RESEARCH ARTICLE

The emotional labour of teleworkers conducting online counselling during Covid-19.

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Abstract
Drawing on emotional labour theory, this paper explores the barriers to emotionally complex telework, with a specific focus on the space, interface and pace of work. We examine the working lives of mental health counsellors who adapted from in-person delivery to online delivery whilst working from home, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Our qualitative data set comprises of semi-structured online interviews with 31 counsellors across the United Kingdom. Findings reveal that boundary issues, increased technical interruptions, increased screen time and associated fatigue, and increased contact-ability due to digitalisation were key barriers to conducting emotionally complex tasks and exacerbated the emotional labour of participants creating more negative outcomes. This resulted in heightened emotion management in the home space, emotional dissonance, stress and in some cases, burn-out.

KEYWORDS
counselling, COVID-19, emotional labour, telework, working from home

INTRODUCTION

Working from home (WFH) became ubiquitous for many categories of workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hodder, 2020; Rofcanin & Anand, 2020), and research suggests that the increased prevalence of WFH is a global trend that will 'stick' (McCartney, 2022). This trend marks a dramatic shift in how work is performed and experienced. For many service sector employees who were involved in emotional labour, the transition to WFH was especially significant. Specifically, mental health services are essential for economic recovery (Ferenstein, 2021) and the pandemic has changed how mental health systems operate with the increased provision of online services (Fiorillo & Gorwood, 2020). As demand for 'talking therapies' grows and warnings of a looming mental health crisis materialise (Iqbal, 2020), this raises important questions about counsellors' experiences of practising emotion-based telework.

Emotional labour, or the capacity to manage, suppress or induce emotions and the expression of deep or surface feelings in a commercialised (wage exchange) environment (Hochschild, 1983), is a vital part of the counselling role (Mann, 2004). However, emotional labour is also associated with adverse consequences for counsellors' health and well-being, which can consequently affect the delivery and outcomes of treatment (Singh & Hassard, 2021). The 'enforced' home-working (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020) of the pandemic presents an opportunity to evaluate the efficacy of online counselling from a workers' perspective, specifically with the enhanced use of video-conferencing technology such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Webex as a replacement for in-person contact. Whilst there is research that examines the emotional labour process of in-person counsellors (e.g., Singh & Hassard, 2021) and the benefits and drawbacks of teleworking (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003), there is little research that investigates the emotional labour process of teleworkers conducting emotionally complex tasks *online*, such as online mental health counselling.

This research is significant because emotional management is integral for many workers, especially in customer or client-facing roles. Both organisations and workers increasingly value emotional intelligence or using emotion-based skills at work (Kessler et al., 2015). However, there is limited research on workers' experiences of conducting emotional labour in an online environment. Our work addresses this gap and contributes to two distinct literatures. First, we contribute to the WFH literature, also called telework literature. We build on the idea that the pace (Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2021) and space (Felstead & Henseke, 2017) of work have altered the telework experience and argue that they can represent a barrier to emotion-based telework counselling. Second, we contribute to the emotional labour literature by examining how the technological interface influences the lived experience of performing emotional labour online. To better understand the emotional labour process of service workers, we explore the experiences of online counsellors who had to transition rapidly from in-person work to online work during the pandemic. Whilst we acknowledge the many positives or enablers of teleworking (see Boell et al., 2016), our focus is specifically on the barriers and challenges participants experienced.

The contextual environment of online counselling: Space, interface, and pace of work

Counsellors play a central role in mental health provision. Before the pandemic, online counselling had been practised since the 1960s (Grohol & Kraus, 2004) and the precursor to

using a video conferencing platform was telephone or email counselling. However, online counselling was considered a niche within the counselling profession. It tended to address a specific demand, such as providing counselling for clients in remote geographical areas (e.g., Tirel et al., 2020) or offering greater anonymity for clients. In-person counselling was more commonly offered by practitioners, with online services viewed as pervasive and demand-led (Baker & Ray, 2011). The sociology of work, particularly the telework literature, highlights three significant challenges that online workers may face while WFH: (1) issues related to space, (2) challenges with the interface, and (3) the potential impact on the pace of work (Grant et al., 2023; Messenger & Gschwind, 2016; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2021; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021). These problems, most notably the technological interface ones, are substantiated within the counselling literature and online counselling debates.

First, creating a private space within a home environment is challenging and shaped by socioeconomic factors. Counsellors need to have both a private space in their home where counselling conversations will not be overheard and they are required to offer a safe emotional space for the clients to express themselves. Mann (2004) highlights that contextual 'space', subject to interruptions and bounded by privacy rules, can impact the emotional labour of workers. Examples include, home workers being interrupted by the doorbell, or technical glitches (bandwidth) interrupting the flow of conversation and impeding deep listening. Additionally, home space may not allow for a separate place to 'decompress' from emotionally complex interactions. Goffman (1959) described the organisational provision of physical space, such as a break room, as good work design with implications for alleviating emotional labour dysfunctions. The counselling literature has supported the critique on spacial issues (Stoll et al., 2020). However, their main focus was on job processes, client outcomes and client experiences, rather than on counsellors' experiences of work (e.g., Mallen et al., 2005).

