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Emotional labour as experienced by women in leadership positions

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Orientation: In the workplace, emotional labour is said to be disproportionately performed by women. Research also seems to suggest that women in leadership roles practise emotional labour.

Research purpose: This study aimed to determine what work-related situations gave rise to experiences of emotional labour of women in leadership roles. Furthermore, to gain insight into the experiences of the emotional labour of women in leadership roles across industries within the South African context.

Motivation for the study: Within the South African workplace context, little is known about the workplace situations that give rise to specific emotional labour experiences among women in leadership roles.

Research approach/design and method: A qualitative approach was adopted, focusing on a phenomenological strategy, utilising the purposive and snowball sampling technique to acquire participants. Data saturation was reached at 12 participants and thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the raw data from the interviews.

Main findings: Themes identified from the data were leading through emotions, suppressing emotions to get work done, demonstrating emotional intelligence, avoiding emotional stereotyping and navigating the work-home emotional spillover.

Practical/managerial implications: Industrial psychologists are encouraged to create a culture where open conversations are encouraged and are a norm as a way for employees to engage constructively.

Contribution/value-add: This study adds to the literature on situations that give rise to experiences of emotional labour for women in leadership positions in South Africa and has important implications for organisations and women in leadership.

Keywords: emotional labour; women; leadership; emotions; experiences.

Introduction

There is growing evidence that suggests that displaying emotion as a woman in the workplace is frowned upon and these women could face some form of punishment (Beeson & Valerio, 2012; Brescoll, 2016; Kelly & Hutson-Comeau, 2000; Warner & Shields, 2007). For example, studies show that women prefer to manage the need to express their true felt emotions out of fear of receiving backlash (Brescoll, 2011; Heilman, 2001). The 'management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' is referred to as emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Previous research seems to suggest that women leaders are expected to engage in emotional labour more than their male counterparts (El-Alayli et al., 2018). Research also suggests that emotional labour is predominately performed by women in leadership roles (Vial & Cowgill, 2022). This is concerning considering that increased levels of emotional labour result in emotional exhaustion (Chen et al., 2023), and decreased work engagement (Yoo & Jeong, 2017) and task performance (Zhao et al., 2020).

The emotions considered appropriate for women to display at work are typically determined by gender stereotypes of women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Gender stereotypes tend to be more prevalent because traditionally, women were viewed as being responsible for caring for the home and the children. In general, stereotypes of women portray them as sensitive, nurturing and caring (Muller, 2019). Research on gender stereotypes indicates that the representation of women in leadership positions is stronger in contexts of care-giving such as healthcare and early education. Here communal and nurturing attributes are typical of a leader (Brescoll, 2016; Vial & Cowgill, 2022).

Suggesting that for women to succeed in their professional careers as leaders, they may need to conform to the stereotyped male attributes.

In the professional context, women in leadership roles are thought to have less leadership potential if they adhere to the traditional gender roles ascribed to women. For example, in a study conducted by Schein (1975), 167 female managers from various insurance companies across the United States were requested to describe women, men and successful middle managers. The findings revealed that the female participants associated being a successful manager with characteristics they ascribed to being male such as being competitive, ambitious and aggressive. The South African study by Pillay et al. (2019) reported that women leaders struggle to express their genuinely felt emotions due to the perceived lack of organisational support. Also, these women leaders choose to fake their emotions due to external pressures and expectations others have of them in their capacity as leaders. For women to succeed in their professional careers as leaders, they may need to conform to the stereotyped male attributes.

In conforming to the stereotyped male attributes, women run the risk of being criticised for adopting the mannerisms traditionally ascribed to men (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Smith et al., 2015). For example, Brescoll and Uhlmann (2008) showed that compared to men who displayed anger at work, women who expressed anger at work were conferred lower status and were less likely to be hired. Suggesting that the action of women displaying emotions in the workplace is not revered either.

A study by Timmers and colleagues (2003) revealed that participants were of the view that when expressing emotions at work, women would be more dysfunctional than males and the participants of the study were in support of statements such as 'When women become emotional easily, they are not suitable for management positions', and 'Emotional women are not functional in industrial life'. In fact, the slightest display of emotion by women is often regarded as women having little to no control over themselves (Hendriks et al., 2008).

