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Working on the front line with benefit claimants during social security reforms:

Benefit advisor experiences of emotional labour

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Abstract

Benefit advisors working in front-line roles with benefit claimants in the United Kingdom perform an emotionally challenging role which has changed significantly since the Welfare Reform Act (2012). This thesis argues that claimant difficulties due to these social security reforms have impacted the interactions they have with public sector benefit advisory staff who are seen as the face or voice of the reforms, and third sector benefit advisors providing advice and support for claimants struggling to navigate the system. Interview and diary data is used to explore the experiences of current and former Department for Work and Pensions, local authority and third sector staff who work in face-to-face or voice-to-voice advisory roles.

Emotional labour is defined as work that requires staff to evoke or suppress emotions in line with organizational expectations (Hochschild 1983). This thesis utilises emotional labour as a lens through which to understand the complexity of benefit advisory roles which require advisors to manage both their own and claimant emotions. It identifies how advisors skilfully mediate their own emotions, performing the required emotional display alongside using strategies intended to defuse difficult interactions with upset and angry claimants. The effects of this work on advisors both inside and outside of the workplace are discussed, concluding that benefit advisors can struggle with negative impacts on wellbeing and blurred boundaries between work and home life.

This thesis also provides an insight into the variety of strategies advisors use to alleviate negative impacts of their emotional labour and contends that there are multiple workplace factors which influence the extent to which they can draw upon such strategies. Examining these day-to-day challenges has implications for trade unions, employers and policy makers. An important contribution is also provided to existing commentary on social security reforms by illuminating the previously underrepresented perspectives of front-line advisors.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Emotional Labour on the Front-Line

This thesis explores the experiences of Benefit Advisors – staff who work in front-line roles supporting benefit claimants in the United Kingdom – to understand the interactions they have in their workplaces and how these impact them at a time of intense upheaval due to social security reforms (Welfare Reform Act 2012).

Emotional labour is used as a framework for understanding these experiences, a concept originally defined by Hochschild (1983) to describe roles which require employees to mediate their emotional display – both to present emotions that are deemed appropriate by their employer, and to encourage particular emotions in the public they work with. This research aims to investigate how emotional labour functions in an environment where staff are often required to manage negative emotions in the claimants they are working with and to mediate their own emotional display in response to this. It captures these experiences in a period of transition due to significant social security reforms, and offers a conceptual contribution to knowledge through its assessment of the viability of Hochschild's (1983) definition of emotional labour in this setting.

The spark for this research came at the beginning of 2013. The year before I had started working as a Benefit Assistant, and then a Trainee Benefit Officer, for a local authority in England. My primary responsibility was to advise claimants on their housing benefit entitlement, check through new claims, and collect supporting documentation that had a bearing on claims, such as wage slips and tenancy agreements. It was a sociologically fascinating time to be in such a role - as this was the beginning of the implementation of enormous changes to the social security system brought about by the Welfare Reform Act (2012). It was a role I had applied for, fresh from my undergraduate degree, because I (perhaps naively) envisioned I would be helping people to access financial support and that being able to offer advice and support in this way would feel rewarding. The reality was very different: every day I met people who required social security support due to the effects of long

term serious ill health, years of seasonal unemployment due to the coastal location we were located in, relationship break ups, multiple traumas. My role on paper was to advise them only about their housing benefit and I had very little discretionary ability to affect their claim entitlement, but people shared so much about themselves that it felt very difficult at times to hide my own upset or frustration at the lack of support they were often receiving, both financially and from wider structures.

I recall the nervous anticipation before the office opened on 1st April 2013, as this was the first day that the 'removal of the spare room subsidy' came into effect for local authority and housing association tenants. This was the name my employer requested we call a particular legislative change, but it is better known, in the media, academic and public consciousness, as the bedroom tax (Gibb 2015) – a deduction from claim entitlement if tenants were deemed to have an extra bedroom in their property that was highly controversial (DWP 2015, Machin et al 2015, Moffatt et al 2015). Person after person that came to my desk in the coming weeks asked about what this would mean for them, and I found myself the messenger time and again that their entitlement would indeed be dropping. The official suggestion I was told to offer was to explain that affected claimants should look to move to somewhere smaller (thus removing the surplus bedroom and financial penalty) or take in a lodger to fill the empty room, but in reality there were very few one bedroom properties in the area, and the housing waiting list was extremely long. People were going to have less money, and my job was to inform them, and pass on the official advice, which felt increasingly hollow in the face of the reality of people's circumstances. I was required to explain this without displaying my emotional reaction of anger and frustration at the legislative changes, which reminded me of learning during my undergraduate degree about emotional labour, the concept created by Hochschild (1983) in her book 'The Managed Heart' to describe work roles which require employees to suppress their own emotional expression to display the emotions expected by their employer in the context, as well as managing the emotional expression of the public they work with.

This second element of emotional labour was also a required part of my role. Managing claimants' emotions - which were frequently distress or anger at the situation – was deemed crucial for maintaining a calm and orderly office space and reducing the risk of harm to staff and claimants. This could be challenging - the

presence of panic buttons under the desks was little consolation in the moment where, for example, I witnessed a colleague have one of our office phones thrown directly at her face. Whilst some claimants positioned me as advising on something I could not change, others were openly hostile towards myself and the rest of the staff, seeing us as representatives of the system that was making their life increasingly difficult. This felt particularly challenging given that I had been a benefit claimant myself directly before taking up the role, so I keenly remembered how it felt to sit on that side of the desk and feel judged and powerless.

Working in this environment left me exhausted and depleted, and eventually I made the decision to leave, but I continued to wonder how my colleagues were managing in such emotionally charged environments. Staff turnover was high, but some colleagues had worked there many years and I wondered what it was that enabled them to keep working in this environment day after day. Whenever I described my time there to people I knew, I ended up explaining emotional labour to them in order to contextualise my experiences, and whoever I was talking to would usually nod eagerly and explain times they too had worked in roles requiring them to manage their emotions to meet employer expectations across a wide variety of sectors.

Emotional labour therefore offers a powerful lens with which to understand the experiences of benefit advisors working in front facing roles with benefit claimants and this research aims to provide a snapshot of their experiences during a period of huge workplace transformation and uncertainty due to the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 and associated changes to working environments. This context is of sociological significance both because of how it speaks to research on social security reform and its impacts, and because it uses emotional labour to explore a role previously neglected by such research.

This research project was originally conceived to capture the experiences of advisors working in front facing roles (face-to-face, and/or over the telephone providing voice-to-voice support) for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and local authorities (LA), but for reasons that will be elaborated on in the methodology chapter, was widened and enriched by also including the experiences of advisors working outside of public sector benefit administration roles - primarily third sector organisations, but also in one case, as a self-employed benefit advisor offering

services for profit. The differences, and striking similarities between these roles, is something that this research aims to illuminate. Some participants were formerly employed as benefit advisors (at some point since 2013 as capturing the impact of social security reforms was important) but had since chosen to move on to different employment, or had been moved to different roles due to department restructuring.

The following sections introduce the concept of emotional labour and then the context of the reforms benefit advisors are (or were) working in as well as identifying what a benefit advisor's role entails. The specific research questions this project engages with are defined, and this chapter ends by explaining the structure of the rest of this thesis.

1.2 Unpacking Hochschild's 'Managed Heart' and its Influences

Emotional labour has been a hugely influential concept for understanding employee experiences of emotions at work, with Hochschild's (1983) definition credited with leading to an 'an explosion of research on emotion in the workplace' (Wharton 2009:148). The multifaceted applications, directions and critiques since 1983 will be brought into focus in the next chapter, but first it is important to elaborate on the definition of emotional labour and its underpinning theoretical basis.

Emotional labour, in Hochschild's words, is work that requires the 'management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild 1983:7), such as suppressing anger or evoking a welcoming smile. Her theory originally started more broadly, with an earlier paper (Hochschild 1979) exploring how people manage their emotions according to social norms – something she termed 'feeling rules' (Hochschild 1979). This focus on emotion management was influenced by Goffman's dramaturgical model (Goffman 1959) and his ideas about 'face work' (Goffman 1967). Within these, Goffman explained social interaction using an analogy of social actors as players to an audience; aware that their demeanour and actions are under scrutiny and thus monitoring and modifying their behaviour. Goffman (1967) used the term 'face work' to describe how the performances are determined by social norms and the desire to avoid embarrassing or uncomfortable interactions.

He argued that at times this involved presenting the emotions that were expected by the audience rather than those the actor truly felt, emotions which could only be shared on occasion in backstage areas where the audience was not present. Whilst Goffman had acknowledged that this phenomenon was apparent in workplaces, Hochschild (1983) used her own empirical work to conclude that he did not adequately consider how employees' emotions are constrained by employers. She emphasizes that emotion management in workplaces is distinct from other circumstances because in the workplace the feeling rules people abide by due to social norms undergo 'a transmutation' (Hochschild 1983:19) to being organizationally defined, monitored and potentially attracting sanctions if deemed to be inadequately adhered to.

Thus, 'The Managed Heart' (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labour to describe this phenomenon, arguing that the organizationally defined remit of appropriate interactions and emotional displays between staff and those the organization serves is significant in both its nature and effects. Emotional labour constitutes not just presenting an emotional display that employers expect, but also has the goal of impacting the emotions and therefore actions of the person the employee is interacting with. Hochschild's ideas developed through her empirical research with flight attendants and debt collectors in which she observed workplace interactions, interviewed staff, sat in on training sessions and examined training documents, finding overwhelming evidence that employees were required to monitor and modify their emotional expressions in line with managerial expectations. For flight attendants, this entailed maintaining a pleasant, welcoming demeanour even when exhausted and experiencing rudeness from customers. In contrast, debt collectors felt under pressure to suppress empathy and intimidate customers to encourage payment of debts due to their organization's different goal. Hochschild considered these very different examples to be extremes at either end of a continuum of emotional labour, each requiring that staff moderate their emotions to present the emotional display employers demanded in order to both manage one's own emotions and induce a specific emotional response in the users of their services.

Hochschild (1983) also found evidence that her participants were not always putting on a show in the style Goffman assumed. In some instances, employees did indeed

present emotions they did not truly feel (which she termed surface acting), however, in others, employees reported attempting to actually alter the emotions they were feeling to match what was expected by employers, making it easier to sustain their act over time (which she labelled deep acting). She thus concluded that her perspective for understanding workplace emotion was a necessary development of Goffman's ideas, its significance being that it 'fosters attention to how people try to feel, not, as for Goffman, how people try to appear to feel.' (Hochschild 1979:560).

Hochschild argued that this type of work is significant because of the impact it has on staff – who often feel exhausted, unable to relax or even out of touch with their own emotional expression. To understand this, she drew on Marx's concept of alienation, an important feature of his early work (Mészáros 1970, Walton and Gamble 1972), which Mészáros argues is 'a vitally important pillar of the Marxian system as a whole' (Mészáros 1970 :227).

Marx discussed alienation in multiple texts, perhaps most notably the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 (Marx 1844). He considered alienation to function on multiple levels for employees under capitalism, resulting in alienation from the process of one's labour, the products of one's labour, from other people, and from the self. This final type is most relevant to this discussion: the idea that workers are not in control of their own bodies whilst working and these become at the mercy of employers, with the actions a worker is required to take in the workplace constituting 'something that is alien and does not belong to him (sic)' (Marx 1844: 81).

Although Marx was writing about manual labour in factories, Hochschild argues this extends to contemporary workplaces because constantly managing one's emotions through emotional labour means people lose contact with their own authentic emotional experiences. Emotion becomes a commodity and thus 'the worker can become estranged or alienated from an aspect of self' (Hochschild 1983:7). This performance and the accompanying detachment from spontaneously experienced emotions can have devastating effects on staff wellbeing, elaborated further in Chapter Two, which presents a discussion of literature that has come from Hochschild's original concept. The literature review presented in Chapter Two considers applications of emotional labour, as Ashkanasay and Daus (2013) describe it, 'across the gamut of occupations' (Ashkanasay and Daus 2013:285).

Chapter Two will also consider the developments of Hochschild's concept in the four decades since its inception, as well as critiques and refinements of her definition of emotional labour.

1.3 Social Security Reforms

1.3.1 Overview

Exploring the working conditions that staff who administer benefits in the UK have been facing over the last decade requires an understanding of the policy context in which they are working, something which has been hugely influenced by the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (referred to from here on as WRA2012). This extensive overhaul was presented by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government as a reform that had the dual goals of simplifying the existing social security system, and incentivising claimants into work, which would therefore save money on social security spending as claimants move off benefits in to work.

1.3.2 Terminology

The scope of the reform is enormous and too complex to explore here in detail, but key terms and associated abbreviations are defined below in table 1 and this section explores the rationale behind the reforms as well as three of the key features and their impact; specifically the introduction of Universal Credit, an increase in benefit conditionality, and the push towards digitalisation as the default way of making and managing benefit claims.

Table 1 - Terminology and abbreviations used

Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012)	Significant aspects include the introduction of Universal Credit, removal of the spare room subsidy, abolition of Council Tax Benefit and replacement with local Council Tax Support Schemes, the Benefit Cap, replacement of Disability Living Allowance with Personal Independence Payments and increased use of sanctions (CPAG 2015, Welfare Reform Act 2012)
Universal Credit (UC)	Replaces the following existing benefits: Jobseekers Allowance (income based) Employment Support Allowance (work related) Child Tax Credit Working Tax Credit Income Support Housing Benefit. (Welfare Reform Act 2012)
Local Authorities (LA)	Previously administered Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit. Now administer Local Council Tax Support Schemes and until the transition to full Universal Credit occurs, Housing Benefit. (Welfare Reform Act 2012)
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	Previously administered Jobseekers Allowance, Employment Support Allowance and Income Support. Now administering Universal Credit as well as other benefits not affected by Universal Credit such as Personal Independence Payments (PIP). (Welfare Reform Act 2012)
Centre for Social Justice (CSJ)	Founded by the Conservative MP Iain Duncan Smith in 2004 to look at the causes of, and solutions to, poverty in Britain (CSJ 2006). It criticised the previous Labour government's approach to tackling poverty and made recommendations for Conservative party policy.
Social Security	The term social security is used instead of welfare throughout this thesis in recognition of Lister's (2013, 2017) argument that the use of the term welfare carries problematic negative associations. The only time the word welfare will be used is in direct quotes from other authors or when describing the Welfare Reform Act 2012.
Third Sector (TS)	Non-governmental and non-profit organisations including charities and community groups that frequently offer impartial advice on benefits, with Citizens Advice being one of the most closely involved. Some third sector organisations have been commissioned to provide support for claimants (White 2006) – such as the Citizens Advice Help to Claim contract which supported 134,000 people in 2022-23 (Citizens Advice 2024).

1.3.3 Rationale for Reforms

To understand WRA2012 it is necessary to look at the economic factors and motivations that shaped it. The work of the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) played a significant part in shaping the direction of the reforms. The CSJ document 'Breakthrough Britain' (which was overtly linked to Conservative policy recommendations) identified five 'pathways' to poverty; 'family breakdown, educational failure, economic dependence, indebtedness and addictions' (CSJ 2007:6). CSJ publications consistently emphasized that tackling these pathways needs to be done in unison to alleviate poverty as pathways interlink, leading to poverty that extends across generations (CSJ 2006, CSJ 2007). Several themes recur in CSJ documents preceding WRA2012, including worklessness existing over generations, the benefit system not providing incentives to move into work and lone parents being linked to several of the pathways (CSJ 2006, CSJ 2007).

The language of worklessness and dependency that pervades CSJ documents has been criticised for blaming individuals in poverty for their circumstances whilst obscuring structural causes of economic hardship (Lister and Bennett 2010, Slater 2012, Wiggan 2012). Slater's (2012) scathing attack on the CSJ argued that this constitutes a deliberate attempt to divert public attention from the causes of poverty which ignores solutions other than social security reforms, stating that 'emotive terms, phrases and concepts have been strategically deployed...to manufacture doubt with respect to the structural causes of unemployment and poverty' (Slater 2012:950). Lister and Bennett agreed, stating that the narrative surrounding the idea of 'welfare dependency' is due to a 'determination to downplay the effects of structural and economic factors and the role and responsibility of government' (Lister and Bennett 2010: 105). For example, despite CSJ rhetoric about generations of worklessness, Macdonald et al (2013) concluded, emphatically, that they were unable to locate *any* families where three generations had not worked, despite actively looking for participants who fit this criteria (Macdonald et al 2013). This research also questioned the CSJ assumption that families consciously decide to live on benefits – finding that all participants valued work, with many undertaking care or voluntary work, parents encouraging their children into employment and the younger generation expressing a desire to work (Macdonald et al 2013). CSJ language can be seen, therefore, as an example of the rhetoric Golding and Middleton (1982)

identified involving classifying those in poverty as deserving or undeserving poor, or in contemporary terms; taxpayers versus scroungers (Tyler 2020) strivers versus skivers (Lister 2017) and workers versus shirkers (Patrick 2017). Golding and Middleton (1982) argue that this distinction has existed since the 1500s, and it is seized upon during times of economic difficulty to justify social security spending cuts.

The financial crisis of 2007-2008 and subsequent recession in the UK in 2008-2009 certainly constitutes one such period of economic difficulty (Tyler 2020). This was a primary focus for the incoming Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government in 2010, and their Spending Review of October 2010 argued they had inherited a challenging financial situation from their predecessor with a huge deficit requiring an 'unavoidable deficit reduction plan' (HM Treasury 2010:5). The source of the deficit has been questioned (Hodkinson et al 2016) but the discourse presented about the previous Labour government's financial mismanagement was used to justify substantial public spending cuts (Birrell and Gray 2017, Fairclough 2016, Hodkinson et al 2016).

Social security was explicitly identified by the Coalition government as an area where they aimed to make 'savings', with the Spending Review stating 'particular focus has been given to reducing social security costs and wasteful spending' (HM Treasury 2010:5). The 2010 Spending Review echoed CSJ sentiments, laying the foundation for a radical reform of the social security system, to 'simplify the welfare system, promoting work and personal responsibility through the new Universal Credit' (HM Treasury 2010:7). The changes were at that point estimated to be able to save the government £11 billion (HM Treasury 2010). Critics have argued that social security reforms were ideologically motivated and constitute a larger rollback of the state as part of neoliberal ideology (see Birrell and Gray 2017, Gibb 2015, Patrick 2017, Tyler 2020), and whilst a comprehensive discussion of this is outside the scope of this thesis, this debate is important to note.

Shildrick (2018) has described how the idea of the undeserving poor is perpetuated through a culture of 'poverty propaganda' that labels and stigmatises people experiencing hardship as lazy, deviant and unwilling to work. These messages are distributed and reinforced through political and policy discourse, including CSJ

publications, and the mainstream media (Shildrick 2018), with Tyler (2020) arguing that understanding this stigma is essential because ‘the cultivation of stigma has always played a role in the rationing of welfare (Tyler 2020:189). Media such as the television show *Benefits Street* has been highlighted as presenting a highly edited, sensationalised and overwhelmingly negative view of benefit claimants that contributes to this (Garthwaite 2016, O’Hara 2020, Patrick 2017). Lister (2017) argues that the term ‘welfare’ itself carries stigma, and compares it to the phrase social security, which has more positive connotations and connotes something utilised by everyone.

1.3.4 Universal Credit

The concept of UC was first laid out in the CSJ publication *Dynamic Benefits* (CSJ 2009) and is now being implemented. This new benefit, replacing many existing benefits (see table 1) was proposed to simplify the system for claimants and streamline administrative processes, ensuring claimants are not penalized for working and incentivizing long term claimants in to work (CSJ 2009, Griffiths 2024, Ray-Chaudhuri and Waters 2024). Data from 2024 indicates that almost half (47%) of households affected by the move to UC gain at least £200 a year, with couples with children, renters, and households in work most likely to gain (Ray-Chaudhuri and Waters 2024).

UC involves monthly benefit assessments and monthly payments in arrears in an attempt to simulate receiving a wage from work (CSJ 2009) which has been criticised for creating an additional administrative burden for claimants (Griffiths 2024, Summers and Young 2020) and causing additional hardship for claimants who are not used to managing monthly budgets or whose financial circumstances change frequently (Millar and Bennett 2017, Summers and Young 2020). The foundation of UC has also been questioned, because although it ostensibly aims to treat claimants as rational actors likely to choose to work in the new system that incentivises this decision, the reality of UC involves more surveillance and control over claimants’ lives (Millar and Bennett 2017, Rafferty and Wiggan 2017, Wiggan 2012), with Fletcher and Wright calling the Universal Jobmatch system UC claimants use ‘a surveillance tool garnering evidence for sanctioning – a digital panopticon’ (Fletcher and Wright 2018:332).

There have also been multiple problems with the online system developed to manage UC claims which has caused delays in full implementation (Hodkinson et al 2016). The DWP has repeatedly revised their estimates of when the rollout will be complete throughout the course of this research – with the most recent proposed date of completion being March 2026 (DWP 2024), almost a decade later than their original target of 2017. Despite the delays, the rollout continues, with the CSJ claiming that ‘once fully rolled out Universal Credit will be the most powerful poverty fighting tool at the Government’s disposal’ (CSJ 2017:7).

1.3.5 Digitalisation

UC involves applying for and managing claims online, signalling a move away from paper applications and face-to-face support (Alston 2018, Harris 2017, Stafford et al 2012). The DWP justification is that increasing digital services will help them to make decisions quickly, thus creating savings (DWP 2017). There is limited provision for vulnerable claimants to have access to other means of managing claims, and 80% of all claimants were originally expected to be using online services to manage their claims by 2017 (Hodkinson et al 2016). The way the DWP assesses vulnerability has previously been called into question, with Stafford et al (2012) noting that such decisions are ‘both relativistic and subjective’ (Stafford et al 2012:499), relying on staff judgement, prior experience and the behaviour the claimant shows on a particular day. This strategy means claimants who should be identified as vulnerable may be overlooked, and thus not get the support they need, as previous evidence has suggested (Marienfeldt 2024, Stafford et al 2012, Veasey and Parker 2021).

Several commentators have criticized the online service on similar grounds, for assuming claimants are a homogenous group and ignoring the technological barriers faced by groups of claimants including those with mental health difficulties, people without access to a computer and those with literacy issues, which can lead to distress and disincentivize people from claiming (Alston 2018, Birrell and Gray 2017, Fletcher and Wright 2018, Harris 2017, Mears and Howes 2023). In his report for the United Nations, Alston (2018) condemned the approach as having ‘built a digital barrier that effectively obstructs many individuals’ access to their entitlements’ (Alston 2018:8). Similarly, Hodkinson et al (2016) express concerns that the impact

of digitalizing services is not yet understood, cautioning it may lead to ‘digital exclusion and destitution for particular groups of claimants’ (Hodkinson et al 2016:i).

The technology has also been criticised for its design which has been argued to lead to a number of issues including unnecessary delays due to inflexibility in the claim form, inaccurate terminology, and poor communication of decision-making and appeal rights to claimants (Mears and Howes 2023). This context is significant for this research, as plausibly the claimants that have had difficulty claiming online are likely to be the ones seeking face-to-face support.

1.3.6 Increased Conditionality

Conditionality has become an increasing feature of the benefit system since the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980’s, but Fletcher and Wright (2018) argue WRA2012 constitutes a distinct acceleration of this approach. An example of this is the introduction of the Claimant Commitment; an agreement that working age claimants must sign stating they will undertake certain activities to maintain access to benefits. WRA2012 states claimants must take ‘all reasonable action’ to find work (WRA 2012 17:1) including regular job searches, preparation for work and work focused interviews (WRA 2012). This is arguably an increase in benefit conditionality, with Jobseekers Allowance (JSA) claimants now required to search and apply for jobs online through the Universal Jobmatch system or attend Work Programmes if they are requested to by the Department (NAO 2016, Harris 2017). Hodkinson et al (2016) are critical of this, arguing that it takes a punitive approach because the system cannot take adequate account of people’s personal circumstances, thus constituting a ‘far more inflexible, faceless compliance regime for claimants’ (Hodkinson et al 2016:14) that is experienced as paternalistic and controlling by claimants (Patrick 2017).

Claimant obligations are enforced through sanctions, involving a partial or complete loss of benefit for a specified time, which WRA2012 extended from a maximum of 26 to 156 weeks and made newly applicable to lone parents and disabled claimants (Watts et al 2014, NAO 2016). The National Audit Office (NAO) investigated sanctions in 2016 and pointed out that sanctions are neither uncommon nor new but acknowledge WRA2012 increased ‘the scope and severity of sanctions’, which is illustrated by their finding that 24% of all JSA claimants from 2010 to 2015 were

sanctioned (NAO 2016:7). The changes to sanctions have been widely discussed by DWP reviews (Oakley 2014), academics (Fletcher and Wright 2018), journalists (O'Hara 2014), the voluntary sector (Page et al 2014) and campaigners (Pring 2017), with concerns raised that their increased usage, duration and the widening of claimants who can be subject to sanctions disproportionately affects vulnerable claimants (Oakley 2014, Page et al 2014, Pring 2017). The negative impacts of sanctions are widely reported and profound, with Dwyer (2018) arguing that 'they routinely trigger profoundly negative personal, financial, health and behavioural outcomes' (Dwyer 2018:1). Evidence suggests that sanctions are also applied disproportionately, with young men and claimants from ethnic minorities particularly at risk of being sanctioned (Harrison 2023, Parkes 2023, Redman and Fletcher 2022). In addition to this, research suggests regional variation in how frequently sanctions are applied, suggesting variation in local practices (Grant 2013, Parkes 2023).

The rationale behind using sanctions has also been questioned by researchers arguing that sanctions reinforce the idea that poverty is the fault of individuals rather than considering structural barriers, and that their use pushes claimants into deeper poverty which does little to help them into employment (Millar and Bennett 2017, Patrick 2017, Pring 2017, Slater 2012, Wiggan 2012).

The negative effects of sanctions have been widely reported, due to them leading to negative effects on physical and mental wellbeing (Harrison 2023, Veasey and Parker 2021), as well as causing or exacerbating financial hardship – with Citizens Advice reporting that 94% of the people they asked said that being sanctioned had led to needing to borrow money or go without essentials, and 75% saying they were worried about their ability to afford their rent (Harrison 2023). Citizens Advice have reported that claimants do not feel JCP staff are understanding of their reasons for not being able to meet their commitments (such as being late to an appointment), and have advocated that the DWP should allow people to explain or inform them of their right to submit evidence before applying sanctions, as well as using a formal warning before removal of benefits (Harrison 2023, Miller and Rose 2023). Similarly, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) made recommendations last year to substantially reduce the use of sanctions and conduct a review of conditionality in UC (CPAG 2024), indicating that these issues are not being resolved over time.

1.3.7 Changes to Working Environments Post Welfare Reform Act 2012

Changes to DWP and LA staff working conditions have been substantial since the recession and WRA2012. The 2010 Spending Review outlined changes directly affecting staff working conditions, stating that the 'DWP will reduce its corporate overheads by 40 per cent in real terms by 2014-15, through centralisation of support services and rationalisation of strategy and policy functions.' (HM Treasury 2010:67). This was presented as a cost-saving measure which would also assist claimants by streamlining the system and preventing unnecessary bureaucracy. The DWP departmental plan for 2015–2020 (updated 2017) restated their commitment to reducing spending by £12 billion through 'transforming the way we deliver our services to reduce costs and increase efficiency' (DWP 2017). Clarifying information claimants receive, improving claim processing time, accuracy and fraud detection were advocated as advantages, with an articulated focus on reducing staffing levels and the number of centres to reduce operating costs whilst 'investing in a smaller and more skilled workforce' (DWP 2017).

Whilst the DWP has been optimistic about these changes, the impacts of them on staff have been captured in data from the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) who represent DWP staff. This data presents a stark picture of understaffing, unmanageable workloads, poor work-life balance and high staff turnover (PCS 2024), and recent data from the National Audit Office (NAO) states that there is currently a shortfall of 2100 work coaches with Jobcentre Plus (NAO 2025). Research on local authority staff has indicated similar pressures as a result of being 'shock absorbers' of austerity (Hastings and Gannon 2022:887) – with staff reporting needing to work outside of their paid hours to meet demand, an increase in stress related illnesses and drinking and eating more to manage stress (Hastings and Gannon 2022).

1.4 The role of a Benefit Advisor

Benefit Advisor is the term used throughout this thesis to describe staff working in front-facing roles with benefit claimants that involve advising them on, or supporting them with, their benefit claims. In reality, the participants in this research had a variety of different job titles – including Work Coaches, Benefit Officers and

Customer Service Agents – both due to their different employers, and the specifics of their role. However, for the avoidance of confusion, to make the part of their role that is of interest to this research clear, and crucially to maintain anonymity, the term Benefit Advisors has been applied to all. This work may be performed face-to-face, over the telephone (and therefore voice-to-voice), or a mixture of both.

The Benefit Advisors who participated in this research project work (as of the date they were interviewed) – or previously worked - for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) , Local Authorities (LA), and third sector (TS) organisations advising on a variety of benefits including Universal Credit and the benefits that it replaces (see table 1). Previous staff members who worked in their role at some point between 2013 and 2019 (when data generation concluded) were also included. 2013 was chosen as significant because this is when the first reforms from the Welfare Reform Act 2012 came into effect, thus enabling the data to capture the period of legislative and organisational change that this research provides a snapshot of. It was important to include the perspective of participants who are no longer in their roles alongside current staff because of organisational restructuring (DWP 2017) and because leaving their role may in itself be the consequence of other strategies to manage negative impacts of their role failing. Within these sectors, it is important to differentiate between two types of role. The first involves the direct administration of benefits, i.e. roles where advisors can directly amend (or report to colleagues who can amend) information on benefit claims, which is referred to in this research project as Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles. The second type of role is one where the advisor is there to support the claimant with making or maintaining their benefit claim, but they do not have any direct decision-making ability, nor the ability to feed information back to colleagues who can make decisions on allowances. This latter group are referred to throughout this research as Claimant Support (CS) roles. An example of a DBD role would be a Work Coach in a Jobcentre Plus office whose role is to support claimants into work alongside monitoring and reporting on claimants' job seeking activities, and a CS role would include staff working for a third sector (TS) organisation such as Citizens Advice who specialise in advising on benefits.

It is important to note however that the distinction is not a clear split between Department for Work and Pensions and local authority staff in DBD roles, and third sector staff in CS roles. This is because local authority roles can fall into either

category. In addition, some third sector roles – which are still determined to be CS roles due to the advisor not having any decision making capability over the claim – are funded by the DWP, such as Citizens Advice’s Help to Claim service, which is designed to help people to make claims for Universal Credit and support them up until the first payment (DWP 2022, Griffiths 2024) and sometimes involves advisors worked in shared spaces, such as having a desk in a Jobcentre Plus or local authority building. The impact of these blurry distinctions is picked apart in Chapter Seven.

The Actual Sample section of Chapter Three (Section 3.4) breaks down which role(s) participants worked in. As Chapter Three will explain, participants sometimes moved between sectors and roles within one organisation in ways I had not initially anticipated. Each participant’s employment journey is therefore explained in Chapter Three to show the role(s) they occupied.

Table 2 - Benefit advisor role and sector information

Sector	Role
Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)	Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD)
Local Authority (LA)	Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD), Claimant Support (CS)
Third Sector organisations (TS)	Claimant Support (CS)
Self-employed (SE)	Claimant Support (CS)

1.5 Research Questions

My specific research questions, aimed at capturing the experiences of benefit advisors during a context of workplace upheaval are below. The first three questions aim to capture staff experiences fully by understanding the role they do, the effects of their work, and the strategies utilised to minimise any negative impacts of their role. The final (fourth) question is a theoretical question, aimed at exploring the viability of Hochschild’s (1983) definition of emotional labour for this context.

1. How does emotional labour function in benefit advisory roles?
2. What are the effects of performing emotional labour in benefit advisory roles on benefit advisors?

3. What strategies do benefit advisors use to alleviate any undesired effects of emotional labour in their roles?
4. How useful is Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour for exploring the interactions benefit advisors have with claimants in the workplace?

Chapter Three explores these questions in more depth and sets out the specificities of how this research will explore them.

1.6 Thesis Structure

Chapter Two introduces the literature that shaped this research; offering a discussion of public administration literature, including Lipsky's (1980) influential research on street level bureaucracy. Public administration literature is then brought into conversation with Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour to highlight what this can add to our understanding of the role realities of benefit advisors. A succinct history of emotional labour as a concept and important developments and research directions is presented, including research on the impacts of emotional labour on employee wellbeing, and the ways employees manage, alleviate, or even resist, emotional labour.

The design and methodology of the research project is discussed in Chapter Three to provide transparency about how the research was undertaken. This includes a discussion of the epistemological underpinnings of the project, decisions made about the research methods, ethical considerations, and participant recruitment. The ways in which the research design was adapted in the face of challenges is also discussed and reflexive observations are also an important part of this chapter.

Chapter Four sets out the nature of emotional labour in such roles - capturing the specific strategies advisors utilise in the moment in order to manage both their own and claimant emotions, and addresses the degree to which these fit within existing understandings of emotional labour or require new terminology and understanding.

The following chapter (Chapter Five) explores the impacts of working in benefit advisory roles on staff beyond the end of the workday and outside of the workplace. Both positive and negative impacts of emotional labour are considered with

reference to how these relate to existing literature and offer insights specific to this role.

Chapter Six develops from this point to understand the strategies that benefit advisors use to manage the negative impacts of the emotional labour they perform, and the narratives that shape how they view their roles and the people they serve are also focused on here as these constitute another mediating factor in the experience of emotional labour.

The final data chapter, Chapter Seven, considers the external structures that affect advisors' ability to draw upon strategies to manage the emotional labour they perform – including their physical environments, training and support from management.

Finally, this discussion will be brought together in the conclusion, which underscores the key arguments from the research and situates them within the literature. The conclusion also allows space for an exploration of the implications of this research – for benefit advisors, trade unions and management with decision making ability for staff working conditions, as well as the relationship between public sector and third sector benefit advisors. Future research directions are also suggested to develop the findings set out in this thesis.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction and Scope of Review

This chapter offers an overview of the two essential areas of literature this thesis engages with, builds upon, and critiques. Firstly, it discusses public administration literature that enables us to understand the role of benefit advisors in direct benefit delivery (DBD) roles as administrators tasked with enacting policy at ground level, introducing the influential body of research on street level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980). Chapter One has already set out the wider policy context and relevant debates about social security reform and benefit claimants that contextualise the work of benefit advisors in the United Kingdom (UK), and here the discussion of public administration literature explores academic understandings of the role of benefit advisors: how they make decisions, the organisational constraints they are under and how they experience their roles.

Secondly, the chapter brings this understanding of benefit advisory roles into discussion with emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) to explore how this project's focus on the emotional labour required in both Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) and Claimant Support (CS) roles enables a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the tensions and pressures benefit advisors face and how these impact their actions in the workplace. The chapter concludes by identifying the research questions that emerge from the discussion which this research aims to answer.

Different theorists and writers use varying terminology to describe the public that is being engaged with in the diverse workplaces they discuss. For clarity and consistency, this chapter uses the term 'claimant' when specifically discussing roles that engage with benefit claimants, and the term 'service user' elsewhere, except where drawing upon a specific, identified context where the original author uses other language. The term 'service user' is intended to represent the diverse range of relationships staff performing emotional labour may have with the customers, clients, patients, claimants etc. that they interact with at work.

2.2 Public Administration

2.2.1 Overview

Public administration literature is a logical starting point for understanding the experiences of benefit advisors in the contemporary UK landscape. Chapter One has already touched upon the complexities of the current landscape of UK social security delivery. Here, the focus tightens to consider in more depth relevant public administration literature that enables an understanding of the factors influencing the decision-making and spaces for discretion within benefit advisory roles, and how advisors experience their work in terms of making sense of their roles, and managing tensions.

2.2.2 Street-Level Bureaucracy

A key idea in public administration literature has been Lipsky's (1980) hugely influential concept of street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky's central line of argument is that policy is enacted in front-facing public sector offices, where workers are constrained by time and resource pressures that make it impossible to adhere to the decision-making standards dictated in legislation. In such contexts dominated by scarce resources and structural constraints, workers need to use discretion and develop management strategies to perform their roles effectively which is said to constitute policy being remade at the ground level because street-level workers essentially reshape policy through their actions.

A central part of Lipsky's (1980, 2010) argument is that to work effectively in environments with high workloads and a lack of resources, front-line staff create routines and classifications of service users to simplify their work. These classifications are affected by a number of factors and matter because they frequently impact the way service users are treated, including in terms of the time and resources they may be offered. In numerous studies, data indicates that staff in contexts of scarce resources and heavy workloads use their discretion in order to focus on certain service users in order to achieve desired outcomes, a practice known as 'creaming' of more desirable service users whilst 'parking' those who are more complex, more challenging to deal with, or least likely to succeed (Carter and Whitworth 2015, Greer et al 2018, Rees et al 2014). As an example close to the topic

of this project, research that has focused on staff working with unemployed service users has found that those seen to be closer to employment, or perceived as behaving in a more collaborative way, are offered more personalised employment support (Andreotti et al 2024).

A wealth of recent research on street level bureaucracies within social security offices – albeit much of it outside of the UK - provides useful insights for further exploration, such as that employees struggle to balance their dual role purpose of helping and policing claimant behaviour (Gross et al 2018, Stray et al 2023, Taylor and Seale 2013) and exploring how advisors use discretion in their decisions about whether to sanction claimants (Nguyen and Velayatham 2018, Trochymiak 2022). Significant attention has also been paid to how advisors working with unemployed benefit claimants categorise claimants and the extent to which these categorisations rely on staff biases and prejudices towards individual claimants and groups of claimants (McGann et al 2022, Redman and Fletcher 2022, Rice 2012, Taylor 2015), including the framing of deserving and undeserving claimants (Golding and Middleton 1982, discussed in Chapter One). These categorisations are important to sociologists because they ignore genuine structural disadvantages in favour of individualising unemployment and framing claimant difficulties as the result of a lack of motivation (Fuertes and Lindsay 2016, Holmquist 2009, Taylor et al 2011, Taylor et al 2018, Turgeon et al 2014). One attempt to understand this concluded such claimant blaming to be a way of restoring a sense of job satisfaction in a context where staff may otherwise have to confront feelings of failure at not being able to provide effective support for claimants (Taylor et al 2011).

Efforts to understand the workplace experiences of staff working with benefit claimants have often focused on those engaged in roles that utilise activation – aimed at moving unemployed claimants towards paid employment. The tensions and arguable failure of these policies in specific contexts is outside of the scope of this research but has received rich academic interest (Grundy 2019, Peterie et al 2019, Wright 2012). Focus has been placed on how the involvement of performance monitoring in supporting jobseekers makes it challenging for staff in front-line roles to effectively support claimants. A managerial focus on fulfilling targets in order to get a claimant into *any* job, regardless of suitability, is incompatible for advisors striving to provide effective and personalised support and has been described as ‘a

philosophical war with practical consequences' (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody 2007:207). The consequences of this cannot be understated, with research suggesting that it contributes to not only to disharmony between front-line staff and management (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody 2007, Grant 2013), but also active attempts to resist and staff turnover (Johnson Dias & Maynard-Moody 2007), as well as negative claimant perceptions of the quality of support they are offered (Madsen 2024). This friction can be understood in the context of worker identities and sense of role purpose: people are often driven to front-line advisory roles because they feel these roles offer the opportunity to make a positive difference to people's lives, and thus occupational identity construction hinges on the idea of being able to provide effective support. (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003). When these goals are at odds with employers focused on performance monitoring and/or behavioural activation, this causes friction between front-line staff and management (Johnson Dias and Maynard-Moody 2007, Watkins-Hayes 2011).

As digitalisation is an important pillar of Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012) reform, it is also important to note previous research on the ways that digitalisation is impacting these roles (Ball et al 2023), including how digitalisation tends to constrain discretionary power, except in a minority of contexts where staff find opportunities to work around the system (Marienfeldt 2024).

Emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) offers another dimension for understanding such behaviour that takes into account how the intense emotional strain required in such interactions between advisors and claimants can impact advisor use of discretion, and how some claimants may receive a more personalised, or higher quality service. Explicit discussions about emotional labour in street level bureaucracies have a precedent (Nguyen and Velayatham 2018, Taylor 2014), with Nguyen and Velayatham (2018) arguing that the critical role played by emotions in benefit administration settings has been previously overlooked. This research fills this gap, by focusing for the first time on the UK context since the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012. In a particularly relevant piece of research on social security staff in the USA, Taylor (2015) found that staff internalized institutional rhetoric about deserving and undeserving claimants to enable them to manage the emotional labour they performed (Taylor 2015). Crucially, she also found staff were choosing not to use discretion in situations where it was possible to, because

adhering to the rules and treating everyone in the same way gave them some measure of job satisfaction in an environment constrained by financial pressure that hindered staff from gaining job satisfaction through providing genuine assistance to claimants. Conversely, Irvine et al (2024) describes advisors as experiencing 'moral distress' from their interactions with claimants – feeling an ethical imperative to do something to help, but being unable to because of organisational and resource constraints, so this research will add clarity by exploring how benefit advisors experience and navigate this challenge.

Emotional labour is a valuable approach because it hones the focus on benefit advisor decision making to the level of individual interactions. It recognises advisors as not only constrained by legislation and processes that attempt to dictate the acceptable limits of support for claimants, but also by organisational feeling rules (Hochschild 1983) that dictate the scope and boundaries of organisationally defined appropriate emotional expression. This enriches academic understanding of the factors governing advisors' actions and decision-making processes, and crucially provides an insight into the impact of this kind of work, both in terms of the immediate impact and longer term, cumulative effects of doing such a role.

In addition, a focus on emotional labour recognises the complexity of the current benefit advisory landscape (as explored in Chapter One), in which advice and support for claimants is increasingly split between the public sector and third sector in what Edmiston et al term 'local ecosystems of support' (Edmiston et al 2022). Edmiston et al (2022) argues that these ecosystems are comprised of multiple organisations and are worthy of academic attention because they shape people's access to social security, despite being 'fragmented and contingent' (Edmiston et al 2021). Shifting to a focus on emotional labour enables an understanding of the experiences of advisors involved not just in direct benefit administration but also in claimant support (CS) roles – not just in the third sector (TS) but also in local authorities (LA) This allows the consideration of whether, and to what extent, benefit advisors who do not have any administrative or discretionary influence over benefit claims, but still play an important part in the process of advising and supporting claimants, may face similar challenges and pressures as the direct benefit delivery (DBD) roles which have received much more attention in the literature to date.

2.2.3 Organisational Context of Benefit Advisory Roles

Whilst discussions of street-level bureaucracy are central to understanding benefit advisory roles, there is additional relevant literature that explores the work experiences of benefit advisory staff and the complex role they provide as both gatekeepers of the social security system and advocates for claimants (Brodkin and Majmundar 2010, Stray et al 2023). The violence faced by staff working with benefit claimants has been one such area of study, with concerning findings that violence is a regular reality for front-line staff working in social security (Stroeback & Korczynski 2018). This study found that workers are able to reconcile experiences of violence with satisfaction in their roles by rationalising such episodes of violence as being directed at the system they represent, rather than aimed at the advisor personally (Stroeback & Korczynski 2018). Elsewhere, it has been highlighted that violence – or the threat of violence – is a reality that is not acknowledged by management, who both downplay the risk to staff and frame these concerns as being the fault of individual staff members, rather than being due to the system (Bishop et al 2005, Rosenthal and Peccei 2007).

The language used within the DWP has also received attention for reframing benefit claimants as ‘customers’ despite them not only having no choice over using the service, but also being subject to multiple obligations to avoid sanctions (Bishop et al 2005, Rosenthal and Peccei 2007). It is argued that this focus on benefit delivery as customer service permeates staff expectations too – with official documentation produced by Jobcentre Plus consistently referring to customers and the provision of customer service, and training focusing on customer service rather than recognising the emotional intensity of many interactions (Rosenthal and Peccei 2007).

Finally, it is important to note how the current landscape of UK social security differs from some of the contexts discussed above in that responsibility for supporting people to make and manage benefit claims is shared between the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local authorities who historically administered housing and council tax benefits and who are now involved in supporting claimants to make benefit claims, and the third sector, which also occupies a claimant support role, as well as having previously been subcontracted to provide some employment services alongside private sector companies by commissioned ‘prime providers’ in the Work

Programme (Birrell and Gray 2017, Considine and Lewis 2003, Rees et al 2024, Taylor et al 2017). This landscape was sculpted by successive governments stemming from Blair's labour government, who introduced the New Deal Programmes that outsourced employment support to the private and third sector (TS) , and was reshaped by the successive Coalition government who extended this with their Work Programme (Birrell and Gray 2017, Fuertes et al 2014). The integration and success of such programmes has been subject to academic attention, for example with regards to potential difficulties arising from multiple providers working in quasi-markets (Beck 2018, Egdell and Dutton 2017, Rees et al 2024), some TS organisations experiencing discomfort in being involved in sanctioning (Taylor et al 2017), and empirical investigations suggesting limited effectiveness in actually getting claimants into work (Dwyer 2018, Patrick 2017). A full discussion of this is outside the remit of this project, but it is important to note that it has created an environment where whilst the DWP (and to a decreasing extent, local authorities) are responsible for administering benefits, support and advice for claimants is provided by a wider variety of organisations including local authorities and the third sector. This context is significant because it helps to explain how a benefit advisor's role may shift over time as departments merge, contracts end and advisors from one organisation may choose to move to another or be moved across via Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations (TUPE) to elsewhere in the benefit advisory landscape (House of Commons 2009). It is also significant for understanding how street level bureaucracy alone cannot explain the experiences of benefit advisors who have varying levels of discretion from direct benefit administration to providing impartial advice on making and managing claims. Whilst they may not share the same level of discretionary capability, what unites these roles is that they require advisors to manage their own emotions and those of the claimants they support, making emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) a suitable framework for exploring these experiences.

2.3 Emotional Labour Overview

Emotional labour, as already touched upon in section 1.2, is work that requires employees to engage in emotion management such as suppressing anger or

evoking a welcoming smile in order to match employer expectations. This emotion management has two roles: it is intended to both manage one's own emotional display, and also to produce the desired emotional response in the public the organisation serves. Crucially, Hochschild argued that workplaces constitute a setting distinct from the emotion management that goes on in daily life due to the organizationally defined remit of appropriate interactions and emotional displays between staff and those the organization serves (Hochschild 1983).

As discussed in the previous chapter (section 1.2), Hochschild's interest in these workplace experiences and their consequences was explicitly sociological, with her main influences being Marx's idea of alienation (Marx 1844) and Goffman's dramaturgical model (Goffman 1959). Contemporary research using emotional labour as a concept is diverse and ever expanding and is not limited to sociology: there have been substantial contributions in the fields of psychology and human resource management, as well as significant interest in how emotional labour affects those employed in healthcare roles. One estimate – now over a decade old - suggests 10,000 journal articles have been published that refer to emotional labour, with over half of these since 2006 (Grandey et al 2013). Whilst a full review of this enormous body of research is not possible here, this chapter focuses on significant research directions and influential critiques, particularly those with relevance to a sociological understanding of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles. This discussion of the key branches of research on emotional labour - specifically research focusing on the effects of emotional labour and how to alleviate or resist negative impacts, as well as critiques and refutations of these critiques - demonstrates that it is a rich and relevant theoretical framework for exploring workplace interactions in benefit advisory roles.

