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# The smiling assassin? Reconceptualising redundancy envoys as quasi-dirty workers.

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# The smiling assassin?: Reconceptualising redundancy envoys as quasi-dirty workers

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## ABSTRACT

Despite redundancies having far reaching consequences for organisations, relatively limited attention has been paid to the conflicting experiences of those implementing the redundancy process; the redundancy envoys. By drawing on theories of cognitive dissonance and 'dirty work' we explain how individuals implementing redundancies can experience a disconnect between their outward and inner emotions. We reconceptualise redundancy envoys as quasi-dirty workers as they intermittently perform 'dirty work' tasks that may be perceived as morally tainted, whilst recognising their conventional role incorporates tasks perceived as contrary to that of 'dirty work'. Our study draws on insider research access to redundancy envoys over a five-year period during the implementation of four consecutive redundancy programmes, providing the opportunity to observe decisions and actions in 'real time'. We offer a contemporary reconceptualisation of the redundancy envoy which permits a deeper understanding of the negative impact on redundancy envoys and offers opportunities to examine how this can be reduced. In addition, it is anticipated that the results of this study will offer support to HR functions in reducing the stigma of 'dirty work' for redundancy envoys with the intention of enhancing the management of redundancy implementation.

## KEYWORDS

Redundancies;  
cognitive dissonance;  
restructuring;  
'dirty work';  
job losses

## Introduction

In today's volatile business environment, redundancies are well established as a key component of management practice (Wilkinson, 2005). The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the global scale of redundancies despite government schemes to limit job losses (Petzer, 2020). Yet despite the popular strategy of implementing redundancies as a method to save costs (Gandolfi & Hansson, 2011; Schoenberg et

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al., 2013), studies indicate that redundancies rarely lead to better financial performance or improved productivity (Cascio, 2013). Luan et al. (2013) contend that implementing redundancies during an economic downturn can have a further negative impact on organisational performance and thus redundancies should be approached with caution and moderation, particularly as redundancies have long-term impact at the organisational and individual level (Quinlan & Bohle, 2009).

There are three groups of employees impacted by redundancies; victims, survivors and redundancy envoys. Victims are the ex-employees who have been unsuccessful in remaining employed by the organisation and as a result have been made redundant. Survivors are the individuals that remain in the company during and after the redundancy programme (Baruch & Hind, 1999). Literature on redundancies is replete with studies examining the impact on victims (Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Parris & Vickers, 2010; Waters, 2007) and survivors (Allen et al., 2001; Bergström & Arman, 2017; Brockner, 1996; Tal, 1996 and Tourish et al., 2004). Some of the adverse psychological effects includes; ill health, family problems, marital problems, lower self-esteem, stress and depression, ill health and feelings of social isolation (Gandolfi, 2008b; Greenglass & Burke, 2001; Vickers & Parris, 2007).

The survivors of an organisational restructure often experience the adverse effects of being subjected to the process as profoundly as those who were made redundant. This typically includes feelings of anger, anxiety, cynicism, resentment, resignation and retribution (Brockner, 1992; Baruch & Hind, 1999) unfairness, guilt, job insecurity and relief (Brockner et al., 1988). Other reported consequences of redundancies on survivors include reduced career consciousness (Freeman, 1994), reduced organisational commitment (Freeman & Cameron, 1993; Littler & Innes, 2003) and stress (Nicholas et al., 1998). Survivor behaviour also includes increased levels of absenteeism (Campbell-Jamison et al., 2001; Nicholas et al., 1998) and less innovation (Cascio, 1993). When it comes to the impact on redundancy envoys, literature is limited in comparison to the substantial body of work that focusses on victims and survivors.

Our study contributes to knowledge by focussing on professionals, and their experiences of acting as a redundancy envoy. Being a redundancy envoy is often one of the tasks of the Human Resources (HR) function; it is holding the responsibility of directly conveying the bad news of job losses as a result of redundancies. In addition to the HR function, acting as a redundancy envoy can form part of the roles of directors, line managers and employee consultative representatives.

HR is associated with driving talent and financial outcomes as a strategic partner (CEB, 2014; Geimer et al., 2017). It has developed as a

function to be more focussed on acting as a member of the senior management team in making major business decisions (Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Lawler III & Boudreau, 2009). Directors and managers are often perceived by individuals and peers as the drivers of success (Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997) and strategic change (Åberg & Torchia, 2020; Haynes & Hillman, 2010) to improve competitive advantage in terms of the organisation's survival (Agarwal & Helfat, 2009; Augier & Teece, 2008). In acting as a redundancy envoy conflicting roles emerge, whereby an individual who previously had the responsibility of building an organisation and providing a vision for the future (Cameron et al., 1993; Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997) now has to adopt a role of discarding these values with reduced leader credibility (Cameron et al., 1987).

We therefore provide evidence to support the implementation of redundancies as being conceptualised as 'dirty work' tasks and discuss the consequences for organisations and individuals of this conceptualisation. Recognising that the role of redundancy envoy forms only part of a professional role, we posit that redundancy envoys are quasi-dirty workers, adopting a 'dirty work' task perspective rather than a fully-fledged 'dirty work' occupation (Baran et al., 2012). Due to the episodic nature of acting as a redundancy envoy, we argue that cognitive dissonance can arise in redundancy contexts due to redundancy envoys having to deliver the message of redundancies with a smile, portraying confidence in the decision, whilst experiencing a different internal emotion when they don't agree with the decision on a personal level. We argue that the intermittent nature of the role and its 'dirty work' connotations exacerbate the experiences of cognitive dissonance by redundancy envoys. Often depicted as a 'smiling assassin' by those being put at risk of redundancy, and as per Hughes (1962) observations of 'dirty work', because organisations often delegate the task of communicating redundancies to individuals, it is redundancy envoys who may experience stigmatisation. We thus contend that when managers, directors, HR and employee representatives adopt the role of redundancy envoy, they perform 'dirty work' tasks (Baran et al., 2012) that may be perceived as physically, socially or morally tainted. In contrast, other tasks outside of the redundancy role carry no 'dirty work' stigma (Kreiner et al., 2006). We therefore argue that redundancy envoys are quasi-dirty workers, akin with being 'partly, but not really' or 'seemingly' 'dirty workers', as their occupation is not normally that of a 'dirty worker' but does reflect characteristics of 'dirty work' tasks when implementing redundancies (Baran et al., 2012).

Our study makes an important contribution by examining the dichotomy of opposing cognitions experienced by redundancy envoys fuelled by the stigma of conducting 'dirty work' tasks. The impact of these

experiences is of particular importance as the stress and anxiety caused by implementing redundancies can be mitigated, which could lead to a more effective HR strategy as a critical factor for successful redundancy implementation (Cameron, 1994). Research on redundancy envoys is under-developed, and so developing a contemporary understanding of their experiences is important and valuable as their methods can influence the success of a redundancy programme (Wright & Barling, 1998; Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Ashman, 2016).