To the best of our knowledge, few studies have investigated the specific workplace situations that give rise to specific emotional labour experiences. For example, Ngcobo et al. (2022) investigated the extent to which emotional labour influences the sales staff's ability to execute work tasks at the Greyville Racecourse in Durban, South Africa. Pienaar (2019) investigated the emotional labour strategies used by support staff across support departments in South African organisations. In contrast, Pillay et al. (2019) enquired about the emotional labour experiences among white women leaders in consulting organisations across South Africa, thus beyond the ethnic group from which the sample was derived, no inferences can be made regarding the generalisability of the study's findings.

Learning about the situations that give rise to the experience of emotional labour among women in leadership roles would provide meaningful insights into solutions that organisations could explore that would be helpful in the effective management of emotional expressions at work by women in leadership roles. Therefore, it is imperative that this be further explored. To this end, the objectives of the study were to develop an understanding and appreciation of the work-related situations that give rise to the experience of emotional labour of women in leadership roles and to explore their experiences of emotional labour. Based on the above, the current study sought to have the following questions answered:

- What situations in the workplace give rise to the experience of emotional labour?
- What is the experience of emotional labour by women in leadership roles?

Literature review
Emotional labour

Emotional labour refers to the process by which employees display their emotions in a way that satisfies any implicit or overt requirements set forth by their employer in relation to the expression of emotions (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Organisations have rules that define what is considered the proper and improper display of emotions (Diefendorff et al., 2011). There are three categories of display rules, namely, expressing positive emotions while suppressing negative emotions, expressing negative emotions while suppressing positive emotions, and remaining neutral (Côté & Morgan, 2002).

Typically, there are two forms of emotional labour strategies that an employee performs to regulate one's naturally felt emotions and expression of said emotions. These are surface acting and deep acting. When an employee performs surface acting, the goal is to suppress negative emotions and adhere to the organisation's rules regarding expressing emotions. In deep acting, the employee alters the genuinely felt emotions so that they feel and express the emotions required from their place of work (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Emotion regulation theory

According to Gross (2014), emotion regulation refers to an individual's ability to control his or her emotions, occurrence, timing, and experience and expression of emotions. The regulation of emotions may be employed to enhance, reduce or sustain felt emotions (Gross, 2014). Gross (1998, 2014) proposed two strategies of emotion regulation: antecedent-focused and response-focused.

The process through which an individual ascertains the cause of the emotion is known as antecedent-focused emotion regulation. Response-focused emotion regulation refers to the faking of emotional expressions once the emotion has been experienced. A key differentiator between the antecedent-focused and response-focused emotion regulation strategies is

that when using the antecedent-focused approach, a congruous emotional state is experienced with respect to genuinely felt emotions and expressed emotions. On the other hand, with the response-focused approach, an individual attempts to conceal true felt emotions in order to display emotions that are consistent with the expectations set by an organisation (Gross, 1998). According to Gross (1998), those who engage in the response-focused emotion regulation strategy are more likely to feel psychological stress.

Women leaders and emotional labour

In comparison to males in leadership roles, the expectation for women in similar roles is that they will be more empathetic of the feelings of others. The study by Prime et al. (2009) is one such demonstration, where female leaders were expected by research participants to be nurturing towards staff. In a similar vein, Cowgill and Vial (2022) suggested that such behaviours are considered less suitable in male-dominated industries such as finance and technology and more suitable in the education or the health science industries.

Although women in positions of leadership are required to exhibit emotions that will motivate their subordinates to achieve the organisation's objectives (Choi et al., 2014), sometimes it is expected of them to exhibit emotions that are the complete opposite of what they are feeling (Yang & Guy, 2015). Employees are said to experience reduced levels of emotional exhaustion and increased feelings of personal accomplishment when their naturally felt emotions are consistent with the organisation's required emotive displays (Näring et al., 2006). However, when an employee's genuine emotions are at odds with the emotions that the organisation requires him or her to express, the employee begins to regulate and manage the display of emotions and may experience internal conflict (Grandey, 2000).

Research approach

To meet the research objectives, the current study was conducted using qualitative research. Qualitative methods help the researcher answer questions about the participants' experiences, meaning they ascribe to their experiences, and points of view (Hammarberg et al., 2016). This approach allows researchers to understand perspectives regarding a phenomenon from the point of view of the participants (Bellamy et al., 2016). The researchers considered it appropriate for use based on the need to understand the phenomenon of emotional labour as experienced by women leaders. From an ontological perspective, women leaders perceive, comprehend and form reality through their lived experiences, according to constructivism (Gaudet & Robert, 2018). Given that the study emphasised the participants' subjective experiences and recognised the participants as informants and meaning constructors, an interpretivist epistemology was chosen (Willig, 2008).

