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**Managing Emotions and Occupational Demands: A Phenomenological Exploration of the Experiences of Child Exploitation Support Workers**

**Abstract**

Protecting children from criminal and sexual exploitation is a priority for safeguarding teams across the globe. Supporting children who are at risk of exploitation is a demanding role with high staff turnover. Experiences of third-sector child exploitation support workers, commissioned to deliver interventions to safeguard children from exploitation, have been neglected. This study presents an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of semi-structured interviews of eight child exploitation support workers employed by a service in England. Three experiential group themes that captured the emotional and occupational complexities of their experiences performing their role were developed. “Costs and Rewards of Emotional Labour,” depicted how emotions were managed to meet the requirements of the role. “Navigating Autonomy: The Double-Edged Sword of Empowerment and Loneliness,” highlighted unique perceptions of autonomous working. **“**We are in really vulnerable situations at times”:Exploring Perceptions of Risk” demonstrated how, collectively, participants felt vulnerable to risks when carrying out their role. The study provides insight that these third-sector employees face similar challenges as the regulated workforce and that it is crucial that policy makers and senior managers develop safety and system improvements to increase employees perceived and actual safety and wellbeing.

Key words: child protection and welfare; emotions; risk; autonomy; third sector; staff wellbeing

**Introduction**

Child exploitation, abuse and violence is a global emergency requiring a global response (United Nations, 2022). Approximately half of all children worldwide are victims of violence every year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Various global and regional treaties and agreements exist to combat modern slavery and the exploitation of children. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal Target 8.7 focuses on eradicating forced labour, modern slavery, and human trafficking, and the UK government regularly reviews and updates its strategies to tackle modern slavery (HM Government, 2023). However, in the UK, the number of children at risk of exploitation (CRE) continues to rise (Office for National Statistics, 2022). Simultaneously, in recent years many Western societies have seen increasing turnover rates in social service agencies. This is particularly the case in England, where there is a staffing crisis, and social workers are departing the profession in record numbers (Department for Education, 2022). Given that continuity of care is an established protective factor in preventing re-exploitation (World Health Organization, 2018), the number of people leaving the profession is concerning and poses a serious threat to the safety and wellbeing of service users.

*Mental and emotional wellbeing*

Over the past forty years, the Third Sector has grown worldwide (Kallman et al., 2016). In the UK, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO, 2022) reported that third sector organisations (TSOs), which include charities and non-profit, have grown significantly since 2011. At the same time the regulated social care workforce has decreased, meaning that much of the workforce is unregulated. Child exploitation support workers (CESW), many of whom work for TSOs, play a crucial role in responding to child sexual (CSE) and criminal (CCE) exploitation. Their duties expose them to trauma suffered by vulnerable children, resulting in psychological pressures and reduced mental wellbeing, and leading to employee attrition (Armes, et al., 2020). While it is recognised that qualitative research methods improve transparency and rigour in the context of child protection work (Munro, 2011), research focusing on the lived experiences of CESWs employed by TSOs is relatively non-existent.

Emotion is an essential resource in child protection work. Empathy and compassion are crucial in establishing therapeutic relationships with service users but detrimental if exerted excessively, resulting in symptoms associated with compassion fatigue (Craig, 2022). This creates a tension for practitioners who must navigate their own emotions as well as the emotions of the children they support and must manage potentially harmful displays of emotion (Munro, 2011). These demands can be conceptualised through emotional labour (EL; Hochschild, 2003), “the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for organisational goals” (Grandey, 2000, p. 97) EL has positive consequences such as personal accomplishment and increased psychological wellbeing (Gvelesiani et al., 2023), but is recognised as cognitively and emotionally demanding. Despite positive aspects of EL, negative consequences to physical health leading to emotional exhaustion (Harris, 2002), and burnout (Hochschild, 2003, p. 187; Humphrey, 2023) are well documented. Developing an understanding of CESWs lived experience of managing displays of emotions, is important.