2.4 The Impacts of Performing Emotional Labour

2.4.1 Overview

One of the main justifications for exploring emotional labour in workplaces is the well-documented negative effects that can result (Hochschild 1983, Lennie et al 2020, Montgomery et al 2006, Sloan 2007, Steinberg and Figart 1999, Sturdy and

Fineman 2001, Wharton 2009), although, as will be explored, the universality of these negative effects has been contested. Hochschild (1983) argued that intense performance can negatively impact staff wellbeing. She proposed that surface acting produces feelings of inauthenticity because people are aware that the emotions they perform at work are not a reflection of their true feelings, leading to the feelings of detachment and alienation from the self in Marx's terms. Deep acting has different consequences, with the pressure of altering emotions to meet organisational expectations leading to emotional exhaustion and potentially burnout - where employees' ability to perform emotional labour suffers as a result (Dudau and Brunetto 2020, Erickson and Ritter 2001, Hochschild 1983, Montgomery et al 2006).

2.4.2 Negative Impacts

Subsequent research has noted that these negative impacts are significant because they can also impact workers' life outside of the workplace, with Turner and Stets arguing that 'the emotional inauthenticity that comes from labour that forces people to deny their emotions may carry over into other domains, such as the family or intimate relations' (Turner and Stets 2005:40). A striking example is Smith and Kleinman's finding that medical students reported worries that the detachment from patients they had to practice at work was dulling their emotions and affecting their ability to be fully present in personal relationships (Smith and Kleinman 1989) and this bleeding of work pressures into one's personal life is supported elsewhere (Lennie et al 2020), with clear implications for discussions about work life balance. Having a lack of distance from one's role has been argued to increase the risk of burnout (Wharton 1999), so this is a significant concern. This effect can function the other way round too – with the way that employees feel at the beginning of their shift affecting their in-work performances: feeling exhausted pre-shift can make it harder to perform emotional labour and increase the strain employees feel (Van Gelderen et al 2007, Wharton 2009). Specific focus has been paid to the contexts in which workers perform emotional labour – with Erickson and Ritter (2001) suggesting that *which* emotions are managed is significant because managing agitation (defined by the authors as anger, nervousness or irritation) is often linked with feelings of inauthenticity and burnout.

Different disciplinary traditions have treated the implications of this differently too – with sociologists arguing that this is evidence of exploitation and alienation (Brook 2009a, Brook 2009b, Cohen 2010), as opposed to human resource management concerns about how to make this functional for the employee, and psychologists viewing surface acting as more problematic for workers (Grandey et al 2013), as will be explored below.

2.4.3 Questioning the Universality of Negative Impacts

Despite the abundance of research demonstrating negative impacts on staff, a first critique of emotional labour as a theoretical lens is that work on the effects of emotional labour is not unanimous in its findings, with studies, particularly from a psychological perspective, claiming that only certain types of emotional labour are harmful (Kruml and Geddes 2000, Mesmer-Magnus et al 2012, Näring et al 2006). For example, Mesmer-Magnus et al (2012) identified a difference between performing what they term congruent and discordant emotions, arguing that deep acting enables staff to perform congruent emotions because although initial energy is expended to alter emotion in line with organizational expectations, the emotion is then experienced as genuine and thus does not cause alienation or burnout. Surface acting, however, is said to have negative effects due to the increased energy required for constant performance and the awareness that the emotional display is false; an experience which they argue ‘both adds to the experience of stress and reduces their ability to cope with other job stressors’ (Mesmer-Magnus et al 2012:3738). This is echoed elsewhere (Kruml and Geddes 2000, Montgomery et al 2006, Näring et al 2006, Wharton 2009), and is arguably of concern from a sociological perspective as it serves to individualise a systemic issue, something which has been argued by McKenzie et al (2019) who argue that a return to Hochschild’s focus is necessary for recognising the impacts on staff.

Emotional labour can be conceptualised at different levels – looking at each specific event, the individual, group, their organisation, or culture (Grandey et al 2013), but a sociological perspective, driven by Hochschild’s original focus, argues that the organisational level is key because this is what determines the acceptable boundaries of, as well as monitors and constrains employee behaviour.

2.4.4 Positive Impacts

A second critique of emotional labour states it can be experienced as satisfying by staff who are proud of their ability to perform it successfully and who choose to offer additional emotional exchanges not required by organizational feeling rules (Barbalet 2001, Bolton 2005, Bolton and Boyd 2003, Shuler and Sypher 2000). Barbalet feels emotional labour is too negative as a framework for understanding staff experiences because emotions are constantly in flux and 'such emotional experiences may be enriching of the person subject to them' (Barbalet 2001:182). This would appear to have some support in the psychological literature discussed above which concludes that low dissonance enabled by deep acting gives staff a sense of accomplishment and positive role attachment (Kruml and Geddes 2000, Mesmer-Magnus et al 2012, Sloan 2014).

Bolton (2000a, 2005, and Bolton and Boyd 2003), viewing emotional labour from a management perspective, has been a key figure in this stance. Studying the work of nurses led Bolton (2000a) to draw upon care work as an example of a work context where the argument that emotional labour is always harmful falls down because it 'gives little credit to nurses who, through their skilled performances of emotion management, obviously derive satisfaction from their ability to make a difference to patients' well-being' (Bolton 2000a:581). Several other studies of staff involved in care work have argued similarly that emotional performances in care work are not completely commodified in the way emotional labour proposes (Himmelweit 1999, Weir and Waddington 2008, Wharton 2009), with some advancing the view that emotional labour can be offered as a 'gift' to those one is caring for (Bolton 2000a, Lewis 2005). Lopez (2006) offers a more nuanced perspective, arguing that in the context of care at least, emotional labour exists at one end of a continuum which contains what he terms as 'organized emotional care' (Lopez 2006:133) at the other end – with different organisations falling at various points on the continuum based on their approach to, and support of, employees. This suggests emotional labour does not have to be the only organizational approach in care and that a more genuine reciprocal relationship between staff and patients is possible if the organization promotes it – but that this is not always the case, and it outside the control of individual members of staff.

Brook (2009a, 2009b) challenges the notion that emotional labour can be a positive experience from a Marxist perspective, arguing that whilst individual employees experience job satisfaction and may choose to offer additional emotional exchanges, they are still in an exploitative situation where the limits of appropriate emotional displays are constrained by employers. Peart et al (2012) also advance this view, arguing that 'the performance of emotional labour is not discretionary on the part of the employee. The employee is required to summon either a genuine feeling or mood or to fake it as part of their work' (Peart et al 2012:290). The limits of what staff can express is determined by the organization, and therefore genuine expression from the wide spectrum of emotion becomes limited to a narrower range of responses deemed appropriate for the role.

2.5 Strategies for Alleviating and Resisting Emotional Labour

2.5.1 Overview

A major branch of emotional labour research has been the exploration of how staff can alleviate or resist the effects of emotional labour (Korczynski 2003, Naqvi 2013, Sloan 2014, Taylor 1998). This is crucial because these efforts can be said to constitute 'little ways in which the self resists the institutional pull of commoditized emotional exchange' (Williams 2007:361), thus enabling staff to maintain an authentic sense of self in the workplace. Humour is a frequently reported technique, with staff sharing horror stories about difficult interactions to ease the pressure of constant performance (Lively 2000, Raz 1997, Smith and Kleinman 1989).

2.5.2 Support From Colleagues

Support from peers has emerged in multiple studies as a key strategy for managing emotional labour (Korczynski 2003, Lively 2000, Naqvi 2013), with Korczynski's notion of 'communities of coping', based on the call centres he studied, explaining how this functions on an informal level to support staff (Korczynski 2003:55). These ad-hoc communities offer a space for sharing humorous 'horror stories' about difficult interactions, space to vent anger, and an informal network of support during difficult moments that enables staff to maintain their emotional performances with service

users (Korczynski 2003, Lewis 2005). Critically, however, a lack of strong bonds within teams, or an individual team member having difficult relationships with their colleagues can mean that those on the outside of such informal support networks are not able to access these resources and thus do not have access to this valuable emotional outlet (Lewis 2005, Singh and Glavin 2017). This has implications for my research in that benefit advisors, especially those in third sector claimant support roles, may be located remotely from colleagues, potentially weakening such bonds and reducing the efficacy of such workplace communities as a space for support.

The sociological significance of communities of coping cannot be understated, especially as their presence has been noted to also serve the interests of employers in that their presence can make staff less likely to raise concerns about managerial expectations and their working environment with management or trade unions, thus such networks can inadvertently maintain the status quo rather than encouraging staff to collectively push for changes (Bishop et al 2005, Lively 2000). Lively's (2000) work is a useful example; arguing that reciprocal emotion management involving reassurance and a space to vent frustrations is utilized by paralegals to support their peers in a context where senior members of staff treat them poorly. Whilst this provides day-to-day support, she argues this can reinforce organisational hierarchies as the paralegals never directly confront those higher up the organizational ladder who treat them unprofessionally (Lively 2000).

2.5.3 Categorising Service Users

An additional strategy for managing emotional labour in settings that are emotionally charged has been identified whereby staff seek to categorise service users and mediate their responses accordingly. Both Wolkomir and Powers' (2007) study of abortion clinic staff and Taylor's (2014) research on US social security officers found staff utilized such categories to minimize the amount of emotional labour they had to perform: offering those deemed to be wanting (or deserving of) assistance a more personal, nuanced level of care, with more surface level performance offered to less desirable service users who the employee feels less of a duty to support. This method of alleviation is particularly interesting from a sociological standpoint because of the links to street level bureaucracy and the potential implications being

classified as an easy or difficult service user has for those clients and the standard of service they receive, a point which is picked up in Chapter Six .

2.5.4 Disputed Meanings of Resistance

The presence of strategies to alleviate, and especially to resist the demands of emotional labour has been used by some to argue that the concept therefore denies worker autonomy in the workplace (Bolton and Boyd 2003). Bolton and Boyd suggest that Hochschild's conception of emotional labour incorrectly reduces workers to 'emotionally crippled actors' (Bolton and Boyd 2003:290). They draw on evidence from flight attendants in their own study (mirroring Hochschild's (1983) focus on flight attendants) to argue that these staff are clear that they do not enjoy dealing with unpleasant customers and put minimal effort into hiding their disapproval, something they summarise as acting 'reluctantly with barely concealed contempt' (Bolton and Boyd 2003:302). This line of argument suggests that the acts of resistance noted in many studies of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983, Raz 1997, Sandiford and Seymour 2011, Taylor 1998) indicate staff have more freedom with their emotional performances than the concept of emotional labour acknowledges. There is indeed support for the prevalence of resistance strategies within literature that looks at how workers push the boundaries of acceptable performance – such as by tailoring responses rather than following organisational scripts in order to have moments of authentic interaction with service users (Sturdy and Fineman 2001) or by ostensibly supporting service users but putting minimal effort into one's performance so authentic feelings are visible (Sandiford and Seymour 2011).

However, Brook (2009a, 2009b) once again disputes that this is a valid critique of emotional labour, stating that the studies noting resistance to emotional labour indicate an awareness that staff have a degree of agency, but that this does not negate the fact staff are still constrained by organizational feeling rules to the extent of being alienated from their emotions. He summarises this by stating 'these rules dictate the form, content and appropriateness of emotional displays, thereby separating workers from the design and control of the labour process. Workers, therefore, are estranged from their emotional product and the process of emotion production' (Brook 2009b:12). To attempt to resist emotional labour still acknowledges the presence of the boundaries one pushes against, and crucially,

organizations have the power to monitor and sanction staff for not meeting their standards of appropriate emotional display. This is explored below in the following section, which considers the organisational and environmental factors that influence emotional labour.

2.6 Environmental Influences on the Experience of Emotional Labour

2.6.1 Overview

There are multiple factors in the workplace environment that can affect employees experiences of emotional labour, and this section touches on training, the recognition of emotional labour as a skill, monitoring, rewards and punishments, and the impact of mode of delivery.

2.6.2 Training

There has also been some academic focus on environmental factors within organisations that influence worker's experiences of emotional labour and their efforts to protect against its negative effects. The presence, and content, of workplace training has been identified as a mediator in terms of how well supported employees with their delivery of emotional labour (Brunetto et al 2014, DiCicco-Bloom & DiCicco-Bloom 2019, Humblet 2020, Rivera 2015). Hochschild noted that flight attendants were explicitly reminded that emotional labour was a vital part of their role because 'their own job security and the company's profit rode on a smiling face' (Hochschild 1983:104), but in other roles, these expectations are not made explicit and employees are not told what is expected of them. In the absence of formal training, colleagues can provide the basis for how workers understand their organisational feeling rules and acceptable boundaries of performance, and significantly, police this through monitoring each other's performance (Seymour and Sandiford 2005).

2.6.3 Emotional Labour as a Skill

The extent to which emotional labour is recognised and supported as skilled work that is monitored by employers is significant because of the multitude of ways

recognition – or a lack of it – can impact staff. An interesting example of this is Strathmann and Hay's (2009) research on clinic receptionists. They note that descriptions of emotional labour were absent from official profiles of employee roles and duties, yet features of emotional labour were identified by both staff and patients as a key 'silent skill set' (Strathmann and Hay 2009: 227) required for success in their role. Similarly, Wharton (2009) argues that employers often only refer to emotional labour using vague terms such as interpersonal skills. This lack of recognition is argued to be significant because not acknowledging the skill needed to effectively perform emotional labour means that employers can justify poor pay and working conditions (Ward and McMurray 2016). However, these conditions are not the same across all occupations, with evidence from other contexts indicating that some employers recognise emotional labour as a skill and give space to discuss it in meetings, with the group offering feedback on effective delivery as well as support (DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom 2019). In addition, Payne (2009) argues that the content of the job itself matters because the actual performance and emotions managed differ substantially between different roles, meaning that not all forms of emotional labour involve the same level of complexity.

Finally, it is important to note that even within the same role, the requirements of emotional labour are also not experienced in the same way by all staff, with the deferential smiling face of customer service, for example, being traditionally associated with femininity and thus causing particular discomfort for working class men who are increasingly likely to find themselves in such roles but who find such emotional performances at odds with their conceptions of working class masculinity and thus especially damaging to their sense of self (Nixon 2009).

2.6.4 Monitoring, Rewards, and Punishments

Whilst there appear to be differences between roles in how much emotional labour is explicitly recognized as a skill, the monitoring of emotional labour to ensure it is in line with organizational feeling rules permeates many professions, with high standards of emotional labour rewarded (Lively 2000, Naqvi 2013, Putnam and Mumby 1993). Managers supervise emotional labour, and as Putnam and Mumby explain, this has real consequences for staff because whilst good performance is rewarded through performance reviews and bonuses, poor performance means

criticism from senior staff, official warnings, demotions and in some cases, termination. These actions are used to ensure employees perform appropriately and serve to 'sanction those who deviate from appropriate emotional displays' (Putnam and Mumby 1993:38), thus underscoring the acceptable range of emotional displays in the role and making the consequences of not adhering to these clear. However, management input does not have to be negative, with Dudau and Brunetto (2020) outlining the multiple ways that managers can support their staff with the strain of emotional labour: through group debriefing, giving time to recover between interactions, and taking responsibility for difficult decision making with service users.

2.7 Relevance of Emotional Labour to Benefit Advisory Roles

2.7.1 Other Conceptions of Emotion Management at Work

One critique of emotional labour that has emerged is from those who argue that the term is used to cover phenomena that are vastly different and therefore should not be grouped together in one category (Bolton 2000b, Bolton 2005, Bolton and Boyd 2003, Weir and Waddington 2008). Bolton and Boyd argue that 'emotion within organizations cannot be simplified and condensed into one category' (Bolton and Boyd 2003:291), leading Bolton to develop her own categories to explore emotion management at work in a more clearly differentiated way (Bolton 2000b, Bolton 2005). She terms these forms of emotion management 'pecuniary' (based on an organisation's profit motive), 'prescriptive' (emotion management according to professional codes of conduct), 'presentational' (behaving according to more general social rules) and 'philanthropic' (providing service user satisfaction or meeting the needs of service users – the notion of the 'gift' explored above) (Bolton 2005:160).

Weir and Waddington (2008) similarly contend there is confusion over the difference between emotional labour – which, using Hochschild's definition, is organizationally defined and has exchange value, and emotion work – which happens in the private sphere, leading them to conclude that 'arguably there is a difference between what the emotional labour approach sought to demonstrate and what the concept of emotion work has developed into' (Weir and Waddington 2008: 69). They therefore

advocate use of the term 'emotion work' instead of emotional labour because they feel it encompasses a greater variety of workplace experiences of emotion.

2.7.2 Returning to Emotional Labour

However, the view that emotional labour has been diluted and should be reframed has been challenged on two fronts. Firstly, Lively's (2000) aforementioned work on reciprocal emotion management amongst paralegals argues that such emotion management, done amongst staff members at the same level in the organizational hierarchy, exists alongside the emotional labour they must perform with attorneys and clients, so both concepts are useful and relevant (Lively 2000). Brook (2009a, 2009b) offers an additional critique, particularly relevant to sociological interests, arguing that emotional labour is the term which comes closest to describing the exploitative relationship between companies and the emotions of their staff in capitalist societies. He contends Bolton's alternative typologies should be rejected because 'gone is Hochschild's emphasis on the exploitative and alienating nature of emotional labour, with its human cost to the individual' (Brook 2009a: 545). He advocates that future research utilizing emotional labour should instead refine and develop it (rather than abandoning or replacing it) to maximize its transformative capacity for workplaces.

In addition, the applicability of a concept that was originally developed to describe work in private sector customer service environments to public sector work has been questioned (Bolton 2000, Bolton 2005, Himmelweit 1999). However, the claim that emotional labour is not adequate for describing public sector employment which is not motivated by profit has been successfully challenged by research on public sector workers which indicates that whilst there are differences, organizational feeling rules still determine which emotional performances are acceptable and emotional labour still exists (Graham 2002, Lopez 2006, Mesmer-Magnus et al 2012, Taylor 2015). Brook summarizes this, explaining that 'Hochschild's definition of emotional labour, as 'sold for a wage', enables its application to all forms and degrees of waged emotion work...she defines emotional labour by its commodification as labour power rather than by its commercialization as a service product' (Brook 2009a: 539).

As can be seen by the discussion above, emotional labour still has considerable strength for exploring employee experiences. It is useful to note, however, the way some researchers have argued that in the contexts they studied (Taylor 1998, Ward and McMurray 2011), emotional labour is a useful concept but requires refinement to understand the nuance of staff experiences, much as Brook advocated above. A clear example of this is Ward and McMurray's (2011) study of the role of GP receptionists who act as gatekeepers between patients and medical professionals and have a responsibility to keep patients calm whilst they are waiting for appointments. They argue that as well as genuine caring responses, emotional labour does occur, but Hochschild's (1983) original categories of surface and deep acting are not sufficient to explain this. They observed two distinct responses by staff to manage their performances successfully in the workplace – emotion neutrality (where a façade of no emotional response is used to calm patients whilst the worker's genuine emotions are suppressed) and emotion switching, whereby staff match patient emotional responses in brief interactions and then switch to an appropriate display for the next patient, allowing patients to feel cared for and staff to manage multiple short interactions (Ward and McMurray 2011).

Additional research on medical receptionists (albeit in a different context) has suggested similarly that in this role at least, managing patient emotions is as important as managing one's own, and suggests future research should focus more on this aspect of emotional labour as well as personal emotion management (Strathmann and Hay 2009). This could feasibly extend to other contexts where keeping customers or clients calm is necessary, perhaps including benefit advisors tasked with explaining benefit reforms. An additional defence for continuing to use emotional labour as a theoretical foundation to describe workplace interactions is the framework it offers for managers to understand and potentially improve staff working conditions, for their own and staff benefit (Peart et al 2012, Putnam and Mumby 1993) and for trade unions to advocate for improvements in working conditions (Korczynski 2003). This is one of the goals of my research on benefit advisors.

2.7.3 Dirty Work

Research on emotional labour in stigmatised roles, or roles working with stigmatised social groups, has created links with literature on dirty work to explain how these roles can be considered a form of emotional dirty work (McMurray and Ward 2014, Ward and McMurray 2011). Drawing on the idea of occupational dirt, and the associated social and moral ‘taint’ which can transfer from stigmatised service users to the workers that engage with them (McMurray and Ward 2014, Rivera 2015, Ward and McMurray 2016), such research explains the pressure workers feel due to this ‘taint’ that reduces the prestige associated with their roles and adds to the strain associated with the lack of recognition of emotional labour (Ward and McMurray 2016). This feasibly has a parallel to benefit advisory roles – where staff engage in both the difficult work of administering – or gatekeeping – benefit claims, and work with benefit claimants who constitute a stigmatised social group, as seen in the above discussion of the undeserving poor (Golding and Middleton 1982). Dirty work is not always experienced as solely negative however, with previous research suggesting that staff can build a strong, supportive workplace culture through their shared role (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999), and that staff often take pride in being able to do a role that others would find too difficult (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, Ward and McMurray 2016).

2.8 Conclusion

This chapter has explored existing public administration literature, including the enduring influence of Lipsky’s (1980) concept of street level bureaucracy. Public administration literature provides insights into the policy and resource constraints affecting public sector workers, including benefit advisors in DBD roles, and how these constraints lead workers to use discretion in ways that can be argued to reshape policy, and lead to some claimants receiving preferential treatment based on how staff categorise them. What this existing literature does not explore however, is the emotional component of this work both at the level of individual interactions and longer-term effects of continuously having such intense emotional interactions, as well as how advisors who are not involved in administering social security, but still provide benefits advice, experience and are impacted by their roles.

Emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) emerges therefore as a compelling way of bridging this gap. This research utilises emotional labour as a framework to develop an understanding of how benefit advisors working across the DWP, LAs and TS organisations constituting 'local ecosystems of support' (Edmiston et al 2022) experience their roles. A wealth of emotional labour literature focuses on the ways that staff manage negative impacts of emotional labour, and this project allows space to explore what these strategies involve in an environment that has tangible impacts on not just the emotional experiences of claimants in that interaction, but potentially also the content and quality of advice and support they receive with their benefit claim.

Emotional labour has been the subject of much research and debate across the social sciences, but it remains a powerful lens for viewing experiences of emotion in workplaces and a useful tool for sociologists to understand workplace interactions. Critically, research has shown how a lack of organisational support structures or recognition of the skill emotional labour requires can leave workers vulnerable to substantial negative effects (Montgomery et al 2006), which brings the practical value of such research into sharp relief. Hochschild argued for the importance of researching emotional labour in 1983, stating that it is 'a dimension of work that is seldom recognized, rarely honoured and almost never taken into account by employers as a source of on-the-job stress' (Hochschild 1983:153). Forty years later, the contemporary studies discussed here suggest that emotional labour remains prevalent, yet often unrecognised, across an enormous variety of workplaces, and this research adds an important contribution to the literature by illuminating how it functions in UK benefit advisory roles in the midst of austerity and social security reforms.

The research questions guiding this project have been informed by the literature discussed above. These are:

1. How does emotional labour function in benefit advisory roles?
2. What are the effects of performing emotional labour in benefit advisory roles on benefit advisors?
3. What strategies do benefit advisors use to alleviate any undesired effects of emotional labour in their roles?

4. How useful is Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour for exploring the interactions benefit advisors have with claimants in the workplace?

The first and most fundamental question is how emotional labour (using Hochschild's 1983 definition) functions in benefit advisory roles – what benefit advisor emotional labour actually involves on the level of individual interactions – what emotions are evoked or suppressed in the advisor's own emotional display, whether they are required to present an organisational stance that is at odds with their own beliefs, what strategies are used to manage claimant emotions and why, and how their emotional labour is recognised and monitored by employers. This provides an empirical contribution by offering an understanding the content of benefit advisor interactions, and adds to the rich conceptual heritage of emotional labour research.

This is followed by two questions that aim to capture multiple elements of the experiences of benefit advisors – the effects of performing this kind of emotional labour on advisors both inside and outside the workplace, and any strategies used to manage it and alleviate negative impacts. These questions stem from the comprehensive existing literature that highlights the effects of emotional labour and alleviation and management strategies and through these questions, the project aims to establish whether and how the specific context of each advisor's workplace impacts upon their experiences, and whether differences exist between DWP, LA and TS advisor experiences.

The fourth and final question offers a conceptual contribution by centring theory, considering the above elements to comment upon the viability of Hochschild's (1983) definition of emotional labour for this context, to engage with the debate about whether Hochschild's (1983) model is fit for purpose. A full guide to how each question was unpacked and operationalised prior to constructing the interview schedules is available in Appendix One, and Chapter Three details the research design and data generation process in full.

The value of this research lies in how it bridges the gap between street level bureaucracy and emotional labour to understand benefit advisor experiences holistically – considering practical constraints and environmental factors, but also the substantial emotional element of benefit advisory roles, not just within the DWP and LAs but also TS roles. Understanding these impacts and how advisors respond to

them is critical for protecting the wellbeing of benefit advisors, and by extension the claimants they support. Chapters Four to Seven detail the key findings of the project, exploring the nature of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles, its effects, how advisors mediate these and the external factors that shape the strategies they can use.

Overall, these questions have the dual goals of offering an insight into emotional labour in benefit advisory roles and providing a snapshot of benefit advisor experiences in the context of intense pressure and organisational change. This is an important topic not just because it adds to the academic literature on emotional labour and the impacts of social security reforms in the United Kingdom, but also because illuminating the pressures staff face and how they manage these has practical value for multiple stakeholders including trade unions advocating for better working conditions, employers seeking to improve the working environment of their staff, and policymakers designing future social security reforms. The final chapter (Chapter Eight) will return to this discussion to consider the contribution of this research and the implications that arise from it.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the epistemological standpoint and methodological approach underpinning the project, followed by the proposed design and intended sample and rationale for these. Following this, an account is provided of how participant recruitment worked in practice due to access issues and the characteristics of the actual sample that was achieved is examined. The focus then moves on to how the data generation tools – specifically semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries – functioned in practice, including the challenges faced and how these were addressed. Ethical considerations are then discussed, followed by reflections on the unanticipated challenges that arose throughout the fieldwork, and how I managed and analysed the data. Finally, this chapter identifies which of the following data chapters engage with each research question.

The project aimed to generate in depth, nuanced data regarding the experiences of Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local authority (LA), and third sector (TS) staff working in face-to-face or voice-to-voice roles with claimants. This focused on how current and former benefit advisors have experienced their roles and interactions with claimants since the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012), utilising Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour as a framework for understanding their experiences. Using a qualitative approach therefore made sense to enable the generation of rich data that captures the complexity of staff interactions with claimants (Mason 2002). Fieldwork took place between March 2019 and February 2020 and involved semi-structured interviews, with the addition of solicited diaries for some participants. Initially, additional fieldwork hours were planned, which will be described in depth below, but the Covid-19 pandemic influenced my decision to cease data generation at that point.

3.2 Proposed Design and Sample

3.2.1 Methodological Approach

Acknowledging one's epistemological position is crucial as this impacts the decisions made at every stage - from research design through to data analysis and reporting findings (Aull Davies 2008, Bryman 2016, Doucet and Mauthner 2002, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). I take a constructivist approach, which is a type of interpretivism. Interpretivism posits that there is no one objective social reality, and that the realities people have constructed can be explored by asking them about their views and experiences (Grbich 2007, Lincoln et al 2011, Hesse-Biber 2017). Interpretivists argue that 'meaning is socially constructed via the interaction between humans or between humans and objects' (Hesse-Biber 2017:23).

Constructivism considers how people understand and interact in their social worlds, so exploring how participants experience their realities is crucial because 'researchers in this paradigm attempt to gain increased knowledge regarding their study and subjects by interpreting how the subjects perceive and interact within a social context' (Lincoln et al 2011:110). Qualitative research is closely aligned with a constructivist epistemological stance as it enables the generation of rich data that gives space to participants to share their experiences and understandings (Scotland 2012), which is why I decided upon semi-structured interviews and solicited diaries as tools of data generation. These approaches are described below in sections 3.2.2 and 3.2.3.

As researchers are also part of the social world being studied, I believe it is vital to recognise my role in co-constructing data with my participants, rather than assuming I am an unbiased agent who is able to 'collect' data from them (Holstein and Gubrium 1997, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Denzin and Lincoln 2011). For this reason, I use the term 'generate' rather than 'collect' when discussing my methodology to acknowledge my role in the process of research design, practice and data interpretation (Lincoln et al 2011). As a former staff member for a local authority working directly with claimants from 2012-2013 and a former benefit claimant, my own experiences have no doubt shaped my research at every stage. Therefore, rather than having a specific section to discuss reflexivity, my reflexive commentary is embedded throughout this chapter.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were my primary tool for data generation. Semi-structured interviews are valuable because of their ability to offer direct access to participant opinions and experiences in a format that enables participants to share their views and articulate what they consider to be important in their own words (May 2001, Wengraf 2001, Mason 2002, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Bryman 2016). As my research could lead to the disclosure of sensitive information, I was keenly aware that the location in which the interviews take place was a crucial consideration to ensure participants felt comfortable enough to talk openly about their experiences (McCosker et al 2001). My initial plan was that interviews would be conducted somewhere discreet, comfortable and quiet, such as a quiet café or a rented private space in a library or public building. Additionally, as my research concerns workplace experiences, there was an additional factor to consider. It has previously been argued that interviewing participants in their workplace can encourage the articulation of standard company responses as opposed to staff sharing their own feelings and thoughts (Edwards and Holland 2013), which is something I wanted to be sure to avoid by ensuring my chosen location would have no link to their employer. More importantly, as some participants would be discussing their current workplace, it was imperative that there was no risk of anyone related to their workplace overhearing the interview, or even seeing the participant talking to me and raising questions.

Due to financial constraints and the geographical spread of participants, I planned to also offer participants the choice of telephone or online interviews alongside face-to-face interviews. As data generation occurred prior to the popularisation of MS Teams and Zoom, Skype was chosen as the online platform as it was a widely used video call platform that was free of charge. Telephone and online interviews have been recognised as a viable financial option when participants are not easy to reach (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010, Rubin and Rubin 2012). Telephone interviewing can also be argued to offer benefits through enabling researchers and participants to talk in a private, comfortable location free from interruptions, thus facilitating the generation of rich data (McCosker et al 2001, Wengraf 2001, Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010).

However, Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) do caution that the appropriateness of telephone interviews depends on the specific research questions; when there is potential for significant distress face to-face interviews are preferable as they enable researchers to promptly identify this so they can minimise it. Although this is a valid criticism, participant choice in the interview location was an important factor to maintain their comfort, which was intended to encourage both participation and open discussion in the interviews.

Skype interviews have been noted to have similar benefits to telephone interviews (Hanna 2012), but with the benefit of being able to see body language and facial expressions. Gray et al (2020) argue that interviewing through an online platform offers multiple benefits to both participants and researchers – this saves travel time, makes participants in diverse geographical locations accessible, and offers the benefit over telephone interviews in that the researcher can see the participant – thus helping to build rapport and read the participant's facial expressions.

3.2.3 Interview Schedules

The interview schedules were designed to cover participant experiences of interacting with claimants, the emotions they feel (or felt, in the case of previous employees) about work and whether their workplace enables expression of these, how WRA2012 and associated austerity measures have changed their workplace, what support is available to them, the relationship with their management and how their role affects them both in and outside the workplace.

The way the research questions were operationalised is presented in Appendix One. To explore job content (and engage with my first research question) I asked about what participants roles involved on a daily basis: the tasks they did, and whether there was any administration of claims or just offering advice, what skills it takes to do their jobs, as well as what their interactions with claimants involved in terms of the type of interaction and emotional responses on both sides. In order to answer my second research question regarding the effects of emotional labour in advisory roles, I asked about how they felt both at work and at the end of the day and any workplace changes due to social security reforms as well as other organisational changes they had experienced. To establish any strategies used to manage or alleviate emotional labour, I asked about the support available to them in their workplace including

training and managerial support, and what they do when they are faced with angry or upset claimants.

Questions were worded in everyday language with the intention of fostering an informal, relaxed environment and the phrase emotional labour was not used. This was both to avoid any misconceptions participants may have held about what emotional labour constitutes and also a strategy to make them less likely to give answers they may have believed I was hoping to hear.

The interview schedule was refined through multiple drafts. My goal was to have a flexible structure containing core questions to ask and themes to cover, and piloting my questions with a former colleague (for my MA dissertation) indicated my initial attempt was far too rigid to allow for the natural flow of conversation. After several unsuccessful attempts to create a structure that felt necessarily comprehensive but flexible enough to allow a follow up of interesting and unexpected points through probes, I revisited Mason's (2002) approach to constructing interview schedules, based around the idea of referring back to the research questions at every stage to ensure the schedule aligns with them at each point. This finally gave me an approach that produced a structure that was both comfortably comprehensive but able to offer space to follow up the unforeseen directions characteristic of semi-structured interviewing (Wengraf 2001).

I constructed separate interview schedules for former and current staff, covering the same themes but ensuring questions about job satisfaction were worded appropriately and that the schedule for former staff accounted for the fact that participant recollections may not be as detailed in some aspects, as well as a short additional section about leaving their role. The actual interview schedules are available in Appendix Two and Three for both current and former advisors.

3.2.4 Solicited Diaries

Solicited (as opposed to pre-existing) diaries were chosen in conjunction with interviews to capture the experiences of current staff. Diaries have been advocated for exploring sensitive topics (Lee 1993, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Kenten 2010, Bartlett and Milligan 2015), with Harvey arguing they are unique because 'reflecting in a diary can provide a way for participants and researchers to explore ambivalence in their intimate daily lives' (Harvey 2011:665). Solicited diaries

therefore provide participants with the opportunity to articulate and reflect on their emotions with minimal influence from the researcher, which also has the benefit of addressing power imbalances between researchers and participants as the participant has greater control over what they choose to include and how they express their experiences (Bartlett and Milligan 2015).

Crucially, diaries also have the benefit of capturing experiences and emotions at, or close to, the time they occur. This is valuable for investigating emotional labour as diaries offer participants the opportunity to write about their working day at the end of that day, which is preferable to relying on memory to recall such information in interviews at a later date (Kenten 2010, Spowart and Nairn 2014). Diary methods have been used in some research on emotional labour (for example: Van Gelderen et al 2007 on police officers) but their potential remains underused in emotional labour research which created another incentive to utilise them.

Conversely, solicited diaries have faced criticism because participants record their entries for a specific audience and purpose and it is therefore claimed they might engage in self-censorship (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). However, Kenten (2010) argues that interview and focus group data may be similarly self-censored and diaries provide depth and insight unavailable from these other methods so they are a valuable tool, particularly given the above discussion of their unique value in accessing participant emotions at the time they occur.

Diary methods are also time consuming for participants to complete, requiring more sustained effort than interviews (Spowart and Nairn 2014), which I attempted to remedy by offering an additional gift voucher for diary completion. Whilst a more substantial inconvenience allowance was not possible (due to resource constraints), it was hoped participants would recognise this as a gesture of thanks for their time.

Combining diaries and interviews is an established approach (Spowart and Nairn 2014) because this offers participants more space for expression and enriches the interviews. In ideal circumstances, it would have been useful to conduct a pre-diary and post-diary interview to have the opportunity to explain the process to the participants and see if the insights they provided in their data changed over time as familiarity with the medium developed and we built rapport. However, due to resource constraints and not wanting to inconvenience participants with an additional

interview, I took the decision to have a short email conversation with each participant to explain the diary process prior to completion and then interview them once their diary was returned and I had been able to review it.

3.2.5 Focus Groups

I originally intended to utilise multiple qualitative data generation techniques to enable a triangulation of approaches (Richards 2015, Bryman 2016). The initial research design therefore included the use of focus groups as the final method of data generation. The focus on the interaction between multiple participants in a focus group is argued to generate data distinct from interviews, offering an insight into shared understandings and experiences (Gibbs 1997, Bryman 2016). If this had gone ahead, participants who engaged in earlier stages of the research would have been invited to participate in an online focus group once initial data analysis was complete, offering the opportunity for them to give their feedback on whether their views were represented accurately, as well as having the opportunity to generate additional data benefitting from both the group context and them having had time to reflect on their original interviews and/or diaries.

This was planned for late spring in 2020, but the onset of Covid-19 and associated pressures and uncertainties meant that I faced both practical challenges and more importantly, felt it was too much to ask of participants at a time of such uncertainty where they were likely to be facing increased challenges in their work and home lives. This stage of data generation was therefore abandoned.

3.2.6 Proposed Sample

This section explores the ideal sample. The sampling approach I planned to use was purposive which is consistent with my approach as a qualitative researcher aiming to reach a relatively small number of participants to interview and/or complete diaries, in order to generate rich, nuanced data to understand their experiences.

Initially, I considered three main ways to reach out to participants: through trade unions, through my own personal networks from my former employment, and finally, through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling was considered because it involves making contact with initial participants who then suggest other participants from their personal or professional networks – thus offering access to a greater number of

participants (Bryman 2016). It has been argued to generate distinctly rich data due to the snowballing process meaning that later participants come into the study with some prior knowledge, which means they have already had time to reflect on the questions the researcher is interested in (Noy 2008).

At the inception of the project, the plan was to solely recruit participants working for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Local Authorities (LAs).

Difficulties from the beginning in recruiting from these groups (discussed below), engagement with literature discussing the significant role of TS staff in benefit advice (discussed in section 2.2.3) and contact from third sector (TS) staff who were keen to participate, encouraged me to expand my definition of benefit advisor to incorporate their perspectives. The revised plan was then to enable the research to compare and contrast the experiences of staff in different organisations, and across both direct benefit delivery (DBD) and claimant support (CS) roles.

This research does not aim to represent the experiences of all benefit advisors, instead to provide a snapshot of the experiences of my participants at the time of the research. Nevertheless, I wanted to ensure my participants were able to offer data on the range of characteristics I was interested in. Ideally, a variety of participants would be recruited to enable comparisons and commentary on a number of issues relating to emotional labour and this context. The factors I was initially interested in are detailed here:

Table 3 - Participant inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
• Current or former DWP, LA or TS employee • Works/worked in a front facing role involving direct contact with benefit claimants (face-to-face or voice-to-voice) • Role involves/involved giving advice on, discussing, assisting with or administering benefit claims • Worked in role during or since 2013	• Has not worked for the DWP, LA or TS • Does/did not work in a front facing role involving direct contact with benefit claimants (face-to-face or voice-to-voice) • Role does/did not include giving advice on, discussing, assisting with or administering benefit claims • Left role prior to 2013 (when WRA2012 changes began to be introduced)

In addition to these basic criteria, I aimed to find participants with a range of characteristics of interest to the research questions. The ideal sample I aimed for would have advisors representing a range of experiences:

Table 4 - Ideal sample features

Relevant Feature	Rationale
Mix of advisors involved in face to face and voice to voice work	To see if this mediates experiences of emotional labour, as it has previously been suggested that there are differences between the two modalities (Mann 2004). This was of particular relevance because digitalisation was central to Universal Credit with claimants encouraged to make claims online rather than over the telephone or in person, an approach originally termed ‘digital by default’ (DWP 2017).
Mixture of staff working for LAs, DWP, and in TS roles	Explore any commonalities and differences between these organisations
Advisors with and without management responsibility	Managers can offer insight on how they support their staff with emotional labour
Advisors who had been in role for different lengths of time	Explore whether coping strategies develop over time, feedback on how changes over time have impacted work environment (advisors employed pre WRA2012), insight on new training and induction processes (new staff)
Employed in a range of locations across the UK	Potential impact of regional differences (e.g. local unemployment levels) affecting staff experiences and crucially, because the rollout of Universal Credit (UC) has been enacted at different times in different locations
Mix of male and female advisors	Explore whether these factors impact experiences of emotional labour, as previous authors have suggested (Graham 2002)
Mix of white British and BAME advisors	Explore whether this impacts experiences of emotional labour, as previous authors have suggested (Malvini Redden and Scarduzio 2017, Nguyen and Velayutham 2018)
Mix of current and former advisors	DWP staffing levels were still being reduced at the point of data generation as part of a long term plan (DWP 2017), therefore important to include current and former advisors, specifically anyone who is or was in post at any point between April 2013 (when the first changes introduced by WRA2012 came into effect) and the present day. The reason for this was to include the experiences of advisors who may have been made redundant, or those who decided to leave – either as a result of the changes and their impacts – or for other reasons.

The resulting sample actually achieved was significantly impacted by the access difficulties faced throughout my attempts to recruit participants, which are explored below.

3.3 Participant Recruitment

3.3.1 Trade Unions

I recognised from the outset that contacting employers (the DWP, LAs and TS organisations) directly to ask if they could promote the research project to their employees would not be an option for multiple reasons. Firstly, I was aware that the DWP have been reluctant to participate in more high-profile research (NAO 2016), and employers are likely to be concerned that a research project which asks about staff experiences and the impacts of their work is likely to elicit responses about negative experiences as well as positive ones. Protecting participants from negative repercussions for their career should their employer find out they have said anything negative about the organisation was paramount, so it did not make sense to alert their employers to the research. Aside from this, I was also aware that going through employers when asking about experiences at work which may be critical of management was unlikely to elicit open responses from participants if they knew their employer was aware of the research.

Despite bypassing employers, I initially planned and attempted to recruit participants through the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), who represent DWP staff, and Unison, who represent LA staff. The trade unions therefore functioned as a gatekeeper, defined as ‘those who are in a position to ‘permit’ access to others’ (Miller and Bell 2002:55) – in this case reaching a large pool of benefit advisors who are trade union members. Engaging with gatekeepers can help researchers with participant recruitment if researchers are successful at convincing the gatekeeper that the research is in their interests (Lee 1993). My hope was therefore that Unison and the PCS would be willing to recommend participants as trade unions are keen to highlight issues and advocate for improved working conditions, because gatekeepers are more likely to engage with research if they recognise it will enable their perspectives to be heard (Rubin and Rubin 2012).

I was able to make contact with the PCS through an introduction by an academic who has worked closely with them, whom I had emailed to ask for guidance on potential access routes. Such professional connections can be key for reaching hard to reach participant groups (Smith and McBride 2019) and indeed the initial PCS contact was keen to participate, and filtered the email through to a regional

representative, who forwarded my call for participants around their office. This secured one participant but, but the contacts made through the PCS union member were work email addresses. On noticing this, I was then concerned about sending any communication to these email addresses in case communications are monitored by management, limiting my ability to reach out to participants through the PCS. I therefore stopped emailing employer addresses, and as I did not have alternative contact details for their union members, this thus affected my ability to utilize this route. I also attempted to access Unison to reach LA staff but was not successful in gaining their support – the contacts I emailed initially said there was no one who met the criteria and when I asked about local authority advisors working with benefit claimants they said there was no way for them to contact these teams. I cannot be sure of the reasons for their reluctance to engage with the project, but as a large trade union representing multiple professions it is possible they did not feel that the research had much value to their goals. Therefore, attempts to advertise the research through the PCS and Unison more widely – such as promotion through their mailings or social media channels, proved unsuccessful, as I did not receive any positive responses to my contact attempts with them via email and telephone or attempts to follow up.

3.3.2 Snowball Sampling

I had initially hoped that previous experience of working as a trainee benefit officer may assist me in negotiating access, as I am still in touch with two former colleagues. Indeed, one participant was gained in this way, giving me initial confidence in the approach. After that, progress seemed to stall for a variety of reasons. Most of my former colleagues have moved on to new roles, breaking the chains of contact I was intending to utilize. This was unfortunately my experience of attempting snowball sampling with other participants too – former staff were often no longer in touch with previous colleagues, and as departments were undergoing a lot of upheaval, they reported that staff turnover was currently high.

A different issue – that I was somewhat embarrassed not to have foreseen - presented itself with current staff, who may face penalties if they disclose to other employees that they have been part of the research in an attempt to recruit them and management become aware of their participation. This concern meant that I did not

directly ask participants who were currently employed as benefit advisors whether their colleagues would be interested in participating as I feared it may lead to disciplinary action or other workplace challenges. However, one participant who worked in the third sector was keen to connect me with their colleagues and forwarded on information about the project in a non-work WhatsApp group with several of their colleagues.

My status as an outsider was acutely aware to me following these access attempts – I was initially disheartened at not being able to convince the trade unions of the value of my research and in snowball sampling faltering, but I was fortunate in being able to pivot to more successful techniques that enabled me to reach participants directly. My sampling approach therefore ended up being purposive and opportunistic, utilizing social media, as well as personal and professional connections. These approaches are detailed below.

3.3.3 Opportunities for Innovation

Due to the initial difficulties I faced during participant recruitment, I endeavoured to take a flexible approach, utilising opportunities that arose during fieldwork. This is a recognised approach because such spontaneous innovation can be crucial for gaining access to participants when other techniques have failed (Lee 1993, McCormack et al 2012, Kara 2015). Snowball sampling and access through the trade unions were not as successful as I hoped, but social media and personal connections proved useful, so I capitalised on these. I certainly became more aware of the power of social connections in terms of the number of friends and acquaintances who offered to put me in touch with people they know who work in the relevant sectors. In addition, meeting people in academic contexts, even if unrelated to my research – other PhD students in my department, people I have met at conferences, on training courses and at ESRC presentations, for example – generated useful leads I did not anticipate.

In each case, I forwarded a graphic ‘call for participants’ (Appendix Four, and described further below) and an information sheet to my contact for them to pass on to the person they knew. Whilst many of these did not generate new participants due to either the person declining to be involved or the well-meaning person who had put us in contact not realising that the person did not actually work in a role that was

suitable for my sample, I was able to gain a handful of participants through this route that I would have been unlikely to reach otherwise.

3.3.4 Social Media: Twitter

Realising that most of my outreach would need to be online and that this can be a fertile source of participants (Kara 2015), I decided to reach out to participants directly through my professional Twitter (which has since rebranded as 'X') account. I utilised the services of a close friend who is a graphic designer to create a graphic 'call for participants', containing information about my research in a clear, succinct format, which I hoped would be eye-catching way of attracting attention (see Appendix Four).

Consideration went into the content of the graphic to maximise its effectiveness. The graphic used a shade of green similar to that of the Jobcentre Plus logo in the hope that this association would catch the attention of DWP staff and other advisors used to engaging with content from the DWP, and contained information about the project as well as my credentials as a researcher. I decided to include an image to break up the text and make the graphic more eye catching - the image used at the top of the graphic is a professional photograph of me at a desk taken by my previous employer in the administrative role I worked in after leaving the local authority. They had taken it as part of a large series of images for promotional materials but had not used this image – they authorised its usage, and the colours were edited to integrate it with the rest of the colour scheme. Banner versions of the graphic were created for Twitter so that the key information would be contained in the thumbnail available before people click to expand the full image.

I removed references to emotions from this, describing the research as being about experiences in the workplace, so as to not deter potential participants who might be hesitant if they thought the research was all about emotions. This was also a response to the lack of success following my initial recruitment attempts through the trade unions, and due to an awareness that social media users are expecting accessible, concise content. Wording Tweets (with limited characters!) to encapsulate the research aims and who was eligible proved challenging, but the following is an example of one such Tweet, aimed at DWP and LA staff:

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED Have you worked face-to-face or over the telephone with benefit claimants for a local authority/DWP/Jobcentre Plus in the last 6 years? Are you interested in being part of a PhD research project exploring your experiences at work? More info: [link to Wordpress website]

To complement the graphic, I created a free Wordpress website, containing information about the project, information about me and my credentials, a copy of the full participant information sheet and an online contact form. I attached the website link to all my online attempts at generating participants, and within three months had over 300 views on the website, with several potential participants filling out the contact form. As explored above, some of the people who made contact were not eligible for participation, but it was promising to have more people considering the research.