Second, the interface can be problematic. Within the counselling profession, there has always been some scepticism towards online counselling, and researchers have sought to identify both the barriers and enablers (Baker & Ray, 2011; Paterson et al., 2019; Stoll et al., 2020). Research shows that the online environment changes how counsellors and clients experience the therapeutic relationship. The differences experienced by counsellors can be positive and negative. Some studies (e.g., McBeath et al., 2020) emphasised increased client contact and connection online, while other studies (e.g., Békés & Aefjes-van Doorn, 2020) noted that therapists found it more difficult to read emotions and express empathy online, for example due to the lack of non-verbal cues (Baker & Ray, 2011). Online counselling before the pandemic was viewed as a good supplement or adjunct to in-person sessions, allowing for more creativity with technological modalities (Stoll et al., 2020). Post-pandemic, this raises questions about the efficacy of a large-scale move towards online counselling, whilst acknowledging the 'normalisation' of tech-driven working practices as an outcome (Carroll & Conboy, 2020).

Third, the pace of work changes online (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021) and facilitates what Hochschild (2012, p. 121) refers to as a 'speed up' of work. In her example, she referred to air-cabin crew who had less time to complete emotion tasks due to increased volume of work, with more passengers. Online work, as described in the teleworking literature, offers benefits and drawbacks to speed and pacing of work. Reduced commute time and greater autonomy when WFH to some extent alleviate time pressure (Schulze et al., 2023). Fewer social interactions speed up the pace at which work can be accomplished (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021). Pacing of working time is utilised by time pressured workers as a coping mechanism and a positive aspect of flexibility. Contrastingly, the pace of work has increased with more frequent usage of technology and enhanced contact-ability, leading to over work, exhaustion and psychosomatic

health complaints amongst workers (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). However, these debates are dependent on levels of worker autonomy. Thulin and Vilhelmson (2021) argue that highly qualified teleworkers are in control and setting the pace of telework when compared to less qualified staff. Hassard and Morris (2022) counter this in their study of managers. They described the 'ubiquitous acceptance culture' of voluntary, technology enabled overwork, suggesting this is compliance from highly qualified staff, rather than free choice over pace of work and working time. These challenging working practices have significant implications for workers and subsequently clients, where the therapeutic relationship is impacted or frustrated by the conditions of work.

WFH online

The literature describes WFH online as contradictory and paradoxical, presenting both 'good' and 'bad' outcomes. Scholars argue that experiences depend on workers' context, sector, and personal preferences (Boell et al., 2016). At its best, it can be seen as a 'win-win' for workers and employers due to the associated well-being and potential work-life balance benefits. It is described as technologically feasible, flexible, autonomous, and desirable (Bryant, 2000), allowing the opportunity to combine work with caring responsibilities (Awotoye et al., 2020; Wheatley, 2012). Post-pandemic, it is increasingly acceptable for both men and women (Abendroth et al., 2022).

The negatives, however, are also widely recognised. These include worker experiences of isolation and work intensification (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010), the inability to switch off (Felstead & Henseke, 2017), gender-orientated boundary issues often described as 'the double shift' for women (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Wheatley, 2012) and exhaustion due to high job demands (Sardeshmukh et al., 2012). Specifically, the challenges associated with boundary management are prevalent in the literature (Rofcanin & Anand, 2020). Wöhrmann and Ebner (2021) identified indirect links between teleworkers' health and working time, boundary management, and the interrupted nature of digitised telework. They argue that the high work demands associated with telework can lead to psychosomatic health problems and stress.

To acknowledge the increasing prevalence of emotionally complex telework, we utilise an emotional labour lens (Hochschild, 1983) to understand workers' experiences of conducting emotional labour online. Counselling is an excellent example of emotion-based telework because of the nature of the job's role and responsibilities. However, many other teleworking jobs require deep acting and emotional dissonance, for example in healthcare, where online consultations have become more normalised and commonplace, or technical professions with a customer care element (see Vennila & Vivekanandan, 2017).

Emotional labour

Counsellors practice emotional labour by expressing healthy emotions to support the client and regulate or manage any unwanted emotions that may not benefit the client (Van Der Merwe, 2019). Emotional labour can be defined as:

> Firstly, requiring face to face or voice to voice contact with the public, secondly requiring the workers to produce an emotional state in another person [e.g.,

> Service user] and thirdly to allow the employer to exercise a degree of emotional control over the emotional activities of employees (Hochschild, 2012, p. 147).

This definition pertains to regulating or managing expressions and feelings as part of a service worker's role. Early research by Hochschild (1983) focused on private sector service workers, especially air cabin crew. However, subsequent studies have shown that emotional labour, commodified through wage exchange, extends beyond service workers to encompass not-for-profit and public sectors (Brook, 2009) and self-employed workers (Cohen, 2010; Terry et al., 2021). These findings hold particular relevance for counselling services in the third sector and those affiliated with health or educational organisations (e.g., NHS, schools, and universities). Such counselling services often employ workers in various nonstandard and contracted work arrangements (Jones, 2016).

The current discussions in the emotional labour literature predominantly revolve around in-person workers operating within physical office spaces or organisational premises. These workers include flight attendants (Bolton & Boyd, 2003), retail service workers (Ikeler, 2016), hairdressers (Harness et al., 2021), home credit workers (Terry et al., 2021) and psychologists providing in-person therapy (Clarke et al., 2023). While earlier literature covers telework, such as call centre workers using phone information and communication technology (Nath, 2011), there is limited recent material on other types of online workers.

