The Ebb and Flow of Feeling and Display in Research: Intermittent 'Failure of Face' while Conducting a Workplace Ethnography

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Abstract

Purpose – The author responds to the call for papers on 'navigating failure in ethnography' published in the *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*. This paper explores the 'successes' and 'failures' of the researcher’s emotional labour while conducting a workplace ethnography, reflecting on their positionality as both a worker and researcher in a public house (pub) setting.

Design/methodology/approach – The author conducted a year-long *hybrid ethnographic* study in a pub and employed methods of *participant observation, observant participation, and interviews*. This resulted in over 1,200 fieldnote entries, of which more than 390 referenced 'success' and 'failure' in his display and management of emotion while working as a bartender. Fieldnotes were analysed inductively through thematic analysis.

Findings – Using organisational requirements for feeling and display as a benchmark for the author’s success and failure, the findings indicate that he was, or assumed he was, largely effective in performing emotional labour. However, his service “shield” occasionally slipped, leading to instances of constrained or unfiltered rejection of performative expectations. This resulted in research-related anxieties that prompted the researcher to engage in damage control to 'save face’.

Originality – The author argues that the passive stance typically adopted by scholars studying emotional labour reflects a lack of intimate understanding of a job role, hindering a deeper grasp of the demands in the workplace. In addition to examining both successes and failures, this paper enriches the concept of emotional labour by offering a nuanced account of the researcher’s personal experience as a bartender, detailing moments in which they 'served,' 'failed,' and 'saved face' throughout the investigative process. The author also asserts that managing performance failure is an essential component of doing this type of ethnographic research.

Keywords – emotional labour, hybrid ethnography, failure, surface acting, deep acting, genuine emotion

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Introduction

A tipple here, a quaff there, a giggle here, a cackle there – “a pint of Estrella please, mate”, “my teacup is dirty”, to “let’s get fucked up” (customer expressions, fieldnotes) - contemporary public houses (pubs) are a breeding ground for a range of social activity, specifically within the context of the UK. Pubs are a place where alcohol and food are ordered and devoured, workers can be seen walking around vigorously preparing drinks, distributing food, providing ‘punters’ with a service giggle, all the while being engulfed in an atmosphere in what seems, to an outsider, like booming indistinct babble. They also dress, organise, and clean the stage for the clientele that, for them, is ‘kept rigorously separate’ from *their* work and other daily routines (O. Smith, 2014, p. 152).

In general, people, customers, or punters usually frequent *pubs* to consume alcohol (Waitt and Jong, 2014), pursue various forms of social adventure – wooing others, strengthen bonds with friends, family and/or acquaintances, engage with strangers, as well as to dine on ‘pub grub’ (Christmas and Seymour, 2014). Techniques are used by onsite workers and the overseeing organisation ‘to inspire, or create illusions, to direct clientele to enact certain emotional responses’ (Green, 2021, p. 100). To heighten the atmosphere, and to titillate emotional responses from customers, the physical surroundings may be altered, for example, dimmed lighting to set the mood, music to stimulate excitement, and interior design to set a relaxed or party tone (Hubbard, 2005). Witnessing others ‘going out’ is a recurring theme for the workforce but, in most conditions, this action is an irregular leisure activity for them due to workplace constraints. Nevertheless, the provision of such settings provides a flamboyant foundation for the visitor where forms of emotional intensities and transgressions of the norm can arise *seemingly* without constraint, and in some situations, they are even encouraged (Hubbard, 2005; Waitt and Jong, 2014).

Building on previous research on emotional labour in service industries (Green, 2021, 2022; Seymour and Sandiford, 2005), and utilising a hybrid ethnographic approach (Seim, 2021)—combining observant participation and participant observation— I was inspired to investigate this social milieu in greater depth by working and observing in a pub over the course of a year. A part of this study aimed to explore the processes and complexities involved in doing emotional labour as a bartender. I sought to

explore: How did I manage my emotions and displays while embodying the identity of a bartender in a heightened, dynamic, and alcohol-fuelled workplace?

While research on these workers remains limited, an even less explored issue is how researchers who also occupy the identity of a bartender in the field may *fail* to engage 'satisfactorily' with the individuals they study (Green, 2021; Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). According to Hammersley and Atkinson, ‘there is perhaps one emotion above all that ethnographers may find it difficult to talk about and [not] cope with: *feelings of dislike or even of disgust* towards the people they are studying, or at least towards some of them’ (2019, p. 81). I aim to engage with this 'difficult' topic, offering a nuanced exploration of how I navigated my emotional displays while interacting with customers and colleagues who triggered ‘ill’ feeling, which sometimes lead to performative *failure*, during the research process. Despite the focus of this paper being on my performative successes and failures, it is important to recognise that workers in front-facing service roles routinely encounter similar challenges. Such instances of performative failure are arguably embedded within the emotional and embodied labour that defines service work (e.g., Green, 2021; Rafaeli, 1989).