The paper commences with an overview of the role of the redundancy envoy, followed by the theoretical positioning of the study. We next outline our research design and the subsequent section presents the results of a five-year qualitative longitudinal study. Next, we discuss the adverse impact on redundancy envoys and how this informs the reconceptualisation of redundancy envoys as 'quasi-dirty workers' as well as how the cognitive dissonance experienced may be mitigated, prior to offering implications for theory and recommendations for practice.

### **Idiosyncrasy of the redundancy envoy**

Redundancy is not a new phenomenon (Baruch & Hind, 1999). Concerned with the dismissal of an employee due to the cessation of an operation, change of business location or no further demand for a particular type of role, the management strategy of restructuring, often resulting in redundancies, has been used globally for more than two decades (Gandolfi, 2009; Williams, 2004; Allen et al., 2001; Orlando, 1999; Tourish et al., 2004). The objectives of redundancies are to promote organisational efficiency, productivity and improve market competitiveness by making changes that positively impact costs and align the business with the changing economy, such as reducing the size of the workforce and/or restructuring to lower overhead costs (Allen et al., 2001; Cameron, 1994; Gervais, 2014; Burke, 2009). Despite these reported organisational benefits, redundancies have a severely negative impact on all of an organisation's workforce.

In redundancy lexicon, the following labels are used to describe the incumbents of the role of implementers of redundancies; executioners (Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997; Gandolfi, 2006), executors (Downs, 1995), downsizers (Burke, 2009) and downsizing agents (Clair & Dufresne, 2004). Ashman (2012a, 2012b, 2015) however argues that 'redundancy envoy' is more in keeping with the experience of being an agent, messenger or diplomat when delivering the implementation of redundancies. Ashman (2012b) postulates that the term of 'executioner' is inaccurate and unfair as the role of the occupant requires sensitivity, resilience and discretion, whereas the term 'executioner' implies skills associated with

using an axe or a noose. Gandolfi (2009) suggests that the definitions of executioners are broad and include responsibilities associated with formal redundancy implementation. Our research therefore adopts the terminology of redundancy envoy as used by Ashman (2012a, 2012b, 2016), as it reflects the role of a messenger, with a further distinction to the label 'executioner' in that redundancy envoy roles are different as their proximity to the affected employees in delivering the message is typically on a one-to-one basis. Research by Kets De Vries and Balazs (1997) refers to executives, such as directors or owners of an organisation. Their role in redundancy implementation is generally different to the majority of redundancy envoys as they are typically responsible for the decision making in implementing redundancies and may be involved in the overall announcement to the affected employees. Executioners' exposure to the 'dirty work' tasks is thus short lived and limited. We argue that redundancy envoys own a significant weight of 'dirty work' tasks in comparison during redundancy implementation. A further distinction between the term executioner and redundancy envoy is that our research includes employee representatives as part of the classification of redundancy envoy.

Research on redundancy envoys is limited, with the current body of knowledge being predominantly more than fifteen years old, with notable exceptions including the work of Gandolfi (2008a; 2008b), Kets De Vries and Balazs (1997) and Torres (2011), which focuses on the negative consequences and importance of executives in the success of implementing redundancies. Ashman's (2012a, 2012b, 2016) work is also a notable exception wherein he explored redundancy envoys in the public sector (2012a, 2012b) and undertook a comparative study between public and private sector envoys in 2016 across a range of organisations. Our research extends Ashman's (2012a, 2012b, 2016) work by exploring the experiences of redundancies in the private sector from an insider perspective during the course of four consecutive redundancy programmes. Gandolfi and Hansson (2011, 2015) explore the non-financial consequences of implementing redundancies with a strong focus on the HR impact. We build on this work by gaining the unique insider perspective of redundancy envoys and by including employee representatives. Arguably, recent literature by Rook et al. (2019) that addresses stress in senior executives is relevant to directors adopting the role of redundancy envoy. However, this research is not specifically aimed at examining the stress experienced during the implementation of redundancies and hence we complement this research with our specific focus on stress during redundancy implementation. Previous studies have recognised the specific role of HR in the implementation of redundancies (Sahdev et al., 1999), the overall importance of HRM and knowledge management

(Edvardsson, 2008) and specifically HR as a strategic partner during change management programmes such as redundancies (Lemmergaard, 2009). More recently research has been conducted on the bundles of HR practices adopted during recessions (Teague & Roche, 2014) and the impact of different high-performance working systems as part of a HR strategy (Cregan et al., 2021) and their relationship with successful redundancy outcomes. Our research reinforces and highlights the specific importance that HR has in limiting the cognitive dissonance experienced for all the categories of redundancy envoys as part of its role as strategic partner. Interesting new research has emerged from McLachlan et al. (2021) that is novel in the inclusion of employee representatives in a case study of the impact on redundancy victims, survivors and 'endurers', however it is not specific to redundancy envoys. In addition, Bergström and Arman (2017) research has also highlighted the important role of employee representatives in their role of redundancy envoys during the implementation of redundancies.

### **Theoretical positioning of the study**

The term 'dirty work' is commonplace in today's society (Ashforth et al., 2007) and is argued to be a necessary evil (Kreiner et al., 2006). Literature on the stigma of 'dirty work' tends to focus on how stigmatised occupations cope (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bolton, 2005; Simpson et al., 2012). The mitigation of the occurrence of the 'dirty work' stigma has also been explored (Devers et al., 2009; Helms & Patterson, 2014). Zhang et al. (2021) define six sources of stigma: physical, tribal, moral, servile, emotional and associational. We contribute to knowledge specifically in the category of the 'emotional' stigma associated with 'dirty work' tasks. Emotional stigma is defined as the requirement to engage with burdensome and threatening emotions (Zhang et al., 2021). Emotional stigma presents as emotional labour which is socially constructed along with 'dirty work' (Rivera, 2015). Emotional labour refers to emotions that are perceived outwards, including smiling, or a lack of emotional demonstration whilst felt emotions are experienced, such as regret (Hochschild, 1983; Rivera, 2015). Emotional stigma is assigned to occupations that are defined as 'dirty work' due to their proximity to negative emotions when working with people who are upset or abusive (Zhang et al., 2021). McLoughlin's (2019) work demonstrated that the burden of the emotional stigma could lead to a negative impact on the individual's well-being. We build on 'dirty work' research, by extending the perspective of Baran et al. (2012)'s work that posits how roles that are not typically defined as 'dirty work' occupations yet include 'dirty work' tasks are



still exposed to stigmatised scrutiny which causes cognitive dissonance for the incumbents.