*Risk management*

Risk perception, risk regulation, risk management, and risk tolerance are central to social care. Risk perception motivates behaviour, and risk assessment is fundamental to social care work, which involves understanding service users’ circumstances, identifying risks, assessing the likelihood and consequences of risks, and managing those risks (Clarke et al., 2011). Child protection work has been long associated with risk aversion. Munro’s 2011 child protection review called “to make the system less ‘risk averse’ and more ‘risk sensible’” (p. 135). Uncertainty is inherent in child protection work and as such there is no completely safe option. Recently, the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care (MacAlister, 2022) concluded that the system is complex, bureaucratic, and risk averse. This has led to backlash from Social Work leaders, who state that the report overlooks key system wide problems that result in cautious child protection practice (Simpson, 2021).

Along with service user risks there are occupational risk factors for child protection workers. Being anxious (Baugerud et al., 2018) and having a lack of boundaries (Truter & Fouche, 2019) increases the risk of negative outcomes. Being inadequately prepared is associated with emotional exhaustion and attrition (Lizano & Barak, 2015). Risks that relate to interactions between workers and others include a lack of professional and peer support (Littlechild et al., 2016), service user aggression (McPherson & Barnett, 2006) and client attacks on workers (Hunt et al., 2016). Much of the discourse surrounding risk in child protection work is focused on making decisions that may dramatically affect the lives of children and their families (e.g. MacAlister, 2022; Munro, 2011). It is only within recent years that the literature has increasingly highlighted personal safety as a concern and has acknowledged that child welfare workers may encounter unsafe working environments through visiting clients in unsafe neighbourhoods and engaging with resistant families with volatile issues (Kim & Hopkins, 2015). Currently little is known about how practitioners understand and manage the risks to personal safety involved with engaging with vulnerable children themselves.

Child support workers often work alone, and despite there being “very sound reasons for making it policy that a lone social worker never transports a client” (Bibby, 2017, p. ix), practitioners often do so. Violent and aggressive incidents are the third largest cause of injuries in the health and social care sector (Health and Safety Executive, 2021). Employees have a legal right to expect a safe workplace, however, what social and support workers do in their work outside of the office has been practically ignored (Ferguson, 2009; 2014). Ferguson adopts a ‘mobilities approach’ and argues that understandings of risk must be grounded in the lived experience of social work, the tasks social workers undertake and the environments in which they do so. The focus of Ferguson’s work is assessing risks to children and how practitioners physically engage with children “to uncover any risks to them” (p. 1101). As “mobile, lived experience is the very stuff of risk” (p. 1101), developing an understanding of how practitioners assess and manage risks to personal safety in the context of mobile social work practices is important.

When individuals engage in actual or perceived high-risk behaviour, their tolerance increases as they perform risky tasks without adverse consequences (Kim et al., 2023), leading to reduced vigilance. Workers may engage in previously perceived dangerous behaviours as they become habituated to them, which is a key contributor to occupational injuries and fatalities. Risk habituation is well documented in sectors such as construction (Kim et al., 2023), yet within social care this is relatively unexplored. Forty-five percent of child protection workers report having felt exposed to risks and danger yet continue to work (Cabiati et al., 2020). Given that uncertainty and risk are inherent features of the work, it is crucial to gain insight into how risks to personal safety are interpreted and managed by CESWs.

In recent years, social work professionals have been given increasing flexibility and autonomy in decision making. Munro’s (2011) recommendations “are largely biased towards increasing professional autonomy” (p. 130). Since Covid-19 lockdown policies, like other industries, social work has seen a transition to increased remote and hybrid working (Daley, 2023), which brings about autonomy. Perceived job autonomy has positive consequences for employees, including increased job satisfaction, a sense of competence, enhanced well-being, and fewer cases of burnout (Worth & Van den Brande, 2020). However, there are several negative consequences of autonomous working, including workplace loneliness, (Xia & Li, 2018) and the risk of “normalisation of social disconnection” (Kong et al., 2021, p. 19). Decision fatigue due to having to make decisions independently has also been reported, with potentially fatal consequences in the context of child protection (Gillingham & Whittaker, 2023). The aims of this study are to understand how CESWs employed by a charitable organisation in England manage emotions, perceive risks and individual vulnerability, and their experiences of autonomous working. The study addresses several research questions:

How do CESWs experience managing their emotions to meet the requirements of the role?