Research setting and sampling

The study was conducted in various organisations across different industries in South Africa. In line with qualitative approaches, to meet the objectives of this study, the authors employed purposive sampling. This is the only type of sampling that would allow us to reach a sample that possessed a set of predefined characteristics that would help answer the research questions (Campbell et al., 2020). Moreover, snowball sampling or the process of acquiring more participants from the current participants in the study (Noy, 2008) was used. This method was utilised in the study because getting into contact with women in leadership positions was quite difficult due to their busy schedules and accessibility. In contrast, current women in leadership positions were more likely to know other women with shared characteristics. The inclusion criteria identified that participants had to be women in leadership positions, have more than 5 years' work experience in the corporate environment and be South African. Sampling stopped once data saturation was reached with 12 participants. Collecting data until the point of saturation (see Forero et al., 2018) assured us that we were likely to have obtained all the possible data on the topic for the group of participants. Table 1 reports the demographics of these participants.

Data gathering

The interviews were semi-structured, to encourage participants to freely share their lived emotional labour experiences. Semi-structured interviews are dialogues between a researcher and a participant that are directed by a set of predetermined but open-ended questions (Gilbert & Miles, 2005). Semi-structured interviews were employed in the study because it allowed the participants freedom to discuss their experiences but ensured that the research objective was addressed. The duration of the interviews ranged from 45 min to 1 h. The interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions such as: 'As a woman occupying a leadership role, do you resist expressing your true feelings at work? Please elaborate'. The researcher

TABLE 1: Profile of participants.

Code	Age (years)	Industry	Years' work experience	Position	Education level
P1	46	Import/export	14	Senior management	Degree
P2	35	Logistics	5	Senior management	Degree
P3	36	Financial	5	Senior management	Degree
P4	40	Health	10	Senior management	PhD
P5	50	Education	13	Senior management	Diploma
P6	43	Legal	7	Senior management	Degree
P7	46	Technology	8	Senior management	Degree
P8	60	Water utility	21	Senior management	Degree
P9	45	Energy	21	Senior management	Degree
P10	26	Food and beverage	5	Junior management	Degree
P11	49	Health	14	Senior management	Master's
P12	51	Education	10	Senior management	Diploma

conducted, recorded and transcribed the interviews via Microsoft Teams or Zoom, as preferred by the participant.

Data analysis

In keeping with the generic qualitative approach, thematic analysis was an appropriate method to analyse our data as it can be used across a wide range of approaches and epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analyses were utilised to analyse the raw data from the interviews to explicate our understanding of emotional labour as experienced by women in leadership. In conducting the analysis, firstly, the interviews were transcribed verbatim from the audio recording, the transcripts were read through to check for inaccuracies and then again, several times over to familiarise ourselves with the data. Secondly, the data were combed through and coded selectively to pick up on the data of interest based on the specific objectives. Like codes were grouped together and themes were searched for. Once these were established, they were reviewed and those that were too complex were broken up and those that were too similar merged. The themes were named and defined according to the data. Lastly, the findings section was drawn up, taking care to justify the themes: (1) with the relevant evidence from the data and (2) based on the objectives of the study.

Strategies employed to ensure quality research

Purposive sampling was used as it allowed us to extract data from those with the desired experience (see Campbell et al., 2020). This, in turn, allowed us to meet our research objectives. The interviews were transcribed to allow for a more robust data analysis. Given that this study formed part of the first author's master's dissertation, (1) several peer debriefing sessions took place in order for the authors to confer on all issues related to the research process and (2) investigator authority was established when the second author trained the first author to ensure she had the requisite skills to fulfil her research-related roles.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Industrial Psychology and People Management at the University of Johannesburg, IPPM-2021-516(M), to conduct the study of emotional labour as experienced by women in leadership positions. Through information letters, all participants in the study were informed regarding the purpose, the aim of the study and the nature of their involvement. They participated voluntarily and were aware of their right to withdraw anytime without question or adverse consequences. They were aware that they were allowed to opt out of answering any question they did not feel comfortable answering; however, all participants answered all questions. The recordings and transcripts were stored on a password-protected laptop. Confidentiality was ensured by replacing participants' names with a number in the reporting.

Findings

The thematic analysis yielded five themes: (1) leading through emotions, (2) suppressing emotions to get work done, (3) demonstrating emotional intelligence, (4) avoiding emotional stereotyping and (5) navigating the work-home emotional spillover.