This paper is replying to Verbuyst and Galazka's (2023) call to unshroud the taboo of ethnographic 'failure' in research. While the authors argue that failure ‘is difficult to define as it comes in many guises’ (p. 62), contributors to this special section have commented on their struggles with feelings of failure during ethnographic research (Hendriks, 2024) as well as methodological failures (Rosell, 2024). However, in this paper, ‘failure’ is examined through my sporadic inability to conform to the organisational expectations for emotional display as a *pub bartender*. I conceptualise my performative failure through three forms of display: *serving face, failure of face, and saving face*. ‘Serving face’ refers to my adherence to the organisational requirements of display in the pub corporation, either through surface acting or genuine felt emotion. In contrast, the ‘failure of face’ denotes my perceived rejection of these organisational requirements. Lastly, ‘saving face’ describes the *deep* actions I took to modify my internal feelings and/or outwardly display. The implementation of saving face was equipped to mitigate my anxieties concerning the potential loss of my position as a bartender and, by extension, as an *ethnographer* (see below).

This article is organised as follows: First, I provide a brief overview of the concept of emotional labour, outline the various ways in which organisations manage its production, and introduce the concepts of surface and deep acting. These concepts introduced by Hochschild (1983) highlight the primary methods I employed while performing emotion management in a pub. I then review previous research on emotional labour, arguing that much of the existing literature is produced through a *passive* lens—one in which researchers fail to immerse themselves in a job role to fully understand the processes of emotion management and/or work. Next, I describe the methods used, which include a hybrid ethnographic approach and discuss how I analysed my fieldnotes (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Seim, 2021). The findings section details the organisational training on display and offers recommendations from onsite management on their expectations from staff to perform at work. In reference to these suggestions, I then assess the ways in which I 'served,' 'failed,' and 'saved face' during my fieldwork, analysing these actions through the lens of my role as a bartender. Additionally, I explore the anxious aftermath arising from the tension between my dual role as both researcher and bartender, specifically in relation to my intermittent rejection of the expected emotional display. I conclude by providing a deeper understanding of the relationship between the concepts of surface and deep acting. I also argue that performative failure is an inevitable aspect of conducting *this type* of ethnography, and that managing such failure is a necessary part of the process.

Emotional Labour in Service Industries

The concept of 'emotional labor emphasizes the relational rather than the task-based aspect of work found primarily but not exclusively in the service economy' (Steinberg and Figart, 1999, p. 9). While there are several definitions spanning various disciplines, this paper broadly views emotional labour as 'the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions' (Morris and Feldman, 1996, p. 987). For job roles to require emotional labour, they must possess three essential qualities: '…face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public… require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person… allow the employer, through training and supervision, *to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees*' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 147,

emphasis added). The management of workers' emotional labour in service sector roles can involve diverse and intricate methods of supervision and surveillance. For example, for Hochschild's flight attendants 'the lines of company control determine who fears whom… the fear hierarchy works indirectly through passengers and back again through their own immediate supervisors… Supervision is thus more indirect than direct. It relies on the flight attendant's sense of what passengers will communicate to management who will, in turn, communicate to workers' (ibid, p. 116). While customers and supervisors, at varying degrees, play a part in the control over workers' performances, the tone of how employees should act in the context of work is usually set prior and/or during employment by more 'senior' overseers within an organisation – by introducing, or reminding, them of 'the rules of the game' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 95). Some of the ways in which organisations do this may include, setting criteria that managers have to abide by when screening candidates during selection processes, defining parameters of conduct, create and distribute in person or online training on performance expectations, outline tips and tricks - '…avoid cold or continuous staring…' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 96), and deliver refresher training to reinforce their expectations for workplace behaviour (Bolton, 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2006; Leidner, 1999). To contextualise my performative 'failure' and 'success' while conducting this workplace ethnography, organisationally constructed online training and onsite managerial recommendations served as a *guide* when analysing documented interactions in my fieldnotes (see below).