The distinction between emotional labour and emotion work has high conceptual validity. Emotion *work* involves managing emotions or pretending to feel certain emotions, which is common to all social interactions. Hochschild (1983) originally rooted emotional labour in structures of employment, the result of workers selling their labour-power as exchange value. She distinguished emotion work as those same acts performed in a private context where they have use-value. Crucially emotional labour is sold for a wage and that is why it can be alienating, not because it involves pretending to feel certain emotions (Cohen, 2010). However, the debate moved between Marxist concepts of 'use' and 'exchange' value to distinctions between autonomy and control (Callahan & McCollum, 2002). Bolton (2005) argued that it is managerial control over workers emotions, rather than the sale of labour-power, that marks the transition from emotional work to emotional labour. This is a significant, if contested, premise (Brook, 2009) as Bolton's interpretation suggests workers have autonomy to manage emotions in the workplace and may 'gift' extra emotion work to customers as an act of philanthropy. Brook (2009) has countered this idea, arguing that workers 'emotional gifts' are commodified by virtue of the fact that employers understand that the final service product is their property, whether planned or not. Cohen (2010) further argues that even where workers are self-employed, and subject to no managerial control, dependence on clients for income may influence worker-client relations and subsequent performance and outcomes of emotional labour.

In some service work, emotional labour may involve surface acting. However, the work of counsellors differs significantly due to the necessity of presenting an 'emotionally limber' self (Van Der Merwe, 2019), which is beneficial to the client. The professional norms of counselling require practitioners to empathise with clients authentically, aligning with the counsellors' value system of caring behaviour. This presentation of the emotional self aligns more closely with Hochschild's (2012) concept of deep acting, making it a central aspect of counselling work. Deep acting in counselling involves more than surface acting (managing outward behaviour and expressing emotions), as counsellors endeavour to genuinely experience or feel the emotions they wish (or are expected) to display. Mann (2004) argues that emotional labour is a

critical feature of work-life for counsellors due to the potentially severe consequences of genuine emotions leaking in their interactions with clients (compared to other professions). Additionally, the lengthy emotional nature of client interactions and the in-person element further contribute to the significance of emotional labour in counselling work.

In the counselling profession, many counsellors acknowledge using their emotional skills as an integral aspect of their career choice and attraction to the occupation. Tolich (1993) posits that emotional labour, when performed as part of specific job tasks, may not always lead to alienation, nor is it entirely under the organisation's control. Emotional labour can facilitate better job performance and directly influence associated outcomes such as job satisfaction (Callahan and McCollum, 2002). For example, some workers may positively embrace the organisation's prescribed feelings rules (Plummer, 2018). In contrast, others engage in 'faking it,' leading to negative emotions and a form of emotional dissonance or 'depersonalisation,' where workers become disconnected from their genuine emotional expressions. Hochschild (1983) emphasised that this detachment can lead to stress and burnout. Thus, a nuanced perspective emerges, illustrating that emotional labour can generate positive and negative outcomes. The evolving landscape of counselling provision, characterised by increased online services and altered contractual practices, such as utilising home space by workers, emerges as a prominent aspect potentially impacting the experiences of emotional labour and the physical labour process of counsellors.

We suggest that counsellors may encounter novel challenges associated with online work's space, interface, and pace. In addition to facing the emotional dissonance familiar to in-person emotion workers (Van Der Merwe, 2019), counsellors also navigate boundary and technological challenges as online home-workers. Consequently, we pose the following research questions:

1. To what extent is 'working from home' (WFH) experienced as a barrier for online counsellors practising emotion-based telework?
2. To what extent is video conferencing technology experienced as a barrier to online emotional labour?

METHOD

We used an exploratory qualitative approach to answer the research questions, which is appropriate given our interest in an underexplored and complex phenomenon (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Our analysis focused on in-depth, semi-structured online interviews with 31 practising counsellors (see Table 1). Our interviews focused on identifying the critical barriers to emotionally complex work online and understanding the emotional labour process of online mental health counsellors.

Participant context: Pre-pandemic and during-pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic represented a massive shift in working practices towards telework. Specifically, this affected where and how participants conducted their work. We conducted our research during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, October 2020—June 2021. Participants were recruited through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

TABLE 1 Demographic data.

Gender	n	%
Female	26	83.9
Male	5	16.1
Total	*n = 31*	*100*
Age	**n**	**%**
20–30	1	3.2
30–40	6	19.4
40–50	4	12.9
50–60	6	19.4
60–70	3	9.7
70+	1	3.2
No information:	10	32.3
Total	*n = 31*	*100*
Highest qualification	**n**	**%**
ET therapy	1	3.2
UG and CBT	1	3.2
PG Dip	13	41.9
PG Dip and CBT	1	3.2
MSc	11	35.5
MSc and CBT	1	3.2
PhD	1	3.2
No information:	2	6.5
Total	*n = 31*	*100*
Specific online counselling qualification	**n**	**%**
Yes	7	22.6
No	22	71
No information:	2	6.5
Total	*n = 31*	*100*
Type of organisation	**n**	**%**
Charity/third sector	7	22.6
Private practice	4	12.9
Schools & college	5	16.1
University	14	45.2
Police	1	3.2
Total	*n = 31*	*100*

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

Gender		*n*	%
Work experience		*n*	%
1–5 years		16	51.6
6–10 years		8	25.8
11–15 years		4	12.9
20+ years		3	9.7
Total		*n = 31*	*100*
Type of employment		*n*	%
Full-time employed		7	22.6
Atypical employment			
Self-employed full-time		3	9.7
Several part-time Jobs		14	45.2
Working contract to contract		7	22.6
Total		*n = 31*	*100*

(BACP), the largest UK professional association for counsellors and psychotherapists (currently 60,000 members), plus other known counselling organisations and services.