Whilst often having little in common, stigmatised occupations do share a 'visceral repugnance' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, p. 415), which has implications for 'dirty workers' and roles that require episodic 'dirty work' tasks. A further distinction to note is that implementing redundancies 'is an activity that contradicts their basic outlook towards business life' (Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997, p. 17) as executives are responsible for employee engagement, improved financial performance (Harter et al., 2002) and organisational culture (Hartnell et al., 2016; Yanchus et al., 2020); elements that conflict with the implementation of redundancies. Role conflict when implementing 'dirty work' tasks may be an additional burden for redundancy envoys in comparison to 'dirty work' occupations that do not comprise a dual role. A re-examination of redundancy envoys as quasi- 'dirty workers' conducting 'dirty work' tasks therefore appears timely as organisational studies on 'dirty work' often neglect to reflect the changes in the demand and nature of occupations (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999, Simpson, Slutskaya, Lewis & Höpfl, 2012).

As per the concept of cognitive dissonance, redundancy envoys may be adept at displaying a different emotion to that which they feel. When an individual holds two or more elements of knowledge that are relevant to each other but inconsistent with one another, a state of discomfort is created. This unpleasant state is referred to as 'dissonance' (Harmon-Jones & Harmon-Jones, 2008, p. 1518). Cognitive dissonance theory researchers have argued that the existence of needs is presented through external justification (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1957), which influences the cognitive dissonance experienced and results in motivational changes in attitude (Aronson, 1969; Wan & Chiou, 2010). Redundancy envoys experience cognition or attitude in accordance to the extent to which they feel personally responsible for the task they are performing (Cheng & Hsu, 2012). Should the task be of a negative consequence, such as implementing redundancies, redundancy envoys are bound to experience dissonance, regardless of whether the situation could have been reasonably avoided (Goethals et al., 1979).

Contemporary studies are in short supply, yet contrary to the negative indications discussed previously, there is some evidence in the literature to suggest some positive outcomes for redundancy envoys. For example, studies have found that redundancy envoys expressed optimism as tough decisions were made and there was a belief that the organisation was on a road to recovery (Sahdev et al., 1999). A study by Papalexandris (1996) proposed that HR managers are key in handling redundancies and driving competitiveness in larger firms, and that their joint



responsibility with line managers is critical during the difficult task of implementing redundancies. Research by Van Dierendonck and Jacobs (2012) positions the importance of redundancy envoys in the redundancy process as they have a direct impact on how fairness and justice is perceived by victims and survivors and can therefore influence motivation. Redundancy envoys have been described as unsung corporate heroes who try to limit the negative impact on victims during major change programmes (Frost, 2003), and who can help to enrich jobs and keep people motivated during restructures by encouraging employees to develop a more positive approach to lateral career development (Holbeche, 2009).

It is therefore important to understand the experiences of redundancy envoys as their perceptions are different and distinct (Clair & Dufresne, 2004) and they largely adopt more than one role; that of survivor and change agent (Dewitt et al., 2003). Utilising and combining the theories of 'dirty work' and cognitive dissonance allows us to understand the external and internal experiences of redundancy envoys; whether they are perceived as tainted by a critical mass and/or personally, and whether they experience a disconnect between the emotions they portray and those that they genuinely feel. Redundancy envoys are likely to have a pivotal impact on the success and outcomes of the redundancy strategy as well as on employees' reactions (Gandolfi, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Dewitt et al., 2003; Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997).

### ***Development of research questions***

To begin to develop a contemporary understanding of the impact of redundancy on those that are implementing the process we use the following research questions to frame our study:

- How can 'dirty work' be reconceptualised to recognise the 'dirty work' tasks carried out as part of the role of redundancy envoy?
- How can cognitive dissonance experienced through the role of redundancy envoy be mitigated?

### ***Research methodology***

As there are limited contemporary studies examining the redundancy process from the perspective of the redundancy envoy, we adopt a qualitative research design that permits the collection of rich data from different sources (Remenyi et al., 1998; Trowler, 1998). We draw on data collected from redundancy envoys across a range of different

industries, including engineering, healthcare, technology, transportation, construction and retail. [Table 1](#) represents the roles, codes and typical areas of responsibility in redundancy implementation.

We also present data collected from a five-year longitudinal study conducted within a multinational engineering conglomerate. The longitudinal study examines the impact of four consecutive redundancy programmes from the perspective of the redundancy envoys implementing these programmes. The first author of the paper was employed as a Human Resource Business Partner (HRBP) within the multinational engineering conglomerate that is the subject of examination and acted as an insider researcher. As with previous studies that have utilised insider research (Breen, 2007; Unluer, 2012), holding a position within the organisation being researched allowed the researcher to develop trusting relationships with participants, and to cause minimal disruption to normal activities (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Ryan, 1993). Further, being an insider researcher provided the opportunity to observe and to ask questions about behaviours, and to subsequently make sense of these observations (Coghlan et al., 2016). Insider research offers several benefits to qualitative studies including having a greater understanding of culture and exploring the process of practice rather than simply its outcome (Reed & Proctor, 1995; Pugh et al., 2000). Studies have questioned the dichotomy of the ‘insider/outsider’ researcher and suggest that this distinction is overly simplistic, and a continuum is more accurate whereby the researcher is sometimes on the inside and sometimes on the outside (Breen, 2007). This is a helpful conceptualisation for research, yet for our study the researcher was predominantly on the

**Table 1.** Responsibility remit of redundancy envoys.

Abbreviation Code	Role profiles included under this code	Typical areas of responsibility in redundancy activities
HRD	Human resources director within small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) and large enterprise businesses. Director of HR services firm Proprietor of HR consultancy	Strategy Planning Implementation Communication
HR	Human resources advisor Human resources specialists Employee and change consultant Human resources manager Human resources business partner	Implementation Coordination Consultation Planning
OD	Chief Executive Officer Managing director Business function director Head of a business unit / function	Strategy Planning Implementation Communication
LM	Line manager	Communication Implementation Consultation
ER	Employee representative	Consultation Advisory role Communication

'inside' as her role comprised that of redundancy envoy and, somewhat ironically, her position was put at risk of redundancy during a restructuring of the HR department. This experience afforded a very valuable and unique perspective and insight into what it feels like as an employee when your ability to generate an income in your current role is threatened. Not only was it a challenging situation due to the threat of losing income, but even more significantly so due to the insider researcher being the main breadwinner in the household and pregnant with her second child. The researcher therefore identified as being on the inside, and this perspective is adopted throughout the longitudinal study.