Surface and Deep Acting

For Erving Goffman (1959), everyone acts in some form to mask our true emotions, from saying 'I love you' to a partner you feel a sense of ambivalence towards, to internalising and accepting a ludicrous and hilarious decision made by a friend – a *suspicious* haircut. For 'acting' in our personal lives, however, is different to the acts we put on at work, especially for those working in service roles. As mentioned, there are institutionally constructed rules to follow, attitudes required, managers to appease, and smiles to express. Hochschild (1983) describes two dramaturgical ways in which interactive service workers manage feeling and engage in emotional labour: *surface acting ('faking it') and deep acting ('feeling it')*.

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‘In surface acting we deceive others about what we really feel, but we do not deceive ourselves…’ (Hochschild, 1983, p. 33), here ‘the body, not the soul, is the main tool of the trade’ (ibid, p. 37). It is a way of adjusting expressions to fit expectations of a particular job, it is also an adoption of an outwardly display that contrasts from internal feelings. For example, being a bartender in a pub requires cheerful greetings to hundreds of customers who enter an establishment, this may result into happiness being ‘painted on’ rather than being ‘a part’ of the employee. The increased frequency of contact with others may wither genuine interaction and thus surface acting becomes a valuable tool that, when applied ‘successfully’, supports workers’ performative job role requirements. Whereas ‘…deep acting… [the] display is a natural result of working on feeling; the actor does not try to seem happy or sad but rather expresses spontaneously (ibid, p. 35).

In deep acting, it is said that a worker will consciously modify their emotions to express the required workplace feeling. Unlike surface acting, when deep acting is effectively implemented, workers evade the feelings of phoniness, and a sense of satisfaction is felt. This result is bound to the worker wanting to ‘successfully’ perform the job role by adhering to organisational expectations of emotional labour. Thus, dwelling on what emotion organisations want *them* to display and what they *must* do to induce that performance. Deep acting requires the subject to draw upon memories, images, and the imagination of feeling - it is an *active attempt to modify emotions*. The relationship between both surface and deep acting is rather ambiguous, aside from those who reject ‘to perform emotional labor are said to “go into robot.” They withhold deep acting and retreat to surface acting. They pretend to be showing feeling… Half-heartedness has gone public’ (ibid, p. 104). As well as ‘many [flight attendants] of them want to do deep acting but cannot pull it off under speed-up conditions, and so they fall back on surface acting’ (ibid, p. 134)

Particular to this paper, the concept of surface acting will be used to explain many interactions with customers and colleagues while simultaneously working and conducting research. The concept of deep acting, although rarely implemented in the field, will demonstrate the conscious effort to manipulate my emotional display after reflecting on intermittent performative ‘failure’ at work. The use of these concepts will not only demonstrate how I enacted public emotion management while in the field, but

also offer a deeper theoretical understanding towards the relationship between the two concepts.

Researching Emotional Labour in Service Occupations

Academics use of the expansive conceptual makeup that is emotional labour have explored various occupations, including bill collectors (Hochschild, 1983), supermarket cashiers (Rafaeli, 1989), beauticians (Toerien and Kitzinger, 2007), as well as bar, club, and pub workers (Farrugia *et al.*, 2018; Green, 2022; Seymour and Sandiford, 2005). It is a concept that has been highly cited in reference to many service sector occupations. Yet, through the construction of knowledge, many researchers who have focused on the conceptual development of this theory have, arguably, positioned themselves passively within the research process (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Bolton 2005; Hall 1993; Hochschild 1983; Korczynski 2003; Lee and Madera 2019; Watson *et al.,* 2021). When I indicate investigative passivity in this context, I imply an absence of the lack of integration within a job role to *feel* the specific workplace requirements of emotional labour. Those who have are, arguably, a minority amongst their peers (Green, 2022; Rafaeli, 1989; Sandiford and Seymour, 2011).

Brian Moeran (2009) broadly argues that ‘observant participation should, I believe, be the ideal to which we all aspire during our research’ (p. 147). However, despite the extensive research conducted on emotional labour, many scholars have continued to position themselves as *outsiders* to the individuals they study (Grandey et al., 2013). An outsider, in this context, is a researcher who does not fully immerse themselves in a job role, thus missing an opportunity to critically examine and challenge the theoretical assumptions underlying emotional labour. By adopting a job role, a researcher can uncover the ‘unspoken truths that are sunk into the flesh of active participants’ (Seim, 2021, p. 5), and more critically, ‘distinguish between what people say they do and what they actually do’ (Moeran, 2009, p. 139). Given the substantial body of research on emotional labour, it is time for scholars to move beyond merely identifying theoretical gaps as an outsider in service occupations and to position themselves as ‘insiders’—*that is, to actively engage in the job itself*. This proactive approach would not only lead to a more nuanced integration of emotional labour into

theoretical frameworks but also foster greater academic creativity and insight into those whom we are most curious.