How do CESWs understand, experience, and manage perceived risks, and how does this subjectively impact engagement with service users?

What are the subjective experiences of autonomy, and how does this impact employee engagement?

**Methods**

Design

A qualitative design was chosen to explore subjective lived experiences of TSOs occupational experience. Experiences are subjective and interpretative; therefore, this study was informed by constructivist interpretative phenomenology and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2022). The dataset comprises individual, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, which offer flexibility.

Context and participants

All participants (*n* = 8) worked as CESWs, for a not-for-profit charity commissioned to deliver targeted, one-to-one interventions to approximately eighty children in the Midlands of England. All were caseworkers aged eighteen plus, tasked with safeguarding those at risk of CRE through personalised, preventative, and targeted support. Each handled an average of 12 cases. Although not intentional, all participants were women.

*Table 1. Participant information*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Pseudonym** | **Age** | **Gender** | **Qualifications** | **Hours worked per week** | **Hours spent travelling** | **Days working from home** | **Time employed (months)** |
| Emma | 32 | Female | BA Counselling & Psychotherapy  MA Criminal Justice & Criminology | 37 | 5 | 1-2 | 13 |
| Louise | 28 | Female | BA Social Work | 37.5 | 15 | 2 | 20 |
| Rachel | 21 | Female | Placement Student | 37.5 | 10 | 1 | <12 |
| Heather | 24 | Female | BSc Psychology | 38 | 12 | 3-4 | 24 |
| Fiona | 34 | Female | No relevant qualifications | 37 | 10 | 1 | 13 |
| Gloria | 26 | Female | BA Youth and Community Work, MA Social Policy, Mental Health First Aider | 40 | 10 | 2 | 18 |
| Hannah | 28 | Female | Placement Student | 37.5 | 15 | 2 | 18 |
| Michaela | 39 | Female | Degree in Child and family health and wellbeing | 37.5 | 15 | 3 | 30 |

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Derby, in line with The British Psychology Society’s (2021) Code of Human Research. Local and national service managers provided explicit written consent to recruit participants from their organisation, and all participants provided verbal and written informed consent.

Materials

Interviews were audio recorded using a Speak-IT digital voice recorder, V30. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. Audacity was utilised for audio enhancement, ensuring high transcription accuracy during manual transcription by the first author.

Procedure

Support workers were recruited via personal contacts at the charity. Interviews, conducted by the first author (SM) in December 2022, assisted the participants in meaning-making while simultaneously offering a wealth of data for analysis. Interviews were carried out at participants’ place of work in a private office and lasted 40-60 minutes. Questions were designed to provide narrative accounts as well as provide contrast, be evaluative, and comparative (Smith et al., 2022). For example, unique motivations to become a support worker were explored, and participants were asked about challenges experienced in carrying out their role, with prompts such as “Are there any aspects of the role that surprised you?” and “Are there any aspects of the job that differed from what you expected?

Analytic Approach

To understand how CESWs make sense of their lived experiences, data were analysed using IPA. Grounded by phenomenological, hermeneutic, and idiographic principles IPA is a participant-oriented approach. Researchers enter the hermeneutic cycle, whereby analysis is an iterative process which moves from the part to the whole to increase levels of understanding (Dibley et al., 2020). Thus, researchers adopt the double hermeneutic, whereby the researcher makes sense of participants sense-making. Guided by four indicators of IPA excellence (Nizza et al., 2021), analysis was conducted by the first author (SM), following the seven-step IPA principles outlined by Smith et al. (2022). Each case was analysed within the context of its own narrative, remaining faithful to the individuals’ interpretations of their experiences, even during cross-case analysis, before being considered in relation to theory (Smith et al., 2022, p. 24). Auditing was conducted by the second author (CC), creating a validity check. Both authors contributed to the write up of the final paper for publication. A TSO Quality and Development manager kindly provided feedback and recommendations on an earlier draft of the report, which have been incorporated into the discussion.