Leading through emotions

Participants prioritised managing emotions at work. They reported taking a step back and having to respond thoughtfully rather than react to what is being said or done that is impacting them negatively. This response had a bearing on their subordinates' abilities to perform their tasks. For example:

> 'You've got to manage your reactions, because your reactions impact the way your team delivers.' (P7, 46 years old, Degree)

> 'And I try, always to stay calm and in control of myself… I need to lead by example.' (P12, 51 years old, Diploma)

Furthermore, the women leaders were strategic in building trust and confidence by encouraging open communication with their subordinates. Participants described their leadership style as collaborative, understanding, nurturing and motherly to promote their teams' productivity. This was achieved through a leadership style that involved being a good communicator and listener. For example:

> 'As a leader, … what I found is to be a good listener. Sometimes, you have to sit down and talk to your employees. You can get to the root causes of issues faster when you do that. You need to be a good listener and get as much information as possible, because when people feel that they can speak to you and you are approachable, you tend to have better working relationships.' (P5, 50 years old, Diploma)

> She added: '…and just by sitting down and being a good listener, you can provide solutions and help the person. We believe in a positive way of reaffirming the person of their value. And when people are sad, my belief is to be there to guide them. When you help them through a situation, they will commit to doing a good job at work because they know, when they needed you, you were there.' (P5, 50 years old, Diploma)

> 'You also have to give them [subordinates] a lot of support, and you have to be brave, and you.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

Some participants expressed that on the built-in roles of being a leader was counselling their followers. Although this was not made explicit in their job description, they found it to be a necessary part of their work to motivate others and get the necessary work done when dealing with clients. This role was emotionally taxing on them to have to invest in others. For example:

> 'We deal with a lot of clients… There's a lot of counselling …' and 'You emotionally invest in what you do, … and in terms of how taxing would that be on you and the people around you.' (P4, 40 years old, PhD)

'When my colleagues struggle with their emotions, they come to me.' (P8, 60 years old, Degree)

'I think being in a leadership role, it's essential for you to rather encourage more; encourage them more than discourage.' (P10, 26 years old, Degree)

However, being vulnerable is a two-way street and the participants themselves also expressed how a component of being an effective leader is showing and communicating their vulnerabilities as this humanises them.

'… [C]ommunication is essential and having the strength to be vulnerable and let people in is a vital component to being a good leader.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

Suppressing emotions to get work done

In the previous theme, we saw how being vulnerable and expressing one's humanness was used as an emotional labour strategy. However, this was not always the preferred strategy, as another strategy was to place and uphold boundaries. At work, they lead and behave as leaders do where there is no place for such aforementioned boundaries. It is the desire to be respected at work and get things done that causes the participants to suppress their emotions. All the participants noted that it takes emotional labour to suppress their felt emotions at work. This is a form of impression management as it helps the women leaders to create a desirable image about themselves in order to meet some sort of work objective. For instance:

'I tend to keep my barriers upright, and that's just how I lead. I am very outcomes driven.' (P7, 46 years old, Degree)

'… [C]reating an image and the character you need to stick to, so you are role-playing. This is tiresome because you cannot be yourself. For example, being casual and being friendly will be misunderstood. I think men have it easier; they can be themselves.' (P5, 50 years old, Diploma)

'You have to be the kind of person where you have to smile even though you do not feel like smiling.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

'You have to show them that you are brave, even though you might not be at a point in time.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

Not only were emotions suppressed in order to create a positive impression about themselves, but they were also suppressed in order to create a positive work environment for their followers. For example:

'… [I]f a staff member does something incorrectly, as a human being, sometimes, you get very irritated and angry. But there are a lot of times when you have got to suppress your emotions and anger and keep calm and try and get them into the position or situation that you want them to be in, without creating negativity in the workplace.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

'The environments that you create among your staff, … you can have a positive influence on them or a negative influence.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

'Sometimes, I want to kill my people, but I cannot tell them that.' (P9, 45 years old, Degree)

But this was not a unanimous strategy. Some women felt that dealing with people in the workplace had hardened them and they had become somebody they had not always been, and so rather than managing their emotions, they allow the rawest forms of their feelings to come out so that they are taken seriously. For example:

'I became so harsh because I had to be, because I am not like that naturally. I had to become that way because you are dealing with people. You've got to tell them where to get off when they need to be told. So, I think it has changed me.' (P7, 46 years old, Degree)

'… [I]t's almost as if you got to be like cold.' (P9, 45 years old, Degree)

'So, you find yourself, as a woman, starting to get a bit hardened.' (P6, 43 years old, Degree)

'It then becomes natural for us as women, including myself, not to want to express our feelings and emotions at work.'