### ***Data collection***

The insider researcher used multiple methods of data collection (Berg, 2001; Patton, 2002) to gain a greater understanding of the cognitive dissonance and perceptions of 'dirty work' tasks experienced. These included in depth interviews and the capturing of field notes through diary keeping by noting daily events and observations from meetings (Etherington, 2004; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) as well as secondary data collected through an organisation wide online 'Mood Board'. To ensure accuracy, validity, reliability and transferability of data, researcher interpretations were cross checked with the participants through follow-up interviews (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Finally, all participants received a copy of their transcribed interviews for accuracy and further comments. The study was conducted in two stages:

### ***Stage one: understanding cognitive dissonance experienced through interviews***

A broad sample of 17 redundancy envoys working in aviation, transportation, logistics, education, engineering, manufacturing, cosmetics, automation, technology and hospitality were selected using criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). The criterion was that all participants must have previous experience in the active implementation of redundancies, which included being classed as a redundancy envoy. Semi-structured interviews were used, with questions that drew on the theoretical focus of the study, thus enabling our understanding of the cognitive dissonance experienced by redundancy envoys and to what extent they perceive themselves, and are perceived by others, as conducting 'dirty work' tasks. Interviews were conducted over a 12-month period, lasting on average one half to two hours, and were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

### ***Stage two: longitudinal study as insider researcher***

The longitudinal research was conducted in a division of a large, global engineering conglomerate. This organisation had experienced a series of four redundancy programmes, primarily driven by a need to improve efficiency and productivity. During the four redundancy programmes, data were collected from the impacted workforce to inform the extent to which 'dirty work' was perceived and observed. Phase 1 of the business restructuring occurred between November 2011 and April 2012 when two businesses were merged. This was followed by Phase 2 from November 2012 to April 2013 when duplicate processes and positions were removed from the merged businesses. A further restructuring, Phase 3, took place between April–July 2013 with the final phase, Phase 4, driven by profitability targets and carried out between August 2013 and January 2014.

The second stage of data collection was thus focussed on gaining a deeper insight into the real experiences of being a redundancy envoy in the field. Longitudinal data were collected over a period of five years using the following methods:

- Semi-structured interviews
- Critical ethnography: Author diary keeping/observation
- Comments from the organisational Mood Board

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

During the five years as an insider researcher, semi-structured interviews were undertaken with the redundancy envoys specific to the four redundancy programmes implemented in the organisation. Participants were therefore selected based on their knowledge and experience of redundancies (Bernard, 2002). As the lead author had a long-standing career as a HR professional, access to participants was not a significant challenge. Semi-structured interviews were the main source of data and a further 19 participants were interviewed from the organisational setting; totalling 36 participants across stages 1 and 2 of the research comprising of a further nine HR professionals, six HR directors, 10 line managers, seven organisation directors and four employee representatives. The scale of the global organisational setting allowed for interviews to take place with participants who had redundancy experiences from various countries including UK, Switzerland, Canada, South-Africa, United Arab Emirates, Poland, Germany, France and America. Interviews lasted approximately one and half to two hours and several participants had 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews for more focussed discussion. With the combination of

2<sup>nd</sup> interviews, some interviews lasted up to four hours. Interviews were mostly conducted face to face, however due to the international component, some interviews took place *via* phone and video conferencing. All interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim, with participants validating transcripts once complete.

### ***Critical ethnography***

The researcher kept a diary of field notes and observations in Afrikaans, the first language of the insider researcher, to protect the data. This allowed notes to be taken more freely when in close proximity to colleagues. Trowler's (1998) work on 'academics responding to change' influenced the researcher positively on the approach and benefits of qualitative data and using in-depth analysis to make sense of the data, complementing the data collected from interviews. The observations and notes from diary keeping gave context and meaning when following up with semi-structured interviews and focussing questions to mitigate underlying assumptions.

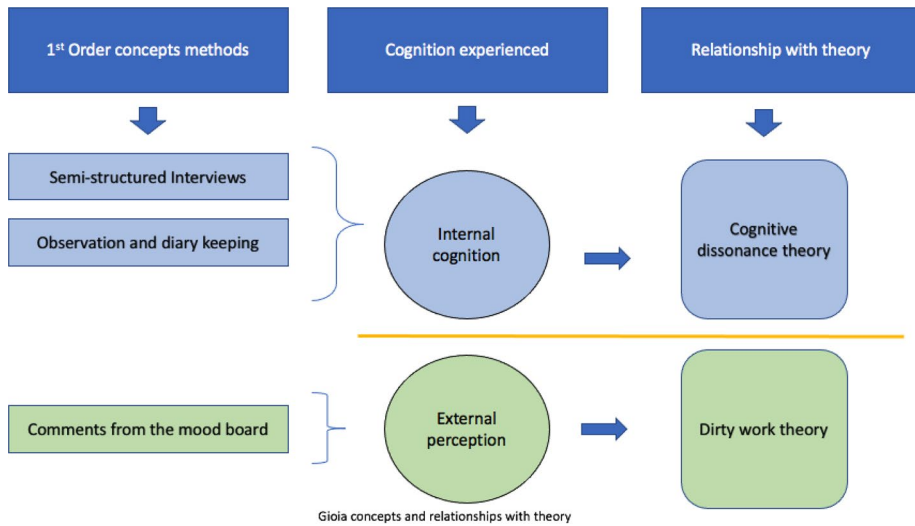
### ***Comments from the organisation's mood board***

The Mood Board was used as a secondary data collection method that captured the perceptions of employees. By using a digital platform, employees had the opportunity to provide anonymous qualitative feedback on how they felt, what concerned them and what made them happy whilst being impacted by the redundancy programmes. Sixty-six random employees were invited on a weekly basis to post feedback. The average response rate was around 50%, indicating that nominally there is a response from approximately thirty-three employees per week. Over the course of the study, a total of 2033 comments were analysed.

### ***Data analysis***

Throughout the two phases of the research design, as detailed below in [Figure 1](#), we drew on Gioia et al. (2013) work to develop our data structure and analysis.

Synchronous to data collection during stage 2, and subsequent to the first stage of analysis of data collected in stage 1, first order concepts were developed (Gioia et al. (2013)). This led to the identification of 2<sup>nd</sup> order themes informing potential new domains and eventually the formation of aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2010). Our interpretive approach comprised of concurrently collecting and analysing data, whilst interviewing new participants. Trustworthiness of data was achieved by



**Figure 1.** Gioia concepts and relationship with theory.

deploying Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria of peer debriefing, where one author (insider) had responsibility for collecting data whilst the second author (outsider) adopted a more general formulation, challenging alternative explanations.

## Results

Our data indicate that the negative impact on redundancy envoys is significant and that cognitive dissonance is experienced repeatedly by those who have to deliver the bad news of job losses, whilst not being able to show their true cognition of self-doubt and low morale. We explore the negative and positive cognitions that led to dissonance and discuss this within the context of 'dirty work' tasks.