Methods and Analysis

The findings outlined in this paper are a product of a year-long *hybrid ethnographic* investigation into a corporate pub based in Central London[1], pseudonymised as Rita's Public House and Dining (*Rita's*) (Seim, 2021). Rita's is a 'gastro pub', meaning that its business model emphasises not only offering high-quality beverages ('wet' products) but also providing a decent standard of food. In this sense, it could be considered a 'restaurant within a pub'. The venue is situated in East-Central London, relatively close to Farringdon and King's Cross railway stations, within the London Borough of Islington. The clientele varied, including local residents, visitors scoping the surrounding area, and business professionals (fieldnotes). Research began in January 2022 and lasted until January 2023. I gained access to the field through previous contacts in the industry and was *employed* as a bartender for the duration of the fieldwork (Green, 2021, 2022). Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Ethics Board of University College London in 2022.

A hybrid ethnography includes methods which observes others as well as the self and requires the researcher to '… "surrender" to the exigencies of the field' (Wacquant, 2004, p. 11) and 'embrace the view that our subjects are embodied just as we are, and like us, they relate to the world in passionately *felt* ways' (Mears, 2013, p. 21, emphasis in original). The methods I chose to adopt during the research process included participant observation, observant participation, and interviews with 36 pub workers. Focusing on the observational element of this study, although the two methods share some similarities, they also have notable differences. Where participant observation inherently *watches the actions of others*, observant participation allows the researcher, at varying degrees, *to embody* the experiences of those who intrigue them the most (Monaghan, 2006; Vidich, 1955; Wacquant, 2004). The objective of this method is 'to

[1] Corporate pubs or 'pubcos' arose after the introduction of legislation - *The Supply of Beer (Tied Estate) Order 1989*. They have been described as 'highly acquisitive, are usually backed by international corporate financial houses, and are profiting greatly as former brewers continue to sell off pub estates' (Hollands and Chatterton, 2003, p. 33).

cautiously connect the ethnographer's embodiment as an *active* participant to others in the field while simultaneously recognizing important dissimilarities in experience' (Seim, 2021, p. 6, emphasis added). The analytical gaze moves from others to the self, but *not lost within*, as reflections on feelings and encounters are discussed with the participants - how to 'appropriately' engage with irate customers, or reflecting on 'bad' collegial behaviour, for example (fieldnotes).

Although I adopted a sociological hybrid ethnographic approach, within the context of studying organizations, this research design can be likened to what has been described as 'at-home ethnography' (Alvesson, 2009). An 'at-home ethnography' consist of a researcher who 'has a 'natural access' and in which …he is an active participant, more or less on equal terms with other participants. The researcher works … in the setting and uses the experiences and knowledge of and access to empirical material for research purposes' (ibid, p. 159). In contrast to a hybrid ethnographic approach (Seim, 2021), a researcher's adoption of both participant observation and observant participation is not employed in tandem but rather is dependent on the researcher's level of involvement within a workplace. For example, in the 'at home' context, a participant observer is understood to be a researcher who seeks employment for the purpose of research. Whereas in observant participation, 'participation comes first and is only occasionally complemented with observation in a research focused sense' (ibid). While my previous research project may be characterised as an 'at-home ethnography' (Green, 2021, 2022), the present study is better described—using accommodation metaphors—as an 'at-hotel ethnography'. The desire to return to this sector after having left 'home' served as a catalyst for *this* project, offering an opportunity to deepen my understanding of performative workplace dynamics. In this 'at-hotel (hybrid) ethnography', I re-entered the field with the awareness that I had once been 'at home', yet with the recognition that both my employment and research involvement were temporary and primarily *motivated* by the aim of producing academic knowledge.

Analysis of Fieldnotes

Over the twelve-month investigative period, activity was documented based on *82 shifts* I worked at Rita's. It should be noted that over this period, each month was

based on a specific theme. For example, in month four, I solely focused on the aspects of emotional labour enacted between colleagues and customers, as well as gauging my own application of public emotion management. In month six, I concentrated on precarious elements of the job role and exploitative practises initiated by management. As a result, hundreds of thousands of words were produced in over 1200 fieldnote entries.