The participants agreed that all the acting caused them to become emotionally exhausted. For example:

'… [I]t is not physical exhaustion, but it is also emotional. It is an emotional kind of exhaustion or emotional injury' (P11, 49 years old, Master's).

Another participant agrees, stating:

'It becomes highly frustrating and inhibiting' (P8, 60 years old, Degree).

Displaying emotional intelligence

All participants said they are more prone to experiencing emotional labour, especially in leadership positions. However, participants noted that emotional intelligence was a necessary skill in handling interpersonal situations as a woman leader. This helped them to be aware of the root cause of their emotions which was important in a work setting. For instance:

'You will need to have the emotional intelligence to be aware of what you are feeling and what causes you to feel that way.' (P11, 49 years old, Master's)

She further stated that emotional intelligence helped her deal with frustrations at work:

'… [I]t does cause a lot of frustration at times. …but you must have the wisdom to know to choose your battles.' (P11, 49 years old, Master's)

One participant indicated that emotional intelligence allowed her to be aware of her emotions and the source of those emotions:

'… I think it comes from also having insight into your emotional state, where you act on the emotional bar. Are you emotionally immature or emotionally mature?' (P3, 36 years old, Degree)

Other participants shared similar perspectives: '…in a leadership role, you need to detect your emotions…' (P5, 50 years old, Diploma) and 'I am very conscious of my emotions at work' (P7, 46 years old, Degree).

P3 stated that emotional intelligence helps her understand that there is an appropriate time and place for every emotion, and she has learnt to convince herself to accept this:

'Sometimes it is [*emotions*] genuine, and sometimes I have to talk myself into it. Sometimes I sit there, and I feel frustrated, but I also have insight to understand that there is a time and place for everything.' (P3, 36 years old, Degree)

P10 indicated that her organisation had sent all the leaders to emotional training workshops focused on dealing with unpleasant emotions professionally. This helped her lead her subordinates more effectively. She stated,

'… [W]e've been to emotional intelligence training. … One can always express unpleasant feelings such as anger or pain… I know how to react to a situation'. (P10, 26 years old, Degree)

This was an insight that was shared by most of the participants. However, they also indicated that it could be emotionally exhausting. P11 shared that:

'… [I]t is not physical exhaustion, but it is also emotional. It is an emotional kind of exhaustion or emotional injury'. (P11, 49 years old, Master's)

Avoiding emotional stereotyping

The theme of avoidance of stereotyping emerged from the data. Participants indicated that they were conscious of the stereotype of women being emotional in the workplace. Consequently, they intentionally avoided behaviours that support this stereotype. P2 stated that she feels a sense of accomplishment when she does not give in to stereotypes in the workplace: 'I feel like I am not giving in to the stereotype of women being emotional. I am pleased when I make logical choices instead of resorting to an emotional choice'. She further added she felt like there was an unspoken emotional expectation on her than compared to her male colleagues:

'So I do feel like as a woman, it requires a lot more poise, posture, and control from anyone in a leadership position to handle the punches thrown at you or situations that you are put into, more so than a man.' (P2, 35 years old, Degree)

However, there were instances where she felt emotional, but at the fear of giving in to the stereotypes, she concealed those emotions. She went on to add: 'As a woman, I need to exert more emotional effort into a leadership position'.

P8 indicated that it is easy for a woman in the corporate environment to get labelled as emotional and blame PMS (premenstrual syndrome):

'Oh, she's being so emotional; oh, she has PMS. Oh, she's just had a bad morning at home … but no-one says that when a man shows emotion at work, or, you know, expresses his feelings or whatever.' (P8, 60 years old, Degree)

In contrast, if a man has a bad day, it is just a bad day and nothing more. She indicated that if a woman is labelled as emotional in the workplace, they will not be considered a professional: '… you are not going to be taken seriously when it comes to your decisions or your recommendations that you are making', which she believes is stereotyping in the workplace: 'I think it's more stereotyping than anything else'. The same participants maintain that this stereotype led

to the women being perceived as weak, '… being a woman in a leadership role, it is almost expected of one to not openly express feelings and emotions, …as this is seen as a weakness'.