### *Evidence of negative internal cognition and cognitive dissonance*

We identify four negative internal cognitions (see Table 2) which manifested in different behaviours and affected the health of respondents; stress and anxiety, empathy, doubt and insecurity, and guilt.

### *Stress and anxiety*

From our study the redundancy envoys unanimously agreed that they suffered high levels of stress and anxiety as a result of the



**Table 2.** Cognitive dissonance data structure.

Internal cognition Interview data	Cognitive dissonance theory 1st Order Concepts	2nd order concepts	Aggregate dimensions
<p>It is a very stressful job. (I-OD) It is obviously stressful because you don't want to do it. It felt like 6-9 months of additional pressure. (I-OD)</p>	<p>Observation I am not doing another redundancy guarantee you. I am not doing it. (DO-OD) I am worried about him. I think he is losing the plot. He said he wanted to come in to catch up with me, as he is scared of going over the edge. (DO-OD)</p>	Stress and anxiety	Evidence of negative internal cognition experienced Evidence of negative internal cognition experienced
<p>I need a mental break – it has been very stressful for the last few months, especially with the appeals. (I-HR) We had nobody to turn to and had to do every step on our own. There were supposedly managers, but they were not real. (I-LM) It almost always has an impact on me. (I-OD) You cannot live through all of that without it not having an impact on you. (I-HRD) It upset me. (I-HRD) It affected me personally. (I - ECC) I found it very unpleasant. (I-HR) It is difficult. It is especially difficult when people are upset. (I-ECC) Redundancy is one of the hardest things to do, even after 30 years. (I-HR) It was an unpleasant experience. It always has an impact on me. (I- HR) It remains sad. (I-HR) That was really painful, really, really painful. There were tears when I had to wave goodbye in the parking area. (I-LM) My nick name during the implementation was the 'smiling assassin. (I-OD)</p>	<p>Comment after a redundancy announcement: Empathy Glad that is over. (DO-OD) Everyone being so negative at management meetings, it is just draining. (DO-LM) Last week was so bad. I actually moved my desk to sit somewhere else. (DO-LM) I try not to get sucked into the negativity, but I do. I just cannot help myself. (DO-LM) It was so hard. I just found it too hard. It was really hard to do it in her home. It is her own personal space and it felt like an invasion of privacy.... (DO-LM) I try not to get sucked into the negativity, but I do. I just cannot help myself. (DO-LM) Scared of going over the edge. (DO-OD4)</p>	Doubt and insecurity	
<p>Things mull over in your head all the time: is it the right decision, wrong decision. (I-LM) I got to a stage where I was wondering if we had done enough to save costs, to plan ahead before we got to making people redundant. If we had pulled up our socks 6 to 9 months ago, we would not be in this situation. (I-LM) As a management team we could have watched out. The matter was not taken seriously, had we responded earlier we might have saved jobs. I felt that I failed. (I-OD) Although I had to make them redundant, we were all leaving the company and in the same boat, until I applied for a job to run the new depot and was successful. No one actually said that I sold them out, but I felt like it. (I-LM) I felt personally responsible for putting him in that position. It was hard at the last meeting when he thanked me for the opportunity and apologised for letting me down. That was harder to deal with than someone saying, 'go to hell'. (I-OD) I felt guilty because I did not know as much ... what should I know, have I missed something, is it me? (I-LM6)</p>		Guilt	

(Continued)



**Table 2.** Continued.

Cognitive dissonance theory 1st Order Concepts	2nd order concepts	Aggregate dimensions
<p>I lost a lot of sleep. I did not sleep well. (I-LM)                      I lost a few nights sleep over it, things mulling in my mind about people. (I-ECC)                      I slept very bad during that period. My problem is that I rather internalise it. (I-LM)                      I could not sleep at night and I had to go to a doctor and get medication. It was very stressful and too harsh on my soul' (I-HRD)                      I suffered and developed acute stress from implementing redundancies. I had to get help from a psychologist' (I-HRD)</p>	<p>Impact on sleep and Medical interventions</p>	<p>Evidence of the manifestation of the negative internal cognition experienced</p>
<p>I used to go to the gym and go running 4 times a week. I just could not get the inclination to go again and had no time either. (I-LM)                      Not eating the best, eating late at night. Psychologically, a big meal at the end of the night was my reward for doing a hard day's work. I put on two and a half stone. (I-LM)</p>	<p>Impact on health</p>	
<p>This one guy I had to make redundant lived in the same town and kept threatening me, everywhere I saw him in town. I ended up not wanting to go out at night or on weekends and eventually moved away. (I-HR)                      People got very aggressive, shouting and swearing and almost physically threatening. (I-LM)</p>	<p>Physically threatening</p>	
<p>There are a lot of emotions one have to deal with. (I-OD)                      You absorb a lot of emotion. (I-HRD)                      There were lots of emotions involved in the redundancies at the company. (I-HRD)                      I got too emotionally involved in the closure of that site. (I-LM)                      It can be quite emotional at times being a staff rep. It's been an emotional rollercoaster. (I-ECC)</p>	<p>Emotionally taxing</p>	
<p>I was getting on in life, being promoted, whilst they were losing their jobs. (I-LM)                      I got a significant promotion as a result. Redundancies are such a big part of HR and the experience can only do you good. (I-HRD)                      It was enlightening from a learning experience. I did learn a lot. (I-LM3)                      It is really good for your personal development. It is really important to your career if you work in HR as it is a key piece of what HR does, so it is great to get experience in redundancies. I also learned about compromise agreements, so that was great to add something to my toolkit. (I-HR)                      I enjoyed the challenge... yeah... the challenge was making a bad thing good. (I-LM)</p>	<p>Career development                       Skills and personal development                       Welcoming the challenge</p>	<p>Evidence of positive internal cognition experienced                      Evidence of positive internal cognition experienced</p>

implementation of redundancies. The most prevalent reason for this was the on-going experience of conflicting cognitions; for example, redundancy envoys experienced dissonance between their internal emotion and that emotion which they felt compelled to portray in their professional role. This Head of Business Excellence felt exhausted due to pressure and subsequently applied for voluntary redundancy as he felt he had enough:

*'As a big manager in a big business [implementing redundancies] is like failure and I felt the pressure on-a-day-to-day basis. I felt that 6–9 months additional pressure. It drains your energy and you felt tired in a business like this. It sucks the life out of you'* (I-OD).

The impacts of internal cognition were observed and recorded by the insider researcher through diary keeping. For example, during the announcement of the third redundancy programme where the director demonstrated signs of tension; *'shaking leg under the table, delivering the message covering his mouth with his hand, arms folded.'* The anxiety experienced was evident and also noted through the use of his asthma inhaler immediately after the announcement.