Before the pandemic, most of our participants worked from premises, including both organisational premises and rented counselling rooms. Only one participant offered counselling from a home office. During the data collection period, all participants worked exclusively from home, except for two individuals who also conducted in-person counselling on a part-time basis. One participant worked in an NHS mental health clinic, while the other operated in a school setting, supporting the children of key workers.

Before the pandemic, roughly 22.5% of our participants were offering some amount of online counselling as part of a package of services and held an online counselling qualification. This increased to 100% of the cohort offering online counselling during the period of data collection. Pandemic training provision was mostly self-initiated or accessed through a professional association such as the BACP.

Data collection

The research has adopted an abductive approach to data collection and analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), which worked iteratively and recursively with empirical and theoretical materials to understand the emotional labour process of online mental health counsellors. We first read books, articles, and professional reports on counselling online. We then had an initial set of interviews with counsellors, wrote memos, and held discussions within the research team about our emerging findings. Through this process, we understood that while home working allowed counsellors more flexibility and potential for improved work-life balance, many reported work intensification and a more complex and negative experience of emotional labour. At this stage, we refocused the study on understanding the working lives of mental health

counsellors and the intersection of online work and emotion management in the home space. We revised our interview schedule based on our emerging insights to focus more explicitly on work intensification.

Interview protocol

Due to the pandemic-related public health measures, interviews were conducted virtually, using MS Teams and WebEx video conferencing platforms. This approach provided certain advantages in allowing us to recruit from a geographically diverse population, use computer-assisted transcription, and experience using a method that paralleled the phenomena under investigation (Lo Iacono et al., 2016). The main limitation of this technique was that technological problems at times could interrupt the flow of the interview and had the potential to impede deep listening.

Interviews were recorded and lasted between 50 and 75 min. Our semi-structured interview schedule covered several topics, including boundary issues, technical interruptions, increased screen time and associated fatigue, and increased contact-ability due to digitalisation. We anchored the interviews with questions about the details of their working lives (e.g., "Did you deal with the revelation of a traumatic event differently in a home environment? How do you, e.g., leave it at the office?") to elicit examples of participants' experiences that could help us answer the research questions.

Demographics

Table 1 reports the demographics of the study population. The 31 participants are counselling practitioners based in the United Kingdom and offered counselling services throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Most participants (83.9%) were female and held a PG Diploma or higher qualification (87%); however, only seven participants (22.6%) had a specific qualification for providing online counselling.

In this study, participants identified their primary employer, which included university counselling services, charity/third sector funded practices, private practice, school/college counselling services in the United Kingdom, and the police force. Additionally, some participants mentioned other secondary employers, such as the NHS and a private hospital. To categorise the contractual arrangements, we distinguished between typical and atypical employment. Typical employment was defined as full-time permanent positions (22.6%), while atypical employment encompassed fully self-employed roles (9.7%), individuals with multiple part-time roles (45.2%), and those with temporary, fixed-term contracts (22.6%).

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed for analysis and participant names changed for anonymity. Data were coded using Nvivo 12 software. We then used a thematic analysis technique, as Braun and Clarke (2006) set out. Initial codes of enablers/barriers of home working and enablers/barriers of online work generated 58 descriptive codes which, when re-categorised to account for duplication, similarity and crossover, were reduced. We cross-referenced the

identified barriers and enablers to telework within our collaborative research team. We then developed a basic coding scheme and identified three core constructs that underlie our codes. These constructs are based on a comprehensive review of the literature and a comparison of data across participants. The three core constructs were space, interface and pace of work (see Figure 1). Space (1) encompasses the home working environment, including challenges related to boundaries, potential interruptions, and the overall impact of the work setting. Interface (2) refers to the technological environment. This construct addresses the use of video conferencing platforms to substitute the embodied in-person experience, as well as the experience of screen work, which may be susceptible to interruptions or technical glitches. Pace (3) relates to working time control, exploring the opportunities for decoupling working hours and the potential intensification of the working day within the online at-home environment.