**Analysis**

Analysis resulted in the development of three GETs which are presented in Table 2.

*Table 2. Participant representation across GETs.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| GET | Participants |
| Costs and rewards of emotional labour. | Gloria, Heather, Fiona, Rachel |
| Navigating autonomy: the double-edged sword of empowerment and loneliness. | Gloria, Heather, Hannah, Rachel, Louise |
| “We are in really vulnerable situations at times”: Exploring perceptions of risk. | Hannah, Heather, Louise, Gloria, Rachel, Fiona, Michaela |

1. **Costs and Rewards of Emotional Labour**

Several participants spoke about the importance of developing effective emotional regulation skills and building emotional resilience. When asked how she managed her emotions at work, Gloria explained:

*You get quite good at controlling them within the setting. So, you know like during a visit or during a meeting or something and then if needed, you know you just take a time out afterwards.*

Getting ‘quite good’ implies that Gloria has a level of emotional control and has developed the ability to regulate and adapt her emotional expression in different situations over time. The skill of regulating negative emotions in specific work-related contexts appeared to be particularly salient to her experience. Gloria stated she needed to ‘take a time out’ afterwards as if emotional regulation was a laborious experience that required recovery. It could be interpreted that Glorias ability to control her emotions ‘during a visit or during a meeting’ has developed in response to the expectation of displaying emotions that are appropriate in the context. Hence, Gloria’s experience can be considered as emotional dissonance during interpersonal transactions, in which Gloria hides felt emotions while displaying emotions considered appropriate to meet the requirements of the role; therefore, surface acting in response to display rules.

Heather was asked how she managed her emotions in a child’s home that she described as smelling ‘awful’ with ‘cat wee and poo everywhere,’ which made her ‘feel so dirty after (she has) to come home and have a shower quickly.’:

*I almost have to just put on a brave face for the young people sometimes, like “oh it's OK” just distract myself. For me it's like “you've got little cute kittens!” Like just anything to distract myself from the actual what is going on here in this house.*

‘Brave face’ conjures mental imagery of wearing a physical mask to conceal or alter her felt emotion of disgust forthe benefit of the child. Heather understands the impact of displaying her felt emotions on the child and diverts her attention away from the situation and projects a sense of positivity by focusing on the child’s pet kittens. Heather is regulating her own emotions to display those which are emotionally expected for the role, demonstrating adaptability and flexibility in responding to emotional challenges. Heather later stated, ‘It just makes you feel really, really uncomfortable and I just come home and like talk to my mum.’ In response to her emotional distress, Heather seeks emotional support from her mother, who may provide comfort, security, and an outlet for the emotions she has been supressing.

1. **Navigating Autonomy: The Double-Edged Sword of Empowerment and Loneliness.**

This theme provides insight into how CESWs experience tensions of autonomy. On the one hand, there is an appreciation for professional autonomy. On the other hand, employees whose need for connection was not met felt lonely in their daily work.

Gloria emphasised what she understands as positive aspects:

*You plan your own diary, you plan your own meetings, you do a four-day work week, which is very, very progressive shall we say, which is great. Yeah, there's a lot of creativity that you can have in the role you know, if you wanna create your own resource or you want to try something a little bit different, you know, you can.*

Gloria recognises the importance of adapting her work routine and highlights her positive experience of autonomy which provides her with a sense of agency. Creative autonomy, and the ability to control her own workload were interpreted as positive s whereby she felt confident that she had the capacity and freedom to develop her own resources, try novel approaches and embraced being innovative. This perception of being a self-determining agent can be interpreted as empowerment.