The analysis of fieldnotes were guided by two research questions: How did the ‘success’ and 'failure' of my emotional labour manifest? And how did I manage performative ‘failure’ when occupying a dual identity? Aided by the software NVivo, I explored the captured data through the use of ‘a foundational method for qualitative analysis’ – thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Rather than applying an inductive, ‘bottom up’ approach, I decided to implement a deductive, theoretically driven, form of reasoning. It is argued that ‘this form of thematic analysis tends to provide less a rich description of the data overall, and more a detailed analysis of some aspect of the data (ibid, p. 84). Thus, coupled with the concepts of surface acting and deep acting introduced by Hochschild (1983) which demonstrate the (attempted) conjuring of my ‘acceptable’ display at work, performative ‘failure’ and ‘success’ was measured according to my perception of adherence and rejection of Rita’s organisational requirements for display (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) (see next section). After winnowing through the data, several themes were established that related to my conduct in the field: ‘successful’ surface acting with colleagues *and* customers, ‘failure’ of surface acting with colleagues *and* customers, genuine felt emotion with customers *and* colleagues, and damage control and anxieties. The content of these themes will be discussed in the following sections.

Contextualising the ‘Failure of Face’: Rita’s Organizational Requirements for Performing Emotional Labour

After being offered a role as a bartender and provided with a ‘flexible employment contract’, new starters at Rita’s are tasked by head office with completing *mandatory* online and in person training. On day one, employees are introduced to the company’s mantra - ‘pouring happiness into people’s lives’ (fieldnotes). Managers are expected to sit down with employees, especially those who have never worked in the industry

before, and describe what the “customer journey” entails through an online storyboard. This begins with a customer pondering what pub to visit and then finishes with them writing a review. Throughout this journey, the worker is shown as a leading actor in the space and is required to greet customers with a friendly “hello” and initiate the service interaction by using various service scripts (Hall, 1993). This included, for example, “do you have a booking?”; “would you like any food or drinks”. According to this training, ‘first impressions count’ in retaining, and have returning, customers. Thus, team members are commanded to continuously display an *‘upbeat, helpful, happy to always chat & make recommendations’* façade (fieldnotes). When customer consumption has ceased, and they are set to leave the premises, workers are instructed to leave them with a ‘cheery goodbye’ … “see you soon, maybe next week at our next event?”’ (fieldnotes).

Upon the completion of the ‘customer journey’, various modules on an online training platform *must* be completed. Aside from maintaining the need to be ‘upbeat, helpful, happy to always chat…’ the organisation offers training on other display rules (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), specifically when dealing with *customer conflict*. In one module, they directed us to adopt a ‘CPR’ method which contained some of Goffman’s (1959) dramaturgical terminology:

‘**(C)alm** - Adopt a *friendly manner* and *tone of voice* with *open body language*

Make it clear you are a team member, speak slowly and build common ground

Take the situation *"off stage".* Move away from large groups to talk but don't put yourself in danger or go outside

(P)ersuade - Avoid win-lose situations (think win-win)

Use humour, calmness, eye contact, communication, tact, diplomacy and confidence

DO NOT use sarcasm and never use physical contact

(R)esolve - It is important to treat all customers consistently

If the situation requires, call the police on 999

All incidents must be reported to the manager’

(Fieldnotes)

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After the completion of the online training, employees are sporadically provided with performative refresher trainings during their tenure which included terrorism awareness, refusing service, and training ‘tarot cards’ – these cards provided suggestions on being respectful, saying a ‘fond farewell’ and a ‘warm welcome’, upkeeping ‘positive vibes’, and avoiding ‘negative vibes’ (fieldnotes). These head office formulated trainings were only part of the company’s arsenal in guiding workers to perform emotional labour, onsite managers oversaw the conduct of staff, guided by organisational expectations, and provided direction to those who needed it:

…you are very much on stage … very much playing a part … you are a team member at Disney, you've got the big Goofy… the big Mickey Mouse thing on your head and you're playing a part. You're there, it's an experience. People come to the pub. You're an experience now. It's not a very elaborate experience, but it's an experience, nonetheless… You have the biggest impact … You have to be on stage and obviously there's certain things you can't say … if you want to call a customer a cunt, come back of house, call them a cunt to me, get it out of your system and we go back and we go again… *you have to kill them with kindness*.

(General Manager)

While most of these trainings offered remedies in customer interactions, the organisation was much vaguer when alluding to collegial communications. Overall, while there was a lack of formal training on how to engage with colleagues, there were frequent informal discussions about managing relationships on the pub floor (fieldnotes). The following section will detail how I deemed myself as ‘successful’ in adhering to these organisational requirements in my role as a *bartender*.