Lee (1993) argues that research that carries the risk of sanctions for participants should be considered sensitive, and that building trust with participants in such research is vital to reassure them that they are protected from potential harm. This topic certainly poses the threat of sanctions, especially for current staff who, if discovered to be participating, may be penalised or dismissed from their posts. This was brought home to me when I sent my first tweet call for participants out, and received a response within a couple of hours, from someone stating:

Figure 1 - Tweet response



I feared that having this publicly attached to my call for participants would deter potential participants, but it felt unjust to delete the reply, so I left it without responding. I cannot say for sure whether it did affect recruitment, but at least two potential participants found the research through this initial tweet with the response, so at least it was not off putting to all. More importantly than the potential for damaging recruitment, was having my fear that my research could harm participants crystallized in such a public criticism (albeit, one from someone who is not linked to

academia, nor an official DWP account). Indeed, one participant told me during their interview that upon taking up their employment they were required to sign a document stating they would not talk to researchers, so this claim had at least some truth to it. This makes the importance of taking all possible steps to preserve anonymity even clearer, which is explored further below.

Nevertheless, social media proved fruitful, with first my call for participants on Twitter having 16,056 'impressions', which summarise the amount of people who have seen the tweet, and 138 media engagements, including 67 retweets (where someone shares your tweet with their followers, thereby increasing the number of people who will see it), and a subsequent one having 12,741 impressions, 127 media engagements, and 64 retweets. I continued to periodically send out tweet calls for participants to maximise the potential for this to reach people who may be interested in taking part, and reached out to individuals and organisations I thought may be able to amplify my call through having a large number of followers with an interest in social security (e.g academics, social justice campaigners).

3.3.5 Social Media: Facebook

Alongside my calls for participants on Twitter, I decided to utilize my personal network more fully by also posting my call for participants graphic and website address through periodic posts on my Facebook account. These posts were set as public so my Facebook friends could share them, enabling me to reach people I did not know personally but who know my friends, and even wider in cases where those people then shared the post with their own friends. I was surprised with the level of success this had, with one such post having been shared 30 times. Having a mutual acquaintance seemed to enable potential participants to trust my credentials as a researcher, and three potential participants ended up making contact as a result of Facebook.

This did however lead to one incident that I had not anticipated, where a potential participant made contact via Facebook. He decided to participate, but after our interview (which was not face-to-face) he revealed that he had looked through a number of my photos on Facebook and asked questions about my personal life (e.g. saying he had seen a photo from my wedding and asking how long I had been married). This made me very uncomfortable, as loved ones are featured in my

photos and I felt that I had inadvertently given the person more access than I would have liked to my own identity outside of my role as a researcher. Later that day I received a friend request from him on Facebook, which I did not feel comfortable accepting. After an emergency meeting with my supervisors about how to proceed, I sent a short message thanking him for his participation and reminding him of how he could withdraw his data, which he did not decide to do. I also increased the privacy settings on my Facebook account so that very minimal information was available to future participants.

This left me reflecting uncomfortably on the realities of research – both in terms of participants misconstruing rapport with the researcher as friendship and the ethics of this (as explored by Duncombe and Jessop 2002), but also my own identity as – at that point – a woman in my late twenties, substantially younger than the participant in question. I was left wondering if this level of familiarity would have been extended to a male researcher, or whether my position as a researcher would have been treated differently if I was older than the participant.

3.4. Actual Sample

This section details the characteristics of the actual sample. The following table details each participant's role as well as how they contributed to the research. It contains their pseudonym alongside length of service, employer(s), whether their role is face-to-face, voice-to-voice or a mixture, whether they were currently in role at the time of participation or were a former advisor, how they were interviewed and whether they completed a diary.

Table 5 - Participant characteristics

Participant Pseudonym	Length of service	Employer(s)	Type of role	Delivery of role	Current or Former Role	Diary Completion	Interview Method
Alex	<1 year	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face, voice to voice, webchat	Current	Yes	Telephone
Brian	20+ years	DWP	DBD	Face-to-face	Current	No	Telephone
Carrie	3 years	Local Authority	CS	Face-to-face	Current	Yes	Not Applicable
Denise	4 years	DWP	DBD	Face-to-face	Former	Not Possible (left role)	Telephone
Emilia	<1 year	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face, voice to voice, webchat	Current	Yes	Telephone
Fran	7 years	Local Authority	CS	Face-to-face	Current	No	Telephone
Gina	10+ years	DWP	DBD	Face-to-face	Former	Not Possible (left role)	Telephone
Helen	15+ years	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face	Current	No	Telephone
Imogen	3 years	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face, voice to voice, webchat	Former	Not Possible (left role)	Skype
Joanne	35+ years	Former: LA, DWP, TS Current: Self-employed	DBD/ CS	Face-to-face	Current (self employed)	No	Skype then telephone (connection issues)
Kayleigh	5 years	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face	Former	Not Possible (left role)	Skype
Liz	20+ years	Current: DWP Former: LA	DBD	Face-to-face	Current	No	Telephone
Maddy	<5 years	Local Authority	DBD	Face-to-face, telephone	Former	Not Possible (left role)	Skype
Neeta	20+ years	DWP	DBD	Face-to-face	Current	No	In Person
Peter	10+ years	DWP	DBD	Voice-to-voice	Former	Not Possible (left role)	In Person
Ryan	<1 year	Third Sector	CS	Face-to-face, voice to voice	Current	No	Telephone
Sarah	<5 years	Local Authority	CS	Face-to-face, voice to voice	Current	Yes	Telephone

Below, Table 6 presents the participants demographics in relation to the relevant features I aimed to recruit for:

Table 6 - Comparison to ideal sample

Relevant Feature	Participants
Mix of advisors involved in face-to-face and voice-to-voice work	• One face-to-face only • One voice-to-voice only • 15 mixed
Mixture of staff working for LAs, DWP, and in TS roles (<i>where participant has worked in more than one sector, most recent is listed</i>)	• 6 DWP advisors • 4 LA advisors • 7 TS advisors
Advisors with and without management responsibility	One TS benefit advisor with management responsibility for paid staff and volunteers (Helen)
Advisors who had been in role for different lengths of time	Ranged from <1 year to 35+ years
Employed in a range of locations across the UK	14 English, two participants from Central Scotland, one from South Wales. English participants: eight based in the East Midlands, two based in the North West, with one participant each based in the East, South East, Greater London and North East.
Mix of male and female advisors	Primarily women (N = 13)
Mix of white British and BAME advisors	• White British N=14 • Black British N=1 (Denise) • Asian British N=1 (Neeta) • Polish N=1 (Emilia)
Mix of current and former advisors	Former N = 6 Current N = 11

The sample achieved meant the research was unable to comment on any gender differences in advisor experiences, and limited the ability of the project to comment upon the role of managers as only one participant had management responsibilities for other benefit advisors. However, there was more diversity in terms of location, sector, and whether participants were currently or formerly employed as benefit advisors.

Throughout data generation I realised that many participants start in one role and then move around within the same department or organisation, so pinning down a specific job role and title is more challenging, thus justifying the umbrella term benefit advisor to encompass all these roles. In addition, whilst I had initially envisaged no

crossover between DWP, LA and TS advisors, throughout the fieldwork it became clear that the picture is more complicated than this: Liz had worked for both an LA and the DWP, and Joanne had moved from the DWP to an LA, then a large TS organisation, and finally moved into self-employment: providing benefit advice for a fee. Whilst this role in itself does not fit the criteria for participants, she had worked in her TS role within the time period the project covers (i.e. post 2012), was able to reflect on her previous positions and she justified moving to providing claimant support for a fee by saying that she was able to devote her full time and energy to the claimants she supports in a way that was not possible in her previous roles. Of the seven participants who had worked in TS roles, six of these were within a large TS organisation that provides claimant support, whilst the final participant (Kayleigh) worked for a small local organisation providing claimant support with overt anti-austerity goals.

The following diagram presents the years each advisor was in their role and the organisations each advisor worked for, including transitions between organisations, visually:

Figure 2 - Participant time in role

Participant	Pre 2011	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Alex											
Brian											
Carrie											
Denise											
Emilia											
Fran											
Gina											
Helen											
Imogen											
Joanne											
Kayleigh											
Liz											
Maddy											
Neeta											
Peter											
Ryan											
Sarah											

Employer	
DWP	
Local Authority	
Third Sector	
Self Employed	

3.5. Data Generation in Practice

3.5.1 Overview

The ways in which I utilised interviews and diaries, including how my initial plans were adapted in response to challenges during fieldwork are outlined below.

Semi-structured interviews formed the core of my data generation, with all but one participant taking part. Each participant was invited to a semi-structured interview lasting approximately an hour (which, in reality, varied between 38 and 95 minutes). In addition, solicited diaries were used with a small number of participants who were eligible (i.e. currently working in a front-line benefit advisory role) and willing to complete them.

The interview schedule proved to be a useful prompt; participants offered thoughtful, detailed responses to my questions and often volunteered additional information they thought would be helpful, and I tried to give them space to articulate their experiences and feelings alongside the interview schedule. In practice, I was struck at the depth with which former advisors were able to recall their experiences and circumstances in depth, and how advisors who had moved across multiple organisations, or between multiple roles at the same organisation, were able to compare experiences at each. During the interviews, I ensured I repeated important points back to participants to check I had understood them correctly as a measure to ensure my understanding was accurate.

As the project developed, the focus developed additional dimensions in response to early interviews that highlighted unanticipated areas of interest – specifically, how advisors feel their work impacts experiences within their community. This was then incorporated into the interview schedule ahead of later interviews to probe this issue further. Such flexibility is one of the benefits of qualitative research as it takes an iterative approach, allowing researchers to adapt and refine their focus in response to initial data generation and analysis (Scotland 2012).

The final two questions in the interviews served an important role. The penultimate question I asked each participant was ‘Is there anything that you feel we haven’t covered that would help me to understand your role?’ – this elicited valuable responses, with participants reiterating statements they felt were important, or using

the time to clarify earlier points. The final question was 'what is/was the most enjoyable or rewarding part of your role?' This served to end on a lighter note rather than leaving participants at a point where they had just discussed negative experiences as a measure to protect participants, and was followed by letting the participant know the recorder was being turned off.

Semi-structured interviews do have limitations - they can be labour intensive, leading Mason to describe them as 'heavily consuming of skills, time and effort' (Mason 2002:82). The initial administrative time taken to arrange an interview and setting up a quiet, private space with recording equipment only to receive a last-minute email from the participant asking if it is possible to reschedule was disheartening, but I recognised that participants were generous in offering their time and input with no benefit to themselves except for an inconvenience allowance of a £10 gift voucher. The time requirements of interviews also involved the time needed afterwards to finish notes, check and securely upload recordings and also time spent completing my fieldwork journal to reflect on the interview experience close to the time it happened, whilst recollections were still fresh.

The rich data the interviews generated made them worth the effort and time commitment required however, and they were an exhausting but at many points enjoyable experience. The interview with Sarah, someone of a similar age to myself whose role and experiences mirrored my own previous role in many ways was particularly enjoyable, as we were able to establish rapport easily and shared amusing stories about help centre work after the interview had concluded and recording had ceased; arguably a form of reciprocity which can occur when the participant and researcher have shared experiences and the researcher is therefore able to share part of their own experiences with the participant (Oakley 1981).

3.5.2 Interview Settings

Two of my interviews took place in person. My goal when establishing where these should occur was based partly on my ethics clearance (which prohibited me interviewing participants in their homes for safety as a lone researcher), but also on practical concerns about finding a location that was local to the participant, quiet enough for the recording to be audible, and not prohibitively expensive to use.

My first face-to-face interview was undertaken in a booked room on the university campus, which offered the atmosphere I had hoped to create. However, my second required thinking on my feet, as the café we had agreed upon was very busy due to unexpected bad weather, making it a hectic environment with little space and a high level of noise. Heavy rain made sitting outside the café an impossibility, and I was worried we would have to reschedule until my participant offered for the interview to take place in her car. I initially hesitated – weighing up any risk to my safety with the fact that it was an area on campus which I am very familiar with, and which I knew was close to a security gatehouse staffed by a security officer, as well as the fact that the participant was also a woman and that she had been referred by a mutual contact. I decided the opportunity was too important to waste. The environment ended up working well in terms of being both quiet and having no risk of being overheard, but it left me pondering whether, as a female researcher, I would have made the same decision if the participant were male. This stuck in my mind as the first time discussions about researcher safety and the quick decisions researchers need to make in the field felt relevant to my project, especially as applying for and receiving ethical approval had not prepared me for such an instance.

Using telephone interviews for researching sensitive issues has also been advocated to encourage participation without compromising data quality (Sturges and Hanrahan 2004, Holt 2010). This certainly echoed my experiences – whilst the face-to-face interviews both took closer to 90 minutes than an hour, there was no discernible difference in how open participants were about their experiences. Similarly, the amount of relevant information did not noticeably differ as the additional time in the face-to-face interviews was spent either revisiting topics or on subjects less relevant to the research. The only differences I found were the need to listen closely to participants' intonation and pauses to judge whether they had finished talking on a topic or if a question was too sensitive, so I could move on or offer a break if needed (although this was not utilised because there were no instances where a participant became audibly distressed). In addition, participants took a little longer to 'warm up' in telephone interviews –initially giving shorter answers, which then blossomed into the longer, more nuanced and comprehensive responses given by face-to-face participants from the very beginning of our encounters.

I found the Skype interviews very similar to telephone interviews – the only additional factor being anxieties about technical issues (which materialised with Joanne who had to abandon the Skype interview and switch to telephone part way due to a poor internet connection her end which interrupted the flow of the interview). However, the benefit of being able to see participants faces and body language during the interview, as previously noted (Gray et al 2020) made this worthwhile in the rest of the Skype interviews.

Once the interviews concluded more in-depth information about the research questions was offered during a verbal debriefing to ensure participants were fully informed about research aims. Whilst withholding some information about the research initially was not ideal, using debriefing to address any gaps in information presented prior to interviews has been advocated as necessary in many research contexts (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Post interview, once the recording had stopped and I had informed the participant of this, I spoke more with participants about my own experiences as a benefit advisor. The post interview discussion was not usable as data, an unfortunate fact given that participants often shared additional experiences and feelings in this less formal environment.

3.5.3 Interview Recording

I aimed to audio record interviews with the participants' consent to enable me to focus on what was being said rather than needing to take extensive notes throughout (Rapley 2004). All but one of the participants consented to their interview being recorded, and the consent form they completed and my oral introduction during the interview explained the recording would be securely stored and destroyed (once transcripts had been produced and checked) to preserve anonymity (an issue which is explored further in section 3.6.2). In these cases, I took some basic notes during the interviews about relevant contextual information for the discussion or areas of the interview schedule I may need to return to, and these were destroyed after the interviews. I used an Olympus digital voice recorder for the recording, which was very successful, picking up the participant's speech and minimizing background noise – including barking dogs and heavy rain. I was initially concerned about audibility of telephone and Skype interview recordings, but found that placing my

laptop or telephone on speakerphone next to the recorder creates a good quality recording.

In the case of Brian, who consented to participate, but not to be recorded, the decision was made to proceed by taking detailed notes to record important points from the discussion. Although handwritten notes would invariably lose much of the richness of a full transcript (Silverman 2001), they can still enable the generation of valuable data. Nath's (2011) research on emotional and aesthetic labour in offshored call centres highlights how this kind of flexibility is necessary when participants are uncomfortable with audio recording, and her nuanced analysis shows that the lack of recording does not necessarily compromise the quality of the data. This is echoed elsewhere, with Edwards and Holland (2013) noting that audio recording is not always possible or appropriate, and proceeding without it can make participants less self-conscious and thus willing to offer more detailed answers. In the case of Brian, proceeding without recording was the only option, and his perspective as a union representative added a valuable perspective to the data.

3.5.4 Solicited Diary Realities

Every participant who is a current member of staff was offered the option to complete a diary for two working weeks, with four of the 11 current advisors choosing to do this. Of those who chose not to complete a diary, some did not give a reason, but others cited time pressure or explained that their role did not involve claimant contact every day. For example, Liz, as a fraud investigator, explained she has periods of intense interaction with claimants, but these are sporadic and cannot be judged in advance as things often change at the last minute. I was keen to include participants who only wanted to take part in interviews (not least because of the initial difficulties in obtaining participants), so presented the diaries as a potential, but not crucial, element of participation – participants could complete a diary, or interview, or both.

Giving participants the option of completing handwritten or online diaries so they can opt for the medium which is most convenient for them was a decision taken to make the process as smooth as possible and minimise attrition (Bartlett and Milligan 2015). It took me some time to establish the best method for the online diaries – weighing up the need for data security compliant to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with convenience and the desire to not make the process arduous for the

participants. A MSform posed a secure and convenient solution, to be completed online daily by the participants using a link I would provide, which upon completion would email me to tell me to log in and check the entry. Electronic diaries such as these help to alleviate some of the downsides of handwritten diaries for both participants and researchers – they are more secure and convenient to complete and have the practical benefit of not requiring transcription (Jones and Woolley 2015).

I provided the participants with an online diary to complete for two working weeks prior to being interviewed, with a short prompt asking them to record how they were feeling at the end of their work day, whether any particular events happened that day which they felt strongly about (without giving claimant details), and what they were planning to do that evening. Keeping a diary of this duration requires effort on the part of the participant and is a significant time commitment (Kara 2015, Bartlett and Milligan 2015), so I encouraged completion by highlighting the potential positive impacts of the research and offering an additional gift voucher as a thank you for their time. Although the use of such tokens of gratitude can be contentious, their value for increasing participant motivation in diary research has previously been noted (Alaszewski 2006). I offered to send participants email or text reminders to ensure all entries were received but on asking, all four participants indicated they would prefer not to have these, and for the most part they remembered to complete their diaries diligently each evening, with any gaps explained in subsequent entries.

Initially, participants who agreed to complete the diaries were anxious about not knowing what was expected in terms of how much to write or what would be ‘useful’ to the research, so I tried to stress that whatever format felt right for them was acceptable and anything they wanted to express was valuable. The prompt used on the MS Form was deliberately short, to enable participants to express themselves in their own terms. With each participant, their initial entries were shorter, but these blossomed into longer, more detailed entries very quickly as each participant found a style that felt right for them. There were differences in how they approached their entries, for example Emilia assigned pseudonyms to memorable claimants she had worked with that day in order to discuss their interaction and refer back to it, and Alex provided additional contextual information about his day that helped to explain his emotions. Alex and Emilia both wrote long, detailed entries, but the shorter entries

provided by Carrie and Sarah nevertheless contained succinct expressions of the memorable interactions they had that day and how this was impacting them after work.

The data from the completed diaries is incredibly rich, and this data greatly enhanced the data generated from the subsequent interviews with those participants by enabling me to frame my interview questions around their experiences. Prior to interviewing the current staff members who had completed diaries, I annotated my interview schedule to integrate prompts related to the diary data. The diary data meant I was able to ascertain some of the answers to questions beforehand, which I then checked my understanding of with the participant to be sure I had not misunderstood them. The diary data also meant I had specific examples to draw upon to help explain the questions, enriching the flow of the interview, and giving the participant a framework for discussion of particular instances.

It is important to note that Carrie decided not to complete an interview after completing her diary – her entries described how intense and challenging her role felt, so it makes sense that completing an interview too may have felt like an additional burden. This led me to reflect on whether keeping diaries – that encourage participants to reflect on their emotions and experiences, including those that are difficult – could be harmful to participants who were already struggling with these experiences. Conversely, both Alex and Sarah commented in the interviews that they had found the diary keeping process beneficial for acknowledging and reflecting on their emotions - as Sarah explained it, offering an opportunity for 'getting stuff off (her) chest' at the end of her work day. This echoes Scott's (2022) finding that participants in her diary-based research similarly felt diaries provided a helpful function in offering space to explore and unpack emotions. Such self-reflexivity amongst participants through participating in research has previously been explored (Cassell et al 2020) with methods such as diaries offering a space where participants actively consider how they present themselves and explain their experiences.

3.6. Ethics

3.6.1 Overview

Ethical research practice is crucial for any researcher. The protection of participants is central to ethical research and The British Sociological Association (BSA) clearly states that researchers must 'ensure that the physical, social and psychological well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by the research' (BSA 2017:5). I received ethical clearance from the university but recognise that my obligations did not stop there - ensuring my approach and conduct at every stage of the project is ethical has been of central importance to me and governed my decision making at every stage. However, Ryen (2011) has noted that although codes such as the BSA's articulate what clearly constitutes unacceptable practice, they do not always provide advice on managing unexpected ethical concerns that arise during the research process, and such unanticipated issues are common in qualitative research (Reid et al 2018). Below I outline some of the most pressing concerns I grappled with throughout the project – preserving anonymity, followed by obtaining informed consent, and lastly ensuring participants were protected from harm, followed by reflections on some unanticipated issues.

3.6.2 Preserving Anonymity

The data generated in this research can be considered sensitive because even when anonymised, it contains the participants' own words about their workplace experiences, including those they found upsetting or stressful, or where they were interacting with someone who was distressed or angry. In addition, elements of participants' descriptions of the peculiarities of their workplace may make them identifiable to colleagues, managers, or union members, so it was crucial to ensure the data included here does not compromise their anonymity, whilst balancing this with the need to represent their experiences accurately.

I initially had concerns that the solicited diary data in particular would potentially contain very sensitive information due to the noted tendency of participants to share private information about themselves through this medium (Harvey 2011, Bartlett and Milligan 2015). However, I found that even in interviews, participants disclosed sensitive information, both in their descriptions of (unnamed) claimants, and of their

interactions in the workplace, which made scrutiny essential when reporting this data. The decision about whether to include quotes from participants, or descriptions of particular experiences, has in each case been a balance of considering what the data offers with the overarching need to preserve anonymity.

For example, one participant disclosed an experience of racism perpetrated by colleagues in the workplace, and felt strongly that this should be reported in my findings. However, the need to ensure I do not compromise anonymity has made this challenging, as disclosing the region she worked in, and even the most basic details of the situation may make her recognisable to other people who were involved.

Assigning pseudonyms is one basic way participants were protected to ensure employers and colleagues will not be able to identify them. I removed all identifying information – such as references to specific locations - at the stage of transcription to further assure anonymity. When reporting my research and using direct quotes, participants are only linked to their pseudonym, as well as a note about which organisation(s) they work for and where relevant, whether they work face-to-face or voice-to-voice and are a current or former staff member. I have not identified the location they are based in or more specific information about their job title as a way of ensuring it is impossible to identify them from the data extracts. The only exception to this is where basic information is offered in order to contextualise their experiences. This does unfortunately limit my ability to comment upon any geographical differences in experiences, but participant protection is more important, and Table 6 indicates where participants are located which has been separated from their pseudonym to offer more general information on this.

3.6.3 Informed Consent

Obtaining informed consent is crucial for ethical practice and involves ensuring participants understand what they are agreeing to, any potential costs and benefits of participation, what data will be used for and their right to refuse to participate or withdraw at any time (Homan 1991). All participants were supplied with an information sheet explaining the research aims and their right to withdraw at any time, and consent forms were signed detailing what the data would be used for.

I also considered the privacy of claimants who have not only been unable to give informed consent, but are also unaware that their experiences have been discussed

at all. Most participants went into a substantial amount of detail when discussing particular workplace interactions – either to offer a concrete example of the impact of a particular legislative change, to describe an unusual or volatile interaction they had, or in many cases, because the interaction was one that they found memorable due to the emotional impact it had on them. Whilst they never named the claimants involved or gave specific identifiable details about them, they often gave substantial detail about the claimant's circumstances - including extremely sensitive topics such as mental health difficulties, domestic violence, and severe and terminal illness (to name only a few). I understand that participants included these details because of the emotional impact the interactions had on them or because they wanted to emphasise a particular point (such as feeling that Personal Independence Payment (PIP) was failing terminally ill claimants). However, out of respect for the claimants themselves, I have given careful consideration to each quote included and where I felt a point was important but the participant's words gave too much personal information, I have summarised in broader terms rather than using a direct quote.

3.6.4 Protection From Harm

Protection from harm is a basic, and crucial, ethical guideline (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009, Ransome 2013). Although participants provided informed consent according to the ethical standards of my institution and were reminded of their right to withdraw, there is still the potential that what we discussed may have a lasting impact on them. I ended each interview by asking participants if there was anything they wanted to add that would help me to understand their job role and experiences, in an effort to allow space for them to articulate anything important. Once I stopped recording, as well as giving information about their right to withdraw and thanking them, I offered them a brief story about my own experiences as a benefit advisor which was relevant to something they had said, as a small gesture of reciprocity (Oakley 1981, Rubin and Rubin 2012).

Most participants used detailed descriptions of claimants in dire circumstances to exemplify the most upsetting experiences they had at work, and the level of detail, even for staff members no longer in role, indicated that these were stories that are indelibly marked on their memory. A striking example was Peter's (a former DWP call handler) description of taking a call from a claimant who was actively suicidal,

particularly given he never found out what happened to the claimant and the DWP's recognition of his distress in dealing with such a call was a £25 gift voucher. This caused him to become visibly choked up during the interview, particularly as he stated this was the first time he had reflected on how inappropriate the DWP's response was, especially as he had spent the voucher and felt guilty about this on reflection. Causing participants who are still in their roles to reflect on times at work where they feel unsupported or conflicted about their roles also has ethical implications, as the research may only serve to exacerbate these feelings.

Conversely, being able to talk about such experiences in an interview can have positive effects for participants by giving them the space to discuss significant aspects of their life in detail, which can be a powerfully cathartic process, especially when the researcher shares some of their experiences (Oakley 1981). There has certainly been some evidence of this sentiment from participants, with two participants telling me that being able to talk about the challenges they face had felt like a release. The long-term effects of participation cannot be assessed at this stage, but previous research suggests that often participants do not recall their participation in depth, or remember it only broadly as a positive experience, even when discussing painful topics (Oakley 2016).

At the beginning of each interview I offered each participant the opportunity to ask questions, and at the end I reminded them of how to contact me should they wish to remove their data, or if they had any questions. For practical reasons, participants were informed of the deadline for the withdrawal of data, as once research reaches the point of submission or publication it is no longer possible to amend it. However, no one chose to do this, and two participants followed me on my academic Twitter account subsequent to their interviews, indicating their ongoing interest in the project.

Finally, whilst my priority has been to minimise any possible risks to participants, it is important to acknowledge the wider positive implications that my research could have for benefit advisors. Drawing attention and giving voice to their experiences has been one of the aims of my research from the beginning, which could not only provide an academic contribution but also evidence that could be used by trade unions to highlight present challenges and advocate for better working conditions.

The above discussion has explored how I prepared for data generation and responded to ethical issues that I was prepared for. However, unanticipated ethical challenges also developed in the process of fieldwork and I describe these below.

3.6.5 Reflections on Fieldwork

This section covers my reflections during and following my fieldwork to address my emotional responses to the fieldwork process, the practical concerns and challenges I faced including how I had to adapt my original research design in response to Covid-19, and how my insider outsider status as someone formerly a part of the group I am researching impacted my experiences.

An aspect of fieldwork I did not initially anticipate would be my own emotional labour in the interviews – managing my own emotions when participants expressed political views I did not agree with, or in one case where Gina expressed what I felt to be racist views towards claimants who have moved to the UK from other countries. It was important to put my own beliefs aside in order to continue the interview, as it would have both impacted data generation and been inappropriate to challenge these beliefs in this context, but it left me feeling conflicted, a sentiment previously recorded by other researchers (Bott 2010).

The hardest challenge, and one I did not anticipate, was the emotional toll it would take on me hearing in detail about distressing experiences staff had, or the situations they described of their upset at not being able to help claimants in dire circumstances, and how the process of transcription and analysis necessitates continuing closeness with this aspect of the data. Whilst I do not go as far as Chatzifotiou (2000) in claiming that there was a transferral of pain and stress in this process, I certainly agree with her assertion that their experiences have ‘reverberated for some time’ (Chatzifotiou 2000:8.1), often coming to mind when I am not working, and stubbornly staying there. Such experiences have been noted by other qualitative researchers who describe their own similar experiences in qualitative research that involves difficult emotions, and encourage reflexive engagement with the emotions that emerge, (Smith and McBride 2019, Scott 2022). Nevertheless it felt uncomfortable and inappropriate to be so affected by something I was not myself experiencing – especially when some of the time what was upsetting was not the benefit advisor’s experiences, but those of the claimants they were

working with. I was reminded of several claimants I had worked with too, echoing the finding from several former advisors that they remembered certain cases years after leaving.

Reflecting on data generation was at times an uncomfortable experience – from critiquing my phrasing when asking questions as I listened to recordings, to frustration that I did not ask more about particular topics that data analysis brought to the surface as important – such as asking in more detail about the physical environment in which advisors worked, or probing more at times where a participant made an ambiguous comment. I also wondered if there were additions to my interview schedule that would have helped me to understand participants' perspectives more fully.

3.6.6 Insider Outsider Status

The complexity of my multiple positions in relation to the research made consideration of my positionality particularly pertinent (Reich 2021). I approached the project primarily as researcher, but also as a former benefit advisor myself, as well as a former benefit claimant who, at the time of data analysis, was helping a close family member to apply for Universal Credit, and complete an application followed by a mandatory reconsideration (to appeal the initial rejection of their claim) for Personal Independence Payment. These multiple positions undoubtedly contributed to my emotional response to the data, which is why keeping a fieldwork journal was key for exploring and acknowledging these emotions and reflecting on how they may affect my interpretation of the data.

As mentioned above, reflecting on how my identity impacted the research is crucial for reflexive research practice because my identity impacts every stage of research practice – from initial research design to analysis and data reporting. I was acutely aware of how participants may position me – a white woman (then) in my late twenties from a working class background. For example, I was conscious to present myself professionally in face-to-face and Skype interviews where participants could see me. Remembering that I had been required to cover my tattoos whilst working for the local authority (even those on my feet that claimants could not possibly see under the desk), I found myself dressing in similar office attire that covered my tattoos, and wearing minimal jewellery in order to be taken seriously by participants

as a researcher, and former benefit advisor myself. However, not all participants had the same institutional dress codes - this dress code would possibly have been perceived differently by participants such as Kayleigh, who volunteered for an anti-austerity TS advisory organisation.

Throughout data generation, I realised that I occupied a peculiar position with some participants positioning me as a former, or partial insider, and others seeing me as an outsider. In our initial discussion before each interview I disclosed why I am interested in the topic – explaining that I was working in a front of house role for a LA when the WRA2012 changes came into effect in April 2013, and that overall I spent 15 months working for the LA as a Benefit Assistant and then Trainee Benefit Officer. The aim here was both to be upfront and honest with participants, and also a hope that this would assure staff that I understand their position and will represent them accurately because I have first-hand experience of their working environment and some of the pressures they face.

My familiarity with some of the technical language staff use helped in the interviews to bolster my credibility, offering some degree of insider status. The importance of understanding technical language is articulated by Aull Davies, but she also cautions against assuming that my understandings are invariably the same as my participants because ‘different interpretations and understandings may hide behind shared vocabularies.’ (Aull Davies 2008:125). To ameliorate this, I aimed to follow her recommendation to use time with participants during data generation to clarify their meaning of such terms. Our discussions were peppered with technical terms and acronyms, so this was not always possible, but wherever there was any doubt I tried to check my understanding in a way that interrupted the interview flow as minimally as possible.

My position as a partial insider was particularly useful for Gina’s interview. She had worked for the DWP for over 20 years (although she had now moved on) and she referred several times throughout the interview to her age and life experience helping with her resilience, explaining that this is why younger, less experienced advisors like myself find current benefit advisory roles challenging and are likely to leave. Although I (internally) disagreed with some of her interpretations about why I chose to leave, I did not challenge this, partly out of respect and also to allow space for her

to articulate her own views, as well as curiosity about how she was framing them around my experience. In this instance, disclosing my former role enabled access to viewpoints that she may not have articulated with another researcher who did not have the same relationship with the role being discussed.

There is also potential however for my position as a former employee in this sector to hinder access as some potential participants may be more willing to engage with a novice with little prior knowledge of their role (Rubin and Rubin 2012), and my disclosure about my experience may therefore change the shape of the interview, or the participant's willingness to discuss certain topics. This is an important consideration, but it would be misleading to not mention my employment history to participants as it has no doubt impacted the decisions I have made throughout the research process. It is impossible to be certain, but I do not feel that my disclosure has been negative for rapport building, nor for the level of richness in the data generated. For my own part, I used my fieldwork diary to reflect on the emotions brought up by the interviews to enable reflexive reflections throughout the research process, especially when it came to data analysis.

3.7 Data Analysis Strategies

3.7.1 Data Storage

All data (i.e. raw audio recordings of interviews and downloads of diary data from MS forms, as well as transcripts and signed consent forms) were stored securely on the university's Microsoft OneDrive account as per the university's policies to protect privacy. The interview recordings were destroyed once they had been transcribed and checked to protect the sensitive and identifiable elements present as the anonymised information is contained in the transcripts produced from the recordings.

3.7.2 Transcription

Interviews were transcribed verbatim to keep the nuances apparent in natural speech patterns such as pauses, intonation and laughter, which can help contextualise participants' words (Wengraf 2001). Transcription was mostly done myself, but a professional transcription service familiar to the university was used for five interviews (due to ill health). All transcripts were checked against the audio

recordings for accuracy but I paid particular attention to those I had not transcribed personally, to ensure that the conventions for noting speech features such as laughter or tone changes were consistent across all transcripts.

At this point, I also removed sensitive information – primarily references to specific locations, real names and other identifying information. In two cases, I also removed some detail from accounts of specific incidents the participant described to ensure that the participant could not be identified should anyone familiar with the events read the transcript. In one case this was at the request of the participant, who offered the information as context to help me understand their role but did not want it to be shared with anyone else. The other section of data was an account of an incidence of racism which caused a very heated disagreement between the participant and colleagues and subsequent disciplinary procedures, which felt too specific to leave in its full form. In the latter case, I instead included a very broad summary, because the participant had articulated that the event was a very important example of how unsupported they felt in their workplace and a general workplace culture of racist attitudes from colleagues.

3.7.3 Data Analysis

Data was analysed using the software package NVivo. The use of software was chosen because it facilitates efficient data storage, retrieval, and analysis over pen and paper strategies (Bazeley and Jackson 2013). The interview transcripts and diary entries were input, with demographic information added for each participant to help to contextualise their statements. Memos were also used to highlight important points such as references to specific pieces of legislation, locations, or organisations.

Thematic analysis was identified as an appropriate analysis approach, as it is flexible and offers an inductive approach (Terry et al 2017). I utilised Boyatzis' (1998) model of thematic analysis, which acknowledges that data analysis is never solely inductive because research is driven by existing theory. Thematic analysis involves closely reading the raw transcripts multiple times, then assigning initial descriptive codes which gradually develop into categories exploring latent meanings which, as more data is analysed, enables them to be grouped into analytical themes (Saldaña 2021), These tentative themes offered the opportunity to develop and refine ideas, allowing

the exploration of how the data relates to existing theory, and for new ideas to emerge from the data.

As my research questions focus on emotional labour, when coding I was inevitably influenced by existing literature – most notably research utilising emotional labour, but also other concepts related to the context (such as Lipsky's (1980) discussion of street level bureaucracy). At every step it was important to ensure my engagement with existing literature was critical and allowed for new explanations of the phenomena to develop if appropriate (Aull Davies 2008, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). I kept a paper journal throughout fieldwork, and whilst analysing data this was a particularly useful tool for reflecting on my understandings and ideas and in particular, reflecting on moments where I felt the data resonated with my own experiences or jarred with my personal and political beliefs.

An excel spreadsheet was also used as a record of the decisions made on NVivo to enable reflection on these (for example, when new 'nodes' were created to code sections of data to). The emphasis of thematic analysis on looking deeply at the meanings implied in raw data aligns with a constructivist approach that emphasizes the importance of exploring how people understand their experiences and opinions (Mason 2002, Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

Once codes were established and assigned to nodes, I not only explored the linkages on NVivo but also utilised MindView software in order to visualise the linkages as mindmaps and move these around into sections with ease. This software was selected for practical reasons as I am familiar with it, but it offered a helpful additional way to consider how to bring the findings together into coherent sections, whilst offering space away from NVivo to reflect and question my decisions.

3.7.4 Data Presentation in Thesis

In the following chapters quotes are presented to explain the participants' views in their own words. For consistency and clarity, these conventions have been followed when quotes are used:

- Direct quotations from participants are presented in inset, italicised text with tighter line spacing than the rest of the text

- Each quote is followed by brackets with the participant's name, and which organisation they work for
- Where quotes have been shortened, ellipses are used to indicate this
- Notes on tone, or where identifying information has been paraphrased are indicated by square brackets in the text
- Diary data is indicated with square brackets at the beginning of the quote and is presented verbatim

As mentioned above in section 3.9.2, interviews were transcribed verbatim so that the participants phrasing and speech features (eg: false starts, pauses, self-corrections) were preserved during data analysis. However, in the quotes presented here these aspects have been standardised for ease of comprehension, in line with Kvale and Brinkmann's argument that 'transforming the conversation into a literary style may highlight nuances of a statement and facilitate communication of the meaning of the subject's stories to readers' (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009:186).

Finally, some participants are quoted more than others in certain sections and across the chapters as a whole. This is because some participants offered unique perspectives or articulated typical perspectives succinctly, and where their views were distinct from the rest of the participants this is indicated. It is also the case that some participants were able to offer more detailed or relevant information on some topics – for example, advisors who had worked in their roles before 2012 were better placed to compare their current working conditions with those pre WRA2012.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has offered a methodological contribution through demonstrating how solicited diaries can be a useful research tool in qualitative research on emotional labour as they capture rich, contemporaneous data that can then be explored further in interviews. An additional methodological contribution is the discussion of how, as an outsider researcher, researchers can respond to initial difficulties accessing participants via gatekeepers to develop a new access strategy that harnesses the wide reach of social media.

The next four chapters present the data, and the following table summarises which research questions each chapter addresses:

Table 7 - Chapter content

Chapter	Research Questions Covered
Chapter Four – The nature of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles	1, 4
Chapter Five – The effects of performing emotional labour on benefit advisors	2, 4
Chapter Six – The ways in which benefit advisors alleviate the negative impacts of emotional labour	3, 4
Chapter Seven - The external factors that influence advisors' ability to draw on emotional labour management strategies	1, 3

Chapter Four, the first chapter reporting findings, explores the nature of the roles benefit advisors perform – what their interactions with claimants involve and how they are required to manage their emotions at the level of individual interactions. Chapter Five builds upon this discussion to consider the impacts – both positive and negative – of performing emotional labour on benefit advisors. Chapter Six then explores the strategies that advisors use to manage these impacts, and Chapter Seven, the final findings chapter, explores the external factors that shape experiences of emotional labour and advisors' ability to draw on support and management strategies. Finally, Chapter Eight brings the data into dialogue with existing literature to consider how the research questions have been answered. This final chapter also underlines the original contributions and implications of this research, assessing its successes and limitations, as well as future research directions.

Chapter Four: The Nature of Emotional Labour in Benefit Advisory Roles

4.1 Introducing the Data

This chapter explores the experiences of benefit advisors across Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local authority (LA) and third sector (TS) roles, using emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) as a lens to understand their interactions in the workplace. It engages primarily with my research questions about how emotional labour functions in these roles and how staff manage the emotional labour they perform at work. This discussion also provides context necessary for answering my other research questions, setting the scene for an exploration of the effects of working in benefit advisory roles, the ways in which staff attempt to manage or alleviate impacts of emotional labour, and the external factors that influence their ability to draw on these strategies.

The focus here on looking at benefit advisory work at the level of specific interactions with claimants is essential for understanding the level of skill required to successfully perform these roles. I argue that these are roles that require a complex interplay of emotion management, which functions in two ways. Firstly, advisors manage their own emotional display to ensure it both fits within organizational standards of acceptable behaviour and does not exacerbate difficult interactions with claimants who are already upset or angry.

In addition, they undertake a range of activities to manage the emotions of the claimants they are working with. Managing the emotions of someone else is an aspect of Hochschild's (1983) definition that has been argued to be underrepresented in research on emotional labour (Strathmann and Hay 2009, Ward and McMurray 2016), but is of great importance for understanding this context and the skills advisors possess.

4.2 Managing the Self

Staff are required to evoke neutrality and professionalism whilst suppressing other emotions which are not considered appropriate both by their employers, and in some cases, by themselves – specifically anger, fear, disgust and upset, which are explored below in turn.

This self-management occurs in conjunction with the requirement to manage the emotions of claimants to ensure a calm and orderly interaction that enables claimants to convey information about their circumstances and ask questions, whilst ensuring staff are able to gather the information required to process or support their claim, explain decisions or correspondence and advise on the best course of action.

The nature of specific interactions with claimants varies according to employer and role, but for my participants they typically involve any combination of:

Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles - Requesting information, checking claim forms, verifying evidence supplied by the claimant, recording changes of circumstances, explaining benefit entitlement, agreeing actions claimants must follow to maintain entitlement. In some cases this can also include some degree of processing claims to calculate entitlement.

Claimant Support (CS) roles – Advising which benefits a person may be entitled to, doing rough calculations of benefit entitlement, assisting claimants with benefit applications, liaising with DWP/LA departments, explaining correspondence from DWP/LA, supporting claimants with appeals, signposting and referrals to other support services including foodbank referrals.

Crucially, there is also an additional element of verification and surveillance particular to DBD roles in which staff are expected to monitor and make judgements about claimants which can result in penalties such as sanctions and fraud referrals, adding an additional element of complexity and pressure to the interaction. Liz is the most obvious example of how this occurs – she works in a fraud department so the majority of her interactions with claimants are interviews under caution, but as previous chapters have explored, these are increasingly a part of other DBD roles too.

4.2.1 Performing Neutrality

In response to my question about what skills it takes to be an effective benefit advisor, the need to be 'professional' was described by most participants, with no distinction between those in DBD and CS roles. Although on a surface level this may seem like an obvious requirement, unpicking its meaning and relevance in this context is a crucial part of understanding the nature of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles. What emerged from analysis is that being 'professional' – a term that conveys that this emotional display is expected by employers - constitutes a performance of neutrality in which staff keep a calm, impartial exterior during interactions with claimants.

Maintaining neutrality has previously been recognised as a specific strategy for staff engaging in emotional labour in high pressure environments with customers who are dissatisfied or distressed (Ward and McMurray 2011), and its role here was clearly articulated by almost all participants in some way. Denise described this neutrality as performance by describing managers wanting her to '*keep [her] professional face on*' rather than getting emotional in interactions with claimants, and the following quotes are indicative of what emerged from the data:

You can't be tender hearted, you can't get too involved and if you felt that you were then really it would be better to give that customer to somebody else... you need to sort of be a little bit reserved (Gina, DWP)

Neutrality is therefore seen to be more appropriate than showing emotion, and the following quotes begin to explain why:

People aren't looking for friends, they're looking for y'know, robust advice (Helen, TS)

Emotion kind of clouds your perception of the detail of it so it is easy to make mistakes when a case makes you angry or upset so you kind of think that process of talking through. At the end of it I sometimes find myself catching like, things that I had not talked about (Alex, TS)

The expression of emotions in response to claimants is therefore seen as something which is detrimental for the claimant – it prevents staff from being able to fulfil their roles in giving advice on complex legislation successfully, so the presentation of emotional neutrality is key to providing good service. It is important to note however, that the degree to which participants talked about using neutrality as a default stance

differed, with some being more flexible in their emotional expression than others. Sarah, who works in an LA help centre, was a good example of this:

Some of the things are really sad and I think sometimes a bit of empathy and showing that actually, it has touched you is a good thing but then other times I think if somebody is coming in and they need somebody who's strong and in control who can go 'right, ok, right we need to do this, we need to do that, I'll write this down, I'll ring this number' and almost take charge of the situation. So I think it varies really and I just try and gauge it as to what I think they need and what's the most helpful thing in that situation. (Sarah, LA)

Maintaining neutrality can therefore be seen as a strategy that is emphasised because it serves three functions: it aligns with employer expectations, it allows advisors to distance themselves from intensely emotional interactions, and crucially, they position it as being the most appropriate mode for supporting claimants who are struggling to navigate the benefit system. The emotions that may need to be suppressed in order to consistently evoke this are explored below.

4.2.2 Detaching from Beliefs

One aspect of the role which caused particular difficulty for some participants in DBD roles was the requirement to adhere to regulations and advise on legislative changes, and in some cases, penalise claimants for non-compliance – such as through the use of sanctions. This caused a significant amount of difficulty in instances where participants themselves felt opposed to particular legislative changes – considering them to be unfair, flawed, or poorly implemented – but were not able to express this in the workplace. I did not ask participants about whether they felt any opposition to legislation or its implementation, but participants sometimes spontaneously mentioned their views when asked about the impact of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012) on their role, and when asked about whether they can express their feelings at work more generally. The requirement to perform neutrality, coupled with direct organizational monitoring in some cases, meant that participants felt a disconnect between their beliefs and the work they are required to do. This was most stark with Liz: as a fraud officer, her interactions with claimants are recorded and therefore subject to intense scrutiny:

If we are interviewing somebody it is recorded so if we say anything that may highlight that we think the Department is wrong, then that could stop any further action being taken so we have to be very professional...even if somebody is telling you how poor our Department is and you might believe them, you have to keep following your professional role, ask all the questions (Liz, LA/DWP)

Here, Liz demonstrates a strict level of control over her emotional presentation. However, concern about interactions being monitored was present in the discussions with several other participants. Sarah in contrast works in an CS role for an LA, with less direct managerial control and no direct responsibility for administering benefits. However, when talking about WRA2012 she reports herself and colleagues as disapproving of legislative changes, but feeling similarly unable to express this:

The worst part is we all feel the same. We're like, yeah, it is awful! The changes they've made are awful, but we've got to be the ones who almost go along with it. And we disagree with it so yeah, it's hard. (Sarah, LA)

As a member of staff in a LA, Sarah is still linked to benefit administration in a way other staff in CS roles are not. This requirement to mask one's feelings about legislation was not apparent in the accounts of other participants in CS roles, which indicates that there is more space to express opinions on legislation, as well as a lack of the tension caused by being required to implement it. In addition, CS staff are fundamentally able to position their roles as helping claimants to navigate accessing benefits and challenge unfair decisions rather than something that they are a part of administering. The development of narratives that enable advisors to feel satisfaction about their roles will be returned to in Chapter Six.

In contrast to CS staff, the three participants directly involved in part of the sanction process described this being something they found particularly challenging:

I can count on my hands how many times I've sanctioned anybody...I don't like - I've never wanted to do it (Neeta, DWP)

I wasn't a decision maker and this is where it became really really difficult for y'know, it is against every principle you have. You are making a decision based on the evidence you have in front of you however it is sent to somebody else somewhere else in a benefit delivery centre who then makes that decision, erm, and that was really difficult as well, trying to explain that to claimants (Denise, DWP)

It is important to note that Denise, like several other participants, found themselves in their current roles after restructures and TUPE, so the tension between their personal views about how to support claimants and what they are required to do in the workplace could be felt intensely. Denise described intense frustration at this aspect of her role:

From what my ethos was and what I had came from to being in the Jobcentre and wanting to support people into employment or different opportunities...I was pulled back to say 'no, we police the benefit system' and that is what it was like -, I was an Employment Advisor y'know? A lot of that kind of - that option for me to work with that person and stuff, that was taken away (Denise, DWP)

The strategies participants use to manage this intense disjuncture between their personal/political beliefs and what they are required to do in the workplace will be explored more fully below, as these are of central importance both for the discussion of strategies to alleviate emotional labour and what this means for how policy is enacted by front-line benefit advisory workers (Lipsky 1980).