P10 stated that she holds a lot back at work simply because if you overshare: '… people always use the gender card. They either say you are overreacting, or you are emotional'. As a result, she does not express herself the way she would like to.

'You are afraid to express yourself the way you would like to express yourself … it makes me feel a bit. It used to make me feel inferior.' (P10, 26 years old, Degree)

Navigating the work-home emotional spillover

Participants found it difficult to shut down after work so that they could dedicate their time to their families, giving rise to the final theme in the study. The participants indicated that they found it difficult to 'switch off' when they got home. They further noted that they had to hide their true feelings from their families to avoid spillover, as they realised that taking out their work frustrations on their families was unfair. Participants indicated that they could thus not express their frustration at work or at home, which ultimately led to them experiencing emotional labour.

For example, P1 stated that suppressing her emotions at work negatively impacted her personal life. She could not always separate the two roles:

'Unfortunately, spillover from roles occurs at times because of the emotional frustration you experience in the workplace. Sometimes, you bring it home with you, and that irritation does not just leave at the door when you walk in the house… because the situation is not changed. The situation is still real; this situation is still being dealt with. So, unfortunately, you cannot separate roles. As human beings, we do not have a switch where you can switch off and say… Ninety percent of the time, you tend to bring your emotional baggage home with you.' (P1, 46 years old, Degree)

P3 shared a similar experience:

'If something affects your work, … you can't be yourself. You can't let your emotions come out. So, when you come home, you are taking out that frustration, that anger, sometimes on your family, on your spouse. So, it does impact, to a great extent, your family life, because they are the ones that you are comfortable with, the ones that you can be yourself with.' (P3, 36 years old, Degree)

P4 indicated that she comes home with many emotions and usually has no outlet for those emotions. Furthermore, after attending to everyone else at work the whole day, when she arrived home, she felt like she did not have enough emotional energy to give to her family:

'You come home with a lot of emotions', 'You feel like you don't have enough to give at home … after you've dealt with everyone else's problems.' (P4, 40 years old, PhD)

P5 stated that she found it very difficult to separate the various roles she had:

'You cannot draw that line between personal capacity – me as a person and me as a manager and then your role as a wife, a

mother. So, emotionally, … it does take its toll on you over a long period.' (P5, 50 years old, Diploma)

P7 also shared: 'Sometimes, I find it difficult to switch off', which she found negatively impacted her family and personal life. However, P9 and P10 were very conscious of boundaries and separated their work life from family life. For example, P9 stated:

'… [Y]ou got to be able to separate your work from your personal life, so I put boundaries in place.' (P9, 45 years old, Degree)

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to identify the situations in the workplace that give rise to the experience of emotional labour among women in leadership roles within the South African context. It also drew attention to how these women experience emotional labour at work. Five themes emerged from the data, namely, leading through emotions, suppressing emotions to get work done, demonstrating emotional intelligence, avoiding emotional stereotyping and work-home emotional spillover. A detailed discussion of each theme is presented as follows.

The research participants alluded to the necessity of leading through emotions. Leading through emotions refers to the ability of a leader to use his or her emotions to lead more authentically and effectively (Humphrey, 2012). Managing one's emotions is crucial for the participants. For the participants, reacting logically rather than emotionally in situations that can cause them to feel negative is essential. This may be because the participants believe that, to be an effective leader, one may need to regulate her emotions. Previous studies support this by suggesting that a leader's capacity to control emotions indicates leadership competence (Day, 2000; Duan et al., 2022). Alternatively, the participants may choose to regulate their emotions out of fear of being scrutinised for showing emotions (Smith et al., 2016).

For the participants, it is also important for their subordinates to perceive them as trustworthy. The participants expressed that they establish trust through open communication with their subordinates, being collaborative, understanding, nurturing and motherly. Showing compassion and support towards subordinates are typical traits of leaders who are women (Eagly, 2005). Humphrey (2012) explained that leaders lead with a specific set of behaviours that assist them to establish authentic relationships with their subordinates. The same can be said about South African women who are leaders in their respective workplaces. These women do so by encouraging open communication, collaboration and creating a conducive learning environment for their subordinates (Van Wyk, 2012).