In the second analysis phase, we specifically focused on the barriers identified and examined the associated emotional labour themes. The conceptualisation of themes is described by Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 41) as, "patterns of shared meaning underpinned or united by a core concept." These shared meanings were generated by examining how barriers to online counselling were emotionally experienced and how they altered counsellors' previous, pre-pandemic, emotional labour practices. The themes encompassed the following aspects: increased emotion management, emotional dissonance, seepage of authentic emotions, distractions and interruptions affecting emotional labour, distanced communications and experiences of exhaustion or burnout. For example, our analysis revealed that technical and spatial interruptions experienced by counsellors resulted in more significant emotional dissonance, as they found it more challenging to embody the feeling rules, such as 'being present,' while simultaneously dealing with the interruptions. This in-depth analysis allowed
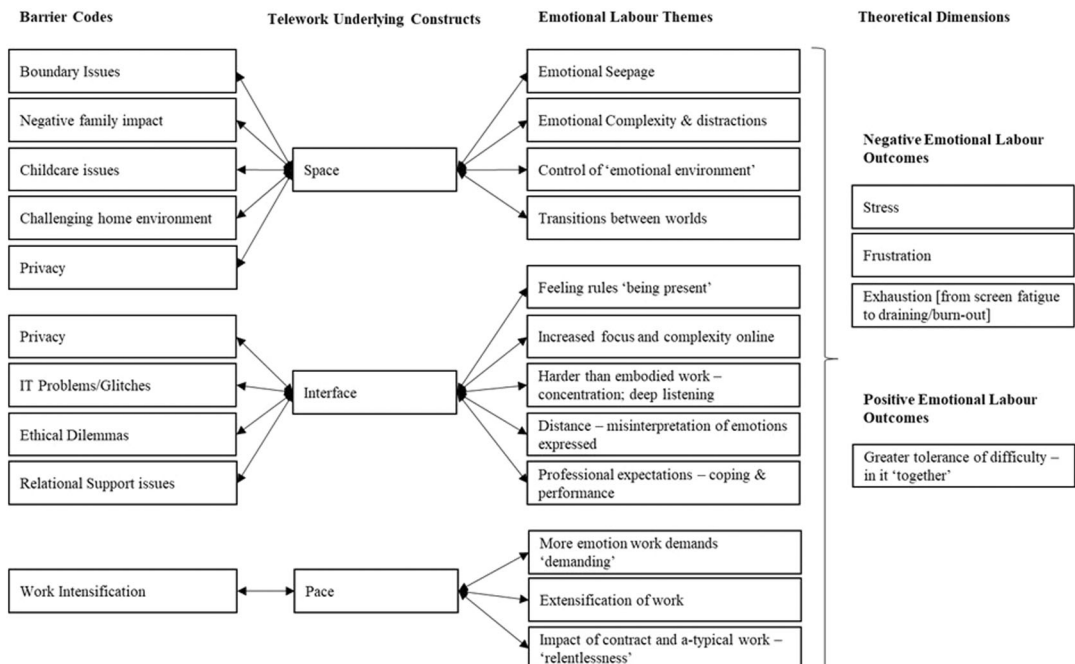

FIGURE 1 Data structure.

us to better understand and distinguish between positive and negative experiences of emotional labour in online counselling.

FINDINGS

Spatial challenges for online home-workers

RQ1 *: To what extent is 'working from home'* (*WFH*) *experienced as a barrier for* online *counsellors practising emotion-based telework?*
The data on home-working reveals that spatial distractions, lack of processing time, and lack of spatial control increased the likelihood of boundary conflicts and stress arising from spatial tensions. This tension contributed to negative experiences of emotional labour.

Distractions and the inability to perform emotional labour due to either the distraction itself or the fear of being distracted became a pervasive theme of the interviews. Practitioners outlined various circumstances where the people they lived with (e.g., family members, flatmates) had to adapt their behaviour to accommodate the counsellor's work. Specifically, the nature of counselling, which requires deep listening and the capacity to offer a safe, private space, became more difficult to re-create for many practitioners, resulting in their stress and anxiety. This lack of spatial control created a more complex 'emotional environment' and contributed to feelings of stress and dissonance.

> It was difficult trying to carve out some space, and also silence for me is incredibly important because if I'm listening to a client who's crying, I don't want to hear other people in the house. [Int 2]

Participants were candid about the negative impact of WFH on their personal relationships and how they dealt with managing emotions as part of their work and managing emotions in the home environment with partners and family members. Managing emotions within private relationships would be classified as emotion work, not emotional labour. However, because this management is due to the paid performance of work in the home environment, this can also impact their emotional labour. The following quote illustrates emotional seepage from the commercialised work environment into the home environment. Jenny reveals that she had to show 'respect' to her husband by moving her work to another part of the house (upstairs). The volume and quantity of work she performed at home impacted him negatively. It controlled what spaces he could use in his private home, and the intrusion ate into his perceptions of private time.

> He couldn't come into the kitchen if he heard me talking. However, I always tried very respectfully to make sure I came up here to do it. I know the impact on him has been about how much I'm working. [Int 23]

Similarly, Moira enacted strict control of the home environment and how her family members were required to behave and interact within that space. Her threat to her teenage children of '*don't you dare*' highlights the challenge of interruptions. The strong imperative to control the work environment to create privacy is coupled with the gendered aspect of

emotional labour, where women often take on more domestic responsibilities. The act of balancing work responsibilities with childcare introduces an increased level of emotional complexity. This complexity involves negotiating the use of space and ensuring privacy to serve the clients effectively while protecting children from exposure to potentially inappropriate adult content associated with the work.

> [I'm]Briefing my kids to within an inch of their lives. You know,' when I go upstairs and that door was shut, don't you dare knock on that door unless in the direst of emergencies ...and being aware that your family were wondering about your work, who are you talking to, what are you talking to them about? [Int 28]

Whilst losing the commute was cited as an advantage to WFH, participants also noted the time and space they had lost. Specifically, the ability to process work within a neutral 'in-between' space was crucial for counsellors in facilitating the subsiding of work-related emotions. This space allowed counsellors to transition into their private lives effectively. This form of emotional management is a crucial skill for counsellors; however, the home space hinders the transition time. Participants provided multiple examples of their challenges in managing emotions and making the necessary transition while counselling in the home environment. These difficulties were most notable during sessions involving traumatic disclosures.