### **Empathy**

The personal impact of absorbing the negative emotions of the victims was a challenge for redundancy envoys due to the emotional impact of the empathy that they felt. This resulted in redundancy envoys experiencing unpleasant internal conflict by doing a task that they had to do and that was right for the organisation's survival, yet caused a feeling that was contradictory to 'doing' the right thing;

*'putting people at risk of redundancy, at best, is a horrible thing to do'* (I-LM).

Redundancy envoys appeared to be overwhelmed with the personal negative impact that they experienced, declaring a loss of personal and emotional control, often resulting in tears during conversations and interviews;

*'I do not know if I am coming or going, yet, I have to continue with this dysfunctional working'* (DO-LM).

Redundancy envoys vicariously felt the pain and suffering of their victims. It is not an everyday task for managers and HR professionals to cause such significant, disruptive damage to employees' psychological wellbeing and thus when they step into the role of redundancy envoy, the realisation of the shock of the damage causes a sensation of 'pain' for redundancy envoys;

*'It is terrible. It is a sick feeling and very painful when you realise the impact on people with redundancy' (I-OD).*

Some redundancy envoys experienced the destruction of their employees' livelihoods to such a severe extent they even intimated toward self-destruction such as this envoy who stated;

*'Sometimes, when I drive to work, I think that if I just make a mistake on the road, I can stop this pain' (DO-LM).*

Such quotes highlight the often unrecognised, inner turmoil being felt by the redundancy envoys empathising with those receiving news of job losses.

### **Doubt and insecurity**

Through the process of implementing redundancies, envoys were doubting their own actions. This doubt, experienced internally, impacted on their professional confidence and added to the cognitive dissonance experienced of feeling insecure whilst having to deliver the news of job losses with conviction. A line manager shared the following experience:

*'I was nervous of whether I am doing the right thing, whether I am saying the right thing' (I-LM).*

Our data show that employee representatives experienced similar cognitions, whereby they were self-conscious about who was watching them coupled with a lack of confidence. They experienced doubt about whether they were doing the right thing, arguably due to the episodic nature of undertaking 'dirty work' tasks.

*'It feels that everyone is watching you and I question myself if I am doing the right thing' (I-ER).*

The feelings of doubt were also heightened as many of these procedures were new to many of the envoys, as a result of being inexperienced and unprepared for 'dirty work' tasks.

*'The tribunal has added real pressure. I did not know if what I did was right or wrong' (I-LM).*

From our study it was clear that redundancy envoys rarely shared their doubts with colleagues or managers and their experiences of being alone with their doubts was common amongst the interviewees.

### **Guilt**

Guilt was the most widespread negative emotion experienced by redundancy envoys, arguably due to the conflicting role of being 'builders' of

the organisation for most of their career and then switching to the role of a redundancy envoy and thus being perceived as 'destroyers' of the workforce.

*'You feel guilty, even if you are making the lowest performers redundant' (I-OD).*

Envoys appeared to feel personal responsibility for the need for redundancies and then felt guilty when they were implemented:

*'If I think I have not done enough to challenge the business on their rationale and the individual selection of a colleague, I feel like I have let that individual down'(I-ER).*

There was also the sense that redundancies were not the fault of the person being made redundant, which seemed to intensify the level of guilt felt by the envoy. In contrast, in their day-to-day role, managers, HR or employee representatives may dismiss employees, which is generally accepted as it is perceived as deserving when an employee breaches a company policy and thus the dismissal is justified. With a dismissal due to redundancy, redundancy envoys could not rationalise the dismissal, as they perceive it as undeserving:

*'The hardest thing for HR is to make people redundant when it is not a fault or mistake of the employee' (I-HRD).*

Guilt was also compounded as many of the redundancy envoys had worked with the organisation for a significant period of time and had formed personal relationships with colleagues. Implementing the redundancy process with colleagues considered as friends elicited strong feelings of guilt from the envoys. In this situation cognitive dissonance was experienced due to the guilt of removing a source of income from a colleague and friend whilst maintaining the professional detachment required of the role.

*'Of course, I had to stay professional in the meetings, but was going "bastards" under my breath' (I-LM).*

Feelings of guilt were not experienced to the same extent by HR professionals. Arguably this may be because they perceived decisions to implement redundancy programmes to be made by business directors, and so saw themselves more as a 'vehicle' to help the business achieve its operational aims. The role of implementing redundancies is traditionally a larger part of the role of HR professionals. From our interviews it was clear that many of the directors, managers and employee representatives had limited experience of the redundancy process. This is in contrast with HR professionals:

*'As an HR person you will get involved in restructures and you will do it a few times in your career, because that is your job' (I-OD).*

HR professional therefore saw restructuring as very much part of their role, which was in contrast to the majority of the redundancy envoys involved in our study.

### **Manifestation of cognitive dissonance**

The four second order themes identified clearly demonstrate examples of cognitive dissonance as experienced by the redundancy envoys. We found that cognitive dissonance led to redundancy envoys finding the experience of implementing redundancies emotionally taxing, which manifested itself physically. Our illustrative quotations in [Table 2](#) demonstrate how redundancy envoys experienced a negative impact on their sleep patterns due to the redundancies preying on their thought processes, driven by self-doubt, guilt and anxiety. To help overcome the sleep deficiency and negative emotional impact, redundancy envoys often relied on health interventions such as medication, therapy and psychological support. Some redundancy envoys required medical interventions for symptoms which they believed were from the long-term effects of experiencing cognitive dissonance and examples included a heart attack (OD) and onset of arthritis (LM). Redundancy envoys also experienced poorer physical health, which they believed to be as a result of the emotional burden, and in consequence did not engage in exercise and developed poor eating habits. These habits led to weight gain, increased smoking and alcohol intake, as demonstrated by our illustrative quotations in [Table 2](#).

We did find, however, that some redundancy envoys were able to reduce their experience of cognitive dissonance by focusing on positive internal cognition. For example, some of the envoys in our study focused on the opportunities afforded to them from gaining experience of redundancy. Whilst closing a business where this HR Director made over 1000 employees redundant, including himself, he was approached to join a new firm through the outplacement support provider:

*'Carrying out the redundancies, lead me to become a partner in a new firm' (I-HRD).*

This HR consultant reflected that she developed multiple valuable business skills during redundancy implementation, such as increased attention to detail, influencing and negotiation and assertiveness:

*'My assertiveness levels increased. I gained improved influencing and negotiation techniques and skills. My attention to detail increased significantly as decisions required were not only based on business knowledge but also employment law technicalities. It toughened me up' (I-HR).*

A director in the finance department found relief during the redundancy implementation through identifying solutions and feeling challenged:

*'I enjoyed the challenge to resolve, influence and find appropriate solutions to the various challenges posed by the redundancy situation' (I-OD).*

