

ROLE OF BELIEFS ABOUT EMOTIONS IN EMOTIONAL LABOUR: A STUDY OF CZECH SENIOR BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT MANAGERS

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Abstract

This study examines how beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term, relationship-driven business contexts. While emotional labour research has primarily focused on short-term roles, less is known about how emotion regulation operates in sustained strategic client relationships. Based on semi-structured interviews with 12 senior managers in the Czech Republic, analysed using template analysis informed by Grandey and Gabriel's framework, the findings show that beliefs influence emotional labour at three interconnected levels: as antecedents shaping initial orientations toward emotional demands; as evolving intermediaries recalibrating emotional engagement through experience; and as real-time components guiding moment-to-moment regulation or generating ethical tensions. By positioning beliefs about emotions not only as stable antecedents but also as evolving and enacted elements of emotional labour, the study extends understanding of how emotion regulation unfolds in long-term B2B relationships. The findings suggest that organisations can strengthen managerial resilience and authenticity by targeting underlying emotion beliefs, for example through coaching and reflective development practices.

Implications for Central European audience: This study suggests that beliefs about emotions play an important role in how senior business development managers perform emotional labour. While the concept of emotion beliefs has been examined internationally, this research explored it within the Czech context, offering insights relevant to Central European business culture. Building on Central European Business Review's established interest in workplace well-being and the role of emotions in organisational life (Pauknerová, 2024; Globočnik Žunac, 2024), the findings suggest that resilience could be supported, and a sense of authenticity maintained, not only through skills training but also by addressing managers' underlying beliefs about emotions. Coaching, reflective practice, and leadership development may provide useful avenues for supporting adaptive regulation in relationship-driven roles in the region.

Keywords: emotional labour; beliefs about emotions; business development; B2B relationships

JEL Classification: M12, J24, D91

Introduction

Emotion regulation is central to emotional labour and plays an important role in managerial performance and well-being in high-stakes business environments. Senior business development managers (BDMs) routinely face emotionally demanding situations in which they

must regulate their own emotions and, indirectly, those of clients and prospects. Effective emotion regulation supports decision-making and performance in high-pressure contexts (Lo & Repin, 2002) and contributes to organisational outcomes (Haver et al., 2021). In business development, however, emotional labour extends beyond isolated encounters: it is also essential for building trust and sustaining the long-term client relationships that are fundamental drivers of success in business-to-business (B2B) markets (Boles et al., 2001; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Palmatier et al., 2006).

Emotional labour, originally conceptualised by Hochschild (1983) as the management of emotions to meet organisational display rules, has been examined extensively across service and organisational contexts. Subsequent research distinguished between surface acting and deep acting and demonstrated that different regulation strategies have distinct consequences for well-being and performance (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Gross & John, 2003; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011). Grandey (2000) integrated emotional labour with Gross's (1998) process model of emotion regulation, and Grandey and Gabriel (2015) provided a structured framework linking antecedents, regulatory processes, and outcomes. Recent agenda-setting review of the field documents that the antecedent model of emotional labour has expanded to include stable and dynamic individual differences – including motives and emotional capabilities, and calls for research that captures longer time horizons and the non-service occupational contexts that the cross-sectional literature cannot adequately examine (Gabriel et al., 2023). In parallel, growing evidence shows that beliefs about emotions, relatively stable lay theories about whether emotions are useful, controllable, or harmful, influence whether individuals adopt adaptive strategies such as cognitive reappraisal or rely on more suppressive forms of regulation, and a recent meta-analysis confirms that stronger malleability beliefs are reliably associated with more adaptive regulation and better psychological outcomes (Becerra et al., 2020; De Castella et al., 2018; Ford & Gross, 2018, 2019; Gutentag et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2024; Stillman et al., 2010; Waizman et al., 2023). In most of this work, however, beliefs are treated as relatively stable inputs that shape strategy selection, with limited attention to how they may evolve through professional experience or operate during the enactment of emotional labour itself.

Despite these advances, two limitations remain. First, emotional labour research has concentrated on short-term, transactional service roles (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019), leaving comparatively less understanding of how emotional labour unfolds in long-term, relationship-driven B2B contexts where the same client is engaged repeatedly over months or years and display expectations are negotiated relationally rather than governed only by formal scripts (Anaza et al., 2018; Karantinou & Hogg, 2001; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011). Second, while beliefs about emotions are recognised as antecedents of regulation, they are typically modelled as static inputs rather than as evolving and context-sensitive elements of emotional labour. As a result, little is known about how such beliefs develop through accumulated professional experience or how they operate in real time during sustained relational work. Addressing these limitations is particularly important in senior business development roles, where emotional demands accumulate across repeated client interactions and where authenticity, composure, and strategic restraint must be continuously balanced.

The aim of this study is therefore to examine how beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term B2B relationships. I draw on Grandey and Gabriel's (2015) framework as an organising structure that distinguishes antecedents, regulation processes, and outcomes, and I use it to position beliefs about

emotions in relation to established elements of emotional labour rather than as a rigid model to be tested. I therefore address the following research question: ***How do beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term client relationships?***

I address this question through a qualitative, interpretive study based on semi-structured interviews with 12 senior business development managers in the Czech Republic, analysed using template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012) with Grandey and Gabriel's (2015) framework as the initial coding template. The findings show that beliefs about emotions operate at three interconnected levels: as antecedents that shape initial orientations toward emotional demands; as dynamic intermediaries that evolve through accumulated professional experience and recalibrate emotional engagement; and as elements enacted in real time during emotionally charged interactions. By positioning beliefs not only as background predictors of strategy choice but also as evolving and enacted components of emotional labour, the study refines current understanding of how emotion regulation unfolds in sustained B2B relationships and extends emotional labour research beyond the short, scripted encounters that dominate much of the empirical evidence.