> Whereas before, I had the commute to do that, but [now] because it's in the house, it's right behind the door and I open the door, and someone saying, "what's for lunch", it would give me a splitting headache if I tried to sort of go through the two worlds too quickly. [Int 3]

Whilst some counsellors could rationalise boundary challenges, others felt highly stressed by changes to the work environment. Gordon (Int 13) described gaining a shared understanding with his clients, who acknowledged they would be subject to interruptions. He described this as a shift in the relationship, '*We became very tolerant and accepting and patient with each other*', and he formed a positive view of WFH. However, Anette experienced the changing demands more negatively, feeling wholly depleted. Her change in the work environment led to burnout and sickness absence, highlighting the darker side of telework.

> I have experienced stress and for the first time in my own working career I've been off. I was just completely depleted, and I've never experienced that before. So that would have been after about nine months of working from home. [Int 29]

Technological challenges for online home workers

RQ2 : *To what extent is video conferencing technology experienced as a barrier to online emotional labour?*
   The data reveals that technical interruptions, the emotional distance associated with online work, greater complexity in managing emotions, altered pacing of work, and varied accounts of autonomy in scheduling, contributed to work intensification and a more

complex and negative experience of emotional labour. The combination of the spatial challenges with the interface and pacing challenges increased the barriers to online emotional labour.

Zoom, Webex, Microsoft Teams, and several other video conferencing platforms presented various interface-related issues, which can be grouped in the category of technical interruptions. Participants reported challenges with sound quality, bandwidth issues, frozen video feeds, limited visuals (e.g., camera pointing at the floor) and difficulties initially connecting or getting online. Both the counsellor and the client encountered similar potential problems. Counsellors took extensive measures to address these issues, such as investing in higher-cost Wifi with faster connectivity, preparing clients for potential problems and having backup technology available, like a phone call. The occurrence of technical interruptions gave rise to three main issues. Firstly, these interruptions harmed the quality of the client-counsellor relationship and consequently affected the level of service delivered to the client. Secondly, the absence of visual cues resulting from these interruptions significantly impacted the embodied experience of counselling, leading to a decline in the quality of mutual understanding between the counsellor and the client. Lastly, the continuous technical disruptions contributed to the heightened stress and exhaustion the counsellor experienced.

The following excerpt highlights the importance of avoiding technical interruptions. Gareth describes needing to have an affinity for and comfort with the technology so that the counsellor can focus on the relationship and service provided. The 'feeling rule' (Hochschild, 1983) for the counsellor is being attentive so the client feels 'heard' and 'held'. However, the technical interruptions could obstruct the feeling rule, creating emotional dissonance.

> I think it is important because you need to feel comfortable that this is, a good safe environment to work in, you don't want to be distracted by the technology because, you really need to be present and listening to your clients. So, you don't want to be worrying about 'oh, my God, the broadbands' just dropped. [Int 15]

Working harder to build relationships became a pervasive theme of the study. This 'hard work' is described as focused listening and visual concentration to overcome technical limitations. This emotional labour required counsellors to demonstrate patience, allowing more time for trust and rapport to build and the capacity to ignore or resolve sound-related issues. Background noise and sound cutting out were common problems impeding deep listening.

> I find it more stressful working remotely from home I think maybe I've had to work harder to have patience and that's impacted on the relationship especially if I can't hear somebody very well or there's problems with the connection. The relationship has been more difficult to build because of it. [Int 28]

Traditional counselling is described as 'embodied' work, where the counsellors can see the whole person and understand how the client may feel from their physical cues, such as tapping a foot impatiently or wringing hands anxiously. This experience contrasts with what was seen and heard on video conferencing platforms. These more stressful working conditions added to the complexity of emotional labour and contrast with the embodied experience of relationship building. Counsellors highlighted where clients either purposefully or accidentally obscured

what could be seen of themselves, requiring more effort to interpret what the client was trying to communicate.

> You can only see half of them, you might only see the shoulders and the head so you're not getting the full story of how the body is. So you are working a little bit harder trying to take in what they're saying just from what language their using. [Int 30]

The deep acting crucial to counsellors' work, emphasised by Van Der Merwe (2019) and Mann (2004), may be compromised when counsellors perceive their emotional response as misinterpreted or inadequate, attributed to the 'distant' nature of the interface and online communication. Susan worried that clients wouldn't recognise her genuinely empathetic responses due to the lack of supporting embodied gestures. These barriers make emotional labour more challenging and complex to perform, requiring more effort as part of the labour bargain.

> I show a lot of empathy in my body language, without saying anything. Quite often I'm worried that that might not shine through, that they may not pick up on that empathy. When you hear it getting said and you're not in that room it sounds, to me, sometimes hollow. [Int 11]

The pace of online work

The pace of work, which relates to either having to work faster or having to complete a higher volume of work within the same timeframe, was revealed as the critical aggravating factor in the emotional labour of online counsellors. Many participants reported a notable increase in their work volume. Moreover, regular periods of downtime, typically allocated for administrative tasks or professional development, were replaced with additional casework to meet client demands. This evidence highlights the significance of pacing work and mirroring the natural ebb and flow of work in the home environment. Specifically, participants noted that contact time had increased online, with workers perceiving they '*get more done*' at home. Most participants noted that they were working longer hours as technology enabled greater access to work and due to fewer cancellations of online sessions during the pandemic. For example, Moira described being accessible 'all hours' whilst WFH. This increase cannot be solely attributed to video conferencing technology on laptops and other devices; the utilisation of complementary technologies, such as smartphones, also influences it.