### ***Episodic nature of redundancies and the envoy as a 'dirty worker'***

From the perspective of the redundancy envoy our findings suggest that the infrequency of adopting the role of redundancy envoy compounded the cognitive dissonance experienced. Redundancy envoys perform the role of informing those at risk of redundancy and supporting the ensuing processes. Informing colleagues of the potential or actual cessation of their employment was not a task that the directors, managers or employee representatives in the case study carried out on a regular basis. For example, a *Director of Quality and Business Excellence* who had been in employment for over thirty-five years stated:

*'In terms of being involved with redundancies as a manager, this is actually my first time' (I-OD).*

Similarly, this Director of Products highlighted the episodic nature of having to undertake a 'dirty work' task;

*'I have been a manager for over 30 years yet I have never had to make someone redundant' (I-OD).*

From our interviews it would appear that some redundancy envoys were able to carry out the process by entering into a 'faustian pact' wherein their cognitive dissonance was due to trading personal values for the benefit of the greater good; in this case the financial sustainability of the organisation. This HR Business Partner referred to the implementation of redundancies with:

*'I was totally disengaged with the business vision, however I conducted the process professionally' (I-HR).*

The Head of Projects clearly demonstrated the conflicting reality between his emotions by explaining how he was 'not happy' about the action of implementing a 'dirty work' task when asked if he was on board with delivering the communication of redundancies:

*'If you are asking if I am happy, no I am not. I will do it, but I am not happy with it' (DO-LM).*

The episodic nature of the role of redundancy envoy seemed to amplify the negative cognitions experienced, which were further heightened by the

negative perceptions of the redundancy process as shared by employees. Table 3 highlights some of the comments shared by the workforce on the organisational Mood Board and we identify four second order themes. From these comments there is evidence of the retaliation of employees at risk of redundancy through actions such as grievances, appeals and employment tribunals. The findings show how the workforce believed the management to be responsible for the business failure, leading to the stigma of redundancy envoys conducting 'dirty work' tasks.

*'I have now totally lost faith in my management to assist me if I have problems on site and I have genuine fears for the future and success of our department, and in turn my career.'*

Low morale and motivation were key themes from the Mood Board suggesting that by implementing redundancies, redundancy envoys inflicted the consequences of 'dirty work' tasks on the employees:

*'The underlying feeling is that of almost being beyond the point of no return so it will be tough to keep people motivated.' 'I know the business has to save money, but what about saving the morale of your employees?' 'With the current redundancy process going on, the mood is not particularly great at present.'*

The management team was criticised for the perceived lack of communication during redundancy implementation, which contributed to the stigma of 'dirty work', for example;

*'the management team is not doing enough. I can't see where the business is going and I have had enough... Customer complaints going through the roof.' 'No direction, no work, no future!'*

## Discussion

### *Reconceptualising the redundancy envoy as a quasi-dirty worker*

Our findings illustrate the negative perception that employees can harbour towards redundancy envoys (see Table 3), and the negative internal cognitions experienced by the envoys themselves (see Table 2). The analysis of our empirical data supports the conceptualisation of redundancy envoys as conducting 'dirty work' tasks. Themes from our study stigmatise redundancy envoys as responsible for business failure, causing low morale, fostering feelings of insecurity and frustration with management. Furthermore, making people redundant is a conventional approach to dealing with 'problem' workers (Vickers & Parris, 2007). Those that conduct this type of 'dirty work', in this case redundancy envoys, are stigmatised in society and research has indicated that the experience of being stigmatised leads to low self-esteem and issues with identity (Baran et al., 2012; Dovidio et al., 2000; Kreiner et al., 2006) which is also identified by our findings.



**Table 3.** 'Dirty work' tasks data structure.

Dirty work theory 1st Order Concepts	Negative cognitive dissonance experienced	2nd order themes	Aggregate dimension
<b>Mood board</b>			
External perceptions			
The reorganisation is shambles.		Perceptions of failure and pressure	Evidence of negative perceptions of redundancy envoys and their roles during the process of implementing redundancies
There has been zero change management. ABSOLUTE DISASTER!!!			
The management team is not doing enough. I can't see where the business is going and I have had enough...			
Customer complaints going through the roof.			
Stress levels are beginning to have a negative effect on every aspect of my life.			
The main reason for the 'Not good' feedback is due to the massive cuts in projects and leaving 1 particular project manager at breaking point.			
Individuals not doing their jobs. No one accountable, not focusing on the real reason why we exists.		Perceptions of low morale	
I know the business has to save money, but what about saving the morale of your employees?			
Workwise and with the current restructuring/redundancy process going on, the mood is not particularly great at present.			
Not too good at the moment as the mood within the camp is at a low.			
Deflated, job roll has change to a more menial roll, and not sure if the business will still be here at Christmas			
Redundancies causing low morale in the company.			
The underlying feeling is that were almost beyond the point of no return so it will be tough to keep people motivated.			
Well, another round of redundancies announced yesterday doesn't exactly improve your mood.			
No direction, no work, no future!!!		Perceptions of lack of faith and feelings of insecurity	
It is a shame that worry and uncertainty over the future of our business continues to affect morale and performance.			
Still unsure regarding the future. Nothing to reassure staff.			
The ongoing despair continues. Every month we just hear there's no good news right now, I've lost track of how many comments I've heard from people who are worried come the new financial year they won't have a job, or maybe not even a business to work in.			
Due to a lack of technical knowledge (due to questionable redundancy decisions) in the service department I have now totally lost faith in my management to assist me if I have problems on site and I have genuine fears for the future and success of our department, and in turn my career.			
Frustrated that management still haven't got around to actioning certain things they said they would do over a year ago and still acknowledge need to be done.		Frustration with management	
The low morale I believe is due to bad management.			
Individuals not doing their jobs. Where is the management for these individuals?			
I am dismayed at the way things are and I am not the only one.			
Feeling very down about management skills.....			

Our findings demonstrate the stigmatisation of redundancy envoys as implementers of 'dirty work' tasks. The negative consequences are captured as stress and anxiety, empathy, doubt and insecurity, and guilt that can adversely impact performance, reduce job commitment and result in higher turnover (Gandolfi, 2008b; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

We also add to the labels used to describe redundancy envoys by including that of ‘smiling assassin’ as evidenced in our findings.

Building on redundancy envoys as conducting ‘dirty work’ tasks, we offer a further contribution by reconceptualising redundancy envoys as ‘quasi-dirty workers.’ We develop this reconceptualisation by drawing on our empirical data wherein the episodic nature of the redundancy process, coupled with the emotional stigma attached to conducting ‘dirty work’ tasks, seemed to heighten experiences of cognitive dissonance for many of the redundancy envoys in our study. Redundancy envoys seemed ill-prepared to carry out the role, with many stating that they had little, if any, experience. They may thus appear to be ‘dirty workers’ whilst implementing redundancies, although their exposure to ‘dirty work’ tasks are otherwise limited, hence ‘quasi’ akin to ‘partly’ or ‘almost’ ‘dirty work’ occupations.