It requires pointing out, however, that this tension was not present for every participant in a DBD role. Although it was mentioned to different degrees in the interviews – from being a central theme for Peter and Denise to something mentioned less frequently for others, Gina was distinct in expressing very little opinion of the system:

Tightening down on the criteria for these benefits really upset a lot of people, whether it be right or wrong, y'know, I'm not in a position to judge that (Gina, DWP)

The reasons she found this aspect of the role much easier to manage – in effect, treating the legislation as something neutral that she was tasked with administering, suggest she has a different perception of her role purpose, which is in line with what Taylor (2014, 2015) witnessed in social security administration in the US. This discussion intersects both with the effects of this type of work and the strategies staff use to manage it so will be picked up in Chapter Six in the discussion of how staff manage and alleviate the impacts of emotional labour.

4.2.3 Suppressing Negative Emotions About Claimants

In order to successfully present a neutral exterior, participants described having to suppress a variety of other emotions that they felt during interactions with both claimants and other members of staff. Expressing anger, upset, or fear would be detrimental in terms of exacerbating challenging interactions, so this had to be suppressed.

Feeling at risk of threats to physical safety was an aspect of the role mentioned specifically by participants in DBD roles, and is something staff are required to suppress in order to maintain neutrality. This concern was not reported by staff in the third sector except in relation to very isolated circumstances as opposed to an undercurrent of risk that pervades DBD roles in Jobcentres as well as DBD and CS roles in LA help centres. Gina described the content of her fear as follows:

Especially nowadays, you don't know what people are carrying on them, you just don't know what they are capable of doing...And you do – you do feel scared, you do, there's no doubt about it. It doesn't matter how long you've been in the service (Gina, DWP)

For participants, these fears were based upon experience of overt and immediate threats of violence from claimants, as well as concerns about unpredictable behaviour caused by factors such as severe mental health difficulties, intoxication or a history of violence which was known to staff (either through criminal convictions¹ or previous incidents in their workplace). The incidents of violence participants described experiencing, witnessing, or hearing about from colleagues included furniture being thrown at staff members, staff being physically assaulted, threats to harm third parties, and threats to harm staff both in and outside the workplace. All required staff to make quick judgements about the most appropriate way to react, which caused concern for participants.

Although these incidents were infrequent, the undercurrent of risk that staff felt was persistent, with Sarah describing working on reception alone as feeling like being '*stranded on a desert island*' because colleagues were based in another room so were only notified if she pressed her panic button. Sarah described occasions where

¹ The ways in which staff became aware of criminal convictions appeared to be a mixture of local knowledge, media coverage, or flags on the system e.g. to say that a claimant was likely to be violent or that they were not allowed internet access so could not job search in that way.

her managers had failed to notice the light flashing, or where her manager had come out to reception to ask why the button had been pressed – something which had left Sarah feeling vulnerable in future as she felt the alarm was therefore of little use for discreetly alerting colleagues she needed help.

In other cases fear was exacerbated by previous experiences of slow police intervention speed, or police not arriving at all. In addition, other external factors - including the availability of security staff, whether colleagues could hear interactions and raise alarm if necessary and prior experiences of managers not taking concerns about staff safety seriously led to staff feeling unsafe, with two participants reporting feeling unsupported when voicing concerns about their safety to managers. Both overt threatening behaviour and unpredictable behaviour require staff to make quick judgements about their safety and that of colleagues and other claimants, adding an element of pressure and anxiety to interactions which are already fraught. Neeta described one such incident and her wider concerns:

People can come in, y'know - on drugs, knives, whatever and attack. And not just attack you, they might attack another member of the public and then you've got to step in as well. But, it don't help then that we had an incident a couple of weeks back and the police didn't come round at all... it was only because we had a security guard that stood in front of the member of staff...this person did get scared of him and he walked away then. Y'know, that member of staff would have been hit by the chair because he got the chair and tried to throw it at her...customers, they're aware all the time what's going on behind them as well so some customers will step in and talk and help you and support you as well...And I have had a couple of customers say 'oh, we can pick up on this another time if you want'...you've got to do certain things to protect – not just you, but you're protecting that customer because you don't want them to be hurt either (Neeta, DWP)

The unpredictability of such situations, including the risk to other claimants and not knowing how everyone else in the space will respond all contributed to this sense of fear. The final point to note in relation to this is how this impacts staff over time.

Brian, in his capacity as a trade union representative described staff he has worked with as 'traumatised' following such incidents, with little follow up support from their employer and a lack of training in how to manage future occurrences.

Gina – who had over 30 years experience working in DBD roles for the DWP, discussed how whilst she was grateful for the visible presence of security staff, there

were some protective measures such as the use of rooms with screens to separate staff from claimants known to be violent that could actually exacerbate that behaviour and only offered limited protection because these security measures only provide support whilst in the office:

If we knew they were potentially violent then they were marked as that on their claims then we wouldn't see them in the open space, we would take them to the screened area. But sometimes I think that provoked them more...it was like they wanted that kudos, they wanted to be seen in there because it made them feel as if they'd got the upper hand. But we had to see them in there for our own safety really. But...then you can walk into the town centre on your lunch break and you can see them face-to-face in a shop so sometimes I don't know whether that worked because besides I had friends that worked at the Jobcentre that were followed y'know at lunch time and after work and things like that and they always said, if they were really angry, and they didn't get their own way, they would say something like 'I'm going to wait for you after work' and that is quite scary' (Gina, DWP)

This bleeding of fear into participants' time outside work was a feature in the interviews with several members of DBD staff in terms of what this means for feelings of safety. Maddy explained how one such incident – where a claimant made immediate and credible threats to murder their own family members in response to an unfavourable benefit adjustment – affected her:

That night one of the security guards had to walk me to the station and stuff just in case there was any implications for me and they're the things that stay with you more than somebody saying 'thanks for doing that'...both situations are probably few and far between, one's far more memorable than the other. (Maddy, LA)

This is notable because she talks about how a negative experience such as the one she described is so hard to forget – so whilst such levels of risk may be infrequent, they remain with advisors for a long time, staying with them outside of the workplace where as Gina explains above, the protective measures of one's workplace are no longer present. This discussion will be picked up in the next chapter to consider the longer term effects of such instances.

On a less extreme level, several participants (notably in DBD roles) expressed frustration at working with claimants they felt were 'playing the system' and exploiting loopholes to access benefits. Gina felt this strongly, frequently drawing on narratives

of personal responsibility and undeserving claimants (Golding and Middleton 1982), explaining that:

Claiming benefit was like a career choice – they made it a lifestyle. And it frustrated me towards the end, you become very, very cynical. I mean, there are genuine people that are claiming benefit. We all know that and it's the minority that spoil it for the majority. But what you're up against on a daily basis can be quite soul destroying (Gina, DWP)

Maddy was more measured in her approach, recognising that her own biases came into play and that she could be making unfair judgements, but nevertheless struggling with these emotions:

It used to get my back up a bit when I'd see an email come through to say 'I can't afford to pay it' and it would say 'sent from my ipad' because it cost me loads of money to save up to get my ipad and I don't like that that's how it made me feel but that's how it would make me feel because y'know, people should live to their means. And it could be that that person bought that iPad when their circumstances were different and it's now that they're struggling so that's why it's wrong of me to think that way but it's very hard not to have a little bit of cynicism just because of what you do see. Particularly when you've gone through many a DHP² application and looked at the kind of things that people put down on them that you're then like 'ugh, ok, what you see as priorities; your lottery, your catalogues' (Maddy, LA)

Maddy considered this to be a reason why attempting to use discretion rather than aiming to treat all claimants consistently can be detrimental for claimants, which will be picked up in the Chapter Six in the discussion of strategies to alleviate emotional labour. However, it is also important to note here that this is significant not only in the toll such interactions have on staff but because of how this links to the well-recognised rhetoric of deserving and undeserving claimants (Golding and Middleton 1982). The implications of this for staff who are directly involved in advising on, and especially the administration of, benefits are substantial because it can affect the service claimants are offered, as the extensive literature on street level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980) discussed in Chapter Two has explained.

² Discretionary Housing Payment – Issued by Local Authorities (LAs) on a discretionary short term basis to support claimants on housing benefit, funded by a limited budget allocated to LAs by government (CPAG 2015)

Managing feelings of anger in the face of personal abuse from claimants was also reported by the DWP and LA staff interviewed. Gina was distinct in openly sharing frustration at claimants:

They come in there so angry and you are the first person they see...Whoever they are speaking to, it's personal. They forget that you are just a person doing a job. It's like erm, they accuse you, you're - you're the thing they have got to break through...You can explain all the rules and regulations and why they're not getting it but they're not listening. They're just not listening at all to what you're saying. They've come in there to get their money, to get it sorted, what right have you got to keep their money. They're never in the wrong. (Gina, DWP)

Whilst Gina was unique in openly describing interactions in terms of herself as a gatekeeper for benefits, other participants touched on interactions where they felt frustration at claimants which they are required to suppress and the ways in which these feelings can bleed into subsequent interactions:

I wouldn't go and take a break out of wanting to prove a point that 'no, you didn't bother me, I'm ok, I'm gonna call over the next customer and you know what? I'm gonna be nice as pie to the next customer on purpose because you're gonna be still hovering around hearing and listening to me and it should prove to you that actually, I was being nice to you'...the stubbornness in me of not wanting someone to – let them think they've got one over on me or they've beaten me in a way would mean that I wouldn't have taken a break. I would have sat there, toughed it out, and probably even called that customer back and spoken to them later that day if they'd calmed down. (Maddy, LA)

This quote is particularly interesting not only as Maddy evokes similar combat imagery as Gina ('beaten' and 'breaking through' respectively) but it also illustrates Maddy indirectly expressing her frustrations at a rude claimant by putting on an extra helpful performance for others. Techniques such as this are a recognised way of resisting emotional labour, with Sandiford and Seymour characterising this as a form of 'veiled authenticity' (Sandiford and Seymour 2011: 1204) which enables staff to communicate their authentic emotions through an obviously inauthentic emotional display.

Other evidence of surface acting – the outward display of emotions that one is aware they do not truly feel (Hochschild 1983) was apparent when staff talked about being obliged to serve claimants that they felt disgust or anger towards – such as people convicted of substantial benefit fraud and claimants convicted of crimes that staff felt

revulsed by. In these cases it was clear that staff were presenting emotions that they did not feel, and that this was an unpleasant and difficult experience. Denise and Neeta describe how this manifested for them:

There was a lady that had been done for fraud, abusing her job role and defrauding people of money but all the time she was doing that she was working and she was claiming full benefits...she comes into the jobcentre the other week to make a claim for benefits and suddenly it's 'woe is me'... I was fortunate I didn't have to deal with her because I don't know how I would have dealt with that. Y'know, you try and be as professional and empathetic but there was an element where I'm thinking 'what?!' (Neeta, DWP)

One guy who I knew who was a sex offender - we don't know what the charges was but we knew he had restrictions on the internet and everything else and I was like 'so what is your employment history?' and he told me he was working in nurseries, he had been a janitor in schools... it took all my effort and energy not to throw up. But I remained a professional, I was quite detached to be fair because I had no empathy for this man because it was really – it was going to be difficult but what I tried to do was look at work based activity, so training, different training courses he could do, erm, but yeah that was difficult because y'know, despite my personal belief systems...I had to remain professional to that person despite the fact that I despised everything y'know? Yeah, it was really upsetting to know that he had worked in all these different places. (Denise, DWP)

Suppressing their disgust and anger to present a neutral professional façade clearly caused intense discomfort for both participants, and arguably is the most challenging aspect of their roles because it disturbs the deeply held ideas about the social value of their work that help them to manage the day-to-day impacts of engaging in intense emotional labour. This aligns with Ward and McMurray's (2016) identification of some forms of emotional labour as a type of emotional dirty work because dealing with stigmatised individuals – such as sex offenders and people who have committed benefit fraud - transfers some of that stigma on to the advisors themselves.

4.2.4 Suppressing Anger at Other Advisors

Managing feelings of frustration and anger at inefficiencies in benefit administration and at individual members of staff that participants felt exacerbated workplace difficulties by antagonising claimants emerged as a significant challenge for participants. In its most extreme form, two participants reported witnessing racism and transphobia from colleagues towards claimants in Jobcentres. Denise, who had

a particularly difficult relationship with colleagues due to being the only BAME member of the team described this as feeling like a battle – but in this case one in which she represented the interests of claimants in opposition to colleagues:

I think people had difficulty because they were rude to claimants y'know? They were rude to people that were coming in there and y'know that's - nobody chooses to be in there...just because somebody speaks a different language, or they present differently (Denise, DWP)

Whilst Denise's account of witnessing overt discrimination from colleagues towards claimants was not echoed by all of the other participants in DBD roles, several participants described their disapproval of colleagues who lacked empathy and compassion towards claimants. Maddy described such frustration below:

Things like when somebody absolutely stunk...silly things like that you can't really be trained on how to deal with, you just have to be a nice person or not a nice person. And there were people I worked with that were horrific at dealing with those situations and you kind of looked at them and thought 'how are you still working here?' but that's just the way it was because there's no strict policy on what do you do if somebody sits at the counter opposite you that has a massive odour issue (Maddy, LA)

The above quote from Maddy indicates a level of tactlessness that is akin to insensitivity and poor customer service that could be upsetting for the claimant if they realised the behaviour was happening, but Neeta elaborated on how poor behaviour of one member of staff can have serious impacts for the claimant, and therefore also the original advisor's colleagues later down the line – sometimes leading to distressing interactions and/or claimant hardship that could have been avoided:

Sometimes, colleagues that are not doing their jobs properly...it's creating these flashpoints, y'know, click click click! Have you actually checked what you're supposed to? Have you checked that you've done it properly for that person? Because two weeks down the line that person still hasn't been able to get an advance because you didn't do the job properly at the start, erm, and then I'm having to deal with that very upset customer, y'know. Bills to pay, children that are not getting any child tax credit element, because that's all stopped as well, and because there's a doubt around this person's income that hadn't been picked up right at the start (Neeta, DWP)

These frustrations about the conduct of some DBD staff and the way this impacted claimants were also apparent in the accounts of CS staff, who often ended up subsequently seeing claimants who were having issues with their claims:

I know what the legislation says and I know what rules should be applied but they rarely are because either the inexperience of the staff at the call centre coupled with a bit of attitude at the Jobcentre (Helen, TS)

Helen was a third sector (TS) expert on Universal Credit (UC) and throughout her interview she described her frustration about DWP staff not administering UC correctly, which has implications for discussions about discretion and street level bureaucracy (Lipsky 1980).

4.2.5 Suppressing Upset

The suppression of one's own upset in response to claimant interactions was a common feature in the data. This occurred primarily in response to hearing about claimant circumstances, where as explored above, it would not be deemed appropriate to show one's own upset at hearing this information and participants felt it was their responsibility to maintain composure. The impact of these accounts was clear however. In both the interviews and diary data, multiple participants spontaneously described (within the confines of adherence to GDPR) the circumstances of specific claimants who were extremely physically and/or mentally unwell and being severely let down by the benefit system, recalling a level of detail indicative of how deeply the cases had affected them – in some cases even years after they had left that role. The following diary entry from Carrie captures the level of performance required in such circumstances:

[Diary entry] I was upset by my three visits, each person was extremely depressed and it's really sad seeing people feeling that down...I didn't do anything huge, but listened, and two people told me just how much that had meant to them. The other person explained how great it is to be around somebody so bubbly and motivational and told me that I "clearly love life". I'm pleased to hear I'm still good at putting my own front on at work! (Carrie, LA)

Whilst Carrie was able to frame this performance as success in that the interactions were helpful for her claimants, two stark examples were provided by Neeta and Peter of high pressure instances where staff were deeply negatively impacted by particular interactions that did not go as well:

This person threatened to commit suicide, walked away from the office, I'm sat there thinking - I'm trying to resolve the situation so he doesn't feel that – trying to sort an emergency payment out ...and it just hit me. I've never cried at my desk before – and I thought 'what if he goes and does something now?' Y'know, I work somewhere where there's a major railway line just down the road (Neeta, DWP)

In this case, Neeta describes a momentary expression of her upset significant because she was so distressed that she could not maintain her emotional performance, but notes that this is not something frequent. Peter talked about a similar experience:

I'd had people say 'Oh, I'm going to go and kill myself!' but they weren't – you could tell, over a period of time on the phones you can tell...you could tell if somebody means it. But this guy meant it.it still I suppose affects me even now. And of course, you call in your supervisor and they sit with you, although they can't listen in³ ...so basically [ironic laugh] it is down to you...we called the police and everything. I never found out what the outcome was because he ended the call eventually but he wasn't in the same situation I don't think when he ended the call as when he first came on the phone. But I never did find out, erm, even though I was told that I would be given that kind of information, which would have been nice to be quite frank. But, I'll be honest, I didn't kind of, go any further into it because as I say, it still affects me now when I think about it, and I wanted to really put that behind me. Erm, and for my trouble on that phone call [ironic laugh] and this, this sounds really terrible actually, looking back on it, I got a £25 gift voucher from the DWP because of the way - the good way I'd handled the call...looking back on it, it's not really – I'm not sure that was particularly appropriate (Peter, DWP)

Being offered a gift voucher rather than emotional support in such circumstances is indicative of a lack of understanding by employers of how staff are affected by intense conversations where they feel a level of responsibility for the claimant such as those above. The quote from Peter above also touches on another element of some interactions which is extremely difficult for staff: not knowing what has happened to claimants after the interaction ends. This was discussed by other participants as a factor in their distress as this did not offer any sense of closure, or any confirmation that the intervention staff had made had been helpful for the claimant:

³ Peter's managers could not listen in because of a lack of availability of the required equipment to enable this in his office, rather than it not being possible.

You can only go so far, you can only suggest they speak to their health professionals... it is distressing when you don't know, when you don't know how the person is. That's one of the things you just sort of learn to live with and hope that another service will have picked them up.
(Helen, TS)

Brian, in his capacity as a Trade Union representative, described DWP training for dealing with suicidal and violent claimants as 'atrocious', meaning that staff were often required to make decisions about how to proceed with very little support. The implications of this were described by Liz, who described this training as 'a paper exercise' that left her feeling unsupported in her interactions as a fraud investigation officer:

Sometimes you can get upset because you can get into an interview and they have had such horrific ordeals in their life that has led to them being sat in front of us that you just feel, you just don't want to put them through any more (Liz, DWP)

Having a long history of service in DBD roles, she was also able to offer a harrowing insight into the impact of working with claimants who were extremely unwell:

[from her time as a visiting officer] We would be sent a form that is clear that they've got less than 6 months to live, but sometimes they wouldn't know that, so you would go in and they would be so lovely and they would be talking about treatment. I went to one person's house and he was talking about getting married next year...and I knew, I'd got the form that says he has got less than 6 months to live...that is harsher than having somebody swear at you because you've caught them out because they have done some work but they don't want to admit it...I learned that that affected me more mentally, and I know, I remember when I was doing some training one of the ladies said 'that is why I am on antidepressants [Liz], because it is hard to see it' and you're like whoa, I don't want to be on medication because of my job. (Liz, DWP)

The cumulative effect of dealing with situations like this, and the ways staff are able to work through such painful experiences are the focus of the following chapters.

Gina and Maddy also touched on an entirely different circumstance where they were required to suppress their own feelings of upset in the workplace: when claimants were rude or personally abusive in a way they found upsetting:

They know nothing about you and they're just calling you really nasty names and they're hurtful...it doesn't always have to be physical because I think sometimes, the way they speak to you... that's just as upsetting as somebody physically hurting you because they don't know

what kind of day you're having and you're just doing a job at the end of the day and you are trying to help them - whether you agree with them or not, you have a job to do, so you would not sit there and purposefully be awkward with them or deny them of anything that they are entitled to. (Gina, DWP)

In this case, as discussed above in the discussion of suppressed anger, to show that one is upset would be considered a failure in their emotional performance, so participants fell back on neutrality to protect them from this.

4.2.6 Summary

The lingering nature of the challenging emotional performances described above is a critical consideration because they impact the performances required for subsequent interactions – this pressure can be cumulative throughout the workday. Maddy recognised this and described her efforts to manage this:

If I ever had a conversation that was difficult for whatever reason I probably would go on a break after – if I could – just to take that moment. Because it would be very difficult otherwise to not let whatever emotion it had brought up spill into the next dealing. (Maddy, LA)

However, due to time pressure in both DBD and CS roles many participants described situations where appointments are back-to-back without space for a break, or when a benefit advisor has a number of challenging interactions in a row. Being required to pivot from one challenging interaction that requires substantial effort in both managing one's own and the claimant's emotions back to being a neutral professional for the next claimant requires staff to bury emotions deeply and engage in what Ward and McMurray (2011) term 'emotion switching' – a particularly skilled form of emotional labour. This kind of emotional labour is concerning because being required to consistently switch emotional performances between claimants is exhausting and evidence of the lack of control benefit advisors have over their emotional performances,

4.3 Strategies for Managing Claimant Emotions

4.3.1 Overview

In addition to the range of ways staff engage in surface and deep acting explored above is the necessity of managing claimant emotions. Strathmann and Hay (2009)

argue this is a neglected aspect of Hochschild's definition that is crucial for understanding emotional labour as a skill set. Strategies that staff use vary dependent on the situation the claimant is in and the resources staff have to support them, but can be split into four major strategies that may all be used in one interaction, or may be selected independently according to what the advisor thinks is most appropriate. These are: reasoning, managing expectations, acknowledging feelings, and offering listening space.

4.3.2 Reasoning - 'This is why..'

This involves breaking down the reasons behind decision making – usually in relation to claim entitlement – in an effort to present the legislation as unchangeable and consistent ('the rules') and place the emphasis on the claimant's circumstances as the reason behind the benefit decision. Being able to communicate legislation clearly and in language participants understood was therefore described as a skill that is fundamental to this strategy, but also something not all benefit advisors possess to the same degree, as Maddy describes:

There is nothing that you can say that makes anything any better but there is stuff you can say that makes the situation worse so trying to pick your wordings, even the tone that you use, the pace that you talk at, so if you're talking about something more complex slow your pace down so that they're listening and hear every word that you say, so so many little technique things that just really make such a big difference. And it's why sadly, a lot of the people that were put in that benefit role on front counter just did not suit it because they did not have those skills (Maddy, LA)

Reasoning was most often described by staff involved in DBD roles, but was also described by staff in CS roles to a lesser extent. In both cases, it was usually utilised alongside the other techniques below.

4.3.3 Managing Expectations - 'This is what I can do...'

Negotiation emerged as an additional strategy that could be used to manage claimant emotions and enable interactions to proceed smoothly. Peter described how this could function in his DWP call centre role:

Sometimes you got somebody come on who was really angry... but you could, if you had the experience, settle them down in as much as you could get them back to what they had really rung for. I.e. you could say whoa, hang on a minute, what's the problem...I am hearing this for

the first time and if you said that to them it seemed to register, well yeah, hang on a minute, this guy doesn't know what I'm talking about. So they would go through it and then I would go on the system and we would look at it and I would give them the advice...So if you could do that you could kind of reverse the situation (Peter, DWP)

This can be a risky strategy but if successful, can have a very beneficial impact both in one off and ongoing relationships between staff and regular claimants:

I had to say to somebody once y'know, 'when you come and see me -' erm 'you're seeing me because you're a jobseeker. Do not come and see me when you've had a couple of drinks because you can't hear what I'm saying to you, you can't tell me what you've been doing, that's not fair for you, that's not fair for me. Don't put yourself in a situation where you're seen by somebody else and they might sanction you'. And we did put a bit of an agreement together that he wouldn't come in drunk! (Neeta, DWP)

As a Work Coach, Neeta employed this strategy to ensure she was able to build a relationship with the claimant that would make it easier (both practically and emotionally) for her to support them to find work. In this case, this not only led to a good relationship between herself and the claimant (who, to her knowledge, kept to the terms of the agreement) but also meant that the claimant talked about her favourably with other claimants as firm but fair in her approach.

Although CS roles offered less opportunities for this because staff are not involved in processing benefits, participants in CS roles described how they could use this strategy to present an (albeit limited) range of options for support, and to signpost to other services when a claimant had multiple difficulties. However, Kayleigh noted the importance of being cautious in what is offered – such as explaining that she could support them to appeal a decision but this may not be successful – in order to manage claimant expectations.

4.3.4 Acknowledging Feelings - 'I understand..'

Naming and acknowledging claimant emotions as valid was the third strategy used to steer potentially difficult interactions. Even within the confines of the Jobcentre, Denise describes the ways that she would do this:

When somebody was upset I would just be like, look, take your time, I had tissues on my desk, I would open my tissues, you can't offer them tea or coffee or anything like that...so a tissue is about all I could offer. And just y'know, saying 'look, I understand where you're coming from'

and empathising, 'these are the rules, this is the rules of the Jobcentre' so we would go through what the criteria was for certain things – and if I could I would empathise, I would then definitely empathise and say 'look, well this is what you can do in the meantime (Denise , DWP)

Here, Denise describes a combination of reasoning, expectation management and acknowledgment in order to support the claimant. Alex, in his CS third sector role, described using similar strategies, and noted that one of the reasons he preferred not working out of a space shared with DWP was having a physical space more amenable to offering such support, where he could offer hot drinks which are prohibited in JCP (Patrick 2017), and an outdoor space for claimants to smoke and toys available for their children:

Acknowledging people's emotions, acknowledging verbally to them how I can see how hard it is, small gestures...just the passing of tissue... it says to someone that I see that you're welling up, I see that this is hurting... little gestures are sometimes really important or a verbal kind of practical thing like ... do you want me to look after your baby for a couple of minutes while you just get yourself sorted out a bit, little things like that, do you know what I mean? That it makes it human (Alex, TS)

The last statement here is key, because it represents a temporary lapse in the performance of emotional labour to enable a more authentic connection between the staff member and claimant. This comes closest to what Bolton (2000a) refers to as a 'gift' that is not organizationally defined and is instead a connection offered freely by the staff member, but the points at which this can occur are limited both by managerial concerns and having the both time and physical space available (all of which will be explored further in Chapter Seven).

Furthermore, the acknowledgement of claimant emotions is also something that can be deployed strategically, in order to defuse a potentially difficult interaction. Sarah described sharing with claimants that she too had tried to claim UC online to allow the sharing of 'mutual frustration', something which she elaborated on by saying:

If they come in and they're angry, I usually just take the route of almost siding with them, which probably isn't approved by my managers, but they've never said anything... I'm like 'yep, I understand, I'd feel the same way as you if I was in that situation' and that often helps them. (Sarah, LA)

Denise also described a strategic element to her use of acknowledgement:

There will be people who are pissed off and angry because they've waited such a long time or they've been sanctioned... I wasn't confrontational, I would actually just reflect back and say 'I can see that you're really angry, what is going on for you?' and stuff like that so a lot of the time when people were – if there was someone kicking off with me it was deescalated quite quickly. (Denise, DWP)

Alex elaborates on this in one of his diary entries by explaining how he uses a form of acknowledgment that almost constitutes a personal script to manage repetitive conversations with claimants that might otherwise be emotionally draining:

[Diary entry] I have a common conversation with him – he feels guilty, like he's failed in life by claiming. He's a proud man and working is part of his identity. I reassure him that he's paid in to the system all his life so the system can support him in his time of need. It's a line I've delivered hundreds of times over the years, and there's an element of roleplay involved every time. The client will make the claim either way because he needs the money, and the fact he's here tells me he's committed to doing it. But he wants to show his reticence, almost as a way of showing he's not 'one of them' – he's a worker, not a claimant... Working hard is part of his identity, and he's struggling to cope with losing that – I think I'd feel similar. Anyway, I deliver the reassuring speech, so he knows that I don't think he's a 'scrounger' and we get his UC claim sorted out (Alex, TS)

The fact that Alex describes this as a performance he has given regularly indicates that this is indeed a tried and tested tactic drawn upon to ease the claimant's concerns rather than an authentic emotional display. The extent to which this transcends an approach to manage claimant emotions in the moment into a conscious strategy to alleviate the emotional toll of such interactions more deeply will be explored further in Chapter Six, but its presence speaks to existing literature that has found staff drawing upon consistent performances that come into effect depending on how staff categorise the person they are dealing with (Wolkomir and Powers 2007). In addition, this statement is interesting in highlighting how amongst claimants, there can be both feelings of shame at needing to claim alongside negative judgements of other benefit claimants that people try to distance themselves from, a finding that echoes research directly with claimants (Patrick 2017). This kind of stigma management to validate the claimant's deservingness is yet another facet of emotional labour in advisory roles, and links to the discussion below of how simply offering space for claimants to talk – which I term listening space - can ameliorate otherwise challenging interactions.

4.3.5 Listening Space - 'Tell me...'

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was the importance of allowing claimants space to vent their emotions and tell their stories because this is something that was missing from many interactions claimants had elsewhere in their lives.

Sometimes people just need to speak. Sometimes they just needed to get something out, and it wasn't gonna change what you were gonna do, but you would sit there and just let them do it so that at least they felt that they'd got something off their chest (Maddy, LA)

Indeed, the importance of listening was something several participants both cited as an essential part of their role and something that they saw as missing from many interactions claimants have with the DWP:

I listen to what they've got to say which is, I found on the phones, which is often frowned upon, many people, all they wanted to do was to talk. And that helped them. I mean I've had cases where they've rung up because they haven't got paid, we'd had a conversation, and even though I couldn't pay them, they actually thanked me for sitting there and listening to what they'd got to say because nobody else was willing to do it! Everybody else they'd rung up was 'yeah, you're not going to get anything, thank you very much, bye'. (Peter, DWP)

Peter's description of simply listening as being helpful for claimants, even in a context where he could not actually rectify the problem is striking, especially as he notes that his employer discouraged this because there was pressure to end calls as quickly as possible. Peter chose instead to risk consequences from his managers – who regularly listened to call recordings and held meetings with staff about their performance – in order to manage the claimant's emotions more effectively and offer both a better experience for the claimant, and by extension, for himself because the interaction was likely to be less combative. Liz, who also worked for the DWP, provided further commentary on how powerful this strategy could be:

I'm interviewing them under caution and saying "you could be prosecuted" and they say "thank you ever so much for chatting to me today, I now understand about my benefits because I can't get through to the call centre" or "the job centre people aren't nice"...and you are like so, I've put you through this and you are saying thank you because it is the best interaction you've had with the Department – that is terrible! (Liz, DWP)

Liz works in a fraud investigation team which makes this statement particularly striking given that the context she is describing is an interview under caution. The lack of space in which to be heard can also lead to claimants approaching CS staff after poor experiences with the DWP:

A lot of the times all I could do was listen, erm I think for a lot of clients that I saw nobody had listened... so here I was - someone who was sort of new, impartial and they needed to tell their story and have someone understand what they had been through and often I was the first person that they were able to do that with because a GP has got what? Ten minutes with somebody, the job centre has very strict slots and things so that is quite difficult because I couldn't change the situation, as much as I could do to listen and to show empathy and sympathise and help people understand where it was they were upset or where it was they were confused, I can't change the situation, I can't change the fact their PIP has been refused and they are losing their mobility car. I cannot change that, and that is really what they needed, they needed that magic wand and for me to make a phone call and say 'this person is desperate and destitute without their car, please reconsider this before they have to give it back'. They needed me to do that, I really wanted to do that but there is no mechanism to enable me to do that so it is very hard because all I could do is listen and take that on but not actually do very much to really help. (Imogen, TS)

Whilst listening here is described as serving a purpose for the claimant when there was a lack of other potential actions that could be taken, the strain on the staff member involved is also apparent. Due to the lack of listening space being an organizationally defined strategy (at least in the DWP), it is also possible to see the links between the use of this strategy and Bolton's concept of offering additional emotional labour as a 'gift' (Bolton 2000a, Bolton 2005). However, the following excerpt (also from Imogen) indicates how deciding whether to primarily utilise managing expectations or listening space could in reality be merely a pragmatic decision based on wanting the interaction to go smoothly and achieve the desired outcome:

You sort of make a judgement based on body language, tone ...for some people if you try and cut them off when they are venting, they don't feel listened to, you don't get that opportunity to build rapport, and trust and they spend the entire time you're talking to them worrying about what they haven't said because they feel it might be important that I understand what happened last year, so I may know that it is not important...but to them that is just really important that I understand so [if] I haven't let them tell me that is going to make the interview

quite difficult, whereas with other people you have to be a lot stronger and sort of say look I know this has happened and it doesn't feel fair, but this is where we're at now, so we need to do a) or b) today and I need to know whether it is a) or whether it is b) because discussing this isn't going to change the situation. So you sort of make a judgement call based on the person (Imogen, TS)

Finally, whilst listening was reported to primarily be successful in allowing claimants to feel validated and understood, the impact of taking on this additional work of hearing upsetting information about people's circumstances in great detail, especially in situations where outlets for staff can be limited, is explored in the following chapter.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has engaged with my first research question by setting out the way that emotional labour functions within benefit advisory roles in terms of the management of both staff and claimant emotions. Working in a benefit advisory role involves managing the self to evoke a neutral, professional stance, performing neutrality in the way previously described by Ward and McMurray (2011) to maintain harmonious interactions and make appropriate decisions. This can become challenging when it requires the advisor to put aside their own feelings about benefit legislation and implementation, as well as suppression of authentic emotions deemed incompatible with the benefit advisory role. Suppressing anger at both claimants and other staff members, disgust at claimants, fear in unpredictable and at times dangerous circumstances, and upset at the stark realities of claimants' circumstances and inability to change these can require substantial effort and a skilled combination of surface and deep acting (Hochschild 1983). This chapter has therefore demonstrated how both surface and deep acting are present in benefit advisory roles, and are drawn upon based on the situation at hand.

In addition to management of the self, benefit advisors are skilled at drawing upon a combination of strategies to manage claimant emotions in order for the interaction to proceed smoothly. Switching between reasoning and managing expectations to encourage claimants to comply on one hand, with the acknowledgement of feelings and listening space offered for claimants to air their grievances and frustration on the other is a way staff attempt to defuse intense interactions and try to guide them in their preferred direction. Whilst such conduct could be viewed as what Bolton

(2000a, 2000b) terms 'philanthropic' emotion management - a 'gift' that is authentically offered above and beyond organisational demands – the presence of other strategies, and the way the participants spoke about choosing between and combining them (as in Imogen's quote above) makes it clear that this is a strategy chosen from a heavily constrained range of options, which functions to protect advisors from claimant emotions that are more challenging to manage and to give them a sense of having helped in circumstances where they cannot positively impact the claimant's circumstances. This is a salient empirical contribution that also demonstrates the importance of researchers focusing not just on emotional management of the self, but also the service users workers engage with, an aspect of emotional labour that is often overlooked (Ward and McMurray 2016).

The next three chapters will develop this discussion of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles – firstly through exploring the effects of performing this kind of emotional labour in Chapter Five, followed by Chapters Six and Seven unpacking the wider strategies used by advisors to manage the emotional labour they perform, and how their ability to draw upon these is dependent on workplace contexts that are outside of their control. Finally, Chapter Eight brings these findings together to reflect on the overall original contributions and implications of this thesis.

Chapter Five – The Effects of Emotional Labour on Front-Line Benefit Advisors

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter focused on the interactions benefit advisors have with benefit claimants and the nature of the emotional labour they are required to perform to support claimants effectively. It concluded that benefit advisors utilise a variety of strategies to manage the emotions of claimants and to ensure their own emotional displays are appropriate – presenting professional neutrality and suppressing their own feelings about the nature of the interaction they are having, the circumstances of the claimant they are advising, and the benefit system. Here, the focus goes beyond the content of individual interactions with claimants and their immediate effects, to consider the overarching effects of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles. Effects are explored at the level of short-term effects on staff at the end of their working day in terms of what happens to the emotions that have been suppressed, and longer term, how the nature of benefit advisory work means that a blurring of boundaries between work and home life can occur, impacting advisors lives outside work in a multitude of ways. The longer-term impacts on their health and wellbeing are also considered, as are the overriding emotions they feel about their roles and how this impacts their sense of job satisfaction.

This chapter engages with the second of my key research questions – how the emotional labour involved in benefit advisory roles impacts staff outside of the workplace, and what they consider the effects of the emotional labour they perform to be in terms of their health, work life balance, and sense of job fulfilment and satisfaction. Whilst Hochschild (1983) focused on the negative effects of emotional labour on the self, Chapter Two has explored that whilst subsequent research has developed this discussion (e.g. Turner and Stets 2005), there have been criticisms that this evaluation is too simplistic and does not consider the nuanced impacts of emotional labour across different sectors and the possibility of emotional labour

providing both positive and negative impacts on staff (Steninberg and Figart 1999, Kruml and Geddes 2000).

This chapter therefore considers the effects of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles in depth, focusing on the extent of job satisfaction and fulfilment versus negative emotions about roles and dissatisfaction. It then considers the blurring of boundaries between work and home life which can occur due to a variety of factors, specifically; workload pressures, concern for claimants, the lingering impact of negative interactions with claimants and how these can combine to have a negative impact on one's personal relationships. The possibility of work and home identity blurring is also considered, as this makes it more challenging for advisors to recharge between shifts. Finally, the physical and mental health impacts that can in some circumstances result from these experiences are identified and explored.

5.2 The Extent of Job Satisfaction and Fulfilment

5.2.1 Overview

Job satisfaction – and dissatisfaction – emerged strongly as an overarching theme from participants' accounts. Participants discussed the elements of their roles that offered a sense of fulfilment and reward, as well as frustration, upset and in some cases anger and shame that led to a sense of dissatisfaction. Similarities – as well as some differences – emerged across multiple levels: between advisors in Claimant Support (CS) and Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles, between public and third sector (TS) roles, between staff in the same sector, and in some cases, conflicting emotions reported by individual advisors. These are all explored, highlighting the complex interplay of factors that impact how benefit advisors feel about the work they do.

5.2.2 Fulfilment and Rewarding Work

Being able to navigate difficult interactions to resolve problems offered a sense of job fulfilment for participants who felt that the emotional labour required of them was offset by the end result, which can feel hugely rewarding. This was identified through participants discussion of how their desire to provide support and make positive change to claimants' lives enabled them to feel both appreciated and effective.

Sarah's quote below exemplifies this:

I had a guy who used to come in every day and erm, he had a really bad stammer, he struggled with his nerves a lot and he was an alcoholic and being evicted and I managed to find him a place to live, I managed to sort out with him all his benefits so he got benefits, I managed to sort out an emergency grant for food erm, because he'd got no money and I managed to sort out foodbank vouchers for him...I saw him about a month ago come in and he was just like a different person. He looked like a totally different person and it's that – that's what I find really rewarding. (Sarah, LA)

This sense of the challenges of benefit advisory work being worthwhile when there are tangible results was shared by Emilia and Alex:

This is really rewarding when people are telling you that you've helped them a lot, or yes - when they are grateful, when they are telling you that it has changed a lot and they are more positive - feeling positive about their future, this is a great, great reward. (Emilia, TS)

I love that kind of sense of people walking away thinking "I am really glad I have had that conversation because my life is going to be a bit easier"...fixing problems for people erm it is quite a buzz actually, it is quite addictive. (Alex, TS)

Being able to tie his moral and political values to his work allowed Alex to feel positive about his role and this offered a sense of justification for the more challenging aspects of the emotional performances required of him. Ryan elaborated on how he saw the purpose of his role as equipping claimants to support themselves:

We are passing on, like some knowledge to these people, and it's quite rewarding to see that, when we know they've gone away a lot happier than when they came in and they will be able to take care of themselves going forward. (Ryan, TS)

Ryan's statement was indicative of his assertion, shared in particular by other TS staff, that they helped people to build lifelong skills that will enable them to manage independently in the future. Whilst the scope to do this was more apparent in CS roles with their focus on empowering claimants to navigate their benefit claims, being able to resolve complex queries and help people into long term employment and out of financial hardship was also discussed by some DBD staff, including Gina:

I was erm Employer Engagement so I was actually working with employers to try and find positions for people that were unemployed...trying to find suitable people, putting them into work

experience and things like that. And getting results! Seeing outcomes, watching youngsters actually come on board: not really wanting to do anything and then doing a bit of training, getting work experience, and then getting a job. (Gina, DWP)

Neeta (DWP) echoed this sense of satisfaction at seeing evidence of her intervention making a difference to claimants' lives – describing how in her 20 years of service, she had experienced satisfaction on multiple occasions when she came across a former claimant who was now thriving in a job she had helped put them on the path to. It is notable, however, that Neeta felt that opportunities for DWP staff to do this were being eroded by both policy and institutional changes that have moved towards a focus into getting claimants into any job and sanctioning them for missteps, which is discussed below.

5.2.3 Negative Emotions About Job Role

Conversely, a variety of negative emotions are experienced by advisors in response to their roles - frustration and upset, as well as anger and shame in some cases, emerged from participants' accounts as a response to feeling unable to effectively support claimants and make meaningful change. Specific legislative changes including the rollout of Universal Credit and increasing conditionality were mentioned as significant reasons for this, leading to increased feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction for participants who felt conflict between their own values and beliefs and the procedures and decisions they are required to uphold and communicate at work.

The majority (12 of 17) of participants described their motivations for going into the sector as being about wanting to make a difference and support vulnerable people. It is therefore understandable that the gap between their expectations and the reality of DWP and LA roles in particular, led to a lack of job satisfaction and frustration with the constraints they are placed under. Peter felt strongly about this, explaining that:

No, it was not a good place to work. And they had made it more and more difficult for us to do a job which was even at the beginning a difficult job to do...I'll be honest I look back on it sometimes and think I wish I'd not gone, I really do, I wish I'd not ever worked for them to be quite frank. And now all the more, with Universal Credit all the more. Because at least all the other benefits had elements where you could turn round and say "well yeah, we are trying to help, with the restrictions that have to be put on for benefits, yeah, we do help", but

Universal Credit? No we don't, we don't even try. We do not even try to help. Because it is not help, it is not help we are doing. We are paying for them to search for work and that is it. That is it, that is all we do.
(Peter, DWP)

As a call handler, Peter was a member of DWP staff at the forefront of enforcing conditionality, with limited autonomy. The ability to utilise discretion has previously been linked with decreased negative impacts of emotional labour (Sloan 2014), and the way Peter and other advisors maximise opportunities to do this are explored in the following chapter as they constitute a method of resisting or alleviating the negative impacts of emotional labour. Firstly, however, it is important to focus on the toll of feeling that organisational priorities are not aligned with one's own goal of creating meaningful change in claimants' lives.

Neeta's sense of frustration had increased over time as she felt that her role had shifted through successive legislative changes, from her original aim of finding claimants meaningful, fulfilling work towards getting them into any job, regardless of the suitability. This left her feeling upset at the current situation:

People go "oh let it go [Neeta], there isn't anything you can do, nothing you can change!" I'm thinking; no, there isn't, I can't change anything, but it doesn't stop me feeling upset about what's happening. (Neeta, DWP)

Similarly, for other participants, organisational restructures and forced changes of role definitions and responsibilities had moved them away from the roles they originally applied for, which no longer existed as a result of changing DWP focus and new legislation, the context of which has been explored above. This meant that the elements that originally attracted them to their roles were no longer present, and in some cases – such as Denise and Gina – they were working with different claimant groups, or administering different benefits all together even before Universal Credit.

Other participants in DBD roles who had worked in their roles for most of their careers also described this priority shift - described by both Peter and Denise as a 'change in ethos' - within the DWP towards a position where staff are expected not to trust claimants, a position that sat uneasily with those drawn to roles to provide support for claimants:

When I was learning my job on the phones, I was told: "you always believe what they say"...unless I've got evidence – or get evidence in

the future, fair enough – that that person is lying to me, then I believe them. The crux of the matter, at the end of the day, that changed completely. The view that I got, being on the phones, was that “no! We don’t believe any of ya, we don’t believe anything you’re saying, you’ve got to prove everything to us before we will do anything to help you”. That’s the main difference – from we believed you, what we’ll do, we’ll pay you this money, woe betide you if you’re lying to us because we will come back and get it...the complete ethos changed from ‘we believe you, we’ll pay you’ to ‘no, we don’t believe you, prove it before we’ll pay you’ And that, summing it up, is the difference. And that is what I couldn’t live with any longer and I felt it is what my colleagues couldn’t live with (Peter DWP)

This change in ‘ethos’ at the DWP entailed what they described as a shift from guiding and supporting claimants with the goal of getting everyone who is able to into long term work to a punitive system that assumes claimants are trying to play the system and attempts to motivate them into any job available through the threat of sanctions.

Whilst this frustration and internal conflict may be expected in roles where staff are directly involved with enforcing conditionality and communicating DWP priorities, it is important to note that such frustration also extended to participants working in CS roles. For example, Imogen had worked with multiple claimant groups for a large third sector (TS) organisation, but found supporting claimants making claims for Universal Credit to be a particular challenge:

The frustration with it is you might have felt good for five minutes after you saw a client and you had got some sort of break through or help them get some sort of way forward but then the next appointment I had I would see the same problem again because of the same system and because the system was not changing (Imogen, TS)

Her feelings about this were so strong that she even noted that trying to support Universal Credit claimants caused her more distress than time she had spent on a contract supporting claimants who were terminally ill to make benefit claims. She explained that whilst supporting people who were dying requires the suppression of sadness to provide professional advice, the repetitive nature of Universal Credit case work was gruelling – coming up against what she perceived as the same legislative inefficiencies and unfairness with every claimant she saw.

At one extreme end of the emotional spectrum, shame was described by some participants in circumstances where they were aware they were regularly

undertaking surface acting. This occurred primarily when explaining benefit legislation and decision-making processes that they had no input into and did not personally agree with. In these instances, benefit advisors were required to detach from their own beliefs, suppress negative emotions and perform neutrality in interactions where their feelings would not be deemed organisationally appropriate.

Feeling constrained from expressing one's own feelings left a lingering effect of shame about their roles which persisted long after interactions ended. Peter was emphatic about how this affected him:

I just want to forget I ever worked there to be quite frank, in the end I became ashamed of being – I would never tell anybody that I was part of the DWP. (Peter, DWP)

One aspect of DBD roles which was distinct from CS roles was an element of organizational, as well as personal, shame. Whilst Peter was most emphatic about this feeling – as illustrated in the quote above - Denise also felt discomfort at being associated with the DWP. A major aspect of organizational shame related directly to changes to legislation and working practices in the DWP which have already been discussed above, and these were mentioned by the participants who had worked for the DWP through successive governments and policy changes.

The way in which emotional labour can be understood as a particular form of dirty work has been highlighted previously (McMurray and Ward 2014, Ward and McMurray 2016), carrying with it a sense of taint that staff are marked with. This helps to explain why participants in DBD roles felt a sense of shame associated with their job roles, and crucially, this marking as tainted extends beyond the end of the work day, which will be explored below in terms of how it can impact home life.

Liz described how this sense of shame was exacerbated by the way the DWP is perceived, contrasting it with her time in her previous DBD role for a local authority (LA):

I think the Department in general we have a very poor perception with the public. I [very emphatic] don't tell people I work for the Department for Work and Pensions. I will say, if pushed I will say I'm a civil servant...whereas when I worked for the local authority I was quite, not necessarily proud but I would tell people 'oh yeah I work for blabla council'...[the DWP] it's not somewhere that anybody I know is proud to work. (Liz, LA/DWP)

Regardless of how they felt about their roles, all the advisors from the DWP similarly spoke about the way they felt DWP is perceived by the public and described by the media – as inefficient, punitive and bureaucratic. In circumstances where advisors share some of those feelings themselves, this sense of discomfort about one's employment is especially intense.