Serving Face: Expressing ‘Positive’ Genuine Emotion & ‘Successful’ Surface Acting

I noticed [male customer] waiting as I was polishing glasses … I began walking over to him … as I did, he looked at me in the eyes and winked. A warm, fuzzy feeling came over me and I couldn’t help but smile…

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(Fieldnotes, *shift 15*)

Perhaps the least emotionally taxing aspect of the job occurred when natural cheerfulness arose during workplace interactions. Amongst the heap of fieldnotes, I detected over 30 entries that specified ‘good feeling’ that filtered into my “service shield” (Nicolai, Bartender) while serving customers and interacting with colleagues. Alongside being winked at by customers, there were plenty of other acts that induced genuine emotion that aided in the production of my organisationally required emotional labour. For instance, engaging in banter and jokes, playing games like ‘rock, paper, scissors’, dancing, and pretending to be a fashion model (fieldnotes). The aftermath of such communications left a smirk or cackle to linger which ultimately overpoured into separate exchanges - whether it be offering a ‘cheery goodbye’ or an ‘upbeat’ greeting (see above). By complying with the organisation's display rules, the spontaneous emotions I felt during ‘positive’ exchanges allowed me to forgo the need for any form of deep or surface acting to enhance my performances (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005). In their study, Diefendorff *et al.*, (2005) found that ‘displaying naturally felt emotions was used by individuals more often than either…’ deep acting or surface acting (p. 351). As this analysis will illustrate, my experience was markedly different.

The expressions of spontaneous and genuine good feeling were less common than having to implement *surface acting* (Hochschild, 1983; Theodosius *et al.*, 2020). From the data, over 270 fieldnote entries suggest that, at the time of writing, I *believed* that I *was* satisfactorily performing surface acting in the presence of customers and colleagues. Being 'successful' in *surface acting* was evaluated based on my outward displays that adhered to organisational requirements, while my internal thoughts and feelings conveyed the opposite, for example:

... the relentlessness and repetitiveness of service… the constant use of emotionless service scripts resulted into an internally irritable me… To hide what I really felt, I forced a smile onto my face while I was serving and walking around the bar… I wasn’t just frustrated with customers but colleagues too. There were four colleagues behind the bar in an area which only really caters for two people. It was hard to move around, constantly dodging one and other, bumping into each other, everyone rushing… just

annoying! … I kept telling myself to ‘smile and breathe through it, this overcrowded torture will eventually come to an end’…

(fieldnotes, shift 46)

There were a multitude of scenarios that necessitated the adoption of surface acting, including masking personal issues, feigning laughter at bad jokes, and suppressing amusement at colleagues' inappropriate comments. However, the three most common exchanges that prompted the use of surface acting with *customers* were when *I felt the need to feign care* (e.g., during infinite ‘cheery’ hellos – how are you today? - and goodbyes)*, conceal irritation* (e.g., needy customers)*, and hide discomfort* (e.g., being stared at while cleaning). In the face of colleagues, the encounters that generally stimulated the need for me to surface act are similar to that of customers and included *concealing irritation* (e.g., over a managers’ conduct)*, hiding discomfort* (e.g., inappropriate sexual touching)*, and disguising my lack of energy* (e.g., bodily conveying the sense of being occupied when traffic was low at the bar). Through expressions of genuine emotion or by surface acting, I judged that organisational requirements for display were met satisfactorily. Although some interactions were more upbeat than others, overall, I was (or believed I was) *serving face* that saw (relatively) smooth and upbeat service, congenial collegial exchanges, and the efficient completion of tasks – ‘smile, service, “next customer please” …’. However, working in the socio-emotional cauldron that is a pub, the dismissal of desirable emotional displays could be almost as ‘easily’ achieved as projecting genuine, good feeling.

The Failure of Face: Intermittently Rejecting Organisational Requirements of Display

Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) have argued that ‘sometimes the ethnographer will *have to* refuse requests and live with the consequences’ (p. 64, emphasis added). However, what has been overlooked is that the ethnographer may not only *need to* refuse requests, but they may also instinctively reject them and make their grievances known – and *then* live with the consequences. Plucked from the abyss that is my

fieldnotes, just over 90 entries suggest that, at the time of writing, I *believed* that I had 'failed' in performing my prescribed emotional labour as a bartender. Here, I not only temporarily rejected adopting an 'upbeat, happy…' façade but also disregarded the corporate conflict remedy of 'CPR' in some encounters (see above). The following will detail the common forms of the intermittent slipping of my service "shield" in interpersonal interactions with customers and colleagues.

