don't want to get yourself into anything that's deeply upsetting that you don't have to.
>
> (Lisa)

The guidance she was given extended to the tone of voice to use:

> Sometimes it's better to be kind of light, kind of light-hearted but without being dismissive and without sounding like that you just don't care at all. I mean sometimes if you set that tone, they'll kind of follow you naturally, you know. 'Good afternoon, it's the anniversary, yeah? That's no problem'. That kind of way rather than 'Oh God, it's an

> anniversary now, is that your father [said in a trembling, distraught voice]?'. Just kind of keep it light. And if they deviate from that then try and help them but I mean you set that kind of tone and more than likely they'll stick to it.

Even in Lisa's more formal training, management seemed to rely on employees' personal qualities and intuition in dealing with bereaved customers, and in this context the gender profile appears no coincidence; asked about how she was trained to deal with sensitive topics, she emphasized that her colleagues were mainly women and that she had been advised to 'use your discretion, and your feminine sensitivity'. This appears to be another case of managers assuming female employees have a 'natural propensity to locate themselves within an "ethic of care"' (Tyler & Taylor, 2001: 75). Tellingly, as one of the youngest employees in this study, and the only recipient of a formal training programme, Lisa acknowledged that she learned a great deal from observing seasoned employees, some of whom had 30 years' experience of the job and communicated a strong 'ethic of care':

> Lisa: . . . they really had it down to a tee – how to work that kind of conversation, you know. They'd just be perfectly, you know, just the right amount of empathy, the right amount of sympathy, you know, really kind of cushioned the person. It was really nice the way they could do that.
>
> I: So experience was important?
>
> Lisa: Yeah, I think so, yeah, yeah. Maybe life experience as well I suppose because they could probably empathize with a lot more things than I could.

Discussion and conclusions

This article sought to contribute to the relatively sparse literature on service encounters high in affective content. It did so by interviewing a sample of female newspaper employees whose work involved assisting bereaved customers, many of whom were distraught and confused. Emotional labour was the theoretical starting point for the analysis of these interviews, although the analytical lens was subsequently refined. Specifically, it became clear that the management of emotion evidenced in the work practices of the newspaper staff was disinterested and philanthropic in character. There was

no sign of these women seeking to leverage the emotional toll of these encounters in the interests of financial or professional preferment, of translating philanthropic into pecuniary emotional labour. This may be attributed to the socially embedded (Korczynski, 2002) lens through which employees viewed their customers; as Pat put it, 'it's a human thing'. In this sense, our findings lend credence to Bolton's (2000a) distinction between modes of emotional labour and support a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of the topic.

As our analysis progressed further, we became aware that the study of philanthropic emotion management can be substantially enhanced by situating it on the broader conceptual canvas of organizational compassion. Our data resonated with, and was illuminated by, the concept of compassion as a set of sub-processes (Clark, 1997; Frost et al., 2005; Kanov et al., 2004). Other types of emotion management may be surrounded by equally rich theoretical terrain, and researchers would do well to seek this out and explore it.

We would also like to believe that this research both supports and contributes to the growing number of empirical studies focusing on emotional labour at the more taxing end of the emotional spectrum. In this respect our findings indicate that seams rich in emotional texture can be profitably mined in lower paid and overlooked organizational strata and that researchers may benefit from looking for 'life in unexpected places' (Dutton, 2003: 10). The work environment in this study arguably made for such a place, since the deeply moving was intertwined with the mundane: newspaper employees could be consoling a distraught bereaved customer one moment, and dealing with a routine classified advertisement the next.