DWP staff also occupy a curious position similar to that described previously by Rivera (2015) who explored emotional labour in the role of US Border Force Agents. In both cases, media coverage of their work, its political significance, and the existing discourses around service users (discussed in Chapter One) means that these staff are criticised for being too lenient and too harsh at the same time. In response to me asking whether participants felt there were any misconceptions or stereotypes about their jobs, Helen touched upon the way the media contributes to narratives:

I think the media has erm, newspapers in particular, have a big role to play. Erm, some of them are erm, they obviously have got political agendas. Some of them are y'know, putting downright lies on the front. Erm, and some of them look like they should be fine and should be telling you real news and they're just not. (Helen, TS)

Media focus on increasing benefit conditionality and the delays and difficulties in implementing reforms, in particular Universal Credit, and persistent media narratives about undeserving claimants have been explored in Chapter One and Two. These external narratives also contribute to staff in these roles feeling negatively about their employer, and persisting media narratives about undeserving claimants add another level of ambivalence when advisors perceive there to be a different everyday reality in their workplaces. The way benefit advisors engage with narratives about specific groups of claimants and how this informs their sense of their role purpose will be explored further in Chapter Six, as an unexpected finding is that engagement with these misconceptions constitutes a way of managing emotional labour in this context.

Advisors in CS roles were shielded from a lot of these negative associations. Part of this related to the space CS roles offer to be critical of procedures, decisions, and legislation that is deemed to be unfair and unjust. This contrast was particularly stark for Kayleigh – working in an overtly anti-austerity voluntary organisation gave her scope to have genuine emotional interactions with claimants, which she described

simply as ‘*You could be real with people there*’ - expressing her frustration and fury with decisions and processes that disadvantaged claimants. Being able to position oneself as working against this system also protected CS workers somewhat from the taint that stems from their work, an important distinction which will be explored further in the following chapter. Joanne was able to provide a particularly interesting perspective on this, having worked previously for the DWP, a LA, and TS roles before moving into providing benefit advice on a self-employed, for profit basis:

People have the wrong impression of staff that work at DWP, I know there is some bad staff at DWP but there is also an awful lot of good staff that want to do their best which is the majority, you have always got one haven't you? You have always got a couple within an organisation that you know aren't so helpful erm but you know working with [large third sector organisation] and now for myself erm well I get flowers, I get thank you cards, I get chocolates, I get tips, you know and it is different because people are viewing you differently... people know you're trying to help them, but you see when I was at the DWP I was the same person (Joanne, self-employed)

This starkly illustrates the difference in the way DBD and CS staff are viewed by claimants despite the motivations of staff in these roles being the same – being perceived as part of the social security system that claimants experience as punitive and bureaucratic only adds to the negative emotions advisors experience when they share these views, but are perceived by claimants to be part of the system.

In addition to the discussion of shame above, many participants expressed feelings of guilt at legislation and organisational constraints meaning they felt they were not able to provide assistance that would meaningfully enable claimants to alleviate their financial difficulties. It is especially important to consider this in relation to the reason these advisors were drawn to their roles in the first place; as discussed above, many said that they had joined their respective organisations to be part of a role that makes a positive difference to people's lives.

One of the most significant factors influencing how participants felt about their roles was the level of autonomy they perceived themselves as having over their working environment, over decision making, and when to use discretion. Denise – who was TUPE transferred into a role at Jobcentre Plus, found working in a DBD role where she was expected to – in her words – ‘police’ benefit claimants extremely challenging because increasing benefit conditionality felt incompatible with her personal ethics:

I felt like you're a government pawn...even though my title was Employment Advisor, I think my main job really was to police the benefit system and that was horrible, because it was against my ethos. (Denise, DWP)

This sentiment was echoed amongst other participants in DBD roles in circumstances where they felt their personal beliefs clashed with the tasks they were expected to perform. However, it is important to note that these feelings were not shared by all participants involved in benefit delivery. The different ways they make sense of their roles and the discourses drawn upon to describe their role purpose can also be understood as a strategy for managing the emotional pressure of advisory work. The ways in which participants differed in this regard, and attempts they made to manage any disjuncture, will be explored in the following chapter. First, however, it is important to consider how these intense and at times contrasting emotions impact on the health of benefit advisors, and create permeable boundaries between work and home life that enable work life to bleed into time outside of work.

5.3 Blurring the Boundaries Between Work and Home Life

5.3.1 Workload Pressures

The impacts of emotional labour were exacerbated by pressure to work additional, unpaid hours, which means staff have less time to decompress between shifts and puts pressure on their home life. Pressure was both overt in some cases where passing on information was time sensitive, and any delay could have a hugely negative impact on claimants financial situations, and more subtle – where staff feel pressure to keep working past their contracted hours in order to support claimants. This can eat into time outside of working hours, as Neeta – who held a part time contract that in theory allowed her to balance work and parenting responsibilities - explained:

My kids have been stood in the rain waiting for me because I've had to finish something off. (Neeta, DWP)

These difficulties DBD staff face need to be considered on a collective (or institutional) level rather than being considered as individual experiences. Brian (DWP) explained that in his capacity as a regional union representative for DWP staff he had heard from a large number of benefit advisors who were doing unpaid overtime because of workload increases and understaffing.

Bearing witness to the difficulties claimants face can lead to a sense of responsibility to do what one can to resolve difficulties, even when the level of influence advisors have within the system is limited. Neeta (DWP) also described utilising a social media group in her spare time to learn more about UC rollout to fill gaps in official training provided by her employer, leading to a situation where she was doing unpaid overtime both to process claims and to enhance her knowledge. Interestingly, this was not limited to DBD roles as CS staff reported similar experiences. For example, both Emilia and Helen reported using their spare time to read up on legislation and process changes as there was simply not enough time during the work day for this.

Although CS roles were less directly linked to processing claims, some employers still required detailed case notes relating to each appointment. Emilia found herself needing to complete case notes in the evenings in order to perform effectively in her interactions with claimants, especially as she had recently moved to a new role between her completing her diary and being interviewed (still a third sector CS role, but in a different setting) so she was getting to grips with how to manage her new caseload:

I really struggle now so for last week I was really, really overwhelmed and I couldn't detach from my work, but I know that this is only like the beginning so I have to find other way, if that won't work I know that I will have to talk to my supervisor and my manager, however this is not really up to them, it is always up to the funder and this is the problem, lack of staff, this is always the problem. So your manager can tell you "I completely appreciate that but I have no money to pay you for three hours extra admin". (Emilia, TS)

During our interview, Emilia described how she was working on trying to find a better balance with this as she recognised the pressure this placed on her free time.

Ultimately, however, she individualised the problem as her own despite acknowledging that the organisation was underfunded and understaffed. Alex, based in a similar role, described developing his own strategy for managing this:

I will flex a little bit in terms of writing up case notes in my own time on the kind of implicit understanding that I will also take the time I need within the working day and I think kind of morally I feel that... that balances out for me, erm but it is quite an important part for me of kind of mentally checking out of that day and moving on. (Alex, TS)

This is a particularly interesting statement, as it offers a glimpse into how this behaviour – which takes time out of Alex's personal life – is something he considers

worthwhile. However, this reflects his constrained choices: there is insufficient time during his workday to enable decompression between appointments and write-up of case notes, so he has had to come up with his own strategy that means doing unpaid overtime. This is because being able to decompress directly after appointments means the work he does in the evenings is administrative, so once he completes it he is able to relax in the evenings. The significance of decompression between interactions will be explored further in Chapter Seven.

One of the most striking impacts of benefit advisory work that was apparent from the interviews and diaries relates to work life balance. Work life balance is a contested term (Lewis et al 2017), but can broadly be defined as the extent to which an individual is able to effectively separate and balance time spent in their work role and personal life. Here, work life balance is relevant for understanding the blurring of boundaries between work and home life that affects the experiences of advisors inside and outside of the workplace at multiple levels: the time pressures from their roles, difficulty emotionally disengaging after the work day, challenges in personal relationships caused by work, and even in their wider communities.

5.3.2 Difficulty Disengaging From Work

Difficulty in detaching from thoughts about work at the end of one's workday to allow space for relaxation and decompression strongly emerged as a theme from the interviews and diaries. This difficulty exists as a result of both enduring concern about claimants past the end of the working day, and the persistence of negative emotions after challenging interactions with claimants. These were mentioned by participants across DBD and CS roles, which suggests that it is the nature of the emotional labour performed in providing advice on benefits that is significant, rather than these difficulties being related to DBD or CS roles specifically. As explored in the previous chapter, benefit advisors work in emotionally charged environments that require them to perform neutrality, suppress negative emotions, and perform complex work involved in managing claimant emotions to keep interactions as calm and efficient as possible. It was striking that participants described their experiences so similarly, given the differences in their roles. For example, Alex (TS) said: *'it's not like you can leave stuff at the door when you work in a job like this'*, and Helen (TS) similarly explained:

It is difficult to switch off. It's – it's erm - I'm glad I'm able to speak to my colleagues, obviously you can't talk specifics at home because of the confidentiality. (Helen, TS)

This difficulty in 'switching off' was a phrase used spontaneously by multiple participants in response to my question about how they feel at the end of work day and how they relax after work. Importantly, it relates to two specific aspects of advisory roles: authentically felt concern about claimants, and conversely, the continuation of heightened negative emotions after difficult interactions with claimants. Ryan explains that both affect him:

There's definitely some situations where you do still take them home and you do worry about certain people or if the client's been maybe quite rude as well, maybe I'll take that home and vent about it a bit to my wife! (Ryan, TS)

The distinction between these reasons is important because they relate to different elements of emotional labour; the suppression of empathy on one hand, which may accompany feelings of guilt or frustration at not being able to do more to alleviate the difficulties claimants are facing. Conversely, advisors are at times required to suppress their own anger, frustration, or (in some extreme circumstances described in the last chapter) fear in order to comply with organisational display rules by maintaining their professional neutrality until they are outside of the workplace. Whilst the reasons for their difficulty in 'switching off' from work stem from very different interactions and emotions, this finding indicates the importance of spaces to decompress during the working day, which will be explored further in Chapter Seven as their significance is fundamental to the wellbeing of benefit advisors.

As already touched upon in Helen's quote above, several participants expressed that not being able to discuss any of the cases that were bothering them because of confidentiality was a factor that compounded difficulties in disengaging after the work day had ended. For example, Denise (DWP) mentioned how at home her concern about claimants would remain, explaining that: '*You went home and you worried about a lot of the claimants*', a sentiment echoed by other advisors across both DBD and CS roles for the DWP, LA and TS.

Sleeping difficulties were mentioned by three participants. For example, Joanne said:

I mean you do think about cases and they keep you awake at night erm frequently, frequently I mean I wish I had a pound for every time I

have woken up in the middle of the night and wrote a note down on a piece of paper to remind me to do something. (Joanne, self-employed)

Joanne felt that her move to providing benefit advice on a self-employed, for profit basis was part of the reason for this – whilst she had significantly more control over her working conditions and hours, she was alone in shouldering the responsibility for supporting the claimants she worked with, and had no colleagues with whom to discuss her emotions and experiences. The value of colleague support networks has previously been identified as a very important way of staff managing the difficulties of their roles (Korczynski 2003), so it is easy to see how working alone may increase this type of negative impact.

Some participants described more positive experiences when sharing their feelings about work with family members, but it is notable that many of the participants who reported more understanding and support at home explained that this was because they had partners or housemates who worked in roles that also involve significant emotional labour with service users who can be vulnerable, including roles that also offer some understanding of the UK benefit system. Social workers, housing advisory services, and teaching in an economically disadvantaged area of the borough (the participant explained that this meant her friend was often working with the children of claimants she saw at work) were three of the examples given by participants. Whilst these loved ones could not specifically relate to the pressures of benefit advisory work, they understood the impact of their own emotion management in the workplace and the incredibly difficult circumstances people can face and thus could offer empathy and support through comforting words and actions – in Emilia's case, small gestures like her housemate buying her comfort food when she could tell it had been a hard day provided her with validation and were greatly appreciated.

In terms of how participants rationalised the reasons they had difficulty relaxing after work, being a caring and compassionate person was the overriding explanation participants drew upon to understand why they were affected this way:

I will say that I do take – mentally – some of it home with me when I've had clients who are in very difficult situations and I think in order to do this job you have to have at least some compassion to feel that way. It is just a – trying to find the balance of not taking too much home with you and just understanding that some people do have bad situations,

but at least we've done the best we can to help them I guess. (Ryan, TS)

Taken together, these challenges to work life balance constitute risks to the wellbeing of benefit advisors. It is important to consider that these experiences were often combined for a single advisor, and the following quote from Imogen relates to several parts of this discussion. She draws upon a narrative of care as a reason that why advisors struggle outside the workplace, identifies that changes in workload and legislation have increased workplace pressure, and also suggests that there are differences between advisors in their ability to disengage from work:

You can't have these people that are in these awful situations erm and just cut off from that when you're the kind of caring, helpful person doing that job in the first place, that is why you're there so you can't just suddenly - y'know - I mean some people can, because they have got that skill, I am not one of them but you can't then just go home and just cut off and not care (Imogen, TS)

Her use of the word 'skill' here is key – understanding how some people find it easier to disengage whilst others struggle immensely will be explored further in Chapter Six. It is important to note that Imogen was not alone in understanding the emotional difficulties she faced as being linked to being a caring person who was drawn to a benefit advisory role in order to help people. Maddy described her role in a similar way, arguing that a difficulty disengaging from work was a by-product of being a caring and committed benefit advisor, something she feels is actually necessary to perform the role effectively:

Any job that you do that you know has direct impact on someone's life, it - it does stay with you. I've got colleagues who have gone off to go on leave and then will text me and be like "oh my god, I didn't send that letter out for that person!" because you care – if you care about your job then it doesn't matter what you're doing, if it impacts people then you are gonna take it home with you and it is gonna [be] something that stays with you and I don't know that there's much that can be done to stop that and I don't actually know that I'd want that to be stopped because I don't think I want to be someone who doesn't care! I think it's only if you care that you do ever take it home with you. (Maddy, LA)

The fact that Maddy subsequently held a position with management responsibilities (still within the LA, but no longer a benefit advisory role) is particularly important to consider here. She expresses her belief that the ongoing concern that advisors have about claimants is a good thing because it shows one is a caring person – and

therefore, by her reasoning, a good benefit advisor. As a member of managerial staff, this has potentially concerning implications: it suggests that managers could consider these difficulties staff face as unavoidable. This could potentially lead to a lack of managerial enthusiasm for any workplace changes that may reduce the pressures on staff, because the pressure is seen as unavoidable, and staff approaching their managers with experiences of strain may be considered merely devoted employees, rather than managers recognising that they are struggling and need support to reduce the pressure they face.

The benefit system was the primary source of anger and frustration that participants described but framing it as exclusively caused by this does not provide a complete picture of how this emerged as a theme in benefit advisor accounts of the effects of their roles and sense of job satisfaction. Beyond anger in the moment at the level of individual interactions with specific claimants – which was addressed in the previous chapter – lingering negative emotions were also reported. This developed in response to the way staff are treated in general by claimants who do not appreciate benefit advisors' attempts to assist them, and working with claimants who are distressed, rude or aggressive also has an impact on advisors that can reach past the end of the work day. For example, Sarah (LA) described how in some cases, these lingering emotions could lead to a major loss of home time:

I had a really nasty caller yesterday afternoon and it stayed with me all night. I could not shift it, I was in a foul mood last night. (Sarah, LA)

Understanding why some advisors can shift these feelings more easily than others, and how workplaces can be arranged to enable spaces for venting and decompression in the workplace, is an important part of Chapter Six and Seven.

Interestingly, the data from my participants suggests that advisors differed in the degree to which they reported difficulties in disengaging from thoughts about work at the end of the work day. On one hand, some participants cited it as a key reason they had left their advisory roles, whereas others reported it to be a less frequent intrusion:

I don't think there were loads of occasions where I'd come home and be really stressing about it, but I may still have come home and have something niggling or y'know nagging at me, I'd be like "ah, I must

make sure I check on that tomorrow” or “that was a really difficult case”. (Maddy, LA)

Gina in particular described being able to put her working day behind her with relative ease:

Yeah, I must admit, erm, I never really came home and it bothered me, I never really had any incidents where I felt “oh I don’t want to go back to work tomorrow” or “I need time off” or “I can’t do this anymore”. As you walk through the door you just get on with your life at home. And then in the morning get up and go in and think “oh, what is today gonna bring?” (Gina, DWP)

This could perhaps be explained by the different motivation she expressed for starting her job in the first place: she explained she was looking for a role with job security that would suit her strong administrative skills, rather than looking for a role working with benefit claimants specifically. Whilst she identified that challenging interactions with claimants never led her to question whether it was worth staying in her role, there was some evidence that the picture may be slightly more complicated than this initial quote suggests because elsewhere in our interview Gina hinted that sometimes she had struggled to put the working day behind her:

You can go home physically drained and things don’t come out of your head – d’ya know what I mean? (Gina, DWP)

Similarly, Maddy described how wanting to avoid these intrusions into her personal life had even impacted on her career trajectory, leading her to avoid applying for promotions that would mean she had more responsibility for claimants (through increased decision-making capacity on complex cases):

Erm, I think in any job it’s very hard to just be able to just switch off. I think particularly when you’re working in a job where you know what you do impacts people. It’s why up until more recently I never really wanted to get too high up in management because I quite like being able to come home of a night and being able to sleep and not worry (Maddy, LA)

These statements suggest at the least, some ambivalence in their testimonies about the impact of work on home life: even where advisors feel that on the whole they are able to effectively manage negative impacts of emotional labour, there are still instances where they struggle because of it. This suggests the potential for further use of diaries to investigate benefit advisor experiences at the end of the working

day – as these capture contemporaneous accounts of how one is feeling, rather than relying on memory or the narratives staff hold about their roles more generally. Focusing on the frequency and intensity of negative experiences that spill over in to home life would give a more complete picture of the scale of these difficulties in benefit advisory roles.

5.4 Impacts on Personal Relationships

The internal and external pressure to work extra hours described above, in conjunction with the potential for advisors to get home feeling drained or suffering lingering negative impacts from difficult interactions can leave benefit advisors with less time and energy for their loved ones. Previous research has identified the effects of emotional labour on the quality of the worker's personal relationships and ability to engage with these fully due to exhaustion, as well as depersonalisation and detachment (Smith and Kleinman 1989). This links to Hochschild's (1983) assertion that emotional labour can be understood as a new form of workplace alienation (of the sort originally described by Marx) – in this case alienation from one's own emotions which then impacts on the quality of personal relationships advisors are able to maintain.

The reasons for difficulties in personal relationships are multi-faceted – relating to reduced time and energy for personal relationships and difficulties stemming from a lack of understanding by loved ones. Time was the most obvious element and has already been discussed in relation to how this impacts advisors themselves, and the related impacts on loved ones are summed up in Neeta's statement above about her children having to wait outside to be picked up as she needed to finish cases before she could leave work. Neeta was not the only person who discussed the impact of needing to respond to time sensitive issues as they arise in order to support claimants, as Emilia felt that it made certain lifestyles incompatible with advisory work:

This is not a job for people who I think have like little children, erm this is not a job for people who like routine because for me every day is completely different, you cannot prepare, it is very intense, intensive in terms of you see people every day with different problems erm lack of time, it is very, very intense you may be mentally exhausted...I cannot see myself if I had little children coming back home after work and doing something erm else like on top like playing, cooking, no,

completely not, I wouldn't see myself like that, I think that would be really, really difficult to cope. (Emilia, TS)

The sense of exhaustion and how that leaves advisors with little left to give at the end of their working day was echoed by other participants. Carrie's diary entries illuminated how this occurred for her, where performing intense emotional labour in the workplace left her feeling unable to give her loved ones her full attention. This, in turn, created a sense of internal conflict:

[diary entry] I visited my mum after work but didn't give her my whole attention if I'm honest, which annoys me because I spend my days visiting people at work and trying to support them and then when I visit my own mum I struggle to have enough energy left to support her with all of her problems. (Carrie, LA)

This extract starkly illustrates the difficulties faced by benefit advisors – performing emotional labour to effectively manage claimant emotions is skilled work that uses energy, leaving staff depleted and unable to offer the level of emotional support to their loved ones that they would ideally like to.

This can be compounded by the fact that some participants felt that other people outside of their roles did not understand the intense emotional element of benefit advisory work, leaving participants feeling unable to draw on support from those closest to them. Neeta described the difficulty she has in articulating the toll to her husband:

My husband says all the time, he says "don't bring your stress home" he says "you can tell when you've had a really bad day [Neeta]", and I say "well, you have got to be realising from my point [of view] - I've been talking to people all day". My – my cushion has got bits coming out of it now y'know? It's got people's tears on it, it's got people pulling stuff out of it, trying to push stuff into it. He said "so when you used to work at [previous DWP role that no longer exists] you were coming home laughing about things...what you'd done, people who had done really well." He says "At the moment it's all negative, negative." I said "that's what it's like!" (Neeta, DWP)

Neeta's frustration here is palpable – her husband is unable to empathise with her experiences and his questioning of why she is unable to talk positively about her experiences and feelings at work only compounds the negative emotional impacts her role has on her. This extended to her husband asking why she does not look for another job elsewhere, an additional pressure that Gina also expressed. Describing

one's experiences and feelings only to be met with a lack of understanding and questioning of why one would choose to stay in their role (especially as due to organisational and legislation changes, both Gina and Neeta were working in roles that they had not originally applied for) added a sense of isolation to already difficult experiences. These accounts also indicate how the emotional labour performed by advisors can also have an impact on their loved ones, leading to work to home spill over.

5.5 Work and Home Identity Blurring

The above discussion about emotional labour in benefit advisory roles as a form of dirty work that carries its own taint enables us to understand another phenomenon reported by participants – the potential for the risk associated with their roles to impact them in unexpected spaces outside of work. DBD advisors in particular reported the unease of seeing claimants outside of the workplace, and how this affected them. As she works in a fraud department, Liz (DWP) demonstrated most starkly how this features for her, describing how she deliberately changes her image at work in an attempt to not be recognised outside of the workplace:

I'm maybe slightly unique that I change the way how I look for work and I – even though I haven't got a work uniform I wear very drab black trousers, jumper, glasses, hair tied back, no makeup. In my real life I'm more glamorous, but I do this because I don't want to be remembered or recognised. And I have been in supermarkets and if I spot people I'll just go down a different aisle. Erm, but I haven't actually been approached by anyone, but I do think, because I do look different without my glasses, with my hair down, with some lippy on people would have to stare at me to really go "is that her that interviewed me?" (Liz, DWP)

Whilst the measures taken by Liz were the most extreme among the participants, Neeta described deliberately applying for jobs further away from where she lives to minimise the possibility of seeing claimants outside of work. This concern about seeing claimants outside of the workplace is significant; if advisors live in the community in which they work they can be faced with seeing claimants unexpectedly outside of the workplace causing anxiety and tension and thus chipping away at work life balance. Maddy described how this made the journey home from work a tense experience at times because she worried about seeing disgruntled claimants

outside of the workplace and felt the need to be vigilant in case of a claimant approaching her:

I think that I was more wary of not recognising a customer than recognising them, because I think if I recognise someone then straight away I'd be like ok, I'm conscious of them. It's more the people that could have been there that I may have served a year ago that I don't remember, but they remember me - that I was more wary of. Erm, I don't think I ever had many experiences where people actually approached me, fortunately. Erm, like I say it was only ever once or twice I think that I had to be walked over [to the bus stop] by security or something when I was leaving (Maddy, LA)

This was a feature that differed between DBD and CS roles, and speaks to the increased taint associated with being part of benefit administration rather than support or advocacy. Maddy also described how even when attempting to adhere to data protection, living in the community where you work makes it even more challenging to talk about any experiences at work:

I think there were days where I probably did take stuff home with me, and I think you have to be very careful with the kind of confidentiality aspects of – because I lived and worked in the same borough at the time, erm, disclosing – being able to talk about things to...my parents and my then boyfriend erm, but without giving away too much about a person (Maddy, LA)

This blurring happened the other way round as well – with advisors talking about how at times they had seen people from their personal lives in their workplace – a particular problem on the telephone when a claimant may begin disclosing their circumstances without realising they are talking to someone they know. Maddy described how she would transfer the call to another staff member rather than identifying herself in these cases, so as to protect the dignity of the claimant and in an effort to preserve separation between her own home and work selves.

These messy and permeable boundaries between home and work have an overall negative impact on work life balance and can exacerbate negative effects of emotional labour by constraining the choices of advisors outside of the workplace for safety or privacy reasons which both adds to the overall strain of the role and increases the risk of burnout (Wharton 1999).

5.6 Health Impacts

Existing research on the impacts of emotional labour across a variety of professions has linked emotional labour to a variety of health concerns, including exhaustion (Hochschild 1983), physical symptoms, and mental health difficulties (Smith and Kleinman 1989, Erickson and Ritter 2001, Sloan 2014). The impact of performing emotional labour long term has also been linked to burnout – from Hochschild (1983) originally identifying this as a risk of emotional labour and research affirming this (Mann 2004), to studies aiming to narrow down the specific aspects of emotional labour that are responsible and how to combat these (Kruml and Geddes 2000, Erickson and Ritter 2001, Näring et al 2006). My data indicated a number of health impacts on benefit advisors; mental health difficulties, physical discomfort, exhaustion and burnout, which can be exacerbated by staff feeling under pressure to continue working when feeling unwell.

As a union representative for DWP staff in DBD roles, Brian was able to give an insight into levels of stress, depression and other mental health difficulties in the advisors he represents. He stated that a significant number of staff in these roles are impacted in this way and that people needing to be signed off sick from work for stress and depression had risen in response to the changes associated with the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012). This is not unique to his region – with stress and burnout now an area of campaign focus by the Public and Commercial Services Union, which represents DWP staff (PCS 2022).

The causes of this are clearly complex but the evidence suggests that working conditions post WRA2012 have played a part, where Universal Credit payment delays, increased sanctions and people previously assessed as being too unwell to work now being expected to engage with job seeking activities all being mentioned by participants. More generally, working with claimants who are vulnerable and at times facing extremely difficult circumstances, the constraints of legislation and procedures, inadequate support mechanisms in the workplace and crucially, the nature of the emotional labour required in these roles also contribute to the workplace strain that negatively impacts on mental health. In Sarah's case, this left her feeling distressed at the end of her work-day, as she wrote in one of her diary entries:

[diary entry] Finished work and sat and cried and cried. It's exhausting and draining (Sarah, LA)

Diary data was especially useful for illuminating the physical and mental impacts of benefit advisory work, providing a snapshot of how advisors were feeling at the end of the day when physical symptoms and emotions resulting from the strain of the day remained apparent. Emilia's (TS) entries exemplify this:

[diary entry] I saw other 2 clients that day, but my mind was occupied by the situation from the morning. I experienced muscle tension and physical exhaustion. (Emilia, TS)

The following entry is even more telling, and describes a situation where a member of DWP management (in their shared working environment) got involved in her appointment with a claimant and ended up arguing with her about whether a claimant should stay on legacy benefits or move to Universal Credit:

[diary entry] Another situation when the [Jobcentre] manager shows lack of competence, created my frustration and resentment. The client left upset... I felt strait (sic) away muscles ache and heaviness in my breath. My effort was wasted, the client probably won't be back. Another proof of jobcentre people incompetence, I feel physical pain, I know that this case will stay with me for next few days. (Emilia, TS)

The final part of Emilia's statement indicates the link between the physical and mental health impacts of advisory roles – challenging workplace experiences are likely to impact both, which then leads to the blurring of work and home life described above as time outside of work is impacted by the intense emotions generated during the working day. This situation was also exacerbated by Emilia's working environment – her TS role was based inside a Jobcentre, leading to unwanted proximity with DWP staff, an example of the shared organisational spaces that will be discussed further in Chapter Seven.

Carrie's diary entries also captured this where she describes feeling exhausted after work and elaborate on the knock-on effects this can have on her ability to practice self-care:

[diary entry] I plan to go to the gym this evening, although like most evenings, whether I make it there will be another question! It's one of those things where I know I need to give myself some time like that for self care and my own health, but having the energy after 'giving' all

day is quite difficult. I'm determined to go this evening; I need the outlet the gym can provide! (Carrie, LA)

The 'giving' in her statement here is indicative of her feelings about the emotional labour she performs – offering this to support claimants leaves her feeling depleted, thereby impacting her time outside of work. She elaborated on the reasons for this exhaustion elsewhere in her diary entries:

[diary entry] I feel absolutely exhausted today, although to be honest that's quite usual after a day at work. I feel quite drained and again, like normal, am feeling pretty negative which will last a while after finishing work. It's not a surprise that when you're dealing with people who are facing some awful circumstances, it has an impact after work too. I'm still thinking about one chap I met for the first time earlier who spoke to me a lot about his wife passing away some years ago and the difficulties he has faced since, bringing up children and struggling with things in life. The circumstances and lack of support he has received was quite upsetting. (Carrie, LA)

The final part of her statement illuminates how health impacts can be directly related to the inability of the system to provide adequate support for claimants and the responsibility advisors feel when this happens. The link between physical and mental health is inextricable, and the long term impacts of performing this work have shown to be detrimental in multiple contexts (Kruml and Geddes 2000), with burnout a potential result (Mann 2004). Symptoms of this were clear in Peter's statements about how he had felt before leaving his role, once again describing a sense of distress:

I hated it towards the end, basically. I'd got - there was nothing left that would have made me want to carry on working. I mean I could have, I could have reduced my hours and carried on working there but I said to my wife "I can't do it, I cannot think about going on those phones again for even one day a week". (Peter, DWP)

For Peter, this became so unbearable that he could not stay in his role. Other DWP advisors in particular articulated distress due to their roles. For example, the quote from Liz cited in the previous chapter about antidepressants was related to this, and Denise described a sense of 'dread' every Sunday evening about going back to work on Monday.

Making meaningful change to claimants' circumstances has been identified above as a source of job satisfaction for advisors. However, this commitment to supporting

claimants can lead to instances where advisors put their own wellbeing behind the needs of claimants deemed to be vulnerable or in need of urgent assistance. Despite being in an CS role where he had no direct impact on the processing of the claimant's benefits, Alex's diary entries captured his experiences during a period of physical illness – he had a very bad cold that left him with a fever and coughing so hard he struggled to hold a conversation, however he explained that he felt pressure to continue going in to work because of his case load, particularly because he was involved with supporting a vulnerable claimant at the time who he felt would struggle with having another member of staff pick up the appointments:

[diary entry] Feeling horrendously ill, and look and sound it, so was on the verge of not going (which I never do) but first client is an autistic woman I spoke to last week and I worry she wouldn't deal well with cancelling or seeing someone else so I persevere. (Alex, TS)

This responsibility for claimants was also mentioned by Neeta, especially as she felt that colleagues may not be as sensitive to the needs of some of the claimants she supported. She described one claimant deemed by colleagues to be disengaged with job searching, who frequently displayed challenging behaviour towards staff, however, she had managed to build up rapport that would be undermined if a colleague took on the case. Neeta also described an incidence in which her need to take time off work for a hospital appointment was denied by her employer, who deemed her attending training to be more important.

The health impacts of working in benefit advisory roles can therefore be recognised to be wide ranging – affecting energy levels, causing physical symptoms of tension and stress, and when experiences are particularly challenging or frequent, in some cases contributing to longer term mental health difficulties and burnout. These difficulties can be ameliorated somewhat however by workplace support mechanisms, which are discussed further in Chapter Seven .

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the variety of effects of performing emotional labour as a benefit advisor, and how the emotional labour performed in these roles impacts staff outside of their working hours. It has addressed my second research question by

identifying how the emotional labour involved in benefit advisory roles impacts staff outside the workplace, and the effects it can have on their sense of job fulfilment and satisfaction, as well as work life balance and health. This adds the experience of benefit advisors to the rich and important tradition of literature on emotional labour effects across multiple roles (Hochschild 2012), that demonstrate the value of emotional labour as a concept for understanding why emotional performance requirements in the workplace have such profound impacts on staff. Therefore, this chapter also engages with my fourth research question by confirming that the concept of emotional labour as defined by Hochschild (1983) is still a valuable framework for sociologists that offers insights into the emotional component of job roles and the impacts of this beyond the workplace.

Benefit advisory work can provide job satisfaction when advisors feel they are providing support that makes a meaningful difference, and when they feel aligned to the values of their organisation. However, the reverse is also the case: when advisors have an unmanageable workload, feel unable to provide effective support due to the constraints of the social security system, or when claimants are unappreciative and direct their anger and distress at advisors, these negative emotions have a long reaching impact on advisors that lasts beyond the end of the working day, eating into time outside of work.

The data described here demonstrates a methodological contribution of this project, through evidencing the value of diary data for emotional labour research. The contemporaneous accounts participants who completed diaries provided at the end of their work day offer a uniquely detailed and candid insight into their raw emotions and how this affected their actions outside work – such as feeling too tired to exercise, the physical sensations of tension in their bodies, and the difficulties of balancing home and work responsibilities.

Navigating intense interactions with claimants – many of whom are distressed, angry, or in a minority of cases overtly threatening - requires a skilled performance of emotional labour to attempt to manage claimant emotions and provide an organizationally appropriate emotional display of calm neutrality in the face of claimants' often intense emotions. This can have a cumulative effect, leading to a range of negative impacts on staff wellbeing that point towards the potential for

burnout, a serious and well-recognised consequence of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983, Mann 2004, Montgomery et al 2006). Struggling to disengage from worries about claimants, lingering upset and anger after difficult interactions and subsequent negative impacts on personal relationships and detrimental effects on physical and mental health were a core, and extremely concerning, finding. The fact that these effects exist for advisors across the spectrum of DWP, LA *and* TS advisory roles – and therefore, DBD and CS roles – is a clear indication that it is not just the pressure of direct benefit administration that can have a negative impact, but the nature of emotional labour itself in this context that can be detrimental to advisor wellbeing. This offers a new insight valuable for public administration literature, and demonstrates the importance of understanding ‘local ecosystems of support’ (Edmiston et al 2021) holistically, rather than focusing on one particular provider of benefit advice.

Workload pressures in benefit advisory roles have previously been identified elsewhere, such as increased workload leading to unpaid overtime, social security reforms changing one’s role duties, and more frequent contact with very distressed claimants (Hastings and Gannon 2022, Irvine et al 2024, PCS 2022, PCS 2024). These were further evidenced here and provide a stark picture of the working conditions for benefit advisors. Emotional labour exacerbates the difficulties advisors face, and the physical and mental toll of doing such emotionally demanding work leaves staff feeling exhausted and depleted. These negative impacts on work life balance make it harder to recharge and recover after work due to the seeping of work worries into evenings, causing strain on personal relationships, and messy boundaries between working life and personal life that exist because advisors may unexpectedly see claimants outside of work, or people from their personal lives at work as claimants. This was a particular concern for DBD advisors, especially those employed by the DWP which illustrates how being perceived as being part of the social security system (regardless of one’s personal views about legislation and social security reforms) carries an element of organisational ‘taint’ associated with dirty work (Rivera 2015) that is not removable at the end of one’s work day.

Taken together, these findings are of direct concern for any stakeholders interested in finding solutions to protect the wellbeing of benefit advisors, particularly as staff shortages and staff sickness are already a significant issue for the DWP (PCS 2024).

In order to manage these complex effects, participants described a variety of strategies they call upon to alleviate the negative effects of their roles, and the presence (or absence) of support structures within their workplace that shape their ability to utilise such strategies. These support structures and alleviation strategies form the basis of the discussion in the next two chapters, and the eighth and final chapter then brings together these findings to consider the overall contribution of this thesis and its implications for future research and practice.

Chapter Six – Strategies That Mediate and Alleviate the Negative Effects of Emotional Labour

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapters introduced the realities of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles, exploring the various ways staff utilise emotional labour to both manage the emotions of claimants to ensure smooth interactions and manage their own emotional performances to meet organisational demands. Specific features of emotional labour in benefit advisory roles have been identified in Chapter Four, and Chapter Five examined the effects of benefit advisory roles on staff in terms of their experiences and wellbeing both inside and outside of their workplaces.

This chapter develops the above discussion by disentangling the various ways that benefit advisors are able to manage their emotional labour and alleviate the potential negative effects explored in previous chapters. As such, it adds to a body of academic research exploring the diverse strategies workers in various professions utilise to manage emotional labour in their various contexts (Taylor 1999, Korczynski 2001), and it addresses my third research question which asks how benefit advisors manage any negative impacts of the emotional labour they are required to perform, as well as offering evidence for my fourth research question about the usefulness of the concept of emotional labour (as described by Hochschild 1983) to explore the experiences of benefit advisors,

The ways in which negative impacts of emotional labour can be alleviated in benefit advisory roles can broadly be divided into two sections – the first being those which are personalised and undertaken on an individual level, specifically the narratives advisors rely upon to make sense of their roles, the internal processes that shape their experiences, and how they respond to these, alongside the second: those mechanisms which take place on an organisational level and relate to external factors in the workplace, outside of the advisor's control. This chapter will explore the first of these topics to understand the complex interplay of strategies advisors utilise

and the next chapter builds upon this to show how this combines with factors in the workplace to either support the success of advisors' emotional labour management strategies or render them ineffective, leaving them vulnerable to the negative effects explored in Chapter Five.

This chapter addresses the key finding that benefit advisors engage in two main activities themselves in order to manage the impacts of emotional labour, specifically: selective emotional disengagement and correcting misconceptions outside of the workplace. These activities are underpinned by the narratives that staff hold which function on two levels: firstly about themselves and their role, and secondly about benefit claimants. Finally, the potential for discretion to be seen as a site of resistance to emotional labour in some DBD roles is explored.

6.2 Selective Emotional Disengagement

A significant strategy for managing emotional labour in benefit advisory roles – emerging from data across Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) and Claimant Support (CS) roles, and across Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), local authority (LA) and third sector (TS) staff – was a phenomenon I label emotional disengagement because of the prevalence of participants talking about developing a 'thick skin' that enables them to weather difficult interactions more effectively. The process of staff in emotionally challenging roles becoming hardened to the situations of the public they serve has been explored in different ways by previous researchers (Wolkomir and Powers 2007) and also speaks to literature on how street level bureaucrats categorise the service users they deal with in order to manage a substantial workload with scarce resources (Lipsky 1980, McGann et al 2022, Taylor 2015).

Whilst surface acting (Hochschild 1986) was previously evidenced in Chapter Four, selective emotional disengagement is evidence of advisors engaging in deep acting – learning to suppress the emotions they naturally feel in claimant interactions in order to meet 'organisational display rules' (Hochschild 1983) and protect themselves emotionally by learning to feel the emotions expected of them, and the emotional disengagement that comes from professional neutrality.

This is a key finding because an advisor's ability to selectively emotionally disengage from the claimants they serve helps them to cope with an environment where the

majority of the people they interact with are angry, upset, or sharing intensely personal details about their situations that advisors often have very limited control to change. Gina described her experience of this:

You do become very cynical and your resilience builds and you just get, I suppose, harder. Which is not nice, and I suppose in a way you do treat everybody the same, even though we know that people aren't the same. So you have this front when people come in, are they gonna cause trouble, or are they telling the truth, you – y'know what I mean? It's like - it does make you, you sort of judge people before you've spoken to them, so you've kind of already got that wall up...it's your protection, it's your barrier, how you deal with things. (Gina, DWP)

Gina's interview included repeated imagery of walls and barriers, at one point describing that it is necessary to 'build up a resistance' to succeed in the role long-term. Elsewhere in her interview, she talked about the importance of not being too 'tender-hearted' as an advisor, and expressed that she felt the skills needed to emotionally disengage to perform effectively came from age and experience. Interestingly, Joanne also mentioned age as a factor that helps advisors to emotionally disengage, describing it as a skill that one develops through 'life experience'.

Ryan provided a particularly interesting example – showing how learning to disengage emotionally is a process, and a skill that advisors develop over time. Ryan was the newest to his role and so reflected on how he had noticed a shift in himself:

I'd say I definitely do still take it home a bit – to a degree – as I say, it's definitely not as bad as it used to be. I'm not as invested anymore as I used to be (Ryan, TS)

You have to kind of tailor how you are depending on the situation but also at the same time keep them a little bit at arms-length so you're not getting too emotionally invested and maybe doing things outside of the scope of the job. I think you have to be hardened to a degree, but there needs to be something there that stops you from [laughs slightly] y'know like, making everyone exactly the same (Ryan, TS)

Ryan describes this as a balance that he is finding over time, describing this ability to disengage more easily – and become less 'emotionally invested' as a skill he is developing over time in his role. He also elaborated on how learning to find this

balance of providing support without being deeply affected by claimant circumstances can allow him to be firmer in dealing with certain claimants:

I think if anything I've probably become a bit more hardened to certain things. Or maybe I've seen enough where I could probably notice when someone's maybe making things out to be a lot worse than they actually are when you can like see their situation from a different standpoint maybe. I'm not sure. 'Cause, I mean we used to get a lot of people coming in that leaned on us a lot more than they probably should to a degree. Like, say, they probably could have done a lot of what we do for themselves but it's more like almost like they feel like they are so unsure that they just come in to get some help and then you can see how competent they are once they've calmed down a bit. So maybe that's what I've noticed more, so I don't take it home as much with me, so to speak (Ryan, TS)

This was a sentiment that was present in almost all participants accounts – distinguishing a claimant who *needs* an advisor's support from one who does not, either in terms of their competence to manage their claim alone, or in whether the advisor feels their entitlement to benefits is valid (previous research on such judgements about claimants deservingness or undeservingness and level of need have been discussed in Chapter Two). This enables advisors to protect their emotional energy by engaging more authentically with claimants deemed to be in greater need of support. Whilst not directly articulated as such, it arguably represents advisors internalising the rationale of 'digital by default' claim management, and may be a response to their lack of resources due to this policy that assumes all but the most vulnerable of claimants should expected to manage their claims themselves online. It also aligns with Wolkomir and Powers (2007) finding that abortion clinic staff categorise patients as 'good' or 'bad' patients in order to manage their emotional performances, but the fact that this is a process that develops over time is of particular interest and is worthy of further exploration.

As such, selective emotional disengagement was often framed by advisors as a recognition of their own role within the system:

I've only had it a few times where I've – where I'm like 'oh god, that's really awful' because if at the time there's something which is concerning me I can always go through safeguarding and stuff so it kind of – a lot of the time it'll resolve it. Or if they're telling me something which is sad - I know that things are gonna get better because we're helping them and usually they've come to us for help so you know that things are gonna get better for them, even if at the

moment it's bad. So I kind of, I dunno, I justify it like that in my head sometimes (Sarah, LA)

This (perhaps rather optimistic) justification of one's part in a much larger system – especially on the part of TS advisors with no involvement in benefit administration – enables advisors to recognise the boundaries of their role. However, not all advisors found this easy. Neeta and Imogen were very sympathetic to claimants and both expressed immense difficulty in disengaging emotionally when they felt a claimant was being treated unfairly. Imogen spoke about how she felt this ability to disengage was part of what makes someone effective at their role:

You have got to be able to see the light in things and to be able to somehow shrug it off so by no means misunderstand me that I mean laughing at people or laughing with them or anything like that but just being able to kind of have that positive outlook maybe to kind of keep you going when you are dealing with people that you know you are concerned might commit suicide or might become homeless and all of these horrible things, you have gotta somehow you know be able to overcome that in your own mind, I mean that sounds really selfish doesn't it? But I think maybe you have got to have a bit of that as well, just that resilience. (Imogen, TS)

This meant that she perceived her own difficulty in putting up emotional barriers as a personal failing, thus individualising the issue rather than seeing the difficult circumstances in which she works, and their effects on staff, as a systemic issue. This conception of herself became more problematic in the face of increasing challenges and pressure caused by benefit reforms;

I think for me that emotional connection to the job erm and I think particularly since universal credit has come in... taking on all of that distress, I mean benefits has never been easy to work in...benefit advisors that have been doing it for years that I have talked to you know I had this impression that it is since the universal credit particularly came in, went national... that is where this emotional and mental toll has really increased (Imogen, TS)

Being able to disengage emotionally is perceived to be in line with organisational priorities, and being good at one's job, so an inability to emotionally disengage is perceived as an individual failing. Emotional disengagement can go some way to explaining why some staff are able to continue in their roles over an extended period of time, whereas others – including Imogen - experience substantial negative impacts on their wellbeing and ultimately end up leaving their roles.

Emotional disengagement, and the rationing of authentic sympathy and empathy for claimants that results from it, is a way of protecting the self from constant emotional strain. Decisions are underpinned by benefit advisors' underlying narratives about their role purpose and the narratives that they rely upon to explain claimants' circumstances.

6.3 Narratives About the Self

The ways in which benefit advisors understand their roles and position within the benefit system, and the relationship they consider themselves to have with claimants are crucial to explore to understand how advisors manage the emotional labour they perform and why roles can be so emotionally challenging.

At the most fundamental level, unpicking how participants placed themselves in relation to their employer and claimants helps us to understand points of tension within their roles. I asked participants about their motivation for applying for their roles, what it takes to be a good benefit advisor, and what their roles involved on a day-to-day basis to understand their perspectives on this. In terms of their day-to-day experiences, it was striking that the most common imagery that emerged time and again in their responses (regardless of employer or whether they were in a DBD or CS role) was that of battles and fighting:

They're coming in and they're expecting a battle and I'm not gonna battle with them. (Sarah, LA)

That frustration just kind of overwhelmed any kind of reward because you're constantly doing that same battle over and over and over repeatedly for individuals when it is the system that is causing the problem and it is the system that I couldn't do anything about (Imogen, TS)

That was the feeling: 'god, we have got through another week, I've got a weekend now, I can relax a bit, we will start again on Monday' and it's like, it is almost like a battle that you kind of have a bit of a respite from and then go back into it. (Peter, DWP)

The difference between these statements however, is in who the battle is construed to be between: one is either battling combative claimants who need to be vetted to determine the legitimacy of their requests for support, or battling against a benefit system that is at best uncaring, and at worst, unjust, to support claimants to get help that they desperately need. Within the data, advisors in CS roles working for TS

organisations fell at the latter end of the spectrum: they position themselves as helping claimants to succeed in accessing funds to which they are entitled and job satisfaction and their sense of role purpose comes from doing this effectively.