For employees to feel empowered, leaders must establish boundaries and expectations, and employees must be able to self-regulate while adhering to protocols (Steinmann et al., 2018). For Heather, the expectation of working autonomously led to difficulties in decision-making such as when completing an Operation Liberty form, to gather intelligence about adults who pose a risk to children or a child who may be at risk of being exploited:

*I was thinking like what if I do it wrong erm what if I send it to the wrong people? It's all doubt, I was just doubting everything I did. Like, should I call somebody? Should I not? I didn't in the end cause it was OK, but I wish I felt like I had more choices.*

Heather appears to lack confidence in making the ‘right’ decision independently, indicative of a psychological conflict between autonomy and doubt. It can be interpreted that Heather’s doubts and uncertainties arise because of the expectation to self-govern when working from home. Heather’s desire for support is evident, however she refrained from seeking it. Had she been in close proximity to colleagues, she feels she may have had ‘more choices.’ Heather’s wish for more choice is not a desire for more autonomy, rather a desire for support.

Several participants spoke about how working autonomously contributed to feelings of loneliness. Hannah yearned for a connection on a deeper level:

*I like the office when there's loads of people in there. Sometimes it can just be like the office is empty [ ] the only interactions in the day have been with kids… bless them they’re lovely but it's not intellectual conversation [ ]I think from that point of view it could be quite lonely.*

Engagement with other staff members, and intellectually stimulating conversation is something Hannah longs for, a need that becomes obvious when she recalls the office as ‘empty’.

When asked how she managed her emotions to meet the requirements of the role, Rachel described how ‘having support from other people helps a lot.’ Rachel’s narrative, echoes that of Louise, in that she seeks support from individuals outside of her job:

*Keeping a good social life sort of helps because it makes you feel less alone …because it is quite a lonely job because you are you are on your own all the time. Like in the office there's not really many people, so it's quite a lonely job… So having like you know, making sure that you're having people around you outside of work.*

The expectations of autonomous working contributed to feelings of isolation for Rachel, whereby she explicitly describes intrinsic loneliness, repeating how it is a ‘lonely job.’ Rachel describes having few people in the office, leaving her physically and emotionally isolated. Rachel described how she put effort into feeling less lonely by ‘making sure’ she had people around her outside of work, such that she acknowledges the importance of putting effort into feeling connected to others.

While Louise, Hannah, and Rachel all desired stronger interpersonal relationships at work, Heather described avoiding the office when colleagues were there, although she had a close friendship with a particular colleague, Gloria. Heather described her feelings when Gloria went on holiday for a month:

*I feel alone… I didn't really have anyone to talk to because everyone else, because we’re new, when you start somewhere new, you almost don't know where you fit in. And that was how I've been feeling, like where do I fit in? Everyone's really, really nice but they all have their own, like little jokes and little, they have their own sense of belonging, whereas I don't feel like I do. And when I come in the office sometimes it's just so... I just get anxious. I don't know who's going to be in, I don't know what the atmosphere is going to be like. They're all engaged in a conversation I'm just gonna be sat there like, I don’t know what to talk about. So yeah, it makes me feel like the past month without one of my colleagues… I felt alone, very much so. So I was at home a lot of the time, I didn't come to the office.*

Interestingly, although it was previously noted that, for Heather, a consequence of working from home was a lack of support and direction, here she described how she chose to work from home to avoid feeling alone in the office. It seems that, for Heather, the option to work from home provided an opportunity to avoid anxiety associated with going into the office, however this only reinforced feelings of anxiety which contributed further to her inability to build relationship with colleagues.