Frost et al. (2005) draw on Hochschild in suggesting the existence of 'compassion work' which involves 'feeling' and 'doing' compassion in the workplace, and the possibility of 'compassion labour', where compassion becomes appropriated or required by an employer. As Bolton (2000a) argues, however, Hochschild's formulation of emotional labour underestimates the degree of human agency involved. The newspaper staff in this study had a considerable degree of autonomy in managing their emotion work, but this seemed to be more a case of abandonment rather than empowerment, default rather than design. With one exception, there was little evidence of employees receiving training or supervision regarding their emotional labour. Indeed, there were few indications that their emotional labour received institutional acknowledgement at all. It may well be significant that this work was largely the preserve of female staff: emotional labour (including the work of compassion) is often seen as women's work, and thus becomes naturalized, essentialized, invisible and uncompensated (Frost et al., 2005; Guy & Newman, 2004; Lewis, 2005).

Ironically and importantly, our findings suggest that it may be the very lack of management attention that allows compassion to flourish. Whilst our findings are drawn from a distinctive setting, they indicate that compassion in organizations operates in an organic, informal fashion that is both antithetical and non-amenable to managerial systematization and control. Any attempt to capture and manipulate this compassion, no matter how well intentioned, could prove both misguided and counterproductive. Instead, those who seek to encourage employees to show greater compassion towards customers might do well to adopt a style that is flexible, at arm's length, empowering and, where appropriate, appreciative. Our findings suggest that managerial efforts should be directed more to creating an organizational ethos and environment that nurtures philanthropic emotion management rather than attempting to streamline or routinize it: planting seeds rather than setting up systems may be the way forward. These efforts might include reviewing the lexical register of organizational communications to see if they reflect and bolster the emotional tenor desired of staff in their dealings with customers. Similarly, the spontaneous, interactive and personal nature of emotional labour may point to the suitability of less formal training systems such as mentoring in the induction of new staff.

As Frost et al. (2005: 37) warn, however, compassionate practices cannot be co-opted to commercial advantage. Consistent with the ethos of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron & Caza, 2004), they argue that:

> If we attempt to understand the nature and significance of compassion in ways typical of our field (e.g., aiming to identify the competitive edge associated with compassion or questioning the value of compassion in terms of the bottom line) we will likely end up with only a shell of a construct that is a far cry from the rich and timeless images of compassion throughout history. If instead we recognize that the study of phenomena like compassion begs for a different approach to organizational enquiry – one that emphasizes human experience and social life – then we will allow ourselves to enter into a dimension of organizational life that is often invisible and unappreciated.

Acknowledgements

We thank Barbara Townley and the reviewers for their encouragement, insightful comments and constructive suggestions; they have played a significant role in developing this article and related work. We also thank Patricia Findlay and Wendy Loretto for many conversations which broadened our disciplinary horizons.

References

Adams, S. Women, death and *In Memoriam* notices in a local British newspaper. In K. Charmaz, G. Howarth & A. Kellehear (Eds), *The unknown country: Death in Australia, Britain and the USA*. London: Macmillan, 1997, pp. 98–112.

Bolton, S. Emotion here, emotion there, emotional organisations everywhere. *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, 2000a, *11*, 155–71.

Bolton, S. Who cares? Offering emotion work as a 'gift' in the nursing labour process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 2000b, *32*, 580–6.

Cameron, K. & Caza, A. Introduction: Contributions to the discipline of positive organizational scholarship. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004, *47*(6), 1–9.

Clark, C. *Misery and company: Sympathy in everyday life*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1997.

Dutton, J. Breathing life into organizational studies. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 2003, *12*(1), 5–19.

Fineman, S. Emotional areas revisited. In S. Fineman (Ed.), *Emotions in organizations*, 2nd edn. London: Sage, 2002, pp. 1–24.

Frost, P., Dutton, J., Mailis, S., Lilius, J., Kanov, J. & Worline, M. Seeing organizations differently: Three lenses on compassion. University of Michigan Working Paper Series, January 2005.

Gabel, T., Mansfield, P. & Westbrook, K. The disposal of consumers: An exploratory analysis of death-related consumption. In K. Corfman & J. Lynch (Eds), *Advances in consumer research*, vol. 23. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1996, pp. 361–7.