Collegial Interactions

I documented various forms of 'failure' in my 'front region' performances with colleagues (Goffman, 1959). On a handful of occasions being sick and exhausted from previous shifts caused my overall demeanour to plummet hindering cheerful, vibe setting exchanges, and sometimes collegial play was halted by management for being inappropriate (e.g., yelping after a colleague through bar fruit at me) (Erickson, 2009). However, the most common forms of failure of my facial and bodily display occurred when I could not contain annoyance after witnessing what I deemed as 'unsatisfactory' collegial behaviour as well as being managerially marked as idle on shift:

[colleague name] lynches good feeling by moaning about anything and everything... Moan, moan, moan… It is hard to 'fake' laugh every time she pre-emptively moans, groans, and grumbles. Fake laughing has turned to ignoring or dismissively groaning as well as outing my annoyance by saying, "you do moan a lot, don't you…?"

(Fieldnote, *shift 15*)

… [general manager] marched over and sternly uttered "if you want to chat, make sure *you present* at the front of the bar"

(Fieldnote, shift 28)

For outing my annoyance with colleagues, bad feeling rarely lingered past the initial encounter and acted as a minor form of relief of genuine ill feeling. However, being observed by managers and intermittently marked as idle was forever present in my peripheral awareness while on the 'main stage' at Rita's. We were required to maintain

the appearance of being always engaged in work, regardless of the actual level of pub activity. After all, specifically in service industries, '…workers not only *need* to be *present* when their clients or customers need attention, but must also meet unpredictable peaks in demand for labour' (Mik-Meyer et al., 2018, p. 4, emphasis added). After being outed as idle by management, this prompted hastened body movements – for example, cleaning an already cleaned surface or moving to the centre of the bar (fieldnotes). However, my interpersonal communication with colleagues did not reach a point where more intense emotions, such as *unhindered anger*, were expressed. This was seemingly reserved for customers.

Customer Interactions

He [customer] aggressively told me to "fuck off" … my blood began to boil; I couldn't contain my anger…

(Fieldnote, Shift 8)

On a small number of occasions my public emotion management spasmodically slipped resulting in the *failure of face*. In some outlying circumstances, my tiredness was commented on by customers and I was accused of being drunk on shift, as well as being asked to "smile" by some customers (fieldnotes). Yet, as per fieldnotes, failure most typically occurred when I deemed myself as being 'unsuccessful' in controlling my frustration and anger towards customer behaviour. In terms of frustration, I have documented actions where I deviate from upbeat service scripts by asking a customer "are you going to be less annoying" (fieldnote, shift 15) or when in the presence of an intimidating customer who relayed that they have "… a knife…. I am only joking", I replied with, "you shouldn't joke about things like that… sit down" (fieldnote, shift 35). In most circumstances, the display of annoyance was structured in a way that reflected processes of 'successful' surface acting. Frustration was arguably 'professionalised' in these interactions with customers, as I conveyed that a boundary had been crossed while still exercising some restraint in my response. Linking this to organisational requirements, I adopted certain aspects of the CPR method (e.g., speaking slowly) but not all (e.g., taking discussions "off stage" or using humour). However, similar to the expression of genuine good feeling, there were instances where anger was invoked, resulting in unchecked and unstructured responses. For instance, I have been called

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a “dick face”, “poofta[2]”, and intrusively groped by male customers, all of which have prompted unhindered responses: “how dare you… verbally abuse staff …”, “this is why we are stopping to serve you, *fucking prick*[3]…”, as well as forcefully removing hands away from my body (fieldnotes). It is important to recognise that this type of customer workplace abuse (e.g., verbal insults) is not uncommon within the pub industry (*cf.* Green, 2021, 2022).

In my previous study, female bartenders violated organisational display rules by responding to sex-seeking male customers with physical gestures, such as slapping, and verbal rebukes (see Green, 2022). Although managers expressed caution regarding reviews, they refrained from sanctioning or disciplining these employees for deviating from established protocols as such actions were informally perceived as borderline acceptable responses. A similar dynamic occurred in my own communications during moments of anger in *this* project; the abusive interactions I experienced were discussed with management, who tentatively endorsed my responses (fieldnotes). Nevertheless, despite tender managerial acceptance of my actions, I found myself reflecting on the potential consequences and the resultant anxieties inherent not only in my role as a bartender, but also as a *researcher.*

‘Saving Face’: Damage Control and Deep Acting

As mentioned, my service persona dipped and/or slipped sporadically, as I was unable to consistently manage and maintain the organisational requirements for display. This demonstrates that researchers are 'erroneous' emotional beings, not simply the product of a hundred-odd pages of ethical guidelines. However, upon reflection on my behaviour, some of my perceived failure caused a rise in anxiety and led me to enact actions to 'save face’. Removing my bartender pinny and replacing it with my ethnographer hat, I did question, “will the participants still want to be interviewed after our disagreement?”; “am I going to lose the job?”; “have I just ruined my research?” (fieldnotes).