At the other end, Gina in particular positioned herself as protecting the system against benefit fraud and claimants who choose to a 'lifestyle' (in her words) on benefits rather than financial independence through working. She perceived herself as a necessary gatekeeper whose role is to ensure those who access benefits are entitled to do so:

They think 'oh god, I've gotta deal with them again, telling me what to do, trying to put a barrier up between what I want and they've got' That's how I would say that they see us: they've got to break through us, erm, to get what they want. And they can't stand it, they can't stand the fact that somebody is confronting them, as soon as they walk in the Jobcentre now – because they have floorwalkers now that stand in the reception area and sort of signpost them to where they need to go. Erm, and I think they come in there like [imitates claimants] 'right, I've gotta get through these jobsworths -' d'ya know what I mean?- ' - before I can get what I want. I don't need to be talking to them, I want to go in and get what I want, I just wanna get sorted' (Gina, DWP)

The idea of being a 'barrier' to be 'broken through' permeated her language in our interview. She described claimants in generalized terms, and was the only advisor to not draw upon any individual claimant stories in our interview. There was no tension between her values and those of her employer, instead each interaction with claimants is a potential site of conflict, and herself and her colleagues were a tight knit team who ward off the challenges claimants present. Difficult interactions come from telling claimants about their entitlement to support:

Y'know, you're doing a service aren't you, so you follow a set of rules, and if they don't tick the boxes, then you're having the conversation and that's why things have not gone right for them. So you're not deliberately being awkward, which I - I don't think they see that. (Gina, DWP)

Whilst less polar in her stance, Maddy also positioned herself in this way – believing the system to be mostly fair and her role to be about articulating and enforcing the rules set out by procedures and legislation. Even where she felt that claimants needed more support than they were given, she drew upon explanations of limited funds to justify why this could not be a reality:

Morally my feelings are still that most of the people that I dealt with are genuine people that needed help, and that one of the things that I love about this country is that we do help those people. If anything, there's areas that I think we don't help enough but I equally understand, and have worked for the council enough years to know that there's just not the money there for a lot of what you'd like to do. We can't fund it because there's not enough money – there's just not enough money there (Maddy, LA)

Liz was slightly less confident in her stance, articulating that her role purpose is 'to protect the public purse' – which makes particular sense given she works in fraud – yet she experienced ambivalence because she recognised failings of the DWP in specific cases and felt frustration at the lack of support vulnerable claimants are given. Her career history, especially the time she spent as a visiting officer, often meeting terminally ill claimants in their own homes, had given her ample experience of what claimants who are struggling may experience. Her language suggested distance from her employer, who she referred to throughout as 'The Department', but her closeness with her team enabled her to find a middle ground where organisational inefficiencies and indifference to claimants suffering do not equal an overall mismatch between her perceived role function and her own feelings.

At the other end of the spectrum are benefit advisors who see their role to be about supporting claimants to navigate the benefit system – the battles they fight are to obtain support which claimants are entitled to. For advisors working in TS roles, this is a position that aligns with organisational goals. This is a protective factor in terms of managing even in moments where one feels unable to help:

Myself and my colleagues have all had days where – we like to provide solutions, and sometimes there aren't any solutions, and some of the things you're thinking about to help are – more – sad is the wrong word but - are more difficult than they ever were so I feel that y'know, there are days when you think y'know, this is really grim, how – whether – we still do very good work, helping people and challenging – I think most of us go home thinking we're still making a difference. If we weren't there, then it'd be even worse. (Helen, TS)

I think it made people feel validated, even if we were ultimately useless, I think folk felt ok (Kayleigh, TS)

However, particular emotional strain occurs where an advisor's understanding of their role is at odds with their employer. Some advisors in DBD roles fell into this

category, which created friction in their workplace, as this quote from Denise illustrates:

I had a lot of time for the claimants to be fair, erm, because I just believe in people anyway but that was a hard fight. That was a hard fight with my managers, it was a hard fight with my colleagues erm, and for when I did make that decision about people who were ripping it from the benefit system, erm, y'know, when I made that decision I took ownership of that because I was like no – this is why I believe in what I'm doing and rightly so then that would be a disagreement with the claimant (Denise, DWP)

Neeta, Denise and Peter expressed disillusionment with their employer, positioning themselves in opposition to the benefit system which they perceived to have become increasingly hostile to claimant wellbeing and genuine support. They all expressed dissatisfaction with how their roles had changed over time, believing social security reforms and organisational priorities to be detrimental to the goal of genuine support that enables claimants to thrive and where possible, move into meaningful employment.

They all experienced strain because their motivations are at odds with their employer and those colleagues who embody the organisational priorities, leaving them less able to draw upon networks of informal workplace support as discussed above. This is an isolated position which creates more friction for advisors: they are effectively fighting against a system which they are part of, and as the above discussion shows, this is a source of tension and stress. Similarly, Neeta also described her discomfort with being considered the face of the DWP:

It is people's perceptions that we're all the same. And [as claimant] 'it's your fault, you lot!' - I hate that, 'you lot', 'you stopped my -' No, I haven't done anything, I can look at what's happening, I can look and see what I can support you with, there might be stuff that you can bring in that we can then send up to somebody to get that sorted out. It's not me that's personally done that. Y'know? And I don't like, y'know, [as claimant] 'you stopped my money!' (Neeta, DWP)

I do empathise with them [claimants] and I think that's where it affects me a lot more than maybe the other work coaches that are in the Jobcentre...the nature of my personality - unfortunately for me - is I am quite an empathetic person, I do feel it and I want to support somebody and it frustrates me when I can't do it. (Neeta, DWP)

These statements are telling, as she positions herself in opposition to her employer and colleagues – she sees herself as wanting to help claimants, and it causes her distress to be seen as the face of DWP decision making. Compared to Gina's statement below, the difference is stark in terms of which position the advisor aligns themselves with:

We were all there to do a job and we did it to the best of our ability, and we also had a good erm, relationship with each other and we understood the customer – y'know how to deal with the customers...And we felt that we were doing the best that we possibly could with the tools that were provided...I think we - we knew we had to do a job and we always had guidelines and new rules and new things coming out and we did it the best we possibly could and made it the best situation. We could have a laugh, we could laugh about it. Not laugh about the rules and regulations but we didn't take things too erm - seriously enough to get us down. We – we all knew that we were doing a damn good job and we couldn't do any better. (Gina, DWP)

This is a hugely significant, as it impacts what each advisor perceives performing effectively in their roles to look like – and how their own terms of what constitutes good work may differ from their employer. Efficiency and adhering closely to legislation, regardless of the effects on claimants, is at one end of a spectrum that has making an effort to support claimants and prioritising their needs at the other end. For Joanne, who worked for the DWP, a LA, and in TS roles before being made redundant and becoming self-employed to provide benefit advice on a for-profit basis, this was a big part of how she justified charging claimants for her services, something which she argued enabled her to work closely with a claimant to get what they are entitled to:

It is the sheer relief when somebody knows that you're going to help them, you're committed to help them and you change lives, you change lives...I know they have got to pay for it and that isn't my ideal but I am doing what I know how to do and you know OK they may pay me £30 for you know doing out a form but when I do that and I am increasing their income, erm considerably and telling them what they can claim then that is satisfaction...The bunches of flowers that come through the door, the thank you, the relief, the tears... that somebody is helping them are unbeatable. (Joanne, self-employed)

Through looking at the responses she got from claimants, Joanne was able to find validation in the way she chose to operate, despite charging people for her services. Her argument was that this enabled her to work closely with a claimant through the

duration that they needed support, without being limited by organisational constraints. Whilst she was distinct in the sample in that she worked on a self-employed basis, her justification of her role through results and gratitude gives an interesting insight into the ways that advisors position success in their roles.

Looking at why advisors were drawn to their roles in the first place also helps to explain why they may align with organisational rather than claimant needs. Maddy and Gina both expressed personal reasons for seeking their positions, primarily wanting a role with good working conditions:

I knew I was good at organising and paperwork and things like that so I just thought it suited me and the hours were good – erm, they offered flexi time – I knew they were quite good with part-time working if you ever wanted to have children and things y’know so it was that kind of – they were the things that drew me to it. And also, I thought that I wanted to provide a good customer service – and the idea of helping people – which initially, when I first started there, doing the retirement pension claims, and widow’s benefit, and child benefit – that seemed like I was doing a good thing. Providing a good service. (Gina, DWP)

Gina also refers to wanting to provide ‘good customer service’, and her explanation of the claimants she felt inclined to help relates to her beliefs about other claimant groups. Advisors towards the other end of the spectrum framed their role as beyond providing customer service: overtly stating they wanted to help people to make positive lifestyle changes or find work in a role that is meaningful – drawing on a background studying social sciences or rooted in their own experiences with the benefit system which drew them towards this. In the case of DWP staff who felt more closely aligned to claimants, changes to their original role that was chosen to help people pushed them into their current position (eg: through redundancy, restructuring, or TUPE transfers). Ryan’s statements about why he moved into the role, describing it as being driven by wanting to do something ‘meaningful’ and how he explains the purpose of his role to others, are a clear example of this:

I say ‘I help people, vulnerable or not, to get into benefits and to help them get back on their feet’ basically (Ryan, TS)

Alex went furthest in articulating his role purpose as explicitly being aligned with his personal politics and sense of obligation to work in a profession that makes a positive difference:

To me it is about I want a feeling that I go to work every day, whatever I do I have made the world very slightly less awful in some way, I have done something good everyday erm it ties in with my politics and ties in with my kind of moral approach to life as I want to go through life making the world incrementally a little bit better and advice work is good to do that (Alex, TS)

These narratives about one's role provide part of the picture, but they are inextricably intertwined with the beliefs and understandings that advisors have about the claimants they work with. These are explored in the following section, and should be considered to function alongside the ways advisors position their own role purpose and priorities as seeing these together enables an understanding of why some advisors struggle so significantly.

6.4 Narratives About Claimants

Alongside, and intertwined with, the narratives that advisors construct and present about their roles lie the narratives they draw upon to understand and describe the claimants they support. Several discourses underpin the way advisors think about and position themselves in relation to claimants – the language used to describe them, advisors' sense of distance from claimants, perceptions of claimant honesty and who is deemed to be a deserving or undeserving claimant. These will all be explored in turn.

Most fundamentally, the language used to describe claimants differed, although not neatly by sector or role. I asked about the terminology used to describe the service users advisors support in the workplace, and answers ranged from 'claimants' to 'clients' to 'customers' – an interesting distinction, especially as the final term was used mainly by DWP and LA staff in DBD roles. TS staff tended to use the term 'clients', as this was the language used in their workplaces, although Alex's interview demonstrated that the official language is sometimes at odds with an advisor's own internal language, as evidenced by Alex's difficulty to find a term that felt appropriate in our interview:

I have had claimants where I have had to... sorry I call them claimants, that is really bad, I have had clients or service users...I have had people - (Alex, TS)

Alex's attempt to correct himself and judgement of himself for using the term claimants is interesting as it suggests stigma associated with this term. This was also demonstrated by Liz:

Some people use claimant, some people use customer, and over the years it has been moved about but to be honest I feel more comfortable saying customer. Claimant seems a little bit – I don't know - it doesn't seem as positive...we are providing a service to them so in a way they are our customers (Liz, LA & DWP, talking about DWP here)

This is fascinating given that Liz works in a fraud department and the people she engages with are being investigated for fraud – the framing of them as customers using a service is therefore notable as an attempt to give dignity back to them and remove the stigma associated with being a 'claimant'. However, using the term 'customer' could be argued to be an attempt to reframe the relationship to imagine more power than the claimant actually has in the interaction, where advisors in DBD roles are arguably gatekeepers to claimants' access to benefits, especially in Liz's case where the claimants she works with are being interviewed under caution and may face prosecution. Brian made this argument, expressing his distaste for the word customer as it implies an element of choice that does not exist in reality, saying simply 'no one *chooses* to go to the Jobcentre'.

Imogen and Maddy demonstrated an interesting duality in their language around claimants:

I think clients I think is the preferred term for [third sector employer], but I think because most of the people I was dealing with were benefit claimants, it is difficult because then obviously if I was talking to the DWP I would refer to the claimant, so I kind of use them interchangeably but I think client is probably the most appropriate (Imogen, TS)

Back office was definitely claimants. It would always be claimants, housing benefit claimants...I think it would be very different between being at the counter and being in the back office. In the back office if I was talking about someone I'd say 'this claimant' whereas at the counter if I was calling the back office to sort something out I'd be saying 'this customer' so I think it would very much depend on the environment you were working in at the time as to what you would refer to them as...every area kind of has its preferred language but at ours they probably would have preferred claimants generally, but then I think if you've got someone in front of you...some people that were there that really didn't want to be there and referring to them as a

claimant didn't feel right to do that to them. They were just – they were a customer that could've been there for [anything] (Maddy, LA)

Maddy's description conjures up Goffman's (1959) front stage/back stage distinction to explain her actions – Maddy is aware that the front-facing language used in public areas is customers which she describes as being a less stigmatic term, but when discussing individuals with her colleagues in the back office, she defaults to language that is more clinical.

The distance – or lack of distance - that advisors felt from claimants also impacted the way they framed claimant experiences. The discussion above about advisors in DBD roles who align more closely with claimants than their employer makes sense considering that for these advisors, this was related to feeling close to claimants, as Denise and Neeta explained:

I grew up in a poverty stricken area of [the city] and knew that people would only change if they were given the opportunity or the education to think that they could change and the belief system (Denise, DWP)

For me, doing what I'm doing it's - I know how it's affecting somebody, and a lot of colleagues can't see that, because they've never had to sit on the other side. Y'know, I used to be on the other side (Neeta, DWP)

Similarly, some staff in CS roles described being a current or former benefit claimant and how this informed their choice to work in this area. For other advisors within my sample, having never been in this position informed their stance. Maddy's statement below demonstrates her own discomfort with the idea of claiming benefits, and whilst her language is critical of how her working environment exacerbated negative perceptions, it also indicates her own feelings of the shame connected to needing to claim benefits:

Fortunately, touch wood, I've never been in that position where I've been out of work and struggling to the extent that I've had to go down that route but I know I'd be absolutely mortified if I were and some of those environments don't help with that feeling I don't think. And I understand that there's only so much the council can do, there's only so much funding they have, but it literally would just be like you had a bunch of cattle sat out there that were given their ticket, you'd process them through, get them back out the door and they'd be back in again and it just – yeah, it didn't feel personable at all. (Maddy, LA)

Maddy's appeal to pragmatism in terms of the limitations of funding was apparent in other participant statements too, with Helen using this in a different way – to

acknowledge the reality of funding restrictions whilst sharing her frustration that claimants are let down by the current arrangements:

I wouldn't like anyone to think that my head's in the clouds and I think the world should be a utopia. Y'know, I understand about people needing to return to the workplace and also that there's a finite budget to the public purse, but the frustration of not giving people the right tools and the right start to enable someone to do that, y'know people can't correctly seek work or return to the workplace unless they're really supported to do so and you can't support somebody, by not giving them any money to live on! To feed their children, to make sure they get free school meals, people just can't - people can't function if their - if they can't afford to live, and they certainly can't be useful in the workplace (Helen, TS)

Whilst Helen also acknowledges funding restrictions, her emotive description shows frustration with the limits of these and the realities of claimant circumstances.

The perceived 'honesty' of claimants – a framing that clearly links to discourses of deserving and undeserving claimants discussed in Chapter Two – was mentioned in several participants accounts. Helen's (TS) response above makes sense in the context that she has a default stance of trust with claimants:

I assume everybody's telling me the truth until I know otherwise and it's - it's never really done me any – y'know, I've never really got into any trouble with that (Helen, TS)

Interestingly, some advisors expressed that they felt they were able to recognise claimants that are dishonest:

You shouldn't tar everybody with the same brush, but you get to know certain characters that it doesn't matter what they say, you know that they're not telling the truth. (Gina, DWP)

There is a few, don't get me wrong, there is a few people who choose to, to be there, or - for whatever other reasons – but they're easy to see. (Denise, DWP)

I've been asked to cover these roles before but I can't step into that side because it's not something I would enjoy – the fraud side. I, I don't know, I must have some sort of sense, and I do, I sometimes think, y'know there's something not right here, and I pick up on certain bits. And I will put concerns forward but that person keeps carrying on doing what they're doing. And nothing gets moved on and y'know there's people that need support and need benefits. (Neeta, DWP)

As Neeta's comment indicates, dishonest claimants who abuse the system were often positioned in opposition to claimants believed to be honest and therefore deserving of financial support through benefit entitlement. Alongside this, perceptions of whether the majority of claimants are honest was central to the ways advisors described their interactions with claimants, especially if this was seen to be in contrast to the views of one's employer. This has been discussed through Peter's comments previously about witnessing a shift in organisational priorities to a default position of assuming all claimants are lying until there is evidence they are not and how this jarred with his own views.

Additionally, unpicking who is specifically seen as at a disadvantage, and which claimants may be dishonest, or at least exploiting loopholes in legislation, illuminated contrasting views amongst advisors, who differed in their beliefs about who constituted a deserving, honest claimant and which claimant groups were more likely to be taking advantage of 'the system'. For example, Denise identified carers as a group prone to be exploiting leniencies in legislation, including foster carers, who she felt to be taking advantage of outdated legislation to maximise income they did not necessarily need: she described an instance where foster carers received Income Support whilst also being well paid as employees in a legislative loophole that she was unsuccessful in challenging. She also identified recent university graduates as a less deserving group, especially as she felt they received favourable treatment from her colleagues compared to agency staff – often not British nationals - who bounced between short contracts:

I had people who had just come out of university...with really unrealistic expectations y'know, they've just come out of uni so they'll get this kind of job straight away, and I understand and I appreciate that they've worked really hard for that however you've never even worked... I would challenge that kind of attitude whereas some of my colleagues would give those students a lot more time and be lenient for not looking for work whereas somebody who came in who was regularly in and out of work, who was maybe on just short contract work, they would get a bit of a hard time and you think to yourself that person is in here every nine weeks because the agency that they work for doesn't give them any work for a period of time for about three or four weeks and then they get them back on so they don't have to pay them holidays and so they can treat them really, really badly, whereas somebody who is more than capable of just doing any kind of er, other work is choosing not to because they believe – they are arrogant enough to believe that they should walk into a 30 grand job straight

away...women and men who were doing the contracts, they had families to support but they were taking anything they could get in order just to be working because that's their ethos but they were still looked down upon because of their ethnicity, because of their language, and all of that kind of stuff which I found really frustrating. (Denise, DWP)

This is an interesting point in terms of its potential for circumstances where a DBD advisor such as Denise could use discretion. Claimants framed as undeserving to the point of dishonesty offered advisors in DBD roles opportunities to comply with obligations to put forward cases for sanction without feeling guilty about doing so. Denise was at peace with her decision to raise potential fraud cases, or to sanction claimants who were perceived to be not fulfilling their obligations:

Where I felt yeah, I'm challenging that because actually I know you're taking advantage of the system and because of the small minority...it is taking away from other people who y'know - who really need the system at the minute. So yeah. That was, that was difficult challenging that, erm, but I felt that was - I felt right to do that. (Denise, DWP)

Whilst clearly dishonest claimants were an extreme, several participants framed their discussion of which claimants they got satisfaction from helping and which were seen as less in need of support in terms of claimants who were perceived to be embarrassed, or at a minimum expressing gratitude for what they were entitled to, versus those who were seen as expecting of assistance from the welfare state being perceived in a negative light.

When you are dealing with people that have never paid into anything it's like it's just expect – they expect help all the time. And y'know, that is annoying. (Gina, DWP)

Gina was also the only participant to specifically refer to claimants for whom benefits are a 'lifestyle' – described elsewhere in her interview as a specific 'clientele' and 'type of people', but the idea of entitlement and expectation was described negatively by other DBD advisors who aligned more closely with organisational values:

Housing benefit was an area where people were coming to you because they wanted something from you, so they were not gonna be many occasions where they were showing thanks because there was a – kind of feeling of entitlement to something - they're - they're claiming something that they're entitled to – whereas the area that I work in now, you're dealing with people that are needing care, very vulnerable...they'll be very thankful (Maddy, LA)

However, these views were not shared by all DBD advisors. Neeta explained that she felt compassion towards long-term claimants, noting their more complex needs may not be immediately apparent and that they still needed support:

We have a lot of customers that have addictions, there is a lot of things going on in the background, erm, you can't make somebody do something though. I've learned that, there's people that are long term unemployed, and you're thinking 'why are you not at work?' But you can't see the reason why they're not gonna get taken on but people get used to certain benefits and they struggle then, afterwards (Neeta, DWP)

Whilst these attitudes were significantly more pronounced in DBD roles where advisors are part of the structure that determines whether someone is entitled to benefits, some advisors in CS roles expressed their own attitudes of seeing certain claimants as more deserving of assistance – in this case assistance from a benefit advisor with making their claim for benefit:

I think we can to a certain degree see people that um, we don't think would need - 'cause I mean the way it works is that we assess a person's situation and more, do a benefit check. If we get people in that are gonna be quite a clear-cut situation – say they've got no housing elements, or child elements or anything like that, we can pretty much like, guide them on how to make the claim themselves basically. But if it's more a situation of trying to find out people's eligibility and how much they'll get and things like that then we do tend to help them a lot more. Erm, and clients that are maybe not like – English first language speaking, people who are in situations like maybe just had a relationship breakdown – so we do try to help the more vulnerable because they're the ones that actually need the help and the guidance rather than just anyone. (Ryan, TS)

Ryan's statement is important because it indicates that he would treat these groups differently: claimants seen as capable would be given advice to make their claim themselves, whereas those deemed vulnerable were seen as more deserving of support from a CS advisor in making their benefit claim.

These perceptions about claimants matter, because as explored above, each advisor brings their own attitudes and viewpoints about claimants to their role and if a claimant is deemed to be less deserving of support, this could impact the service that claimants are offered and the extent to which an advisor may be prepared to go beyond their minimum obligations to provide additional support. In the case of DBD advisors, it may also impact whether they are put forward for sanctions or treated

with more leniency. As Chapter Four explored, advisors can draw upon a variety of potential emotional performances in their interactions with claimants, so this can affect the outcome for the claimant either in terms of the direct support that is offered with sorting out their benefit claim, or in terms of any additional support that an advisor may choose to provide through the emotional performance they utilise (e.g. the use of listening space). Whilst similar differences in emotional performances have been noted in other contexts (Wolkomir and Powers 2007, Ward and McMurray 2011), the implication for benefit claimants in terms of the impact of differential treatment is significant – for example, whether a DBD advisor chooses to put them forward for a sanction, whether they look more holistically at how to support the claimant into work, or in CS roles the amount of support they are given to make their benefit claim.

The underlying narratives that advisors rely upon to make sense of their role are in constant interplay with the narratives they hold about claimants and together these are a primary indicator of how advisors feel about their effectiveness: if one believes that a claimant is likely to be misrepresenting their level of need, and the benefit advisor understands their role as to protect the system from fraudulent claims, then difficult interactions with claimants are justified by an advisor feeling like they are performing their role effectively. Conversely, if one perceives their role to be more closely aligned with supporting claimants to navigate the system to access benefits they are entitled to, but organisational or legislative constraints prevent them from providing the claimant access to benefit entitlement, they will experience difficulties.

Whilst the ability to affect benefit entitlement was significantly more pronounced in DBD roles, there was not a clear divide between DBD and CS roles in terms of which advisors feel their position is to help claimants navigate a bureaucratic system to attain support they deserve. When staff position themselves and the person they are working with in this way, the realities of the social security system can cause friction for advisors who are unable to utilise protective strategies that enable them to disengage at the end of the workday.

6.5 Discretion and Decision Making – A Site of Resistance?

The long history of research on the use of discretion in front line DBD roles (Lipsky 1980, Lipsky 2010) was explored in Chapter Two, and the data from this project adds

to the existing discussion. For staff working in Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles, where they were involved in some part of the benefit administration process, there were differing opinions on whether being able to use discretion and make decisions was something that was both appropriate and helpful in terms of managing emotional labour. On one hand, Peter, Joanne and Neeta had all worked in their roles for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) for some time, and had experienced a shift from being able to use their own decision making and discretion in order to support claimants, to having less control over the process as decision making moved from local to national offices. Their roles therefore offered less opportunity to be involved in decision making to support claimants, with a move towards merely reporting to external decision makers. The shift is described here, from Joanne's description of their former decision-making ability:

*[Describing time at DWP at the beginning of her career in the 1980s]
People knew who they were talking to, you knew who you were talking to, you had an awareness of what benefits they were claiming so if there was a problem, they got through to you, you looked at their account and you could sort of it out...it was very much a personalised service. Which was great because it was good for the staff because they knew who they were dealing with, and it was good for the claimant because they could get hold of somebody erm calls came straight in to the office so there was no waiting an hour on the line before they got through ...that was better for the claimant and for the staff because the claimant hadn't had to wait and got really angry while they were waiting, and the member of staff you know could pick up the phone straight away and you know it was... on a better footing so to start the conversation (Joanne, self-employed)*

As previously mentioned, Joanne justified moving to providing benefit advice on a for payment basis by explaining that she could offer a committed personal service – giving her control over both which claimants to work with and what decisions to take with regards to assisting them. However, she reflected on the additional personal responsibility that came alongside this. In contrast, Neeta's description of the current situation as a member of DWP staff in a DBD role showed her sense of lack of control:

You know somebody needs to get some help, and you want to help them, erm, but there's things beyond your control - that you can't control – when they are going to get those extra bits and bobs y'know (Neeta, DWP)

This was a source of frustration that left Neeta feeling disempowered to provide meaningful assistance to claimants, especially as she felt the space in her role to work with a claimant from initial contact through to them entering employment had decreased. Denise – also employed by the DWP - described how this lack of decision making ability impacted her negatively, as she was at the mercy of bureaucratic processes that left space for errors by Decision Makers (based externally in back offices) that would negatively impact claimants:

*I worried about like the person has had such a hard time and then they were waiting on a decision coming through so they were still having to come in so this might be something that you've not made that decision or you had not referred them up to a sanction but you were dealing with them that day...they're waiting on a decision from the Decision Makers about whether or not they're going to get JSA or Income Support. Y'know paperwork regularly got lost and you're like but I **know** that I had – I know that I sent that up for them, I know that I did this,, I know that I put all that paperwork there (Denise, DWP)*

Both Neeta and Denise experienced their lack of control over decision making negatively, because they felt that a lack of flexibility within the system coupled with bureaucratic inefficiencies meant that claimants were treated unfairly. Denise explained how a change in DWP focus since WRA2012 affected claimants:

There was only a handful of us who knew how to create a CV, who would actually support somebody to do a job application form... that was ridiculous, erm, as far as I was concerned... every single CV of theirs is the same, so what chances are we actually giving this person? ...I felt there was always that culture that it is somebody else's [problem] - we don't make that decision (Denise, DWP)

As a response, the DWP staff who felt discomfort with organisational priorities, and their part within them, found ways to use discretion as a small act of resistance. The following quotes demonstrate the ways in which they did this:

I would – if somebody is saying 'Neeta, I've had a really bad time, things have been going wrong' I will not put that up for a sanction because they've not done what they're supposed to do. We have a chat about what's going on. (Neeta, DWP)

Whenever I sanctioned somebody it was because of clear evidence that they hadn't been job searching...I didn't think that was always necessarily a reason to sanction somebody...if they had a reasonable explanation then I would accept that so initially before I sent the information up erm, to a decision maker it would be because I was convinced that there wasn't a reasonable explanation...that would only

be really sometimes for people who didn't attend appointments if there was a [suspicion] that they may be working (Denise, DWP)

Peter directly framed this as a way of restoring fairness to a system he felt was unfair, and acknowledged that doing so could have lead to him being punished if it had been discovered:

The rules were there and they were rigidly to be administered to people who were getting benefit. The only thing I found, and it's strange...I always – and I wasn't the only one – but we always tried to find ways round a particular rule if we thought it was getting in the way of being fair to the claimant...when it came to erm, putting through a sanction for somebody. You could – or you were supposed to – if somebody, for instance, rang up and said 'I've missed my bus' - or whatever - 'and I didn't make my appointment at the jobcentre on time'...we had to put through the system erm, what had happened, and y'know, ask a decision maker to make a decision as to whether they should be sanctioned. Now, we all knew, if it went to a decision maker, they would be sanctioned. But, I found that I had the ability to turn round and say 'well, if you are telling me that there was a travel problem I will put that down in the notes, and I will not put it through to be considered for a sanction'...I often did that because the sanctions to me – and I almost had an argument with my supervisor once at a meeting when I was complaining about the sanctions because to me they were unjust...I waited the first few times I did it I waited for someone to come back and say 'you shouldn't be doing this'...because we didn't make the decision but we instigated, type of thing, and uhh, nothing ever happened. So for the two years or so I did universal credit I did that, and I wasn't alone in doing it, and nobody ever came back [to challenge it] (Peter, DWP)

These acts of resistance enabled Neeta, Denise and Peter to manage their discomfort at being involved in sanctioning through giving themselves a small sense of control over which cases they did put forward for a sanction and circumstances where they would decide to use discretion to be more lenient with the claimant instead. Their use of the terms of 'fairness' and 'reasonableness' to describe these choices, indicate how they felt these were justified because they rectified perceived injustices in legislation and procedures, thus enabling these advisors to feel they were making a positive change to claimants and lessening the negative impacts discussed above associated with feeling unable to provide meaningful support.

Alongside flexibility in their decisions about what to put forward for a sanction, Neeta and Denise found small ways to make space for discretion and go beyond what was required of them in their role to recognise difficulties that claimants might be facing

and to consider holistically how to support claimants with challenging life circumstances, including housing difficulties and addiction:

Between me and you and the recorder I will be easy on a lot of people, I know what's going on in the background, we – we chat about little changes. It might be 'ok, the next two weeks, can you check this out for me?... it's just giving them something small to be doing and they feel alright with it. And if they struggle with it we talk about it, we look at what else is there to support them and that's how we get through, erm, the work search reviews sometimes. It's not all about looking for work for some people, it's around what else is going on (Neeta, DWP)

if I could find something to support that person then I would, and certainly with their personal agreements...[I'd] see if they were going to their AA meeting and different things – so it wouldn't all just be about job hunting because it is not realistic, it is ridiculous, y'know but if they were doing things that meant that they volunteered, they went and did work related activity...even if was once a week, then I felt like that was a step closer to employment. So I would try and do things like that... (Denise, DWP)

Whilst this can be seen as a 'gift' in Bolton's (2000) terminology, as Neeta and Denise go beyond their role requirements to provide personalised, flexible support for claimants, these 'gifts' occur only in response to their guilt and frustration at not being able to offer more effective support for claimants as an official and recognised part of their role, and as Chapter Five has shown, this does little to quell the negative impacts they also experience and can actually increase difficulties where advisors are taking on additional work in environments that are already high pressure.

Advisors in CS roles in the third sector did not have the ability to affect benefit decision making, yet some advisors still framed their roles as providing satisfaction through challenging the benefit system they perceive to be unjust:

[Diary entry] I quite the enjoy the irony that the funding for my job comes from DWP to get people onto UC, and often I'm doing the exact opposite and warning people away from a potentially terrible decision (Alex, TS)

Alex in particular described how he found job satisfaction in both being free to advise claimants away from benefit decisions that would be detrimental to them, and helping with issues that technically fell outside the remit of his role. Significantly, he also spoke of, in his words, '*using soft influence locally to improve individual*

outcomes’ through building relationships with DWP staff in their shared space and using this to help claimants he supported:

It is just about relationship building right you know if I can do something that makes their [DWP staff] life a bit easier, that means the next time I have got somebody coming in where I need ... them to kind of cut corners or speed things up a bit, I can call the favour back in and that is working quite effectively so erm you know an example would be if somebody wants an advance erm they need to have shown their ID but that would normally be done at a subsequent appointment so it would be a two or three day gap until they can get back in to a job centre but I can kind of call in a favour occasionally just go ‘look this person has got some ID on them, can we just do that now?’ get their advance issued the same day, that kind of thing so small favours like that that can erm can make the claimants life a little bit easier (Alex, TS)

This is a strategic use of relationship building and discretion in order to affect positive changes for claimants, but relied primarily on Alex’s physical location within a Jobcentre Plus. The use of such cross organizational spaces – shared by the DWP or a LA and a TS organization - will be discussed further in the following chapter.

As one would expect, advisors working in TS roles had little scope to utilise discretion to assist claimants, but Kayleigh demonstrated one act of resistance to her part as a gatekeeper of foodbank vouchers:

What we did very extensively towards the end was give out foodbank vouchers. So people would come in quite regularly for those. Foodbank told us off for giving them out too lax but we decided well, it’s up to you to police that, we just sign them. If somebody’s coming in to say they can’t eat I’m not gonna do your job for you, that’s up to you (Kayleigh, TS)

This action functions on two levels – affording Kayleigh a small sense of satisfaction in being able to help claimants, but also distancing herself from decisions about who meets criteria for assistance by pushing this responsibility for policing eligibility on to the foodbank.

However, not all staff felt positively about opportunities to use discretion or direct resistance within their workplace. As touched upon already, several participants described witnessing discriminatory practices by staff in DBD roles, primarily racism towards claimants whose first language was not English and non-English nationals, and discrimination towards transgender claimants. Denise described it in the following way:

It was very inconsistent y'know, throughout the whole jobcentre, what I felt was a reasonable thing my colleagues didn't necessarily, and I think, for me, I found there was people who were discriminated against quite considerably erm, within the jobcentre (Denise, DWP)

In addition to direct discrimination, she also touched upon what she perceived as unfair decisions made on the basis of advisors' emotions, rather than procedure. This is particularly concerning given that participants spoke about the lingering impacts of negative interactions with claimants and how, without adequate resources to reset and recover, these could bleed into subsequent interactions. (The importance of such spaces will be discussed in the following chapter). Maddy felt strongly that being limited by legislation meant that all claimants are treated fairly, something she spoke at length about as an important part of the role:

As soon as there's staff discretion there, that's where you get away from consistency. And I am very much an advocate for fairness. I don't like people getting any kind of special treatment. There's always gonna be one off cases where someone walks in and says [as claimant] 'I've got an eviction notice' and it might be that that person goes to the top of the list but that's a bit different. That's a priority case. But generally I – whenever I worked in areas where there was a little bit of discretion – or not even discretion, but people could get away with stuff more – people could do something that was outside the norm and it not be picked up, I didn't like it... it was easier that discretionary options were not there because I think as soon as they are it opens you up to being more affected by who you're dealing with. If you've got something very upsetting in front of you – you could have two people in exactly the same situation and one turns up there with their nails freshly done, iPhone in hand, and I'm gonna sit there and think 'well I don't want you to get that!' and the next person comes in in exactly the same situation and could sit there and be crying and I'm gonna be more sympathetic. (Maddy, LA)

She went on to describe why she felt it was better that staff involved in calculating and administering benefits did not meet claimants face to face for that reason, using the example of Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) which are administered by local authorities on a discretionary basis to claimants to top up their housing benefit temporarily:

That's why it's a real difficult thing between the balance between meeting people face-to-face and not having done. If you don't then you're treating them fairly because other than the name you don't know anything about them... I think it was better for the service that there wasn't that discretion there because it would just open up to misuse. And, y'know - not everybody is fair in how they treat people. There are

officers I have worked with as well as customers that I have dealt with that are racist, that are homophobic, that would allow those things to factor [into] their decisions. Whereas a name on a bit of paper, they don't necessarily know those things about somebody – unfortunately I don't have enough confidence in the people that work in these areas to think that they wouldn't adjust how they award something if it was discretionary based on the individual. (Maddy, LA)

In addition to her arguments above about decision making, she also argued that not being able to use discretion enabled her to be steadfast in dealing with claimants:

I knew, I was a bit black and white with things in that if I knew that I was correct with what I was saying then I would be unwavering. Because whether I agree with it or not – which often a lot of the time I didn't, if I was saying the correct thing then you're not gonna budge me on it. It doesn't matter how loud you shout or sadly how much you cry. I can't change it. I'm not – even as an officer you don't have the – other than DHP – you have no discretion as a benefit officer. You're following legislation so you're stuck with that decision whatever. (Maddy, LA)

This highlights how the absence of opportunities to use discretion can also be perceived by some advisors as a benefit rather than a source of frustration – for Maddy it enabled her to not feel responsible for how claimants may be affected as she cannot change the outcome for claimants, she can only advise them of the situation, thus enabling her to fall back upon reasoning and managing expectations as her dominant strategies in interactions.

The above discussion highlights the conflicting ways that discretion impacted emotional labour for participants: on one hand having a lack of ability to use discretion to support claimants causing some advisors dissatisfaction and guilt that they found ways to manage through bending rules and resistance to support claimants. Conversely – in some cases for the same advisor – opportunities for front line benefit advisors to use discretion was viewed as a threat to fairness and equal treatment, leading to claimants being treated unfairly due to the advisor's mood or their own biases and prejudices and the absence of this was perceived as not only fairer for claimants, but also a protective strategy if one feels that the boundaries of their role mean there is no possibility of flexibility, so advisors are merely reporting on procedures that they cannot control.

6.6 Challenging Public Perceptions of the Benefit System

An unexpected strategy was described by multiple participants in their accounts of their experiences: challenging public perceptions of the benefit system. This was not something I had considered prior to commencing data generation, but was described by my first interviewee (Liz) when I asked her if she felt people understood the role she did. Her description of challenging people about their misconceptions around benefit entitlement and generosity, combined with the sense of shame she described about her role (described in Chapter Five), speak to previous literature on the taint caused by emotional dirty work and the strategies workers use to manage it (McMurray and Ward 2014, Rivera 2015, Ward and McMurray 2016). I therefore integrated a question about how staff felt their roles were perceived into subsequent interviews, which led to a striking majority of participants spontaneously describing feeling compelled to challenge misconceptions and stereotypes about benefit claimants in what can be seen as an attempt to advocate for benefit claimants as a group. For some – including Sarah and Imogen – having been benefit claimants themselves either previously or alongside their roles gave a personal and understandable motivation for this activity:

I have been on benefits, I know what that feels like and it is because I know what that feels like that motivated me to do the job that I did...to be quite frank if I spoke to someone who was going to look down on that or kind of you know be very Daily Mail with me then they were going to pick the wrong person... people had not realised what I did and maybe make a throw away comment about people on benefits erm and that wasn't something that I just thought I could smile through, I would generally, unless it was completely inappropriate to do so, sort of say 'well actually I think a lot of people are really, really struggling and it is people in work, that are often needing to claim the benefits because they can't make ends meet' ... you know so you just try and right these misconceptions but you know when it is you versus the Daily Mail ... I don't think I am going to be able to win that one! But you do sort of try and help people to maybe have a bit of a more respectful understanding view that somebody using a food bank or claiming benefits erm isn't necessarily what media depicts them to be, and it could be me, and it could be them, some day in some other circumstances, anyone can get sick, anyone can have a relationship breakdown or some other you know big change of circumstance that completely alters their life, mental breakdown whatever it might be and so I find it very arrogant when people have a them and us attitude because if we can't look after the most vulnerable y'know what is going to happen to us when we're one of them? (Imogen, TS)

Imogen's explanation makes particular sense given her own experiences with claiming benefits. However, other advisors without personal experience are also routinely involved in this activity which entails pushing back against stereotypes of benefits as a lifestyle choice, challenging rhetoric about particular claimant groups (especially 'immigrants') and erroneous assumptions about high levels of fraud. Participants described remarkably similar attempts to challenge misconceptions in their free time:

Even just in general life people would make these judgements...stupid Channel 5 and Benefits Britain and all that kind of stuff and 'immigrants taking this and that..' and I was like 'actually, I work in the Jobcentre and to be honest with you most people who are [committing fraud] are people who are UK citizens' y'know? I'm sure there is from every ethnicity and group and everything else but the ones I have come across have been [from the local area] (Denise, DWP)

The media and politicians – described by Gina as 'benefit bashers' - were identified by several participants as a primary source of these misconceptions:

You know even if people say 'oh it is terrible all these people - y'know - claiming benefits!' and it is like 'well you do realise that y' know actually the personal independence payment doesn't actually cover the additional cost of being disabled y'know? By no means does it cover that' and you know that assumption that personal independence payment is an out of work benefit and it is like 'no it isn't y'know, you do realise you can have it because even if you are working'...it is how, it is how governments and the media frame benefits again as if they are all out of work benefits when they are not. (Fran, LA)

I was particularly incensed by a headline on erm a newspaper that said y'know 'Europeans can have your council house within four weeks - and British people are waiting years' and I used a sense of humour to say to someone 'I've never seen a local authority do anything in four weeks!' which got the conversation moving and I hoped I got some way to dispelling it all. It's a lie, it's not true! Erm, whether I changed any minds or not I don't know but I felt better! (Helen, TS) Part of the motivation for this challenging of misconceptions and stereotypes comes from an attempt to repair the image of benefit claimants, a challenge to the simplistic and prejudicial stereotypes of deserving vs undeserving claimants discussed in Chapter One. Recognising the realities and complexities of claimants' situations can therefore be seen as an attempt to remove some of the stigma surrounding working in benefit advisory roles and remove the taint associated with them, similar to that described in

Rivera's (2015) work on the emotional labour performed by US border patrol staff. However, it also appeared to serve multiple other functions, with Helen saying above that it made her 'feel better', something she elaborated on here:

Talking to people who have no idea what's really going on helps sound off really and you feel like perhaps you're spreading that information, that helps to sort of destress me. Erm, so I'm not always the most popular dinner party guest when I talk about free school meals but it makes me feel better [briefly laughs] when I tell them that it isn't what they think... it's appeared over time and it's appeared at a point where you can't [struggles for words] - you can no longer stay quiet really. I'm not saying that I would - I know what safe environments are and I wouldn't meet a room full of strangers and then start discussing it. It's amongst friends and – not colleagues – but like friends of the family where there's some terrible misconceptions going on about erm free school meals or 'well, everybody still gets child benefit I don't know what anyone's moaning about' - those kinds of things. Erm, I've become quite diplomatic about sort of reading the situation where sometimes people want to sound off opposite me in any way they can and those conversations aren't worth having because they're not going to listen. But I feel like I just couldn't - couldn't really stay quiet any longer. (Helen, TS)

Here, Helen describes two additional functions of such activity undertaken as a response to feeling disempowered to effect positive change. Whilst one may not be able to get claimants the support they deserve, it is possible to at least challenge negative imagery, with the goal of – in some small way – making the public more sympathetic to benefit claimants and therefore more likely to support efforts to support them, and secondly, a more personal purpose through providing an outlet that enabled her to vent about what she perceives to be the unfairness of the system. Correcting misconceptions can therefore be seen as a method for alleviating negative effects of emotional labour.

However, Imogen's description below shows that viewing this behaviour as solely an outlet for frustration and way of soothing negative emotions is overly simplistic, as her sense of duty to correct misconceptions shines through:

Another frustration is I constantly felt that even when I wasn't at work I was having to advocate for people, that I was having to stick up for people because you would have conversations with people that maybe had never spoken to someone who had used a foodbank or never spoken to someone who has been ill and off work or whatever, so you are kind of feeling a responsibility to kind of get that point across for people that they are never going to speak to or hear from, and I found

that took a toll, a lot, now that wasn't part of the job you know that wasn't in my job description to sort of going around you know sorting people out, that was never part of it but I think to me I felt such an indignation about you know people's right to dignity and people's right to respect irrespective of whatever circumstance is going on in their life and not to be labelled as something because of needing to claim benefits, I just felt that so strongly (Imogen, TS)

This statement is particularly interesting because Imogen positions this as an unpaid addition to her role, and part of the 'toll' that eventually led to her leaving her role.

This can therefore also be considered part of the blurred boundaries between inside and outside of the role (discussed previously in Chapter Five) which make it hard for benefit advisors to separate work and home life.

6.7 Coping with Food and Alcohol

Participants were asked what they did to manage during and after a work-day involving intense interactions with claimants, and several described consuming treats on particularly hard days. Liz talked about eating sugary foods in the evenings, Imogen described the constant (and much appreciated!) presence of sweet treats in the office as a way staff pushed through difficult days and Alex's diary entries described him similarly buying sugary treats during his work-day to help him push through exhaustion to the end of the day. Although these may seem inconsequential, the potential impacts on advisors' physical health, especially in conjunction with the impact on their mental health explored in the previous chapter, merit mention, especially as they have been found elsewhere too (Hastings and Gannon 2022). More concerning perhaps is increased alcohol consumption during periods of difficulty at work described by two participants:

I'm not a big alcohol drinker but some days if I had a particularly bad day I might go to the pub and have a pint. And there was one stage where I used to go, regularly I used to go on a Friday and have a couple of pints which wasn't my custom, simply to celebrate that I had got through another week (Peter, DWP)

[diary entry] 'I get a few beers because I feel like I deserve it. I spend a couple of hours catching up with the case notes I didn't get a chance to do today. I knock off at 10.30 to watch Question Time and fall asleep in front of the TV half-drunk.' (Alex, TS)

Alex made several references to consuming alcohol in the two week period he completed his diary, suggesting that this may be a regular coping technique. These

statements highlight the attempts by benefit advisors to manage emotional strain through consumption that, at an extreme, could lead to or exacerbate physical health issues. The potential health impacts highlight the need for better practices in workplaces to enable advisors to decompress at work, such as the measures described below in the following chapter.

6.8 When Other Strategies Fail: Leaving Advisory Roles

The combined effects of negative emotions about one's job role, physical and mental health impacts, and poor work life balance caused by the emotional labour required in benefit advisory roles (as discussed in previous chapters) left the majority of participants feeling under significant pressure. Even for CS staff who face fewer interactions with angry claimants, this was apparent in their accounts. Emilia described how she and colleagues were working part-time in order to manage the negative impacts of their work, and Kayleigh specifically identified burnout – long recognised as a negative consequence of emotional labour (Montgomery et al 2006)- as a reason for high volunteer turnover. Imogen exemplified what happens when advisors are not given adequate resources to help them manage their emotional labour – whilst she felt the work she had done was important, the lack of effective change she could offer claimants left her feeling dissatisfied and she did not have sufficient space within her workplace to process her negative emotions. The cumulative impact of that became very difficult to manage:

*It is like y'know, you watch the football match and your team wins and it is like 'yes!' then like five minutes later they are out on the pitch again against a different team and you're like 'whoa, hang on!'... even winning a tribunal for a client or something or something like that, it is wonderful to be able to do that and to be able to support someone through that kind of process but then you know the next day you have got another one and that is quite difficult I think, to manage, I think I needed to be a lot more emotionally strong or resilient to have carried on, and I think that is probably true for a lot of people and why benefits advisors do find it difficult to kind of continue doing what they do.
(Imogen, TS)*

Ultimately, this led to her leaving her role:

I was coming home exhausted and I live on my own so it was just staying in me, and I had nowhere to kind of let that out and I felt that that wasn't the healthiest position for me to continue being in for my own mental and emotional health to be quite honest (Imogen, TS)

Similar feelings were identified by other participants who had moved on from their benefit advisory roles and constituted a primary reason why they had left their roles. Peter explicitly identified his reason for leaving as being a combination of increased managerial pressure and intense emotional labour:

You had your assessment meetings and they would look through all the sheets of how many calls you had taken and what you had done in them and you thought to yourself 'oh god, y'know, is this really worth doing?' I've got to go through this, and then I've got to go back on the phones and talk to people who are on the edge (Peter, DWP)

This level of dissatisfaction with work eats into work life balance as well, as Denise described:

Friday came and you've got the weekend – but it was the same, every Sunday night you were dreading going back to work on the Monday (Denise, DWP)

It is notable that in addition to the advisors who had already left their roles, two of the current advisors interviewed were actively looking for different jobs, which helps to explain the staff turnover mentioned by participants and indicates widespread dissatisfaction across sectors. For Sarah, this feeling was fairly unambiguous in her mind:

[diary entry] Morale is still pretty low in the office though and a few of us are looking for/have applied for jobs elsewhere. There's only so much any of us can take in this job. It's low pay, getting abuse from customers all day, no recognition for the work we do and we are constantly taking on the work of other services. Staff from other departments look down on us as we are customer services and not seen to be educated like others...I think its seen as dirty work. Its higher pay to work on the tills at a supermarket than what we get. (Sarah, LA)

However, Neeta described ambivalence about making the decision to actively look for other roles. Her conflicting feelings related to balancing the unmanageable workload and lack of job satisfaction she currently felt with leaving a sector she had spent much of her working life in and used to enjoy:

Erm, I've had a couple of days where I have, I've looked up – I'm thinking if I have to resign, how much notice do I need to give them? I don't really need to give them any. It's preferred I give them a month – this morning I had a telephone interview from an employer from down the road from where I work, and I look at local big employers – yes, it's a nice wage, but it's one of these things where – the only way I can

describe it is it's like handcuffs. They're comfortable but every so often -[trails off, pause]

[LH: Yeah. You feel them?]