1. **“We are in really vulnerable situations at times.”****Exploring Perceptions of Risk**

This theme highlights participants’ shared understanding that they were vulnerable to risk and possible danger.When asked about challenges faced in carrying out her work, Hannah spoke about her experience of service user aggression:

*So I was in a school, and I was with the young person, this was primary school as well, so they were, I think they were nine years old, and we were doing an activity on friendships and they just disagreed with me [ ] in probably less than a minute, it went from him sitting down next to me, to him literally tearing the room apart [ ] I think thankfully, because I was in school, I just left the room and safeguarding came and dealt with it, but I always look back on that and like, if I was in the home or if we were out in public or we were in my car, I would not have known what to do, not at all.*

Hannah vividly described how a service user rapidly became aggressive. That this ‘was primary school as well’ and that the child was ‘nine years old’ communicates how this was unexpected. The way in which Heather describes the escalation evokes a sense that the event was unprovoked and unforeseen. Heather’s reflection on her capacity to ‘just leave’ the room evokes a sense of safety within that setting, but also provides a space for making sense of potential situations in the future whereby simply leaving would not be an option. Heather understood it as fortunate that she was in the school setting while the safeguarding team managed the situation, and that if she had been alone with this child, she would ‘not have known what to do.’

Although she had not experienced violence first-hand, Heather’s sense-making manifested in dream content:

*Sometimes I would, like have dreams. I know dreams aren't real, but of like my young people like stabbing me. I know it sounds awful but because you are one to one with that young person and even if you've got a great relationship, you don't know what they can do, like they don't know what we can do like. It's just so. And I, I, I overthink everything so that's definitely something that I overthink about, but that scares me not knowing if they're carrying a weapon at any point.*

Heather described a disturbing dream illuminating how her fears were not only consciously but unconsciously salient, although she quickly dismissed the reality of it. Heather then proclaimed how it ‘seems awful’ to have these dreams, implying a sense of guilt. For Heather, this was a real concern, that the service user may be carrying a weapon.

Like Heather, Louise spoke at length about her perceptions of risk and how these manifested feelings of vulnerability to potential dangers. Of particular concern was how she felt unprotected when working alone with service users:

*We are in really vulnerable situations at times, and I don't think that we have the right risk assessments in place for that. So I am just very careful about who I'm driving around or who I'm seeing one to one with no one around [ ] I'm making decisions based on how my gut feels I think.*

The use of collective pronoun ‘we’ suggests that Louise understands this as a collective experience. Louise feels that risks to herself have not been adequately considered and relies on suspicion and intuition to self-assess risks. Louise acknowledges that risk assessments are in place, but by highlighting that she and her colleagues are in ‘really vulnerable situations at times,’ she emphasises the need for recognising and managing their vulnerabilities in the context of transporting service users.

Louise went on to describe a commonly used location tracking application with an alert feature that the organisation recommends for personal protection when travelling with children:

*We have these alarm things that are fake… they're not very good….they don't…they don't work, [ ] I mean I'm an hour away or something, no one's gonna save me at that time if I'm being attacked. Obviously yeah, so there we are, I think as a company to figure that out cuz I don't think we're safe in situations.*

The above extract highlights that Louise’s employer recognises the risks that lone working may pose, hence the recommendation to install the application. However, Louises perceives this as inadequate and only providing a false sense of security. Louise questioned the utility of an application that was merely reactive, with no one being able to ‘save’ her.

Several participants spoke about perceived risks associated with the transportation of children in their vehicles. Hannahs expresses apprehension about possible future events, and gratitude for the absence of such experiences thus far:

*Cause we have many of the young people in our cars, like just like me and the other young person, and like what if they just started getting violent in the car? Like I wouldn't know what to do! So it’s just like oh God, what if, what if? But thankfully, touch wood so far, it's not happened, and I hope that hopefully it won't. But if it did happen, I wouldn't know what to do like if I was in the car. If I was in the home, I think I just, would just get up and leave, because at that point that's about my safety. Yeah, I do, I do think about that. I wouldn't know what to do, but thankfully it's never happened.*

Hannah contrasts the context of her vehicle with that of the home. She expresses concern for her safety by contemplating potential outcomes and posing rhetorical questions which could be interpreted as engaging in sense making as she has a lack of knowledge about what actions to take. If an incident happened, or she felt threatened in a service users’ home, Hannah would have more control over it and it would be simple for her to leave; however, Hannah interprets that the confines of a vehicle may pose various challenges. Despite Hannah’s fear, an event not occurring ‘so far’ conveys gratitude and a hope for it not occurring in the future. ‘Touch wood, so far, it not happened’ is used idiomatically to represent her hope that her fears remain unfounded, however this is based on superstition rather than Hannah constructively controlling the risks.