According to the research participants, they must suppress their emotions at work to get work done. The findings show that the participants believe their employment organisation expects them to fulfil their work responsibilities, regardless of their feelings. Previous research found similar results and

suggested that women in leadership must remain impartial and emotionless to achieve deliverables (Choi et al., 2014; Cropanzano et al., 2004; Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008). Therefore, despite difficulties experienced at work, women in leadership positions are expected to display emotions that will inspire their followers to meet the organisation's goals (Choi et al., 2014). This may be due to the responsibility placed on leaders to manage their teams' performance (Pillay et al., 2019) and to create a conducive work environment for their subordinates (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). Similarly, in Korea, women are subjected to emotion display rules, that is, an expectation for them to conceal their emotions (Chun et al., 2020).

As expressed by some of the participants, it is important for woman leaders to know when to react in a situation and to control their emotions when it was not conducive to express them. However, as research has found repeatedly, women tend to have a higher level of emotion expression (Kitsios et al., 2022). The challenge arises when leaders do not have the necessary degree of emotional intelligence maturity, enabling them to be socially aware and recognise how to behave (Karimi et al., 2014; Humphrey et al., 2008). When leaders do not possess a strong emotional intelligence, self-regulation does not occur naturally; instead, they have to pretend or mask their felt emotions (Humphrey et al., 2008; Karimi et al., 2014). Emotional intelligence may assist in regulating their emotions at work (John & Gross, 2007); however, when this is not possible, women in leadership positions have to pretend (Humphrey et al., 2008). Beal and Trougakos (2013) warn that this process of changing or hiding emotions may decrease subsequent energy and effortful activities. Not expressing certain emotions causes a disconnect between inner experience and outer expression, which may have a negative effect on self-esteem and social isolation (John & Gross, 2007).

According to the literature, leaders may need to display the appropriate behaviour to maintain a productive work environment (Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008). Sometimes, they must express emotions opposite to what they feel, such as not expressing their frustration with employees and maintaining their composure (Yang & Guy, 2015). The literature supports the study's findings on emotional intelligence and how women in leadership positions employ emotional intelligence to seem composed at work to ultimately maintain a productive work environment (Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008; Humphrey et al., 2008; Yang & Guy, 2015). However, the degree of emotional intelligence varies among women. Therefore, their experiences and level of emotional labour may differ as well (Humphrey et al., 2008).

From the findings, women in leadership actively choose which emotions to display at work because they understand it is up to them to set the tone for productivity. Furthermore, the extent of the emotional regulation of individuals depends on the interpretation of their current situation (Arciero et al., 2003). This theme agrees with the existing literature that

women in leadership use emotional intelligence to regulate certain emotions at work to seem composed and control themselves and their situation (Berkovich & Eyal, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2008). Emotional intelligence allows women in leadership to decide what emotions are appropriate to display in a situation; when this is not possible, it gives rise to emotional labour (Humphrey et al., 2008).

The participants of the study reported that they intentionally avoid expressing emotion in the workplace. This is done out of fear of possible negative interpretations of their emotionally expressive behaviours. For some women, this is the harsh truth. For example, Sczesny et al. (2004) and Heilman (2012) reported similar findings that women occupying leadership roles purposefully suppress their emotions at work out of concern of being stereotyped. According to Smith et al. (2016), women in leadership face harsh penalties for displaying emotions at work more than women in non-leadership positions. Marshburn et al. (2020) revealed that women had been evaluated as unlikeable due to violating normative gender prescriptions, such as expressing anger at work. At the same time, Heilman and Okimoto (2007) reported that when women fail to exhibit gender-expectable behaviours like sensitivity or care towards co-workers, such as these, women are assessed unfavourably as managers and are perceived as aggressive.

This finding of the current study implies that the participants believe that there are gendered emotional stereotypes at work, for example, being thought of as overly emotional (Dolan, 2014; Shields, 2013). It also suggests that the participants are of the view that such stereotypes may influence people's perceptions of their ability to lead. In the past, women in leadership positions have been evaluated negatively for expressing emotions and were considered irrational (Citrin et al., 2004). In fact, it has been reported that the preferred way is for leaders to suppress their emotions at work, to avoid being perceived as having the inability to make rational decisions as leaders (Uhlmann et al., 2013). Suggesting that for the participants, their place of employment may have an influence on the self-regulation of one's own emotions and the kind of emotions expressed.

To prevent the potential transfer of negative emotions from work to the home domain, employees perform emotional labour at home. Similarly, Sanz-Vergel et al. (2012) found that daily surface acting performed by Spanish dual-earner couples spills over into the home environment. Within the context of this study, the participants performed emotional labour by suppressing unfavourable feelings experienced about the workplace, from their families. According to the participants, taking out your frustrations on your family is unfair. It is conceivable that employees attempt to determine the underlying source causing the negatively felt emotions. Should it be that their families are not the source of any negative emotion triggered by the workplace, the participants may choose to modify any observable evidence of unpleasant emotions. This is aligned to the antecedent-focused emotion regulation strategy (Gross, 1998, 2014). It may also be that

employees conceal genuine emotions to conform to family expectations.