Gentry, J.W., Kennedy, P.F., Paul, C. & Hill, R.P. The vulnerability of those grieving the death of a loved one: Implications for public policy. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 1994, *13*(2), 128–42.

Gilbert, K. Taking a narrative approach to grief research: Finding meaning in stories. *Death Studies*, 2002, *26*, 223–39.

Guerrier, Y. & Adib, A. Work at leisure and leisure at work: A study of the emotional labour of tour reps. *Human Relations*, 2003, *56*(11), 1399–417.

Guy, M.E. & Newman, M. Women's jobs, men's jobs: Sex, segregation and emotional labor. *Public Administration Review*, 2004, *64*(3), 289–98.

Hazen, M.A. Societal and workplace responses to perinatal loss: Disenfranchised grief or healing connection. *Human Relations*, 2003, *56*(2), 147–66.

Hoch, J., Schembri, S. & Sandberg, J. Service recovery competence: Towards an interpretive approach. Paper presented at Academy of Marketing Conference, Aston Business School, 2003.

Hochschild, A.R. *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Kanov, J., Maitlis, S., Worline, M., Dutton, J., Frost, P. & Lilius, J. Compassion in organizational life. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 2004, *47*(6), 808–27.

Korczynski, M. *Human resource management in service work*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002.

Korczynski, M. Communities of coping: Collective emotional labour in service work. *Organization*, 2003, *10*(1), 55–79.

Lewis, P. Suppression or expression: An exploration of emotion management in a special care baby unit. *Work, Employment and Society*, 2005, *19*(3), 565–81.

Mars, G. & Nicod, M. *The world of waiters*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1984.

Mead, G.H. *Mind, self and society: From the standpoint of a social behaviourist*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1934.

Mumby, D.K. & Putnam, L. The politics of emotion: A feminist reading of bounded rationality. *Academy of Management Review*, 1992, *17*(3), 465–86.

Neimeyer, R. Meaning reconstruction and loss. In R. Neimeyer (Ed.), *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001, pp. 1–12.
Parkes, C.M. *Bereavement: Studies of grief in adult life*, 2nd edn. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
Price, L., Arnould, E.J. & Tierney, P. Going to extremes: Managing service encounters and assessing provider performance. *Journal of Marketing*, 1995, *59*(2), 83–98.
Rando, T.A. *Treatment of complicated mourning*. Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1993.
Riches, G. & Dawson, P. 'An intimate loneliness': Evaluating the impact of a child's death on parental self-identity and marital relationships. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 1996, *18*, 1–22.
Riessman, C. *Narrative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1993.
Rosenblatt, P. Grief that does not end. In D. Klass, P. Silverman & S. Nickman (Eds), *Continuing bonds: New understandings of grief*. Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996, pp. 45–58.
Rumens, N. Extended review: Emotion in work organizations. *Management Learning*, 2005, *36*(1), 117–28.
Thompson, C., Locander, W. & Polio, H. Putting consumer experience back into consumer research: The philosophy and method of existential-phenomenology. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 1989, September/October, 61–72.
Turley, D. Dialogue with the departed. In F. Hansen (Ed.), *European advances in consumer research 2*. Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1995, pp. 10–13.
Tyler, M. & Taylor, S. Juggling justice and care: Gendered consumer service in the contemporary airline industry. In A. Sturdy, I. Grugulis & H. Wilmott (Eds), *Customer service: Empowerment and entrapment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001, pp. 60–78.

Stephanie O'Donohoe, BSc, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at The University of Edinburgh. Her research focuses on advertising consumption and production, bereaved consumers' interactions with the marketplace, and consumption experiences during the transition to motherhood.
[E-mail: s.odonohoe@ed.ac.uk]

Darach Turley, MA, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in Marketing at The Business School, Dublin City University. His main research interests are the relationship between bereavement and consumer behaviour, mortality and marketing, and the senior market.
[E-mail: darach.turley@dcu.ie]