Other participants spoke about becoming accustomed to perceived risks associated with transporting service users. Gloria, Rachel, and Michaela responded in similar ways when asked about how they felt about being in their vehicle with service users, indicating that they had become habituated to the perceived risks involved with the tasks they carry out frequently as part of their role. Gloria states:

*Yeah, initially I was like, oooh, you know, what if they pull the handbrake or jump out the car, and then you realise that no, they're not going to do that the most they might do is shout something out the window.*

When Gloria started her role, she identified risks as posing grave consequences for safety. Gloria indicates that an absence of these risks materialising over time was indicative of their future non-occurrence. Thus, it may be understood that, while risks may remain, Gloria perceives that her work has become less risky over time.

Similarly, Rachel spoke about becoming habituated to perceived risks over time:

*At first it was a bit like, cause your vehicle was almost like your safe space [ ] So it was a bit weird initially when young people did come into my car cause it was like, whoa you're in my, you're in my space, this is my property. So that was weird initially, yeah but yeah now it's fine.*

The confines of the vehicle had offered Rachel a retreat from the outside world, providing physical and emotional safety. Rachel describes service users coming into her car as ‘weird’, highlighting how uncomfortable she felt. Nonetheless, over time, like Gloria, it appears that Rachel had become accustomed to the situation describing how ‘now it’s fine.’ Despite this, her use of past tense, in describing how it is ‘was’ a safe space indicates that although she has become accustomed to the situation, her vehicle no longer offers the physical and emotional safety it once did.

**Discussion**

This is one of few studies focusing on the lived experiences of CESWs working for a TSO. This research output contributes to Goal 16 of the UN Sustainable Development Goals and offers both practical and scientific value. It provides important insight that may be utilised in tackling critical challenges the public, private, and charitable sectors face in the UK and globally, including increased attrition, poor employee wellbeing (Armes et al., 2020), and reduced agency and morale (Scales & Brown, 2020).

The analysis highlighted how working with this vulnerable group is often accompanied by deeply emotional experiences which can impact employee wellbeing, having potential consequences for service users. How CESWs managed their emotions emerged as a key aspect of their experience, informing the development of the first GET: “Costs and rewards of emotional labour”. Several participants reported inhibiting expressed emotions with service users to fulfil their role. Emotional dissonance resulting from surface acting in EL may lead to burnout (Hochschild, 2003, p. 187; Humphrey, 2023), and is recognised as a form of adversity faced by those in helping professions. Given that the participants expressed how they inhibited felt emotional expression, it may be understood that they were not engaging in genuine EL, which reduces emotional dissonance. Therefore, due to the taxing nature of engaging in surface or deep acting, regardless of the strategy involved, the practitioners may be at higher risk of emotional exhaustion which may lead to burnout.

Several participants described experiences of hypervigilance, intrusive thoughts, heightened anxiety, and sleep disturbances, such as nightmares, which are associated with secondary traumatic stress or compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995; Craig, 2022). Participants understood that their experiences of distress were related to perceived risks associated with carrying out their role. Consistent with previous research (McPherson & Barnett, 2006; Hunt et al., 2016), participants reported instances of service user aggression and physical violence. Feelings of vulnerability in situations such as when transporting children was a salient concern for several participants. While it is well documented that child support workers may encounter unsafe work environments such as visiting unsafe neighbourhoods (Kim & Hopkins, 2015), feelings of vulnerability arising from working with children themselves is a novel finding. This is important as acknowledging and resolving workers’ valid concerns and vulnerabilities is critical to creating a safe workplace and increasing workers’ and vulnerable children's well-being and safety.