> My NHS clients, they would phone at all hours of day or night. They would phone at the weekends. They would text. I had one that would regularly send the most distressing texts, at sort of nine, ten pm at night, or at the weekend. [Int 27]

The online environment essential for WFH exacerbates problems of overwork, where scheduling is unrealistic and does not take into account the need for breaks between meetings. Specifically, appropriate breaks in online work are seen as crucial due to the screen fatigue incurred and the increased intensity of deep listening and visual stimulus online. The evidence

revealed that conducting back-to-back counselling sessions or meetings led to both physical and mental exhaustion. Work intensification occurred where there was reduced dead time or work rest and increased overtime among workers. In response to this barrier, managers who understand the importance of breaks between meetings could address it by implementing more considerate scheduling practices or granting workers greater autonomy in setting the timing of counselling sessions or meetings. However, the data revealed that organisations frequently struggled to address the issues counsellors were experiencing and that where formal policies for teleworking existed, they had been drafted pre-pandemic and did not account for an 'enforced' home working scenario with large-scale uptake.

Access to supervision (counselling for counsellors) and supportive line management were identified as crucial coping mechanisms, notably when formally provided. Nevertheless, most participants depended on self-care techniques, such as engaging in informal 'WhatsApp' chat groups or taking breaks by walking outside when feeling overwhelmed. Talia describes WFH online as 'robotic' and rails against managerial assumptions about the capacity to cope without sufficient organisational support and adaptations. The feeling rule offered was 'you should be able to cope'. As the data revealed, online work shaped workers' experience of both the physical and emotional labour process. It is essential to avoid assuming that counsellors, even if they have an affinity for and enjoy emotionally complex tasks, will not experience it as a negative emotional labour process in altered working environments.

> We got told quite a lot that, 'You guys are counsellors you should know how to cope with this,' and we're like, 'we're people and we've never been in this situation before'. There was the expectation that we were all just completely okay, because we were told that we were trained to deal with this. A lot of us got frustrated because you're really missing the fact that we're not robots. [Int 25]

The prevalence of atypical employment in counselling is substantial, and participants expressed the challenge of balancing job insecurity with uncertainty regarding their working hours and income. They also highlighted the necessity to seek more work opportunities continually. Laura's experience demonstrates the relentless pace of online work, exacerbated by the nature of working contract to contract. Even if employers intend to set limits on work, the actual working conditions render these intentions as mere lip service, as counsellors may lack the control and autonomy to decline work opportunities. Despite self-employment offering autonomy in decision-making, it can sometimes be misleading, as the job and income insecurity linked to atypical work can influence perceptions around the opportunity to say no to clients or to overwork.

> There's also the relentlessness of working like this. You know, we've been told not to work back-to-back with clients, but sometimes that's quite difficult to organise, so I think it kind of highlights the real need for limiting the caseload, I'm only on kind of yearly contracts...working from contract to contract through the summer. [Int 14]

Outcomes of emotion based telework

Acknowledging that not all participants reported negative outcomes, the data revealed a workforce at risk of exhaustion. Despite attempts by some organisations to implement new

teleworking policies, these measures were based on earlier understandings of WFH and were not specifically developed for large remote workforces. Participants primarily practised self-care but did not benefit from sufficient ameliorating working practices to overcome the negative outcomes. In this excerpt, Anne-Marie describes online counselling as 'draining,' attributing it to performing emotional labour on the screen, but she also contextualises the tiredness within the pandemic's circumstances.

> The one word that just keeps coming back to me is draining. It's much more draining the emotion work on the screen than it is face to face and that combined with all the other stresses of just the pandemic and working from home has meant that for me it's been a really, really draining experience. [Int 29]

The final excerpt, in particular, highlights the challenges of conducting all work on the screen and the expectations set by managers or clients for maintaining the same level of counselling input under radically different conditions. Similar to Hochschild's (2012) findings with air cabin crew, the participant experienced exacerbated feelings of exhaustion due to the changed work conditions and expressed a desire for greater control over working hours to allow for more time away from the screen.

> Personally, I've found it really hard, the expectation that we were okay to offer the same level of counselling input. I think it's just exhausting, and I think I wish that we could have had more time away from the screen ... It took longer to process everything, I have felt quite close to burnout [Int 25]

The feeling of being accessible at all hours has been widely documented. This finding is significant as it highlights potentially unsafe working practices. It also contributes to emotional dissonance and depersonalisation associated with emotional labour, as counsellors navigate the isolated nature of home working alongside increased contact-ability in telework. This data reveals counsellors experiencing a sense of detachment from 'normality.' Such emotional dissonance, balancing feelings of isolation with overwhelming contact, may adversely affect mental and physiological health, aligning with the adverse stress outcomes described as the dark side of telework (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021).

DISCUSSION

This paper investigates barriers to online counselling telework through an emotional labour lens, focusing on the space, interface, and pace of work. Addressing this topic is essential, as the rush to increase mental health service provision through online techniques in the UK post-COVID-19 pandemic risks overshadowing workers' voices. This research sheds light on the potential adverse outcomes associated with telework (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021) and emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012). The convergence of these work types leads to the reasonable conclusion that it has the potential to negatively impact workers, resulting in stress, exhaustion, and burnout. Nevertheless, we also recognise the practical and desirable aspects of WFH online, where individuals can achieve work-life balance and maintain service provision/employment. We establish a picture of working practices during the pandemic that highlight the changes in working conditions and outline the difficulties workers experienced without

sufficient ameliorating support measures. This study makes three theoretical contributions as follows:

First, this study emphasises the need for more privacy and boundary management in the working 'space' of emotional labour at home compared to other types of labour. It contributes to the literature on home working challenges and boundary maintenance (Anderson & Kelliher, 2020; Rofcanin & Anand, 2020). Our research aligns with Mann's (2004) argument that counsellors WFH may face difficulties performing emotional labour.