[2] A derogative term for a gay man.
[3] A pejorative term used to refer to a detestable individual

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For much of my perceived failure, I would try to disregard and move on while incorporating an element of reflexivity, I also sometimes issued genuine apologies, or resorted to ‘upbeat’ surface acting to heighten the mode of my display. But in two instances, I focused on my *innate feeling* and made a conscious effort to work on my feeling and subsequent display. For example, after a tensioned filled, tit for tat, disagreement with a male colleague, I felt the need to retreat to *deep acting* (Hochschild, 1983):

… I wanted to stop intermittently fronting my moody side … this could potentially lead to side effects that could be detrimental to my position in the field… I began to work on feeling. I started to fool myself that I *loved* working as a bartender… Even bending over and picking up glasses was classified as a joy. The manipulation of feeling through innate commentary and imagination did resort into a more ‘positive’ display… at least for the remainder of the shift…

(Fieldnotes, *shift 15*)

The aftermath of constructing the required display through deep acting was typically short-lived, often subsiding by the end of each shift. As per my fieldnotes, I turned to *deep acting* on six occasions. While two are reserved for my failure of face at work, the other four instances were to (attempt to) conjure up desirable display before work began. Personal mental health struggles and workplace induced physical and mental fatigue were the main reasons for me to adopt deep acting in these circumstances – ‘I knew that I couldn’t walk around sad. It took a lot of energy to ‘put my game face on’… I relaxed my face, thought happy thoughts… then entered the pub…’ (fieldnotes, shift 17).

Conclusive Discussion: Connecting Dramaturgical Concepts & Managing ‘Failure’

To summarise the content of this paper, I outlined the ways in which I experienced both 'success' and 'failure' in performing emotional labour as a *bartender*, detailing how I engaged in ‘serving’, ‘failing’, and ‘saving face’ – emotion management or work (not) adhering to organisational requirements of display. This analysis draws on concepts of workplace surface and deep acting and the expression of genuine emotion

(Diefendorff et al., 2005; Hochschild, 1983). The management of my (assumed) performative failure contributes to a deeper understanding of the relationship between surface and deep acting, particularly from the perspective of a researcher acting as a service provider, and perhaps more broadly, of service providers in general. In sum, I argue that attempts to conjure desirable display through surface and deep acting are inherently individualistic and shaped by the temporal rhythms, interactions, and expectations within a workplace, as well as personal emotions and individual motives. For instance, contrary to Hochschild's (1983) flight attendants, I lacked the drive to consistently engage in deep acting. Instead, deep acting was used selectively, often triggered by moments of performative failure or external factors that disrupted my emotional equilibrium. I also heavily relied on a 'service shield', which intermittently gave way to bursts of genuine emotion. Reflecting on the factors influencing my overall performance, several influences may have shaped my behaviour, including the complexities of occupying a dual role as both worker and researcher, situated within an 'at-hotel' rather than an 'at-home' reality (see above). This shift from an 'at-home' to an 'at-hotel' positioning arguably created a distancing from the emotional investment typically associated (or assumed) with being a bartender, which exacerbated my lack of passion or emotional connection to the job tasks - serving pints and engaging in repetitive dialogue with customers (cf. Rafaeli, 1989). Unlike some colleagues, such as Andrea, who described her work as something she 'loves' and noted that service with a smile 'comes naturally' (fieldnotes), for me, the job was primarily a means to an end. It was my commitment to the research that kept me engaged, bound to the job, and to the emotional performances I displayed.

Concerning the practicalities of conducting a year-long workplace ethnography in this service sector, it is clear from my experience that performative failure is an inevitable aspect of the process. Amanda Coffey (1999) argues that 'there is … a case to be made that we should not pursue arguments, clashes or difficulties - in a way that we might with personal friends or work colleagues' and that 'fieldwork involves emotional labour … of a particularly managed kind' (p. 41-57, emphasis added). However, what happens when work colleagues and research participants are the same individuals? What if an aim of a project was to understand the processes of emotion management of workers in pub service jobs? The challenge I faced was balancing my perceived unmanaged 'failure' as a bartender, which, although somewhat authentic to the

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context, conflicted with the managed professionalism expected as a researcher. I argue that the anxieties arising from this conflict are inherent consequences of this active research design and that managing these concerns and performance ‘failure’ was and/or is an integral part of the process.

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