This article extends the literature on risk and personal safety in social work. A further novel finding is that while participants experienced distress because of perceived risks, when making decisions involving personal safety in ‘everyday actions of practice’ (Ferguson, 2009, p. 1102) such as when transporting clients, some CESWs appeared to become habituated to risk. This study has offered a nuanced understanding of how CESWs assess and manage risks to personal safety in their mobile, lived experience of practice (Ferguson, 2009). Contrary to the risk aversion associated with the ‘system’ (MacAlister, 2022; Munro, 2011), some participants in this study reported becoming more tolerant of risk over time. Given the inherent dangers associated with lone practitioners transporting clients in their cars (Bibby, 2017), this finding is concerning. The recommendations made in MacAlister’s review are dependent on an empowered, well supported workforce. In this instance, appropriate support may take the form of chaperones when transporting clients. Arguably, risks such as these are avoidable and failure to do this may constitute a key, system-wide problem. This was echoed through consultation with a TSO Quality and Development manager who provided feedback on an earlier draft of this research and suggested a shared risk approach whereby “systems need to be more integrated so that individual exploitation workers are not carrying the load. Risks should always be shared with statutory partners, and this needs a coalition approach” (E. Szwarc-Delves, personal communication, March 20, 2024). Previous literature pertaining to risk habituation predominantly focuses on ‘risky’ occupations such as construction (Kim et al., 2023; Lee & Kim, 2022). Future research should not ignore child protection work undertaken by TSOs. As CESWs expressed that they felt that adequate risk assessments are not in place to protect personal safety in the mobilities of their work that are enacted outside of the office, policy should address these risks.

Consistent with previous research, autonomy is a double-edged sword for the participants in this study. While participants expressed feelings of empowerment, some reported feelings of loneliness and increased stress and anxiety due to individual accountability for outcomes. This included decisions made “in everyday actions of practice” (Ferguson, 2009, p. 1102), such as completing paperwork. Given that decision fatigue may have possibly life-threatening outcomes in the realm of child protection (Gillingham & Whittaker, 2023), and that there has been increased hybrid and remote working in the sector in the current decade, this finding is of note. Difficulties with decision making apply not only to decisions that may affect the lives of children and their families, but to those that are made as practices are routinely enacted. Future research might investigate which factors contribute towards decision fatigue in these circumstances. Employers might adapt working practices to support individuals, for example by encouraging small connections between colleagues, and offering regular points of contact for quick conversations to provide support. In this way, practitioners can maintain a physical, albeit virtual connection.

*Conclusion*

There are some limitations to this study. The emphasis on depth of analysis yields strong insights from a small number of participants, while limiting the breadth of analysis. However, it is useful to consider IPA in the context of vertical generalizability and its role in constructing interpretative theory, as opposed to horizontal generalizability, where findings are extended across various settings. Essentially, we should consider the extent to which findings align with one’s own experiences, the extent to which they offer substantial insight, foster understanding and connect with existing theory. The present study has provided rich insight into how CESWs employed by a TSO in England experience managing emotions, how they perceive risk and vulnerability, and how expectations of autonomous working are experienced. While this sample is unique in terms of how their employer is funded and structured, many of their experiences are comparable to those working in the regulated workforce in England and globally. A particularly novel contribution is insight into experiences of assessing risk to personal safety in everyday actions of practice.

This research is unique as it has drawn upon the practice experiences of TSO CESW’s and demonstrated that these employees face similar challenges as the regulated workforce. This is important because much of the literature informing guidance such as Employer Standards for Social Workers (Local Government Association, 2021), focuses largely on research findings generated from the regulated workforce (e.g. Reddington et al., 2020), which promotes division in the sector, positioning the TSO support worker as low status and low credibility. However, as TSO support workers now make up much of the social care workforce (NCVO, 2022), it is important to value these employees to develop understandings of multidisciplinary working and to prevent staff attrition. This research also develops understandings of tolerance to risk within social care. It is crucial policymakers and senior managers within TSOs and social care alike develop safety and system improvements to increase employees perceived and actual safety and wellbeing.

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