- and you manage your day to day living with these handcuffs on but you sit thinking what it's gonna be like if you weren't having to wear them anymore. And it's just that pressure every day. (Neeta, DWP)

As Neeta's account shows, leaving one's advisory role is not an easy decision, but can be a last resort when other management and alleviation strategies fail to adequately buffer advisors against negative impacts of emotional labour and other pressures in their roles.

6.9 Conclusion

Finding ways to manage and alleviate the negative impacts of emotional labour is critical for benefit advisor wellbeing and longevity in their roles, and the strategies and resources they draw upon are both external and internal. This chapter has engaged with my third research question by identifying the range of strategies benefit advisors rely upon, and provides insights that speak to previous research about workplace identity construction by public sector workers in contexts where they may not be able to provide the desired level of support for the service users they work with (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2003, Taylor et al 2017, Taylor et al 2018). The repeated imagery of battles in participants' descriptions is a striking example of how intense front-line benefit advisory roles are, and whilst previous research has identified similar use of 'militaristic metaphors' in front-line roles with benefit claimants (Taylor et al 2017:14), the value of this research is in recognising that advisors vary in who they perceive themselves as fighting with, and for.

Most fundamentally, the beliefs one holds about the primary purpose of their role are in constant interplay with the beliefs that they hold about claimants, and a mismatch between one's own sense of role purpose and views about claimants compared to those of their employer leaves some advisors particularly vulnerable to lingering negative effects of the emotional labour they perform. This is particularly challenging for those advisors in DBD roles who feel a mismatch between their desire to support claimants to access benefits they are entitled to and the increasingly punitive social security system they operate within, where surveillance of claimant behaviour is part of the responsibilities of their role.

Alongside these narratives, over time advisors undergo a process of distancing or hardening - which I term selective emotional disengagement - that enables them to distance themselves from claimants' experiences in a protective way by focusing more emotional energy on claimants deemed most deserving and giving others a more surface level emotional performance. The development of this 'thick skin', as multiple participants described it, allows them to lessen some of the intensity of their workplace interactions, but remains an imperfect strategy, as the accounts from the Chapter Five have shown. This also speaks to literature on the ways staff in high pressure front-line roles make judgments about who deserves more of the limited time and resources they have to offer (e.g. Wolkomir and Powers 2007). Whilst this is a strategy used by benefit advisors to make their emotional labour more manageable, it has worrying implications for those claimants that advisors deem to not need individualised support, especially as advisor biases are likely to feed into these decisions (McGann et al 2022, Redman and Fletcher 2022, Taylor 2015).

In DBD roles the strategic use of discretion – such as choosing not to put a claimant forward to a Decision Maker for a sanction - can serve as a way to push back against processes and procedures advisors perceive as unfair, and can be understood as a way of managing emotional labour by making decisions that favour claimants. Whilst these attempts to push back against the demands of emotional labour and against the social security system are an attempt to preserve their wellbeing, benefit advisor decisions about *who* gets supported through these actions are influenced by their beliefs about the claimant's deservingness (Golding and Middleton 1982). As discussed above, this is driven by benefit advisors' beliefs and biases, meaning claimants viewed less favourably are less likely to receive such discretionary acts in their favour. Given that some participants reported racist and transphobic behaviour from colleagues towards claimants, and existing data that indicates young men and migrants are more likely to receive sanctions (Harrison 2023, Parkes 2023, Redman and Fletcher 2022), this is a concerning finding.

Challenging misconceptions emerged as the final major strategy for managing emotional labour and is a method that serves multiple purposes – on one hand this can be seen as an attempt to repair one's self-image through challenging perceptions of claimants as undeserving of support and thus changing the perception of benefit advisory roles as a form of stigma management, but advisors

also identified it as a way of trying to make others more understanding of benefit claimants, which can provide a sense of having done something to support claimants and make positive changes when there is no real power to do this within their role. Alongside this, the significance of challenging misconceptions should not be overlooked because of the capacity it provides as a space to vent about frustrations and perceived unfairness within the system and public perceptions of claimants, which is a valuable release when there is not ample space to do this within their workplace, which is one of the topics that will be covered in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven will now bring together the findings from the last three chapters by identifying the external, contextual factors within physical workspaces and organisational arrangements that affect benefit advisor experiences of emotional labour, greatly mediating their ability to manage difficult interactions and alleviate negative impacts of their emotional labour.

Chapter Seven – Workplace Impacts on Experiences of Emotional Labour

7.1 Introduction

The impact of external factors – specifically the mode of delivery (face-to-face or voice-to-voice), the physical environment and whether this is shared with another organisation are explored in this final data chapter to give a rich understanding of what it is like to work as a benefit advisor in contemporary UK settings.

Several external factors impacted the interactions that staff had with claimants, and therefore the nature of the emotional labour required and impacts it leads to.

Differences between whether interactions were face-to-face or over the telephone, as well as the impact of physical space and the peculiar situation of third sector (TS) staff in cross organisational spaces shared with Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff all emerged as significant and are explored here. There are multiple factors within workplaces that affect staff interactions with claimants and how efficiently they are able to manage their emotional labour which are explored here.

These primarily involve formal organisational support arrangements: the training that is undertaken by staff, direct support from line managers, the availability of counselling and emotional support, and the degree of control staff have over their working arrangements and the availability of time and physical space for staff to take breaks between claimants. Alongside these formal arrangements, the presence and perceived effectiveness of trade unions and the availability of informal support from colleagues are also discussed here as they play significant parts in influencing advisor experiences.

7.2 Differences Between Modes of Delivery

Whilst most of the data related to face-to-face delivery, multiple participants also engaged in providing voice-to-voice support over the telephone, with Peter being the only participant whose engagement with claimants was solely telephone based. Those who split their time between face-to-face and voice-to-voice support noted

that this was a double-edged sword. On one hand, Emilia noted that it made it easier to take notes when she was not face-to-face with claimants who were distressed and angry – something that is significant considering her face-to-face work days usually meant she ended up taking paperwork home to finish as a result of this feeling inappropriate to do in front of claimants. The presence of a backstage space (Goffman 1959) where staff could more easily take a break between calls without the pressure of seeing claimants waiting and a space where staff could discuss difficult interactions with each other was also significant:

I'll come off a call and be like 'he was an absolute arsehole!' [laughs] And other people are like 'oh god yeah! I've spoken to him two weeks ago! Yeah, he's awful aint he?' and that helps 'cause you kind of know you're not alone in it. (Sarah, LA)

These informal 'communities of coping' (Korczynski 2003) are a crucial element of support for staff, and will be discussed further in section 7.8. However, several participants also noted that the anonymity of telephone interactions can encourage claimants to be negative towards staff:

I must also say that people on the phone that shout at you, they very rarely come into the Jobcentre and get nasty. You get the odd one obviously that comes in all guns blazing, but most of them will rant and rant and rant on the phone and call you everything but then when they come in they are such a different person. So that needs pointing out I think – it's the fact that they're not seeing you face-to-face and then when you ask them to come in and you do an interview with them they're totally different...they actually see you and they see that you're there to help them they will apologise and say 'oh I'm sorry, I was just angry and I was upset (Gina, DWP)

This is significant in that it suggests claimants see advisors as more helpful in person – potentially as a result of the additional details available in their emotional performance such as expression and body language. In addition, Maddy was able to reflect upon how telephone work changed the content of the interaction from her perspective, as being face-to-face with someone, even in a busy environment with a queue, meant there was pressure to give an emotional performance with more of the flourishes associated with service interactions:

I think that when you were taking those calls your priority was to get the information across to the customer asap...still being polite but it wasn't worried so much about all the extra fluff that you might put into a conversation. Erm, [the focus was] just to get them off the phone.

Whereas in the front office... you might adjust how you were dealing with somebody if you'd got 15 people waiting in the queue but generally because someone's in front of you, you're never gonna be as rude to someone that's sat in front of you as you are to somebody that's on the phone. You're gonna take that bit of extra time to do the pleasantries, you're gonna be conscious of their expressions and reactions to what you're saying. Erm, so I think those interactions - I'm not saying that was easier because they definitely weren't, erm, but they were more relaxed in that you could take your time to get something across. (Maddy, LA)

Finally, it is important to mention that several participants in CS roles (primarily TS, but one LA) were also involved in giving advice over an instant messenger system online. This removal of verbal and physical interaction was divisive. Some participants noted that it made for smooth interactions that enabled clear communication, whilst Alex felt strongly that it was an inferior mode of communication:

It is a really inefficient use of time erm you know most of the things that I have ever dealt with on webchat I could spend half an hour answering a question and take three minutes to answer on the phone...the assumption you can do the same job through webchat that you could sitting with someone face to face is laughable erm and more often than not it is just you know people using webchat just disengage, they drop out themselves anyway so you rarely even finish a conversation with someone. (Alex, TS)

Whilst I do not have enough data on this to comment further, this is an area worthy of further study for researchers interested in changing relationships with service users and the equivalency of different modes of communication, especially in the context of the DWP's commitment to a digital by default model (DWP 2017) which means online interactions like this are likely to proliferate.

7.3 The Importance of Physical Space

7.3.1 Overview

An unexpected finding was the multitude of ways that the physical setting advisors work in is hugely important to their experiences: in terms of the physical layout and décor of the space and the availability of a quiet space to utilise after a difficult interaction. For TS advisors working in DWP offices, this presented an additional challenge that is explored below.

7.3.2 Workplace Set-up

The impact of the physical space in which one is working emerged as a key factor in the extent to which advisors were able to draw on protective strategies to manage their emotional labour. The presence (or lack) of team members, panic buttons, security staff and in some cases other organisations who are part of the social security system all play a part in staff experiences on a day-to-day basis, but on a broader level, physical environments were described a part in setting the tone for interactions. Maddy - a LA worker who worked across multiple sites – described the difference this could make in terms of her feelings of physical safety and the pressure of other claimants witnessing interactions:

[At location one] staff would be on the inside, the customers on the outside, so you felt very secure in that they had the quite wide desks between you and the customer, you had to have a pass to be able to get through to the inside part. At the second location...essentially the customer would be sitting next to you...you could have a customer sat 30 centimetres away from you whilst you're trying to work and sometimes – at points – you're having quite contentious conversations...whenever I worked at that office, there would be a couple of office rooms and I think although security wise it could be argued that being alone – even with the door open – in an office where someone may feel less safe, I preferred that than sitting out on these pods because when I'm out there you had all the customers waiting, literally sitting right behind you (Maddy, LA)

Physical proximity to the claimant she was interacting with at the second location, combined with the increased pressure of having other claimants visibly waiting made this an unpleasant working environment, especially as she felt being in such a space made her feel closely watched and unable to even have a moment where her emotional performance could slip to allow for more genuine emotional expression.

Having the queue visible from one's workstation also mentioned by other participants as causing difficulties both in terms of managing highly emotive interactions and at busy times meaning staff felt unable to take a break because they do not want to keep people waiting. Having a choice over where to conduct interactions was therefore cited as a useful option by several participants, with Helen – who managed TS staff – explaining that part of the role of the person who greeted claimants was to decide which interview room would be most appropriate to use (in terms of how

easily the interaction could be monitored by staff outside) depending on the claimant's demeanour.

A vastly different working environment was described by Kayleigh, who volunteered for a charity that displayed overtly anti-austerity posters and artwork by claimants and attempted to break down barriers between staff and claimants through attention to the physical space:

We very much deliberately made it look as little like a fucking council office or the DWP as possible! It was very homely with cushions, we had a sofa, with art on the wall (Kayleigh, TS)

Whilst the visible anti austerity images here were unique amongst my sample, the TS workers who split their time between Jobcentres and their own office spaces all agreed that the latter are preferable both for staff and claimants due to the more relaxed, informal setting:

I prefer meeting clients in person in the office, as unlike Jobcentres there's toys for the kids, I can make them a cup of tea and they can pop out for a cig. All that makes for a much calmer experience. (Alex, TS)

This welcoming, relaxed atmosphere is a stark contrast to the atmosphere in Jobcentre Plus, with prominent DWP branding and security staff.

7.3.3 Spaces for Decompression

The importance of having both the time and physical spaces where one can decompress after challenging interactions was a significant finding. These spaces are vital for both ensuring negative interactions do not have an ongoing impact for the rest of the day, and because, without these, the emotional burden can carry over into personal life in ways explored in the Chapter Five. The importance of these spaces in a physical sense, building time for this into the work day, and recognition of these spaces as necessary for the wellbeing of staff performing emotional labour in benefit advisory roles should not be underestimated.

I asked participants how they dealt with challenging interactions with upset or angry claimants, and almost all made reference to stepping away from their desks in order to decompress and recalibrate before the next interaction. Maddy explained the

consequence of working at a site which limited these opportunities because of the physical office layout meaning there was no space away from the view of claimants:

You might be able to run into the other room and be like ‘oh my god I just had a nightmare case!’ But if you’re sat with customers all around you, you can’t start having a conversation in front of them because you’re mindful of them hearing anything...if anything you are really restricted in those situations because you – particularly when you were sat out where the customers could see – you couldn’t even pull a face without being wary of that being seen and misconstrued or whatever and so – and that’s why I hated it so much. Because at least I had the office where somebody would leave the room and I could at least have a bit of a moment of ‘annnnnd, breathe’...and I might ping off an email to someone and say ‘oh my god, the customer I just had!’ or then go and take a break. For a lot of the guys, they didn’t even have that luxury of that – that moment. It would literally be: serve the customer – and they’re all sitting there- and you can’t even [make] eye contact with a colleague to be like [exhales] ‘oooooohhh, another one’ You couldn’t do that. So yeah, that was really not helpful.’ (Maddy, LA)

The significance of these spaces for the dual purpose of allowing moments where one can individually take a moment to calm down and reset, as well as enabling opportunities for utilising the informal staff networks of support described in section 7.8 are apparent in Maddy’s account. They speak to Goffman’s idea (1959) of the organisational ‘backstage’, where advisors can drop their emotional performances and authentically express frustrations, upset, and other emotions.

For those employed in the third sector – who in most cases were working in shared spaces such as libraries, multi-agency help centres or as discussed in previous chapters, Jobcentre Plus – a lack of physical space within their workplace was dealt with by physically taking oneself out of their workplace for a walk. Joanne felt this was an important factor in giving staff space to calm down and regather oneself after an emotionally intense interaction:

[Describing her former TS role in the 2010’s] You know you hear some horrendous things...people’s lives, what has happened to them, and really there was no back up for the staff there. You went and y’know had a cup of tea and you had a walk around the town but at least you could do that, you could get out, nobody was sort of erm sitting there to say you couldn’t, it was just like ‘oh god I have had the most horrendous client, I am going to have a walk around the block, I am going to walk down to the sea, stand there for ten minutes and walk back again’ and that was your sort of release. (Joanne, self-employed)

The importance of physically moving to somewhere where one can take a moment to process their emotions should therefore be considered an important strategy for alleviating long term negative impacts of emotional labour and can help to provide an emotional reset before the next interaction.

Conversely, the lack of appropriate and accessible back-office locations such as a staff room or kitchen impacted the ability of some participants to take a break at all. The impact of not having these spaces is shown by Sarah's statement in her interview when I asked why one of her diary entries mentioned her crying in the toilets between calls:

On paper we've got a staff room but to get to the staff room you have to walk through like three people's offices so you don't really want to be walking past - I mean nobody uses the staff room for that reason because nobody wants to be walking through somebody's office to get there! So that kind of is a bit like out of bounds. And then we have like a first aid room which is just down the corridor from us but the first aid room is locked and you have to get the keys from HR, so then you have to go into HR and be like 'can I have the keys for the first aid room please?' and they're like 'are you ok?' 'yeah I'm fine' so you don't wanna be going through all of that when you're stressed after a call...literally your best bet is just to go into the toilets (Sarah, LA)

The indignity and discomfort of crying in the bathroom because the 'staff room' is only accessible through other offices or requires a key – and thus having to explain to a gatekeeper why it is needed - indicates a lack of understanding on her employer's part of why these spaces are so vital for staff.

Alongside the existence of these spaces, advisors need to be given time to utilise them. Both Sarah's diary entries and interview captured how workload and understaffing meant that she experienced pressure not to take a break between calls because of the additional burden this would put on other members of staff in her team:

We've always been told by our manager that if ever we get upset either after a call or dealing with customers or whatever then we can take ten minutes out. And sometimes I do and then sometimes I just think well, we haven't got enough time, we haven't got enough staff for me to be able to do that. Especially erm on the phones because if you get a call and it's a horrible call and there's only your colleague on the phones and there's 4, 5 calls waiting, you can't do that. You can't - you feel too guilty on your colleague to then go and take time out, so we just keep

going and going and going and then people end up being signed off sick (Sarah, LA)

These statements are significant in highlighting how the existence of physical backstage spaces to decompress is not sufficient to enable staff to manage emotional labour effectively, this needs to be backed up by an organisational set up that encourages advisors to take these breaks between interactions where needed.

This was something that DWP advisors also noted was missing from their workdays – where they were not afforded opportunities to take breaks between claimants, with Neeta citing this as a significant source of workplace pressure and Gina commenting that:

You'd just have to see the next customer really. I mean you could – if things were really bad you'd just go because it's not good for you or for the person that you're seeing on the next appointment erm, to take that baggage with you but you can't help it – it's in your head...the next person you get in could be fine but you've still got that in your mind (Gina, DWP)

Gina's use of the term 'baggage' is telling – without time and space to recover, the weight of previous interactions is carried over into subsequent ones, compounding the negative impacts of emotional labour. She also touches on what Sarah describes above, that offering advisors breaks after difficult interactions without encouraging this and setting up the workplace to allow it means that advisors do not feel able to make use of such spaces.

Whilst not a possibility in all settings, flexibility in structuring one's day helps to offer this to advisors. TS staff, for the most part, were given more freedom in how they structured their day. Emilia noted how this enabled her team to use this additional temporal 'space' to work more flexibly with claimants, even when what they were offering was technically outside of the remit of their contract:

I called my manager it was like 'listen, I have write ups and that was really complicated and I am exhausted, I am mentally exhausted, I cannot see my client at half one' or something they will just send someone else, so that was really good like if someone wanted to do something more for a client we had space for that... our supervisors sometimes they were not happy [if there were queues] but if you wanted to really do that then you could, it was really up to you how much you wanted to help, not only with [what contract stipulates]. (Emilia, TS)

Whilst Emilia – and Ryan – note that these opportunities can be limited when the service is particularly busy, entrusting staff to manage their time encourages them to take breaks where needed. Similarly, Alex used this flexibility in how he managed his time to both manage his own emotions and recovery between claimants:

I structure my day so I have got gaps between appointments so I have got a little bit of time to kind of just sit, think, work things out and kind of carefully go through like write case notes (Alex, TS)

The discussion above has explored the importance of physical and temporal space for advisors to unwind after a challenging interaction, and the importance of ensuring advisors are supported to make use of these during the working day. These offer space both for personal reflection and decompression and crucially, to access networks of support from colleagues, which is explored below.

7.3.4 Cross Organisational Spaces

Several participants in CS roles were employed in a TS role that involved being physically located in a Jobcentre Plus for all or part of their working week.

Participants (who, notably, were all from the TS side) described this causing tension for multiple reasons. On a practical level, one participant described difficulty in working within a space where there could be very heated discussions and physical altercations occurring just metres from where they were providing support for a vulnerable claimant, and difficulty accessing private interview spaces when needed as this has to be cleared with DWP staff first because the rooms belong to them.

Ryan described instances where DWP staff advised claimants to speak to him about benefit adjustments which turn out to be unfavourable to the claimant. He described frustration in that DWP staff are likely to know this, and are therefore passing difficult interactions on to TS workers to deal with. He elaborated on how this felt:

I think we do kind of get lumped in with DWP in that respect – and I'm not saying that like it's a bad thing but it is the way that people view the DWP in general that erm, that they're not there to help you basically...I think because we're in the same building as them, kinda working alongside them, they do see us as kind of the same, almost like we're their messengers and we're [laughs slightly] like enforcing the things that they want so they kind of see us that way sometimes (Ryan, TS)

Whilst Kayleigh (who worked for an overtly anti austerity charity) also voiced the feeling that being the 'messenger' for bad news about claims is difficult, even when

one obviously has no part in administering the claim, the behaviour by DWP staff is significant. Several CS staff described instances where DWP staff appeared to lessen their own emotional labour load by shifting a claimant they were having a difficult interaction with on to a CS advisor instead. This both increased the more challenging aspects of CS staff roles, and for CS staff this blurring of roles serves to remove some of the job satisfaction that comes from feeling like one is helping support claimants to navigate the system, discussed in more depth in Chapters Five and Six. Emilia described her own strategies to manage these experiences and reassert her position as someone who is there to support claimants:

Sometimes people are thinking that we are job centre... people might be aggressive, unpleasant, rude, so I always when I was there, I always explain at the very beginning I work for [organization name], we are an independent charity organisation, I am not sharing your information with anyone, I am not employed by the job centre... and that changes their approach - they were more open, they were more friendly (Emilia, TS)

Alex was the most pragmatic about the experience, describing it as offering a glimpse into the broad spectrum of staff attitudes towards claimants:

DWP staff get a lot of grief but I've honestly seen some moments of genuine tenderness and care from the staff here, though [I've] seen some 'I, Daniel Blake'⁴ moments too (Alex, TS)

He also described being able to skilfully navigate what he described as an initial 'frosty atmosphere' from DWP staff, and how offering his skills (due to his long history in advisory roles) to DWP staff when they need them for personal matters has meant he has built relationships and can ask them for support in return:

I've got to know the staff quite well. That can be really useful if I want favours for clients, like getting same-day ID verification for UC claims instead of waiting a few days (Alex, TS)

Not only do actions like this bridge the divide between DBD and CS staff in a way that shows promise for better future relations, being able to provide additional support like this for claimants means that Alex was able to navigate this hybrid

⁴ 'I, Daniel Blake' (2016) is a Ken Loach film about two people struggling to access benefits from the DWP. In it, most DWP staff are presented unfavourably as uncaring and impersonal, and the only caring member of staff is shown to be penalised for trying to support claimants.

position with his sense of his role purpose intact and to manage his own emotional labour more effectively.

7.4 Training

I asked participants about the training inductions they had when they started their roles, as well as any training offered to help prepare for the rollout of legislative changes. Their responses differed massively in terms of both the mode of training (self-directed online study, shadowing colleagues, external trainers brought in to share their knowledge, in house training courses etc) and the degree to which staff felt this adequately prepared them for the challenges associated with their role.

Whilst one might expect differences in provision between DWP, LA and TS training provision, the picture appeared to be more complex. The importance of training on legislation and legislative changes was highlighted by multiple participants, as this gives advisors the confidence to know they are providing the right information to claimants.

Universal Credit in particular was a change that multiple participants felt they had not been appropriately prepared for. In her Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) role at the DWP, Denise was very sceptical of the training she was offered for being more focused on justifying the rationale behind the changes rather than helping advisors understand the legislation in depth and how to implement changes on the computer systems available:

With universal credit or erm, the personal employment agreements or whatever else – all the ethos behind that was there and it was really sold to you and you got training for that but there wasn't any kind of practical stuff to go along with that as well... the bureaucracy and how everything was set up on systems was very old fashioned and that was quite difficult to marry the two of them together (Denise, DWP)

This – coupled with the rapid pace of changes when Universal Credit began to be rolled out and updated – meant that advisors on the front line of advising claimants on this often felt underprepared. Imogen described what this was like in her CS role for a TS organisation:

It was literally changing every week, there was something else coming out, a different change, a different loophole, a different amendment and things so it was really updates from places like the benefits training company, erm you know disability rights association, keeping an eye

on social media, just sort of having an awareness of what was going on... there was all of these things you just had to keep juggling in your head erm and yes it was just...very, very complicated so how claimants were supposed to understand when we were struggling on a weekly basis is just very difficult to fathom. (Imogen, TS)

Here, Imogen described another instance where an advisor took on unpaid additional hours outside their workplace to stay up to date with legislation. Similarly, Neeta (DWP) coped with the rapid pace of change by collating information from a variety of sources; using her own time to search out additional information from social media groups and welfare rights organisations to supplement the official training from her employer. Helen – in a managerial TS role that offered more flexibility – described how her team responded to the fast pace of change when it became obvious initial training was not sufficient:

Initially we took our training from an independent organisation who I imagine looked at the legislation and delivered training 'this is how it should work, this is what should happen, the claimant will have to do x, y and z' and then we trained everybody like that. And then...it became apparent that it wasn't working quite like that and we put our own processes and procedures around it. (Helen, TS)

Helen described working pragmatically to support the staff she managed, including setting up template documents for less experienced staff to use. This is significant, because having the right information to provide to claimants enables advisors feel confident in the advice they are giving, which both increases their satisfaction when the interaction is a positive one, and enables them to reassure themselves that they have done everything they can in situations where claimants are unhappy with the situation.

It is particularly notable given that all advisors worked in claimant-facing roles that very few reported having general training on customer service interactions or more specific training on managing interactions with angry, upset and/or vulnerable claimants. This indicates that knowing how to perform emotional labour appropriate to the setting is something advisors are expected to either intuitively know how to do, or develop themselves in the role. This is an interesting contrast with Hochschild (1983), who described emotional labour being something staff are explicitly recruited and trained to do, whereas this evidence suggests that for benefit advisors, these skills are expected. Ryan explicitly articulated this:

[Training] was more legislation focused. I'd say that the customer support side of it was more running off your own intuition basically and just knowing how to deal with people as you come to them. And obviously – the longer you're on the job obviously the longer you'd be getting to do that so you'd know a bit better further down the line how to do that. It's just when you first start, it's a bit daunting obviously. You've got erm, some very emotional situations and you've not really dealt with it yet so y'know, it was a bit difficult to start with doing that. (Ryan, TS)

Gina had been offered some training in her induction (prior to 2010) on how to deal with different types of claimant interactions, but felt that the training had no bearing on the reality of interactions with claimants who are likely to be upset or angry:

On a training course of say, four weeks, we probably did a couple of days of role-playing but as you very well know, role-playing is fine if it's out of a textbook [laughs] Until you're put in that position you – you learn on the job. You literally learn on the job (Gina, DWP)

Similarly, other participants explained that their training on interacting with claimants was limited to sessions of either basic customer service or conflict management training, watching instructional videos, or brief periods of role-playing within a larger training programme focused much more heavily on legislation and administrative processes. Brian's position as a trade union representative representing a large number of DWP staff in DBD roles meant he had an overview of training offered for managing interactions with vulnerable claimants including those who may be suicidal or violent, and whilst he confirmed that training and procedures for these situations exist, he described them as 'atrocious', leaving advisors in a position where they feel they are 'winging it' in knowing how to manage these situations, and how to manage emotionally afterwards.

However, Helen, who notably worked in a claimant facing role herself alongside managing a large team of volunteer advisors for a large TS organisation, did describe delivering training to help staff protect their physical safety – using strategies such as positioning oneself in an interview room so access to the exit is not blocked by the claimant. Aside from this, advisors appeared to rely on either training from previous roles, or skills developed once in the role through either their own experiences or informal guidance from colleagues. This is significant because it indicates that whilst appropriate emotional performances are expected and policed,

advisors are expected to already have these skills, and at least within my sample, there was little evidence of employers actively supporting staff with developing them.

7.5 Managerial Support

Participants also discussed the degree to which they felt their line managers were available and willing to provide support during and after difficult interactions with claimants. This varied greatly, with some participants reporting that their managers were proactive in looking to help advisors that were struggling and willing to step in to help in difficult interactions if necessary:

My supervisors were very supportive, fantastic, very understanding, also they knew exactly what we were doing because if someone struggled they were coming over or they were checking clients to sit with them so they really understood the complexity and problems that we were facing so they were always, always very supportive and I could call them as many times and I had to and they were always, always very supportive also in terms of problems with erm job centre staff... yes it was great, fantastic support and without that job would be much, much, much harder (Emilia, TS)

Gina described a similar experience:

They were aware of who was coming in on that day erm, they always supported you, they would come over to the desk if the conversation was quite loud or somebody was kicking off, they would always come over and back your corner. Always. (Gina, DWP)

TS staff in particular also highlighted how their managers helped them to engage with other support strategies, including allowing them breaks between claimants, and being part of the network of informal colleague support that existed in the workplace:

My managers were quite kind of good and if I needed five minutes or to go for a walk or whatever then that was OK you know it wasn't like [as hypothetical manager] 'oh you have finished one appointment you better get out there again' - there wasn't that kind of pressure (Imogen, TS)

We do tend to vent to each other, sometimes to our managers, 'cause we do have a friendly working relationship with 'em, so it's not like we're - like kind of how it is with managers in some other [jobs] where you kind of just steer clear and you don't interact as much. But I feel like we can lean on them more in that way so if – if we do need to vent or if they feel that we've had a situation that wasn't great, so they can even say to us [as managers] 'just take a minute, just go and have a

rest' or something. We've at least got that to lean back on, and each other as well (Ryan, TS)

Imogen also described how support from her managers helped her to make difficult decisions that may cause internal conflict if dealt with alone:

I would just always go to the manager and say 'this is what I am going to do' or 'this is what I am going to say, I am going to ask them to come back', often for an example if a client had been drinking and I wasn't able to get the answers from them that I needed to complete the appointment erm you sort of have to call it really and say 'look we can't continue today, I am going to have to make you an appointment to come back', but usually I would run that past the manager because obviously they are quite vulnerable and if they have got no income coming in, we don't want to delay it for them (Imogen, TS)

This sharing of responsibility with decisions that may negatively impact a claimant allows advisors to share the emotional load of their decision making with their manager. However, whilst Imogen and Ryan were both positive about their manager's support, Ryan noted that whilst managers were keen to help, team placement across multiple offices meant a manager was not always on site, and Imogen pointed out that at times managers were busy helping other advisors so were not available to provide guidance or support with complex queries and difficult claimant interactions.

In addition, several participants, including Sarah, felt that managers without experience of the realities of the day-to-day interactions advisors are involved in were not able to offer an appropriate level of support. She talked about this in her diary and interview:

[diary entry] It's exhausting and draining and I don't think our manager has a clue how much it affects us (Sarah, LA)

There is a lot of lack of understanding from our manager about the fact that our stress – the stress of the job is really taking its toll on people and - we're trying to get help, like, we're telling our manager 'look, we're struggling and we're stressed with this' because y'know, we need help and we're not getting anything in return (Sarah, LA)

This lack of acknowledgement of the emotional strain was coupled with several advisors in DBD roles reporting that managerial support during volatile interactions with claimants was totally lacking, leaving these advisors with – at a minimum - fewer workplace resources to call upon to alleviate the negative impacts of these

interactions, and in some cases fearing for their safety (as explored in Chapter Four). Denise described two instances where this occurred. In the first, her manager retreated rather than coming to support her with an angry claimant:

My manager, he had went away, he disappeared, I knew he was on the floor and even though this man's voice was raised he kind of er, went into his office and retreated (Denise, DWP)

In another case, she described having to argue with her managers in order to get protection with very aggressive claimants. The facility existed in her office for claimants to be seen in a room behind a screen, but getting permission to utilise this was not always as easy as it should be, as she described in this instance:

He was a violent offender erm, and we said 'look, he should be dealt with by a man' because he doesn't have any kind of respect for women anyway. The manager didn't take that on board and then - so he kicked off again at another female colleague of mine and then eventually he was taken into the room to have that kind of interview process... Sometimes you had to fight and argue your case in order for that to happen (Denise, DWP)

This could be perceived as a failing of an individual manager, but Brian confirmed this was a more widespread issue with cases he dealt with as a union representative including multiple instances where managerial staff did not take threats of violence staff faced seriously, leaving advisors and security staff to deal with any problems that arose without more senior support.

Alongside a lack of support with difficult interactions, Neeta described other elements where she felt managerial support was lacking. She described multiple instances where she felt let down by managers in terms of the emotional support she felt should have been available to her. She talked about feeling unsupported when claimants she had worked with threatened or completed suicide, and when she needed both practical flexibility and emotional support when a close family member was terminally ill and she had potentially serious physical health concerns:

I had one person one day – y'know it was really upsetting...it was a bloke that threatened to commit suicide. And all I got from my manager at the time was 'if they talk about it they don't really go and do it do they [Neeta]?' And I'm thinking no – that's not what I want to hear (Neeta, DWP)

I had a really upsetting time when my [immediate family member] was terminally ill I just remember being told by my manager at the time...[as

former manager] 'I don't care if your[family member's] ill - you can sort things out for your [family member] on your days off' Erm, not really mate, y'know? ...Five years later on it still affects me now that I think god, at my weakest time, my [family member] was dying, I was travelling every evening to support my [other family members] up north, I was still coming into work, y'know, it wasn't affecting the customers I was seeing, I was taking on the workloads of other people as well – we were really short staffed at the time - I got nothing to support me at the time (Neeta, DWP)

A lack of interest or action in response to the feedback of front-line staff was also reported by participants in DWP roles. Brian expressed that many DWP managers generically praise staff for the 'amazing' job they do without actually listening to their concerns and making changes to support them, leading to a heavier workload for union representatives as the pressure of difficult interactions accumulated. Neeta in particular expressed a workplace climate where she felt that raising concerns was viewed negatively by managers, as she touched upon elsewhere:

I find now if – if I try and say something to a senior manager, my behaviours are brought to the front rather than y'know, this isn't right, why are we doing this, why is it two weeks ago we were told to do something slightly different and this week you're telling us to do something different? (Neeta, DWP)

Neeta responded by continuing to raise concerns as she felt this was morally the right thing to do, despite feeling that other colleagues had been offered opportunities she hadn't because of her speaking out. Neeta's experiences were the most extreme within my sample, but future research could focus on investigating whether her experiences are unusual or whether such responses to raising concerns are commonplace.

Whilst participants varied in the degree to which they felt their immediate managers were able and willing to support them, there was however, a unanimous feeling across participants in all sectors that whilst some line managers may understand and be sympathetic to their struggles and needs, those involved in decision-making at the highest levels of the organisation did not understand the reality of working in ground level claimant facing roles:

[I felt like], I will use these words deliberately, a minion in the system, erm I felt like my views and my experience and what I felt worked well and what didn't was completely irrelevant, they had a project plan and they were going to implement it as they had designed it, and if we had

feedback then we could give it and then maybe in six months they would consider implementing it and I felt that was very ineffective. That may have been the DWP funding element so they had very specific criteria so they weren't able to adapt, erm but yes I found that incredibly frustrating that the organisation that I was working for effectively didn't care. (Imogen, TS)

This sentiment was apparent in other accounts across sectors and DBD/CS roles too, with Neeta describing senior staff as being in 'ivory towers' and Gina saying that the realities of the frontline are 'far removed from them.' This was particularly frustrating for the advisors in my sample because they felt that they were well placed to offer feedback on what is working well and conversely, areas where changes would be welcomed for the sake of themselves and claimants.

I was also able to gain a small insight into the other side of lower level managerial advisory roles, through data from one participant whose role involves managing a team of volunteers and part-time staff alongside working in a front-line role herself: Helen. When asked about how she supported her staff, Helen explained that she routinely sits in with staff who request support with a difficult interaction and that she would take over for members of her team if they request this. She felt that having worked in her role for two decades enabled her to understand the needs of her team and also described proactive strategies to ensure staff have enough support both during and after interactions with claimants:

We've tried to erm, stagger appointments so that myself and the other paid colleague are always around when the erm, volunteer advisors are interviewing so that they can come out of the interview and talk about stuff or...let off steam or their frustrations (Helen, TS)

She described this as effective, saying:

There haven't been any – many - formal issues. There have been a couple of clients where people have said 'I'm not comfortable' or 'it's too much' or 'it's too close to -', 'I'm really having trouble with -'. It happens when – it happens more often with people with children where you – it's hard to see the direct impact some things are having on children and it fits with the advisor's own circumstances and erm – they have said 'I'm really not comfortable with this, I'm finding it too traumatic' and so at that stage we give them whatever support they need and move the cases around (Helen, TS)

Whilst this strategy enables individual advisors to alleviate pressure, it inevitably involves shifting the workload on to another member of staff, so is at best an

imperfect solution. However, this acknowledgment of the strain advisors face stands in contrast to the majority of statements from other participants whose comments suggest that the impacts of emotional labour are ignored by managers who are far removed from front line work and expect staff to intuitively know how to perform and manage the effects of emotional labour whilst providing minimal training and support with this.

Helen also identified that volunteers face additional challenges because they are not recognised as workers, lacking access to some of the formal support structures available to paid staff:

I mean we've always been a volunteer organisation but some days I think "Blimey! People are volunteering to go and see people in such dire situations. I don't understand quite how they're doing it". Erm, but then without any of the recognition that you're in the public sector and you're doing actual, real work (Helen, TS)

The role volunteers play in CS roles in the TS is invaluable, but they lack access to the formal support mechanisms described in this chapter. Both Helen and Kayleigh highlighted how volunteers were less able to utilise support structures within the workplace. Kayleigh was the only participant who worked as a volunteer, but she echoed Helen's concerns, describing witnessing a distressing event when supporting a claimant at a benefit medical assessment:

Some people's wellbeing was I think impacted by volunteering there... 'cause yeah, some people [that we saw] were very, very distressed at times... I remember there was one person I was with, like she used her fingernails to like self-harm and was tearing the skin on her arm and that was like during the medical and I had like, no support after that (Kayleigh, TS)

These statements draw attention to the particularly vulnerable position of volunteers, indicating that volunteers can face significant difficulties due to not being recognised as workers who need access to workplace support structures. Helen's statement is particularly striking because it indicates that she – as the direct manager of the volunteers in her branch of the TS organisation - felt unable to improve working conditions for volunteers. Indeed, the inability of immediate management to provide effective support emerged as a theme from several participants who felt that their immediate managers did understand the challenges of their role, but resource and

procedural constraints from much higher up the organizational hierarchy left them unable to make changes to improve support for staff.

7.6 Counselling and Emotional Support

The availability of counselling to manage emotional strain, or as a follow up after particularly distressing cases varied across participants. Whilst counselling was on offer in theory to DWP staff in Peter's office, he felt discouraged from using it, describing his fear that taking time away from front line work to receive support could be negatively judged by his colleagues and line managers:

I don't know of anybody who ever took that offer or whether it was ever, to my mind it was never really ever offered with any kind of, expectation that you would take it... they will always churn out this 'oh! you could have had counselling' [sarcastically] Oh yeah? Yeah, great! When exactly? When can you come off the phones to have counselling? Did anybody ever come and say 'look, we've organised some counselling for you if you want it' No! That was never the case, you had to ask for it, and then you would be resented for coming off the phones because then you are not picking calls up (Peter, DWP)

Peter contrasted his unmet need for emotional support with his role with the excellent support he received when recovering from a serious physical illness, indicating that looking after advisors' mental health was not viewed in a comparable way to physical health by his employer. Similarly, Neeta expressed that she felt accessing workplace counselling would have a negative impact on the way managers acted towards her as they would perceive her as being unable to cope with her role. Brian described that DWP staff are entitled to take a 'wellbeing day' to help them manage stress, but this can be refused by their manager, meaning that staff are required to go through managerial gatekeepers who, as explored above, many advisors do not feel understand the pressures they face.

The situation in TS roles appeared to be slightly better for staff in terms of informal emotional support, but the formal emotional support mentioned was limited to Helen noting that her team had been given a one-off training sessions on resilience. Whilst she said she personally had found helpful and identified it as a measure to support her staff, this once again places the responsibility for managing one's emotions on individual staff members rather than recognising that the role itself is stressful and

focusing on change at a system level. Taken together, these realities present a concerning picture because they indicate that reaching out for or accessing formal support such as counselling would be perceived as an individual struggling to cope, rather than recognised as a vital part of workplace support that should be available to anyone who needs it due to the nature of claimant interactions and the emotional toll this takes.

An element of support that was not offered – but which multiple participants spontaneously mentioned as being potentially helpful – would be providing advisors with updates on claimants. The previous chapter explored how advisors worry about claimants long after interactions, sometimes recalling particularly harrowing situations years afterwards, and not knowing whether claimants were able to access the support they required was consistently identified as a source of strain. This leaves advisors without a sense of closure or reassurance because advisors are left unsure whether their intervention made any difference to claimant circumstances.

An element of this which could be realisable in some contexts would enabling advisors to be involved in all stages of the claimant's interaction with the service – rather than their part being reduced to one fleeting interaction. This is particularly significant because it relates back to the sociological roots of emotional labour as a concept. Marx (1844) described alienation in terms of workers being alienated from themselves, from others, from the process of their labour, and the product of it. Hochschild focused on the negative impacts of emotional labour related to a sense of alienation from the self as employees are not in control of their own emotions due to organisational expectations about appropriate emotional displays (Hochschild 1983), but here there is also another aspect of alienation – in this case from the end product of one's labour as in most cases advisors do not get the emotional payoff of seeing cases through to the point of a claimant receiving assistance – financial or otherwise – that improves their quality of life, and are therefore left without closure.

7.7 Trade Unions

On commencing my research I was hopeful that trade unions – for example the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS) which supports DWP staff in front line

benefit advisory roles, and Unison which supports public sector workers including local authorities - would play a protective role for benefit advisors by helping staff advocate for recognition of emotional labour to minimise negative impacts caused, as well as more general improvements to working conditions. Unfortunately, this was not the case, with very few participants describing their trade union as a positive or protective factor in their workplace. For some advisors, a distinctly anti-union attitude prevailed in their workplace:

We have a trade union. I'm not part of it. Mainly because the woman who used to do it was – it's all very political as I guess most things are about a council – but she'd had a big falling out with our supervisor and our manager doesn't like her and basically if our manager knew that you were part of the union – which somehow she seems to know, I don't know how – it's like looked down upon. And like for example the union brought in a poster to put up on our noticeboard and our manager saw the poster and was fuming, took it down, demanded to know who put the poster up, yeah so I haven't joined the union 'cause I don't like want to make life worse for myself. I've not really known anybody where they've actually been able to help (Sarah, LA)

Whilst Sarah's description of overtly anti-union management was unique amongst the participants, several participants who had worked in their roles over a long period of time felt that trade union power had decreased. Additionally, Neeta and Joanne – who previously acted as a union representative herself – expressed that trade union members were not viewed positively by colleagues as relationships in the workplace had become fragmented and competitive:

They see it as somebody that is cranky and erm, not pulling their weight, 'the union rep, oh they are off again, yes y'know supposed to be doing the same job as us, you're off at a meeting!' that started to happen, rather than you know having union meetings and all being together and that it was a case of well most of the staff weren't in the union, you know so if there was any sort of strike action then it would be you know 'oh they are going out!' but then it would be 'well I am going out and losing money while they sit there and do the same job and get the same benefits from me losing my salary to stand out here!' ... you know that is a big, big, big, big change y'know, you used to be supported by your colleagues and work together and now it is very much y'know, dog eat dog. (Joanne, self-employed)

The loss of solidarity and feeling that trade unions lack the power to effect meaningful change was echoed by multiple participants across sectors. Two participants described specific incidents relating to discrimination from colleagues

that they had requested union support with, both of which did not have positive outcomes, leading participants to feel the quality of the advice they were given was poor and that representatives were reluctant to provide meaningful support. The following statement from Gina summarises the sentiment of participants about their trade union more generally:

We had trade union people in - in the building - and they were there for you to go and see if you had an issue with y'know work or customers or anything like that, personal, but over the years I think the trade union side wasn't enough, it wasn't strong enough. They were frightened to go against the management. I didn't think they were there to support you in much at all at the end really (Gina, DWP)

The perspective of Brian (DWP) provides an interesting counterpoint here – as a senior trade union representative who represented a large number of staff he felt strongly about the importance of union activity for supporting staff and lobbying for change. However, he explained that the number of PCS representatives had been cut, leaving the remaining representatives, including himself, feeling both overwhelmed with their caseload and hit with an additional burden of emotional labour from supporting staff as well as claimants, which may be one reason why staff felt they were ineffective.

7.8 Networks of Colleague Support

The importance of support provided by colleagues, termed 'communities of coping' by Korczynski (2003) has been explored in a variety of contexts previously, with numerous studies exploring the crucial role colleagues play in helping staff to manage emotional labour (DiCicco-Bloom and Di-Cicco Bloom 2019, Dudau and Brenetto 2020). For benefit advisors, the existence and strength of such communities varied enormously. For Liz, her small team of colleagues were an invaluable source of support that made the emotionally exhausting parts of her job manageable, leading her to describe them as a 'family' she could call upon for practical advice, reassurance about her decision making, a space to 'vent' and emotional support if she left an interaction feeling upset or angry. This can go some way to bridging the gap left when managerial support may be lacking, as advisors can speak to an insider who understands the difficulties of their role. There was definite evidence of this from other advisors too:

For me, talking through things, so talking through with someone else, just talking through what has happened...as soon as possible after talking, after speaking to a client, before I start doing any case notes or anything like that or any kind of follow up work, is just try and talk it off. Erm that works for me(Alex, TS)

There's always a support that if one of your colleagues was really upset then you would take them off for a cup of tea or a cup of coffee and make sure that they were alright (Gina, DWP)

There was ample evidence of reciprocity amongst the participants accounts as advisors described the mutual support they both provide and draw upon as needed. Similarly, humour has previously been identified as an important part of these support networks (Korczyński 2003) and is articulated succinctly here by Gina:

We understood the customer – y'know how to deal with the customers – and we could have a laugh about it, we could laugh and it wasn't all serious even though we were still doing the job. There was a good support network (Gina, DWP)

Whilst Sarah highlighted the importance of her relationships with colleagues in managing the emotional labour her role required, she also explained how the set-up of their working conditions could limit these opportunities and leave her unable to access such support:

If we've got a spare moment we'll just talk to each other about it, like [as self and colleagues] 'ugh! I've just had somebody on the phone and they've been moaning about this and this that and the other' and just getting it off your chest, talking to somebody about it kind of, is enough for that to then kind of resolve in your head. But when you're working from home, and like, I live alone, it's just stuck with you then (Sarah, LA)

This also has implications in a post-Covid context – the impact of measures such as hotdesking and working from home on advisors' ability to develop bonds with and therefore draw on support from their colleagues is worthy of further exploration. In addition, back-to-back appointments and limited opportunities to talk to colleagues on breaks left Maddy feeling unable to fully utilise this form of support:

The way that the breaks worked meant that you would never really be on a break at the same time as your colleagues. It would be somebody else from the one-stop-shop but not somebody that you know really well that you can vent off to and [they'd] understand what you're talking about because the way that it was rota-ed meant that they wanted to kind of move one at a time rather than more than one at once. Erm,

you might occasionally sometimes cross over with lunch breaks, but not often. So no, I don't think there probably was sufficient erm, feeling there that you had that if you needed it (Maddy, LA)

This was similar in third sector (TS) roles, where the small and fragmented nature of advisory teams - who were in most cases spread over multiple locations - limited the ability of advisors to draw on support from their colleagues. Pressure on services exacerbated this, as Imogen explains here:

The difficulty is our service is so inundated you can't really pull a staff member or volunteer to one side unless it happened to coincide when you're both doing photocopying or something like that because that is just you know there is somebody out there waiting that needs help and while you're talking, you're not helping that person and the clients come first because they are you know, they are sitting there for two/three hours waiting because they really, really, need help (Imogen, TS)

Increased pressure on services was a recurring feature across the data, and the pressure Imogen describes represents another element of this.