In the present research, it was also found that some participants experienced a negative spillover of emotions from work into the home domain. This is consistent with earlier research by Chapman (2018) who explained that for some employees, it is challenging to keep their emotions about the workplace separate from their personal lives. It may be plausible that the performance of emotional labour at work causes employees to feel drained, thus further causing them to feel that they no longer have the capacity to control and suppress their genuinely felt emotions in the presence of their homes. This is aligned to the response-focused emotion regulation strategy (Gross, 1998, 2014).

Managerial implications

This study adds to the literature on situations that give rise to experiences of emotional labour for women in leadership positions in the South African context and has important implications for organisations and women in leadership. It is important to note that although emotional labour may be a performance, sometimes employees can partake in genuine, unforced, spontaneous emotional interactions with their colleagues. This includes interaction between women leaders and their employees and fellow leaders. These engagements are important for building relations (Diefendorff et al., 2005).

Women in leadership positions must intentionally disengage and switch off when leaving work (physical or work from home) to avoid negative spillover. Some strategies to do this include practising mindfulness. Mindfulness has been linked to reduced levels of emotional exhaustion (Hülsheger et al., 2013; Sekaja, 2021), thereby prioritising work so that all the critical to-do items are done and using their position power to delegate accordingly and relaxing and exercising to counteract the effects of stress (Farrell, 2017; Manomenidis et al., 2016).

Given that much of the emotional labour took place as a result of interactions, industrial psychologists should create a culture where open conversations are encouraged and are a norm as a way for employees to engage constructively. Organisations can assist their employees by encouraging them to attend emotional intelligence training, enabling them to develop further their emotional intelligence, which is indicated to improve how emotional labour is experienced and performed (Durán et al., 2004). Similarly, these conversations and training will act to reduce the conflict that elicits emotional labour by learning what respectful communication, treating others with respect, considering the viewpoints of others and vocalising own divergent perspectives all look like (Lewitter et al., 2019).

Recommendations and limitations

All the interviews took place during the height of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic and the

associated lockdowns. The emotional labour experiences that the participants recalled in the interviews may have been influenced by the pandemic given that the COVID-19 negatively impacted people's emotions (Sun et al., 2020), but the researchers did not have a way of determining whether the performance of emotional labour was in any way related to the pandemic. Perhaps emotional labour would look different now that the world has settled into a new normal.

Emotional labour is a day-to-day experience. The method of a single cross-sectional interview misses the opportunity to capture all experiences and performances of emotional labour. In this case, a longitudinal method such as a 2-week diary study (cf. Fetvadjiev et al., 2018; McGowan & Sekaja, 2022) would enhance the quality of the data.

Future directions

While it is noted that emotion expression is encouraged in contexts of nurturing work, women should be encouraged to be authentic in all situations. There should be organisational support for use of strengths (see Meyers et al., 2019), which, in this case, is their ability to be nurturing. This involves removing any stigmas associated with gendered emotional intelligence.

Future research should also explore the effects of emotional labour on imposter thoughts among racially minoritised women in leadership roles. It may be that women in leadership roles who are members of a racial minority group perform emotional labour. This may cause them to feel like an imposter as a function of their underrepresentation in the workplace, specifically in leadership roles. Early research revealed that imposter syndrome is common among women in leadership roles (Clance & O'Toole, 1987). Within the South African context, it is unclear if and to what extent surface and deep acting cause women in leadership roles who belong to racially minority groups to experience imposter thoughts due to their lack of representation in leadership roles in the workplace.

Conclusion

This study set out to understand the work-related situations that give rise to the experience of emotional labour of women in leadership roles and to explore their experiences of emotional labour. The findings highlighted that participants lead through emotions, suppress emotions to get work done, demonstrate emotional intelligence, avoid emotional stereotypes and navigate work-home emotional spillover.

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Competing interests

Authors' contributions

This study forms part of T.M.B.'s Master's study. T.M.B. was also responsible for the writing of the minor dissertation. T.M. oversaw the supervision of the study and together with T.M.B. conceptualised the study and assisted with the formal analysis of the study.

Funding information

Data availability

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article in Table 1.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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