The negative cognitive dissonance experienced, as highlighted in [Table 2](#), aligns with the emotions experienced during emotive dissonance whereby redundancy envoys experience a clash between their inner feelings (identified as anxiety, stress, guilt and insecurity) and outer displays (appearing confident and smiling) (Hochschild, 1983). Tracy (2005) argues that emotive dissonance research has overlooked social discourses; how work becomes and remains ‘dirty’. To this point, our findings build on this argument by demonstrating that the ‘dirty work’ tasks associated with the implementation of redundancies could occur sporadically and infrequently and can also be ‘lifted’ once the ‘dirty work’ tasks are complete. Our findings position redundancy envoys as experiencing emotional stigma, as this role requires them to be in close proximity to the negative emotions of the employee at risk who responds with the emotions of being upset or abusive in line with the work of Zhang et al. (2021). Redundancy envoys thus ‘absorb’ the burden of the emotions from their redundancy victims. In a similar vein to McLoughlin’s (2019) research on the ‘dirty work’ experienced in slaughterhouses, our findings demonstrate that the burden of the emotional stigma could lead to a negative impact on the wellbeing of the redundancy envoy. This is highlighted in [Table 2](#) where the manifestation of the negative impact is evident in disturbed sleep, medical interventions and the need for therapy to help redundancy envoys to cope. The data on employee perceptions captured in [Table 3](#) consolidates the interview data and validates how ‘dirty work’ tasks are stigmatised by the perceptions of the critical mass (Ashforth et al., 2007). These perceptions, coupled with the interview data, demonstrate how redundancy envoys engage in sense-making of their organisational experiences (Golden, 2009) with their own perceptions of conducting ‘dirty work’ tasks as validated by the workforce.

### ***Cognitive dissonance experienced through the role of redundancy envoys***

In drawing on Table 2, the second order concepts identified clearly indicate two opposite cognitions experienced by redundancy envoys; a positive cognition and a negative cognition. First, we notice an overwhelming negative internal cognition which is directly related to the unpleasantness of making an employee redundant. The symptoms experienced, as identified in Table 2, are in line with that of cognitive dissonance, whereby one is experiencing something that is uncomfortable and unpleasant (Festinger, 1957). We find the negative impact experienced by redundancy envoys to influence cognitive functioning and emotional distancing, which builds on research suggesting that employees tend to detach themselves emotionally from the organisation (Gervais, 2014). Our findings show that emotional distancing occurs as a result of the contradictions in the basic outlook of redundancy envoys (Kets De Vries & Balazs, 1997), which is to build and grow organisations rather than to reduce the scale.

The second cognition we identified is evidence of positive internal cognition. There is very limited research examining positive indicators for redundancy envoys and this is an area where our findings bring a fresh and very exciting new perspective on these positive impacts, such as promotions, career development and personal growth. Our findings support the limited body of work that has identified optimism when tough decisions were made (Noer, 1993) and demonstrate positive recognition for HR (Sahdev et al., 1999). When cognitive dissonance is experienced, an individual often copes with the internal conflict by modifying a cognition (Sronce & McKinley, 2006). In applying this to redundancy envoys, identifying a positive aspect in the implementation of redundancies, such as 'personal development', allows for a perceptual modification of the negative emotional experience, which leads to a reduction in the cognitive dissonance experienced. We therefore offer an extension to cognitive dissonance theory by demonstrating how individuals can formulate an attitudinal change by addressing the disconnect between cognition and behaviour by providing new evidence to suggest that the positive impact experienced by redundancy envoys results in a lesser experience of cognitive dissonance.

## **Conclusions**

### ***Practical and theoretical implications***

The findings from this study offer extensions to the theories of 'dirty work' and cognitive dissonance. Our evidence positions the role of redundancy envoys as 'quasi-dirty workers', which highlights the

importance of strategic HR interventions to support redundancy envoys in reducing the cognitive dissonance experienced whilst conducting 'dirty work' tasks. The significance of our findings is that redundancy envoys, contrary to most 'dirty work' occupations, only experience an element of 'dirty work' tasks on rare and infrequent occasions, such as during the implementation of redundancies. Due to their lack of preparedness for the 'quasi-dirty worker' role, and the shock of changing roles from 'builder to destroyer', the cognitive dissonance experienced is noteworthy. Further, we present new evidence to demonstrate how cognitive dissonance can be reduced for redundancy envoys by introducing a second, positive cognition to offset the overwhelming negative cognition redundancy envoys experience. The negative impact further extends to employee consultative representatives which experience the same negative psychological and physiological implications as managers and HR professionals during the process of redundancies.

The significance of this research guides us to focus on the importance of strategic HR interventions to provide sufficient support and training to redundancy envoys to help mitigate the negative emotions experienced due to being stigmatised whilst undertaking 'dirty worker' tasks, and to reduce the negative cognition. Practical HR interventions, such as providing support to prepare redundancy envoys for the potentially conflicting roles (Baruch & Hind, 1999; Petzer, 2020), could help reduce the negative cognition experienced by making sense of what is happening on a regular basis.

A further contribution is how our study suggests that in recognising and understanding the experiences of redundancy envoys at a deeper level, redundancies can be implemented responsibly and with compassion (Jacobs, 2020; Petzer, 2020). This builds on the work of Armgarth (2009) that posits how HR interventions, such as a focus on wellbeing and preparing envoys for effective coping (Meichenbaum, 1985) as well as being ready to respond to unpredictable outcomes (Sweeny et al., 2006), can alleviate the negative implications for all impacted groups thus increasing likelihood of realising organisational benefits. Our research also supports Cascio's (2002) notion that HR interventions during redundancy implementation will boost the morale and confidence of the workforce during the aftermath and rebuilding stages. These interventions can thus be incorporated into practical guidance on the implementation of redundancies that is available through sources such as ACAS (2021), CIPD (2021) and XpertHR (2021).

We recognise that a limitation to this study is that we were unable to assess the extent to which the positive impact negates the negative consequences experienced. Nevertheless, our findings offer important insights from the often-overlooked role of redundancy envoy. Collected

over a five-year period, this rich qualitative study provides an important foundation for further work in this important area. We suggest that opportunities for future studies could include gaining a more detailed understanding of the causes of stress and exploring successful coping strategies for redundancy envoys, which could lead to the mitigation of the negative impact experienced. Gaining a better understanding of these aspects will help guide HR practitioners to implement the strategic interventions necessary to support redundancy envoys by reducing negative cognition. Our study suggests that supporting redundancy envoys is crucial to ensuring that they are effective in their substantive role of securing the future sustainability of the organisation.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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