Joanne (DWP, LA and TS before moving to self-employment) felt that opportunities to socialise and build bonds within teams had eroded over time due to working arrangements (including the introduction of headsets when taking calls) and the reduction of workplace social events (such as team parties) that meant advisors felt less connected to their colleagues, and thus less able to rely on them for emotional support. The staff turnover described by DWP staff was not explicitly identified as adding to this, but Peter made a distinction between advisors who had worked in the role for some time and newer staff who he felt were less compassionate towards claimants, so it is reasonable to assume that these colleagues would not be considered suitable for such emotional support.

The difficulties associated with workspaces shared with other agencies has already been discussed above, but it is important to note how this also impacts opportunities to gain support from colleagues where TS staff are often the only person from their organisation at a particular shared location. Alex (TS) described how he had made deliberate attempts to be sociable with Jobcentre Plus staff in the shared space he worked in, and whilst he noted similar frustrations to other TS workers in these settings, one of his diary entries showed an opportunity where he was able to bridge

the DWP and TS divide following a particularly harrowing interaction where a very vulnerable claimant was struggling to access support they desperately needed:

[diary entry] I'm livid afterwards and have a bit of a rant about it to one of the Jobcentre managers who agrees with me that it's an absolute shambles. (Alex, TS)

Whilst Alex was able to call upon the bonds he had built across sectors to access support when he needed it, other advisors experienced a lack of community and support within their own teams. This was most notable for Denise and Neeta. Denise felt that the interplay of being younger than most colleagues and being the only member of the team from an ethnic minority background meant that her views were often at odd with colleagues:

I was [early thirties] when I started erm, so there was very few people my age. And in fact I was called - I was considered really young and again, a lot of the people who had just left high school straight into the benefits centre or whatever and had been there for 20 odd years. And it was those that had – it was still the mentality of – high school – so they had never experienced any other workplace really, they'd only just been within the DWP and so the culture was entrenched in terms of erm, quite bigoted, quite sexist, y'know, really ancient views...it was only because I don't think they had ever been outside that circle (Denise, DWP)

Her willingness to challenge her colleagues' prejudices (as noted previously, she identified racism and transphobia as particular issues amongst colleagues) meant that she felt less connected to her colleagues and thus unable to utilise support networks:

There was a break room that you could go to and stuff like that. Erm, and I had two or three colleagues that I was close with. Everybody else, I didn't really get on with [laughs] and it wasn't because I didn't like them it was just because I challenged a lot of attitudes and behaviours – that was it (Denise, DWP)

This was in fact the catalyst for her eventual resignation from her role: an episode she described where challenging a racist remark from a colleague left her feeling both unsupported by colleagues and disillusioned with the formal structures for challenging prejudice in her workplace. Denise was distinct in reporting such an overt culture of ingrained racism within her workplace, but other participants also noted witnessing racism from colleagues towards claimants. Neeta was also from an ethnic minority background, but she felt that the distance between her and many of

her colleagues related more to her finding it more difficult than her colleagues to manage situations where she felt unable to provide meaningful support for claimants and found it harder to detach – as explored above. This does suggest the possibility of further research to establish if this is part of a wider trend experienced by BAME staff in benefit advisory roles, as has been previously suggested (Nguyen and Velayutham 2018).

7.9 Conclusion

This final data chapter has focused on the external factors that mediate the ability of benefit advisors to use strategies to alleviate negative impacts of their emotional labour, and thus engages with my third research question. It has identified a number of workplace arrangements that can enable or impede benefit advisor attempts to manage the most challenging aspects of the emotional labour they perform, which has practical implications for employers and trade unions seeking to support benefit advisors' wellbeing.

The physical set-up of the space benefit advisors work in is particularly significant in that it helps to set the tone for interactions and determines physical proximity to claimants. Most significantly, the availability of spaces for decompression – a 'backstage' area away from claimants where advisors can have a break after a difficult interaction – was highlighted as a particularly important factor for managing emotional labour. Being able to process or release one's emotions authentically, either alone or in the company of colleagues who have first-hand experience of benefit advisory work, is an important protective factor for benefit advisors, which also enables them to feel ready for the next claimant interaction.

In addition, for those TS advisors who are based in a cross-organisational space with the DWP, there is the additional challenge of this shared working environment leading claimants to assume TS advisors are part of the DWP. This misconception can make their interactions with claimants more challenging as claimants assume advisors have administrative control over their claim and can see them as representing the DWP rather than being an independent organisation there to support claimants to navigate their benefit claims. The particular stigma associated

with working in a DBD role, particularly within the DWP, has already been discussed above in Chapters Five and Six, and this makes clear why advisors feel it is important to be recognised as being separate from this, both for their own understanding of their role and claimant perceptions.

There are also multiple workplace structures that form protective barriers against some of the more damaging elements of emotional labour. Providing adequate training on both policy and how to manage challenging interactions, offering counselling and encouraging advisors to access it, providing time for advisors to take breaks between difficult interactions (and thus to use the spaces for decompression discussed above) are key ways that employers can support benefit advisors with the emotional labour their role requires. Workplace relationships also matter: specifically line managers being physically present to provide assistance and take advisors' concerns seriously when they are dealing with an aggressive claimant, alongside the relationships benefit advisors have with their colleagues.

Informal networks of colleague support - known as 'communities of coping' (Korczynski 2003) – have been previously identified as significant for alleviating the negative impacts of emotional labour (Dudau and Brunetto 2020, Lewis 2005, Lively 2000). However, this chapter has highlighted that not all benefit advisors are able to draw on these networks to the same extent. This can be for practical reasons, such as working from home or in a small satellite office with few team members, but potentially also in situations where the narratives advisors hold about their role and claimants (discussed in Chapter Six) are not aligned with their colleagues.

These external resources can be seen as a toolkit that advisors can draw upon, but the size and contents of the toolkit differs for each advisor – including the knowledge gained from training courses, the availability of counselling, trade union presence, and the space in their office to take a break and decompress with colleagues. Some of these external resources are not static and may shift according to factors such as physical location which can impact the availability of managers and physical spaces for decompression, or the relationships between colleagues working together on a particular day. Although the way these factors intersect is complex, this should be of interest to trade unions, employers and policymakers, due to the immense scale of

their impact on advisors' ability to effectively manage the negative impacts of emotional labour.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This thesis has explored the experiences of benefit advisors – staff who work directly in front-line roles with claimants in the United Kingdom in either Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles that involve administering benefits for the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) or local authorities (LA) or Claimant Support (CS) roles across LAs and the third sector (TS) that involve supporting claimants to access social security. This qualitative research comprised semi-structured interviews, plus four solicited diaries, undertaken by 17 current and former benefit advisors who worked in face-to-face or voice-to-voice roles with benefit claimants. The thesis focus is on the period since the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012) to the beginning of 2020 and it thus offers a snapshot of these roles at a time when emotions were often heightened due to the twin impacts of social security reforms on claimant circumstances and workers' roles.

Previously, the experiences of benefit advisors working in these sectors have been considered in isolation, with a particular research focus on those advisors employed in DBD roles where they directly administer benefits, termed street level bureaucrats by Lipsky (1980). Lipsky introduced this term to describe public sector employees working in frontline roles where there are scarce resources and heavy workloads alongside some degree of discretion in how policy is enacted (Lipsky 2010).

Research on street level bureaucrats has provided valuable insights into staff experiences and decision making, including how these pressurised environments lead to some service users receiving less favourable treatment (for example Carter and Whitworth 2015). This focus, however, is not wide enough to fully capture the contemporary 'local ecosystems of support' (Edmiston et al 2022) that exist to provide advice and support for benefit claimants, as it misses the experiences of advisors working in TS or LA roles who do not directly administer benefits, but still play a crucial frontline role in supporting claimants to navigate social security reforms and access benefits.

The value of this research is in using emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) as a lens through which to understand the similarities, as well as differences, between DBD

and CS advisor experiences across DWP, LA and TS roles. Emotional labour (Hochschild 1983) describes work that requires people to mediate their own emotional performance and to evoke particular emotional states in the service users they work with, according to employer requirements. In this context, it offers a framework that allows us to understand the intensity associated with interactions between benefit advisors and claimants which are often fraught with difficult emotions such as anger, frustration, and upset. Emotional labour has been hugely influential over the last forty years and has been utilised across multiple disciplines to understand emotions in the workplace (Grandey et al 2013, Wharton 2009), but critics, most notably Bolton (2000a, 2000b, 2005) have argued that it presents a pessimistic view of workplace relationships and underestimates the level of freedom workers have to engage in emotional performances at work.

This conclusion revisits the original research questions to identify how these have been answered within this thesis and to recap key findings. In addition, this chapter foregrounds the original conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to knowledge that have been made herein. The limitations of this piece of research, as well as future research directions and key practical implications are also discussed, and a final reflection is made on the novel contributions made by this project.

8.2 Returning to the Research Questions

It is important at this point to return to the original research questions this thesis aimed to address in order to assess how well these have been met. The questions are listed below, followed by a summary of where and how these have been explored across Chapters Four to Seven.

Research Questions:

1. How does emotional labour function in benefit advisory roles?
2. What are the effects of performing emotional labour in benefit advisory roles on benefit advisors?
3. What strategies do benefit advisors use to alleviate any undesired effects of emotional labour in their roles?
4. How useful is Hochschild's (1983) theory of emotional labour for exploring the interactions benefit advisors have with claimants in the workplace?

Chapter Four addressed how emotional labour functions in benefit advisory roles (Question One), asking about the ways that benefit advisors manage both their own and claimants' emotions. I found that performing neutrality - as previously identified by Ward and McMurray (2011) in their research on medical receptionists - provides a way for advisors to mask their felt emotions, termed surface acting by Hochschild (1983). The sociological significance of advisors attempting to suppress negative emotions towards claimants and other staff members, as well as detach from their own beliefs and emotions during interactions has also been explored in this thesis, and is a finding that should not be underestimated given the potential of emotional labour to lead to alienation and burnout (Brook 2009b, Montgomery et al 2006). Alongside this, advisors are required to manage the emotions of claimants in order to reduce the potential for distress and anger. The interviews and diaries showed that they do this in four ways: through reasoning and managing expectations on one hand to encourage claimants to accept the decisions or advice they have been given, but also through softer gestures, specifically acknowledgement and validation of claimant emotions and providing a space for claimants to share their experiences and feelings. The similarities that I found in the strategies used by advisors working across DWP, LA and TS roles indicate that working in a claimant support role (as opposed to directly administering benefits) is not a protective factor because advisors across all roles reported needing to utilise the same techniques to manage the negative claimant emotions.

Chapter Five moved beyond the level of individual interactions to explore the long term effects on benefit advisors' of their emotional labour (Question Two), both positive and negative. The data showed that whilst opportunities to provide support for claimants offered a sense of job satisfaction in some instances, frustration with the constraints of their roles (which diluted advisors' ability to make a meaningful difference) was apparent. For advisors in Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) roles, particularly for advisors working for the DWP, this research has revealed a distinct and particularly concerning sense of shame, highlighting how this context especially can be seen as a form of emotional dirty work that conveys taint onto workers (Ward and McMurray 2016) due to working for an employer with a poor public image. Additionally, DBD advisors (across DWP and LA roles) reported fear of negative reactions outside of the workplace if they encounter angry and threatening claimant

behaviour (such as an aggressive claimant waiting for them after work), which resulted in these advisors experiencing particular strain from their roles. A number of other negative health impacts were discussed by participants across the DBD and CS spectrum due to both unmanageable workload causing time pressure which led to several advisors doing unpaid overtime or using free time to try to stay up to date with legislative changes and also a difficulty disengaging from work when one is either concerned about a particular claimant or experiencing lingering negative emotions after an unpleasant interaction. Advisors discussed how their roles impacted their personal relationships through lack of time and energy to participate fully in family life and feeling unable to access support from loved ones who did not understand the pressure of their role. In addition, and in line with existing literature (Lennie et al 2020, Montgomery et al 2006, Sturdy and Fineman 2001, Wharton 2009) negative physical and mental health impacts were reported by participants, particularly when they could not access a source of job satisfaction from feeling like they had made meaningful change to claimant lives. The universality and severity of the negative effects participants reported paints an alarming picture of advisor wellbeing that should be of concern to those interested in their welfare, and the implications of this for those stakeholders are discussed further in section 8.4.

Chapter Six addressed my third research question. It focused on the strategies advisors are able to utilise in order to manage negative impacts of emotional labour. The interview and diary data revealed the central importance of the connected narratives benefit advisors hold about their roles and claimants as this defines what they view as effective performance in their roles. On one end of the spectrum were advisors who viewed their position as being about protecting the public purse from fraud, and who saw all claimants as potentially undeserving, with advisors who saw their role as helping claimants to navigate access to support and fundamentally viewed claimants as deserving at the other end of the spectrum. When there is a mismatch between an advisor's views and the duties in their role (such as a DBD advisor being required to sanction claimants for minor issues like lateness due to missed public transport), this can lead to particular strain, as multiple participants experienced. Chapter Six also introduced the concept of selective emotional disengagement to describe the development over time of an emotional 'thick skin' (a phrase used by multiple participants) that allows advisors to give claimants they feel

are most deserving more of their emotional energy whilst giving others a surface level performance – in effect rationing this resource to protect themselves from burnout. Whilst similar categorisation of claimants has been noted elsewhere (Wolomir and Powers 2007), this has previously been conceptualised as a decision made with each service user, rather than a skill that develops over time. Finally, challenging public perceptions (and misconceptions!) of social security also emerged as an unexpected strategy utilised by several advisors in order to feel their role is less stigmatised and that they can do something practical to support claimants. Participants described challenging friends and acquaintances when they articulated negative attitudes about benefit claimants or claimed that social security is too lenient. This finding is particularly revealing in how it links to prior discussions of emotional labour as a form of dirty work (Rivera 2015, Ward and McMurray 2016), by demonstrating advisors attempting to repair the negative image of their role through improving the image of claimants. Challenging misconceptions therefore serves the dual purposes of providing space to vent about the punitive system that would not be permissible to express in their workplace, but crucially also attempting to generate a positive external perception of their role.

Chapter Seven considered the mediating factors that impact staff experiences of emotional labour and shape their ability to draw upon protective strategies (also related to Question Three). The research identified a number of interlinked factors, including the mode of delivery (voice-to-voice or face-to-face), the availability and quality of training on both legislation and how to manage difficult interactions, managerial support, formal emotional support within the workplace, trade unions (who many advisors felt were unable to effect substantial change), having a physical space to decompress, the availability of colleague networks to provide informal support and whether their role offers any space for discretion. In addition, the impact of working in a cross organizational space was found to be significant for third sector (TS) staff in that it changes both the support available (e.g. colleagues and managers), and at times, the way in which claimants perceive advisors in relation to Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) staff. All these factors combine to offer each advisor a different range of resources to draw upon for support.

Throughout, this thesis engages with Question Four – asking whether Hochschild's (1983) conceptualisation is sufficient for understanding emotional labour in the

context of benefit advisory roles. Despite critiques such as Bolton (2000b, 2005) I conclude that Hochschild still offers a robust theoretical base for understanding employee experiences in emotionally challenging roles. Emotional labour offers a framework for understanding the complexity of the strategies that benefit advisors employ to navigate their unpredictable workplace terrain in which each interaction may require a different combination of tactics to avoid friction or reduce distress. This is a crucial insight because of the lack of formal recognition and support for benefit advisors within their workplaces.

8.3 Original Contributions to Knowledge

8.3.1 Introduction

This thesis has offered original conceptual, empirical and methodological contributions to knowledge, which are discussed below.

8.3.2 Empirical Contribution

The empirical contributions discussed in this thesis are numerous. Firstly, this research is novel in using emotional labour to explore the experiences of benefit advisors in contemporary UK settings. Bringing together LA, DWP and TS advisors enables an exploration of the striking commonalities in their experiences and the mutual challenges they encounter in the face of shifting legislation and increasing benefit conditionality. The context of transition caused by the implementation of the Welfare Reform Act 2012 (WRA2012) offers a rich canvas of advisor experiences during a period of change and in many instances, increased pressure. An additional empirical contribution is therefore provided through the consideration of staff experiences of social security reform because previous research has overwhelmingly focused on the impact of reforms on claimants rather than staff, with a few exceptions.

In bringing together the experiences of staff in Direct Benefit Delivery (DBD) and Claimant Support (CS) roles, this thesis also offers an opportunity to consider whether the experience of administering benefits presents a unique challenge for advisors, finding that, for the most part, the emotional challenges of the role are shared by advisors in CS roles because both are constrained (albeit, to different degrees) by the legislation. Both types of advisor also reported similar effects of their

work on their wellbeing (discussed at length in Chapter Five), with the exception being the additional burden DBD advisors reported in feeling unsafe or concerned about the idea of being recognised outside of work. Fear and threat therefore emerged as particular to the experience of DBD roles.

Centring emotional labour in the discussion of benefit advisor experiences has provided a comprehensive investigation into the realities of benefit advisory roles in the context of austerity, giving voice to the workers at the front line of social security reforms and highlighting the challenges associated with benefit advisory work. Whilst the data was generated pre Covid-19 and a change of government, it remains relevant in the context of the contemporary Labour government that is seeking to reform disability benefits further (DWP 2025). Alarm has already been raised by the third sector about the impact of this for claimants, with Citizens Advice arguing that the proposed changes will potentially push 1.3 million disabled people currently claiming Personal Independence Payment (PIP) into poverty (Citizens Advice 2025), so the concerns herein about the impact on advisors who support claimants remain timely.

8.3.3 Conceptual Contribution

This research builds upon the existing wealth of emotional labour research, a site of influential discussion and debate across multiple disciplines including sociology, psychology, and human resource management (Grandey et al 2013). The debate between Hochschild's (1983) original definition and Bolton's (Bolton 2000a, Bolton 2005, Bolton and Boyd 2003) proposed alternative is revisited here – finding that Bolton's notion of the 'gift' of additional emotional engagement with claimants occurs only within a context where advisors options are tightly constrained, limiting them from making a meaningful impact on claimant circumstances. Whilst some advisors did offer, for example, additional time to listen to a claimant's explanation of their circumstances – the listening space and acknowledgement discussed in Chapter Four – this does not occur for the reasons Bolton (2000a) states. This type of interaction is a way of alleviating guilt and frustration at not being able to do anything to actually change claimants' circumstances and is an attempt to prevent more strained interactions with claimants rather than being (as Bolton claims) something that is freely offered from a wide range of options.

This thesis also adds a new concept, selective emotional disengagement, to explain the process through which the benefit advisors build up a protective shell that enables them to disengage from difficult and upsetting interactions more readily as they become more experienced in their roles. The multiple negative effects identified in Chapter Five however indicate that this process is only ever partial, and therefore feeds into existing discussions about the negative impacts of emotional labour (Turner and Stets 2005).

Emotional labour is also brought into conversation with Lipsky's (1980) concept of street level bureaucracy in order to explain the pressure, and at times tension, felt by advisors who do have a small measure of discretionary control over claimant circumstances (i.e. advisors in DBD roles). The ways in which participants described choosing not to pass on information that might lead to a sanction and leniency in their definitions of job search activities illustrated attempts to push back against perceived unfairness related to conditionality requirements for claimants – both preventing negative outcomes for the claimant and increasing the advisor's sense of having done something worthwhile. These efforts were however framed within a wider context of disempowerment for both claimants and the staff who support them. This suggests a valuable avenue for future research on front-line benefit advisory roles to understand more about the frequency such discretionary action is taken and crucially, which claimants are more likely to benefit from it, as previous research has indicated that staff prejudices influence their decision making (McGann et al 2022, Redman and Fletcher 2022, Rice 2012, Taylor 2015).

Critically, this research focuses on a role that requires an often overlooked manifestation of emotional labour (Ward and McMurray 2016) – the management of negative emotions in not just the self but also the claimants with whom the advisors work, as opposed to evoking and exaggerating positivity (such as in customer service roles). This thesis therefore adds to the growing body of literature theorising emotional labour as a distinct form of dirty work (Mastracci 2021, Rivera 2015, Ward and McMurray 2011, Ward and McMurray 2016, Whiley and Grandy 2022). The efforts of DWP staff to distance themselves from their in-work identities in order to protect themselves from negative reactions outside their workplace is an indication of the stigma associated with being a DWP benefit advisor in particular. In addition, the unexpected finding that advisors (across all sectors) often felt compelled to question

and correct misconceptions about social security outside of the workplace offers a particularly fascinating finding, as it evidences an attempt to remove the stigma – or taint - associated with working with benefit claimants and thus offer advisors a more positive conception of their role.

8.3.4 Methodological Contribution

The major methodological strength of this project is the use of methods that allow the research questions to be answered by offering direct access to the viewpoints of staff across the spectrum of agencies involved in benefit advisory work. A qualitative approach, utilising semi-structured interviews conducted away from the workplace and solicited diaries, enabled space for participants to articulate their experiences in their own terms, without fear of reprisals.

An additional methodological contribution this thesis provides is the discussion of how outsider researchers can respond to initial challenges gaining access to potential participants. The use of social media to recruit participants for research can be valuable when the researcher is an outsider and the use of official channels – such as, in this case, contacting employers – is impossible due to the nature of the research. Promoting the call for participants on social media enabled me to reach a much wider range of participants who were geographically spread and unrelated to each other – a necessity if, as in my case, gatekeepers are unresponsive and snowball sampling has failed to generate the anticipated participant numbers.

A final methodological contribution of this thesis is the use of solicited diaries in emotional labour research. Solicited diaries are well established as a data generation tool (Bartlett and Milligan 2015, Harvey 2011) but at present, diary methods remain distinctly under-utilised in emotional labour research, with only limited examples (Lennie et al 2020, Van Gelderen et al 2007). Despite the paucity of existing research utilising them, solicited diaries are a data generation tool that proved extremely fruitful in terms of the depth and richness of participant entries. Completing diaries also offered participants the opportunity for reflexive engagement with their feelings about workplace experiences in their entries. What this brought to the semi-structured interviews that followed was a more nuanced discussion, with the opportunity for me to check my understanding of participant explanations, as well as the opportunity to build upon the entries in our interview. The diary entries served as

a springboard to discuss memorable and challenging interactions, as well as a contemporaneous record of how their workplace interactions impacted their activities after work. The use of solicited diaries is therefore strongly recommended due to the benefits they offer qualitative researchers in capturing emotions and experiences.

8.4 Implications of Research

The findings presented here also have extensive practical implications for the working conditions of benefit advisors and offer solid evidence for four major stakeholders. Firstly, they have implications for trade unions - specifically the Public and Commercial Services Union (PCS), who represent DWP staff, and Unison, who represent LA staff. These trade unions should use this data to advocate for change: it highlights the pressures benefit advisors face and the failings of employers to adequately support staff who are experiencing strain due to the emotional labour they perform. Specifically, the workload pressures reported by advisors, and how these can lead to working unpaid overtime, should be of particular concern to the PCS and Unison, as should the deficiencies in training that leave staff feeling underprepared for interactions with claimants, both in terms of their legislative knowledge and ability to manage difficult interactions. However, perhaps most important for trade union interests is the concerning finding that advisors felt that trade unions were unable to successfully advocate for workplace improvements. My findings indicate that urgent action is needed on their part to intervene to enable benefit advisors to feel supported and represented by their unions, through recruiting representatives and engaging with benefit advisors to understand their concerns and encourage them to join the union.

The second stakeholder group is employers. The DWP, LAs and TS employers of benefit advisors should also draw upon the evidence here to find ways to better support benefit advisors. There are multiple ways they can do this, specifically through ensuring training on changes in legislation is kept up to date, limiting the use of cross organisational spaces, providing break rooms away from claimants and giving staff time to use these, and encouraging opportunities for staff to talk to team members about their emotional labour. Some of these recommendations may be challenging to implement due to time and funding constraints but it may be possible

to find solutions. For example, up-to-date training on legislative changes is challenging as legislation is consistently subject to change, but one solution would be clear communication bulletins from management that summarise changes before they come into effect. This would enable front-line staff to feel better prepared and help lessen the pressure some advisors in this research felt to use their free time to keep up to date with changes.

Other recommendations for employers – including limiting the use of cross-organisational spaces, may be hampered by limited budgets, but this should be a key concern for TS organisations who hold contracts with the DWP to deliver services such as Citizens Advice's Help to Claim contract which often involves being situated in a Jobcentre Plus office. As shown in this research, where claimants meet with TS advisors can have significant implications for how claimants perceive them – with many assuming that being situated in the Jobcentre means they are part of the DWP and treating them accordingly. TS employers should take this into account when negotiating contracts to provide benefit advice alongside the DWP, as asserting their independence and protecting their staff from the stigma associated with being employed by the DWP is an important concern. Other proposed interventions are lower cost but hold potentially significant benefits. The most obvious of these in light of the clear importance of space to decompress away from claimants is the provision of a break room (a backstage area, in Goffmanian terms) where advisors could both individually decompress after challenging interactions, and draw on the support of colleagues in ad-hoc communities of coping (Korczynski 2003) that are of mutual benefit. In other workplace contexts, acknowledging emotional labour as a skill and giving staff time in meetings to express their experiences and feelings has been a successful strategy for helping staff manage emotional labour (Di-Ciccio Bloom and Di-Cicco Bloom 2019), so this is also recommended as a strategy to support benefit advisors.

There are also clear implications for claimants from this research. Significantly, participants offered different emotional performances depending on their perceptions of claimant circumstances. These perceptions were driven by participants' biases about whether claimants were legitimately in need of financial support and are linked to wider discourse about the deserving and undeserving poor (Golding and Middleton 1982). This matters because claimants perceived to be less deserving

may be offered less time and patience, and in DBD contexts where advisors do have some discretionary capacity, these biases could potentially affect their benefit entitlement. As an example, the opportunities for discretion embodied in Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and DWP benefit sanctions can be a site of turmoil for DBD staff who face a difficult decision in circumstances where there is a question over whether claimants fit certain criteria. Therefore, to ensure claimants are treated as fairly as possible, measures such as unconscious bias training and peer checking of DHP calculations are strongly recommended. The effectiveness of sanctions have been questioned elsewhere (CPAG 2024, Dwyer 2018) and an appraisal of the appropriateness of their use is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, as the situation currently stands, making the criteria for whether to put someone forward to Decision Makers for a sanction unambiguous would help to avoid situations where claimants may receive a different outcome based on their own characteristics or which advisor they see.

Fourth and finally, this analysis has ramifications for national policymakers – most obviously the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions – when reviewing provision and designing reforms. A key example is the current proposed changes to disability benefits (DWP 2025). The difficulties in implementing Universal Credit (UC) have been widely discussed, so with managed migration of existing claimants on legacy benefits now planned for completion in March 2026 (DWP 2024) the findings in this thesis are a timely reminder of the problems frontline staff have already faced and are likely to continue to as the remaining claimants are moved over to UC. The necessity for prompt updates for staff so they can ensure their legislative understanding is up to date has been demonstrated in this research, so that benefit advisors can feel confident in the advice and information they are giving claimants. Alongside this, this research provides additional evidence for the recommendation made by Citizens Advice (2024) that the DWP should ensure claimants receive clear communication in writing about their benefit entitlement. This would mean claimants are less likely to need to come into offices seeking clarification, and would lower the potential for frustration and distress caused by not understanding the information they have been sent.

8.5 Research Limitations and Lessons Learned

This research project does have several limitations. Firstly, whilst I was able to obtain a varied sample of DWP, LA and TS staff, a methodological limitation is that this was still relatively small (N=17) and therefore limited the ability to make comparisons and contrasts between advisors. One example here is the limited number of male participants (N=4) and minority ethnic participants (N = 3) which meant that I was unable to comment upon whether gender or ethnicity played a significant role in advisor experiences of emotional labour, as previous research has suggested experiences differ across gender (Hochschild 1986, Lennie et al 2020) and for ethnic minority staff (Malvini Redden and Scarduzio 2017). Similarly, whilst individual advisors who used various modes of delivery were able to comment upon how these differ and their experiences, there was not sufficient data on this to comment definitively on whether one mode of delivery is more intense for advisors.

One stark lesson during fieldwork was as an outsider researcher, the extent to which gatekeepers in the form of the Public and Commercial Services Union and Unison were uninterested in the research project, despite the findings potentially being useful to them. I had naively hoped my previous role would offer some credibility that would enable me to make contacts, but this did not come to fruition. Having to pivot to a new strategy (social media), and seizing unexpected opportunities that arose to make contact with potential participants through mutual acquaintances has built my resilience in terms of responding to challenges in the field. Whilst this was successful in the present research, the fragmentation of social media presence across multiple platforms since Twitter's policies have shifted post the rebrand to X means that alternative options would need to be considered, and may not have the same reach that the call for participants in this research did.

The diary data generated was hugely rich and valuable, and I regret not encouraging all eligible advisors (i.e. those currently in their roles) more strongly to complete diaries alongside their interviews. Generating a sample diary entry and being clear about the approximate time required for diary completion may have helped to encourage further participants to choose to complete these, and I would be keen to utilise diaries again in future research with the benefit of this learning.

Finally, this research project provides a snapshot of advisor experiences prior to the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The decision to cease data generation at the onset of Covid-19 was a practical one based on time and resources, as well as uncertainty about what the pandemic would mean for advisors, but in hindsight if (current) staff had felt able to complete a follow up interview discussing their experiences since February 2020, this would have been illuminating for understanding the impact of Covid-19 on their workplaces.

8.6 Future Research Directions

My reflections on the thesis' achievements and challenges led to the identification of five key directions for future research. Firstly, exploring mobility within benefit advisory roles and the potential ramifications for emotional labour would be a valuable avenue for future research. I had not anticipated how common it is for advisors to move between DBD and CS roles across the three employers, or that there is so much movement of individual advisors within each organisation, so future research could be shaped around understanding advisor role movement as this would potentially offer an insight into how they manage the emotional impact of their work.

Secondly, the emotional labour undertaken by front-line staff with managerial responsibility is a topic that has received limited attention (DiCicco-Bloom and DiCicco-Bloom 2019), and research on managers in benefit advisory roles would generate useful insights about how line managers attempt to support staff and monitor emotional labour. I was only able to gain limited data on the role of benefit advisors with managerial responsibility (having only one manager in my sample).

A third, and valuable, direction would be to compare the views of front-line staff like my participants, and back office staff with more decision making capacity, such as DWP Decision Makers. This thesis indicates that front-line benefit advisors construct narratives about their role purpose and claimant motivations to make sense of their work. The data from this research suggests that advisors who view their role purpose to be primarily about supporting claimants are more likely to use their limited discretion to support them in order to both provide meaningful support to claimants and reduce the negative impacts of their emotional labour. The implications of advisors choosing when (and when not to) utilise discretion in areas such as, for

example, making a referral for a sanction or assessing a Discretionary Housing Payment request have major financial consequences for claimants. This research area would therefore be a valuable addition to academic research on street level bureaucracies (Lipsky 1980), especially as advisors' own beliefs and prejudices can affect their decision making, so research which probes more deeply into areas of discretionary flexibility within the current UK social security system and how advisors utilise this is of huge importance for understanding both staff decisions and the effects these have on claimants, particularly as claimants perceived to be less deserving may receive less preferential treatment and ultimately, a lower level of financial support.

A fourth research direction is to build upon the snapshot and carry out longitudinal research to track benefit advisor career trajectories over time. This would facilitate studying the development of selective emotional disengagement as advisors spend longer in their roles, and to understand whether advisors whose narrative about their role purpose suffers from a mismatch with their employer are indeed more likely to suffer from burnout or leave their roles, as is suggested by the present data.

Similarly, the findings generated during this research project provide a snapshot of advisor experiences prior to the onset of Covid-19, so future longitudinal research could build upon this to identify whether experiences of emotional labour changed significantly during the height of the pandemic and beyond, and especially at the time of writing when further significant social security reforms are being proposed (DWP 2025). The use of digital platforms (such as Citizens' Advice online chat and the DWP's journal for Universal Credit claimants) are increasing as a method of communicating with claimants and therefore deserve academic attention to understand how they are reshaping the relationships between claimants and benefit advisors and the impact this mode of communication has on advisors.

Last is a methodological suggestion. Future research on emotional labour would greatly benefit from utilising solicited diaries as a primary research tool due to the rich contemporaneous data they generate. Their advantages for explorations of emotional labour among benefit advisers have been highlighted here, and this could translate to any role that requires emotional labour, but especially those (like benefit

advisory roles) that involve the management of negative emotions, and/or that face intense time pressure.

8.7 Concluding Remarks

This thesis has provided a much-needed insight into a role of sociological and wider interest by exploring the emotional labour undertaken by benefit advisors working in front-line roles with benefit claimants in the United Kingdom. It provides a comprehensive account of these roles during a period of social security reform which has intensified the emotional labour required to facilitate smooth claimant interactions, and illustrates the multiple challenges benefit advisors face. Valuable attention has been paid previously to the impacts of the Welfare Reform Act (2012) on claimants, but this thesis contends that benefit advisors are also impacted by social security changes day-to-day and can struggle with negative impacts on their wellbeing as a result. The uneven terrain of workplace support and lack of recognition of the skill required to navigate interactions with claimants who are often upset, angry, and at times openly hostile towards staff discussed herein should be of concern to multiple stakeholders, specifically trade unions, employers, claimants, and policy makers. The value of this research is in the comprehensive account it provides of benefit advisor experiences as these have substantial implications for staff wellbeing and retention.

Emotional labour has provided a framework through which to understand the complex, and often thankless, position benefit advisors occupy – often sympathetic to claimant situations, but unable to make amendments to provide concrete support. Original conceptual, empirical, and methodological contributions to knowledge have been made in this thesis, which brings together the experiences of DWP, LA and TS staff for the first time to highlight that there are more similarities than differences between their roles when it comes to the emotional labour they are required to perform. All are faced with claimants experiencing frustration or despair at navigating access to financial support and face being associated with benefit claimants who are consistently stigmatised (Golding and Middleton 1982) and thus experience some of the taint of benefit claiming that threatens to strip away their positive identity around the work they do. This thesis argues that this is particularly challenging for DBD staff

who, as the face of the DWP and (in some cases) LAs, are expected to justify and defend policy and procedures which they themselves often disagree with, leaving them particularly vulnerable to negative impacts on their wellbeing and particular feelings of discomfort outside of their workplace due to the negative perceptions of their role held by claimants.

The role performed by benefit advisors – regardless of whether they are in DBD or CS roles across the DWP, LAs or TS – is vital for enabling claimants to access social security, and the level of skilled emotional labour required alongside their legislative knowledge has consistently been overlooked in the extant literature. Most fundamentally, this thesis has centred their voices and drawn attention to the myriad challenges they face working on the front line. It has important practical implications for the working conditions of benefit advisors and consequential support for claimants. It has also established the work of benefit advisors as a meaningful site of sociological research and has made recommendations for further research including their selective emotional disengagement. Building on this thesis, the sociology of emotional labour is in a position to better understand and take seriously this vital and challenging role that functions as the gateway to social security for some of the most vulnerable members of society.

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Appendix One – Operationalising

Research Questions

Section	Questions
Job content	What type of contact with claimants does role involve Is role to find answers or signpost/refer on to other staff Does advisor assess/investigate claims, prepare documents or information for assessment/investigation, or just offer advice?
Interactions with claimants	Interactions advisor finds rewarding or enjoyable Interactions advisor does not enjoy Are claimants ever upset/angry How does advisor respond in these situations Example situation: how would advisor deal with an obviously distressed claimant Does advisor ever have to evoke positive emotion when they don't want to Do interactions ever make them angry How do they react Do interactions ever make them upset Can they show it If not, what do they do
Support	Availability of workplace support Who provides it Is it useful Availability of physical break spaces Does advisor ever support colleagues Trade union member When they joined Ever accessed union support Is trade union support effective Does management offer advice on difficult interactions Does manager step in if discussion if advisor faces difficulties Does manager recognise emotional impact of role

Skills	What skills does it require to get job What skills make an advisor perform well Is emotional labour monitored/sanctioned/rewarded
Training	Induction process What was training Training format Training effectiveness Training gaps Guidelines for claimant interactions Is there enough training on legislative changes
Effects	Feelings at the end of difficult days Do they ever feel angry or upset because of what happened at work How they deal with these emotions How do they unwind How often is it like this Can they share work worries with anyone outside work Frequency of thoughts about work outside of work Frequency that work impacts sleep Thoughts about leaving/why did they leave Do others understand their job Do they perceive there to be stereotypes about job (e.g. 'I, Daniel Blake') Where do any misconceptions come from Feelings when acquaintances ask about role Do they see claimants outside of work – what is it like
Workplace change	Impacts of legislation e.g. Universal Credit, removal of spare room subsidy, benefit cap etc Has role changed – if so, how? Have interactions with claimants changed, how? More or less stressful than pre WRA2012 Other changes to workplace environment e.g. staff levels, team restructures, responsibility changes etc Own feelings about reform – can these be shown? Any requirement to defend social security reform Differences between DWP, LA and TS roles?

Appendix Two - Interview Guide - Current Staff

Establish employer, length of service and type of communication with claimants via email prior to interview

1. **Intro:**
 - Check consent form is signed
 - Who I am
 - Explain about anonymised data
 - Possible research outcomes
 - We'll talk about your job, the types of interactions you have with claimants, how work makes you feel and what support you have, the ways your job might have changed
 - Reminder of right to withdraw/take breaks/not answer any questions
 - Any questions?
 - Happy to proceed? **SWITCH RECORDER ON**
2. **Content of job:**
 - What is a typical day like in your job? / What sort of typical queries do claimants call/come into the office with?
 - Is your role primarily to find answers or signpost/refer them to other staff?
 - Are you involved in assessment/investigation of claims or just advice?
 - What drew you to the role? Any similar previous roles?
3. **Types of interactions with claimants:**
 - Any types of interactions you find rewarding/enjoyable?
 - Any types of interactions you do not enjoy? (*Specific examples? Anonymised*)
 - Are you ever required to interact with claimants who are upset/angry? – Can you tell me a little more about what those sort of interactions typically involve? *Eg: If a claimant calls or approaches your workstation who is visibly distressed about their claim – how do you respond?*
 - Are there occasions where you feel you have to be pleasant to claimants and don't feel like it?
 - Do interactions with claimants ever make you feel angry? *Are you allowed to show it? If not: what do you do?*
 - Do you ever feel upset by what a claimant is telling you/their circumstances? *Are you allowed to show it? If not: what do you do?*
 - In general, do you feel like you can 'be yourself' at work?
4. **Support:**
 - Is there any workplace support available for staff who have had difficult interactions with claimants? *Who provides it? Is it useful? What could make it better?*
 - Is there any physical space at work where you can have a break after a difficult interaction?
 - Do you ever provide support or offer advice to your colleagues if they have had a tough conversation with a claimant?
 - Are you a member of a trade union? *When did you join?*
 - *Have you ever personally accessed support from a trade union?*
 - Do you feel that the union is doing enough to support DWP/LA staff working directly with claimants through workplace changes?
5. **Management/training:**
 - What sort of qualities and skills does it require to get your job?
 - What sort of qualities and skills does it require to perform well in your job?

- Was there an induction process when you first started in your role?
- What did it involve? (eg: shadowing vs formal training course)
- Has there been any formal training since you began working in your role?
- What format was the training? (eg: shadowing, external speaker, residential?)
- Did the training work in practice?
- Are there any gaps?
- Does your workplace have any set rules for how staff should interact with claimants?
- Does your manager provide guidance for how to interact with claimants who were upset/angry?
- Does your manager ever step in if you were having a tough time with a claimant?
- Do you feel you can ask your manager to step in to help if a discussion with a claimant is becoming heated?
- Does your manager ever offer suggestions after a difficult discussion with a claimant on different ways of dealing with similar situations in future?
- Do you feel like management recognise the emotional impact of your interactions with claimants?

6. Effects

- How do you feel at the end of a work day where you have had a lot of intense interactions with claimants?
- Do you ever go home feeling upset or angry because of things that happened at work? *How do you deal with that? Do you do anything to relax or unwind? How many days are like this?*
- Do you feel like you can share your worries about work with family and/or friends?
- Do you ever think about work outside of work time? *How frequently?*
- Does work ever interrupt your sleep? *How frequently?*
- Do you ever think about leaving? *Why?*

7. Changes to workplace

- Has your job changed at all with the introduction of UC/removal of the spare room subsidy/benefit cap/replacement of council tax benefit with local support schemes/increases in sanctions? *How has it changed? Interactions with claimants?*
- Do you feel like you have been given enough training in the legislation changes?
- Do you feel like changes in legislation have made your role any more or less stressful?
- Have there been any changes to your working environment in recent years? *Eg: staffing levels, changes in responsibilities, team restructuring, new guidelines and training*
- Have these changes make your job more or less stressful?

8. Community:

- Do you feel like other people understand the job you do?
- Do you think there are any stereotypes about DWP/LA staff? Where do they come from?
- How do you feel when acquaintances ask what you do for a job?
- Do you work in the same community you live in? *If so, do you ever see claimants outside of work? What is that like?*

9. Closing Statements:

- What is the most enjoyable thing about your job?
- Is there anything you feel we haven't covered?
- Were there any questions you wanted to ask before I stop the recording?

STOP RECORDING

Thank you for participating, reminder about data being anonymised, reminder about how to withdraw and contact details, give gift voucher.

Appendix Three – Interview Guide - Former Staff

Establish employer, length of service and type of communication with claimants via email prior to interview

1. **Intro:**
 - Check consent form is signed
 - Who I am
 - Explain about anonymised data
 - Possible research outcomes
 - We'll talk about your former job, the types of interactions you had with claimants, how it made you feel and what support you had
 - Reminder of right to withdraw/take breaks/not answer any questions
 - Any questions?
 - Happy to proceed? **SWITCH RECORDER ON**
2. **Content of job:**
 - What was a typical day like in your previous job? / What sort of typical queries did claimants call/come into the office with?
 - Was your role to find answers or signpost/refer them to other staff?
 - Were you involved in assessment/investigation of claims or just advice?
 - What drew you to the role? Any similar previous roles?
3. **Decision to leave:**
 - Can you tell me why you left your job?
 - What are you doing now? How does it compare?
4. **Types of interactions with claimants:**
 - Any types of interactions you found rewarding/enjoyable?
 - Any types of interactions you did not enjoy? (*Specific examples? Anonymised*)
 - Were you ever required to interact with claimants who were upset/angry? – Can you tell me a little more about what those sort of interactions typically involved? *Eg: If a claimant called or approached your workstation who was visibly distressed about their claim – how would you respond?*
 - Were there occasions where you felt you had to be pleasant to claimants and didn't feel like it?
 - Did interactions with claimants ever make you feel angry? *Were you allowed to show it? If not: what did you do?*
 - Did you ever feel upset by what a claimant was telling you/their circumstances? *Were you allowed to show it? If not: what did you do?*
 - In general, did you feel like you could 'be yourself' at work?
5. **Support:**
 - Was there any workplace support available for staff who had difficult interactions with claimants? *Who provided it? Was it useful? What could have made it better?*
 - Was there any physical space at work where you could have a break after a difficult interaction?
 - Did you ever provide support or offer advice to your colleagues if they had a tough conversation with a claimant?
 - Were you a member of a trade union whilst you worked in this role? *Are you now?*
 - *Did you ever personally access support from a trade union?*
 - Did you feel that the union was doing enough to support DWP/LA staff working directly with claimants through workplace changes?

6. Management/training:

- What sort of qualities and skills did it require to get your previous job?
- What sort of qualities and skills did it require to perform well in your previous job?
- Was there an induction process?
- What did it involve? (eg: shadowing vs formal training course)
- Was there any formal training whilst you were working in your role?
- What format was the training? (eg: shadowing, external speaker, residential?)
- Did the training work in practice?
- Were there any gaps?
- Did your workplace have any set rules for how staff should interact with claimants?
- Did your manager provide guidance for how to interact with claimants who were upset/angry?
- Did your manager ever step in if you were having a tough time with a claimant?
- Did you feel you could step in to ask your manager for help if a discussion with a claimant was becoming heated?
- Did your manager ever offer suggestions after a difficult discussion with a claimant on different ways of dealing with similar situations in future?
- Do you feel like management recognised the emotional impact of your interactions with claimants?

7. Effects

- How did you feel at the end of a work day where you had a lot of intense interactions with claimants?
- Did you ever go home feeling upset or angry because of things that happened at work? *How did you deal with that? Did you do anything to relax or unwind? How many days were like this?*
- Did you feel like you could share your worries about work with family and/or friends?
- Did you ever think about work outside of work time? *How frequently?*
- Did work ever interrupt your sleep? *How frequently?*

8. Changes to workplace

- Did your job change at all with the introduction of UC/removal of the spare room subsidy/benefit cap/replacement of council tax benefit with local support schemes/increases in sanctions? *How did it change?*
- Do you feel like you were given enough training in the legislation changes?
- Do you feel like changes in legislation made your role any more or less stressful?
- Were there any changes to your working environment before you left? *Eg: staffing levels, changes in responsibilities, team restructuring, new guidelines and training*
- Did these changes make your job more or less stressful?

9. Community:

- Do you feel like other people understand the job you used to do?
- Do you think there are any stereotypes about DWP/LA staff? Where do they come from?
- How did you feel when acquaintances asked what you did for a job?
- Did you work in the same community you live in? *If so, did you ever see claimants outside of work? What was that like?*

10. Closing Statements:

- What was the most enjoyable thing about your old job?
- Is there anything you feel we haven't covered?
- Were there any questions you wanted to ask before I stop the recording?

STOP RECORDING

Thank you for participating, reminder about data being anonymised, reminder about how to withdraw and contact details, give gift voucher.

Appendix Four - Graphic Call for Participants



PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FRONT-LINE STAFF WORKING WITH BENEFIT CLAIMANTS

Do you currently work, or have you worked in the last six years, for a Local Authority, the Department for Work and Pensions, or the voluntary sector in an advisory role which involves direct contact with benefit claimants either over the telephone or face-to face? If so, and you would like to take part in research about your experiences at work, I would really like to speak to you. If you decide to take part, your identifying information will be anonymised so your employer will not know you have been part of the study.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

I am interested in finding out what your job involves; whether the reforms to benefit legislation since 2012 or any other changes to working environments have altered your experiences at work and interactions with claimants; what training and support is available to you; how you deal with any difficult interactions at work; and whether your experiences at work impact your home life in any way.

WHAT DOES BEING PART OF THE RESEARCH INVOLVE?

- You would be invited to an interview lasting no more than one hour at a location which is convenient for you or via Skype/telephone.
- If you are a current employee, I will also ask if you would like to keep a diary to briefly report how you feel at the end of your work day for two weeks prior to our interview. This stage of the study is optional.
- You will also have the opportunity to take part in an online, anonymous group discussion later on in the study to hear about my initial results and talk informally and confidentially to other anonymous employees about your experiences. This will last no more than one hour.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO MY DATA IF I TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

All participants will be assigned a pseudonym and data will be stored securely. The anonymised data will be reported in my thesis, potentially in further academic publications, and during engagement with policy makers.

WHY SHOULD I TAKE PART?

By taking part you will be able to contribute to a better understanding of the working conditions of staff working directly with benefit claimants in the UK. This will help trade unions to advocate for better working conditions, enable managers to understand what support their staff need and give policy makers information about staff experiences and needs.

ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

My name is Laura Anne Hickman and I am a doctoral researcher in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham. This research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the data generated will form the basis of my PhD thesis. This research has received ethical approval from the School of Sociology and Social Policy at the University of Nottingham.

If you would like more information about the research, or if you have any questions, please contact me at laura.hickman@nottingham.ac.uk

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