We observed changes in counsellors' emotional labour as they created 'rules' to limit interruptions in their home environments, particularly prevalent for those with caring responsibilities, leading to gendered impacts. These 'rules' aimed to counter privacy and boundary challenges but may impact deep acting, diverting focus from genuine emotion embodiment. Counsellors also off-loaded stress onto partners or cohabitees to cope with increased pace and intensity.

We found evidence of 'emotional seepage' (Mann, 2004) in the personal home-relationship environment, contributing to household stress. Our findings are consistent with the telework literature (Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021), suggesting that boundary management challenges in home-based work can lead to psychosomatic and stress-related outcomes. This analysis extends our understanding of the 'space' of emotional labour and how the relationship of emotion labour is not just limited to the trio actors of the worker, the organisation and the service user but extends to the family and co-habitus relationships. The employment relationship intrudes into the private space of the home, affecting the household beyond the worker. This has socioeconomic as well as gendered implications, as those who can afford to buy privacy, with larger properties and home help, have the advantage.

Second, we contribute to the emerging literature exploring outcomes and experiences of telework in the new digital era (Felstead & Henseke, 2017; Hodder, 2020; Thulin & Vilhelmson, 2021; Wöhrmann & Ebner, 2021) and argue that teleworking causes emotion work in the private sphere to be felt as emotional labour, when private home space transitions to online working space. Drawing on the connections between the space, interface, and pace of work, we distinguish between the inherent intensity of emotional labour and the intensity imposed or exacerbated by new digital practices, such as video conferencing sessions. Notably, interface interruptions play a crucial role in emotional labour due to their impact on relationship building, trust, and deep listening. Missing a 'cue' can be seen as a lost opportunity for the counsellor or a conversation frustrated and stilted. These interruptions make the work more challenging and intense, frustrating the emotional labour process. Limited visual cues in video conferencing and the accelerated pace of online work compound these challenges.

Online counsellors can establish guidelines for conducting counselling sessions with clients, but they have limited discretion regarding workload and scheduling. This lack of control and autonomy contrasts starkly with the in-person embodied experience in office settings, where counsellors have more control over their working environment. This includes a separate private workspace, less dependence on technology, and the ability to pace their work using natural breaks and processing time. Combining these features with the increased complexity of online work intensifies the workload, leading to potential stress and depersonalisation. Focusing our analysis on the interconnections between space, interface, and pace of work deepens our understanding of the unique challenges faced by teleworking counsellors. Consequently, we argue that telework, which demands emotion management and may be chosen due to the appeal of caring emotionally for others, can result in a more negative emotional labour experience as autonomy and control diminish and work intensifies through digitalisation.

Finally, these findings contribute to the emotional labour literature, emphasising the importance of granting workers discretion over their emotional labour conditions (Terry et al., 2021). Our results indicate that despite employers advising against overwork, remote working policies were piecemeal and immature in their development, which had implications for management practices. To address the challenges identified, counsellors would benefit from greater autonomy in pacing their work and implementation of supportive employment practices. For example, this includes better scheduling of counselling sessions, ensuring sufficient breaks between sessions, up-skilling for technical proficiency and adapting to the home-working context, and providing increased processing time. Protection of 'non-work' time has become synonymous with the working-from-home 'revolution', and the results reveal the extent that participants were available to their clients, driven by managerial demands or market and economic forces that make it difficult to reject paid work. By reducing the burden of overload and exhaustion caused by pacing and blurred boundaries, teleworkers can better cope with unavoidable interruptions and challenges associated with online, at-home emotional labour. As such our findings underscore the need for more sophisticated and formalised remote working policies which reflect the widespread adoption of WFH post-pandemic. Policies should limit screen time and safeguard non-work time for permanent and atypical contract workers.

CONCLUSION

This study captures the lived experiences of 31 mental health counsellors, who transitioned from in-person to exclusively online therapy provision during the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing on emotional labour theory we explore how participants experience this change to their working conditions and practise complex emotional tasks, where the space of work moves into the home environment, the interface of work becomes technology focused video conferencing tools and the pace of work intensifies. We find that these changes offer both benefits and drawbacks. Notably, the emotional labour process is aggravated by the novelty of circumstances, parsimonious training provision, socioeconomic barriers impacting spatial privacy, digital interruptions, prevalence of a-typical contracts influencing autonomy and bargaining power in the employment relationship and a lack of maturely developed working-from-home policies. However, post-pandemic many employees express a preference for WFH and 'hybrid' working has become much more widespread. Much of telework involves customer service or care-oriented roles, with a high degree of emotion management as part of the role. This has implications for teleworkers and highlights where employers could and should adjust working policy and practice to mitigate against some of the negative outcomes. Additionally, as mental health demand expands post-pandemic, we stress the importance of considering the working practices of counselling providers and their online emotional labour process, to ensure successful service expansion across the United Kingdom. While counsellors willingly engage in emotionally complex tasks, the conditions of this online emotional labour can be improved and adapted for the new digital era.

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