The study is positioned within Central European Business Review's broader interest in the human, relational, and managerial dimensions of organisations in Central Europe. Examining senior business development managers in the Czech Republic brings emotional labour research into a regional B2B context that remains less visible in the predominantly Anglophone emotional labour literature, where sustained trust, repeated negotiation, and long-term client relationships are central to managerial work. By focusing on beliefs about emotions, the study adds an individual-level explanatory layer to ongoing discussions of managerial behaviour, relational quality, and employee well-being in the region. This study builds on Central European Business Review's thematic focus on workplace well-being and the role of emotions in organisational life, as articulated in its 2024 special issue on this topic (Globočnik Žunac, 2024; Pauknerová, 2024), by examining belief-level mechanisms in senior managers' emotional labour in long-term B2B relationships.

1 Background

1.1 Emotional labour in long-term B2B relationships

Emotional labour was originally conceptualised as the management of feeling to create publicly observable facial and bodily displays in service of organisational goals (Hochschild, 1983). Subsequent theorising distinguished surface acting (modifying expression without changing the underlying feeling) from deep acting (working on the feeling itself), and treated both as effortful self-regulation embedded in occupational display rules (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Further work has elaborated emotional labour as skilled, socially regulated work embedded in organisational feeling rules and occupational norms (James, 1989; Steinberg & Figart, 1999; Sutton, 1991, 2004; Turnbull, 1999; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Across more than three decades of empirical work, surface acting has been linked consistently to emotional exhaustion, reduced job satisfaction, and impaired performance, whereas deep acting shows weaker and more context-dependent effects (Grandey & Melloy, 2017; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019). Much of this empirical evidence remains concentrated in front-line service settings, call centres, hospitality, healthcare, and retail, where interactions are short, scripted, and bounded by explicit display

rules (Grandey, 2015; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019). Far less is known about emotional labour in long-term, high-stakes business-to-business (B2B) relationships, in which the same client is engaged repeatedly over months or years and display expectations are negotiated relationally rather than governed only by formal organisational scripts. Even within B2B marketing, the emotional and relational work that sustains professional service relationships has been described primarily in terms of trust, rapport, and interpersonal chemistry, with little explicit theorising of how individual workers regulate their emotions to produce that work (Anaza et al., 2018; Karantinou & Hogg, 2001; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011). Gabriel et al. (2023) note that service relationships which are more on-going allow for more latitude in the displays shown, suggesting that emotional labour in relational, longer-term contexts differs qualitatively from the brief scripted encounters that dominate the empirical record. The senior business development manager (BDM) represents a relevant case of this under-examined territory. BDMs cultivate strategic client relationships that often extend over long periods and require repeated emotionally consequential interactions such as contract negotiation, escalation, and conflict resolution, and they typically operate with limited formal scripting. Studying emotional labour in this context extends emotional labour research beyond the short, scripted encounters that dominate much of the empirical evidence, toward repeated and relational interactions. It also makes visible the role of the manager's own beliefs about emotions, rather than externally imposed display rules, as an important mechanism shaping how emotional demands are construed and regulated.

1.2 Emotion regulation strategies and their consequences

Beneath the surface- and deep-acting distinction lies the broader process model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998; Gross & John, 2003), which positions strategies along the timeline of an emotional response. Antecedent-focused strategies, of which cognitive reappraisal is the prototype, intervene before an emotion is fully generated by reinterpreting the meaning of the situation. Response-focused strategies, of which expressive suppression is the prototype, intervene after the emotion is underway by inhibiting outward signs (Gross, 2015; Gross & John, 2003). Reappraisal generally yields more adaptive affective, cognitive, and interpersonal outcomes, while suppression is associated with reduced positive affect, impaired memory, and lower social closeness (Gross & John, 2003). These two strategies map only imperfectly onto the deep-acting and surface-acting constructs of the emotional labour tradition: deep acting frequently uses reappraisal but is not reducible to it, while surface acting overlaps with, yet is not equivalent to, suppression (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Recent research also documented that employees can adopt multi-strategy approaches to performing emotional labour that vary by time, and context, moving well beyond the binary deep-acting/surface-acting frame, and that the antecedent model has expanded to incorporate stable and dynamic individual differences in motives and emotional capabilities beyond organisational display rules (Gabriel et al., 2023; Grandey & Sayre, 2019). This expanded view aligns with my interest in how senior BDMs flexibly construct their emotional conduct over the life of a client relationship.

Beyond these interpersonal consequences, prolonged emotional suppression has been associated with somatic complaints and health problems, including sleep disturbances and cardiovascular strain (Yeh et al., 2020; Zapf et al., 2001), and emotional labour more broadly shows both detrimental and potentially beneficial effects depending on job resources and strategies used (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Zapf & Holz, 2006). Experimental and field evidence

further indicates that dysregulated emotions can impair risk processing and decision quality, whereas reappraisal supports more balanced choices in economic decision tasks (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2011; Grecucci et al., 2013; Heilman et al., 2010). Leadership research similarly links leaders' emotion regulation to subordinates' affect and satisfaction at work (Kafetsios et al., 2012).

1.3 Beliefs about emotions as antecedents of regulation

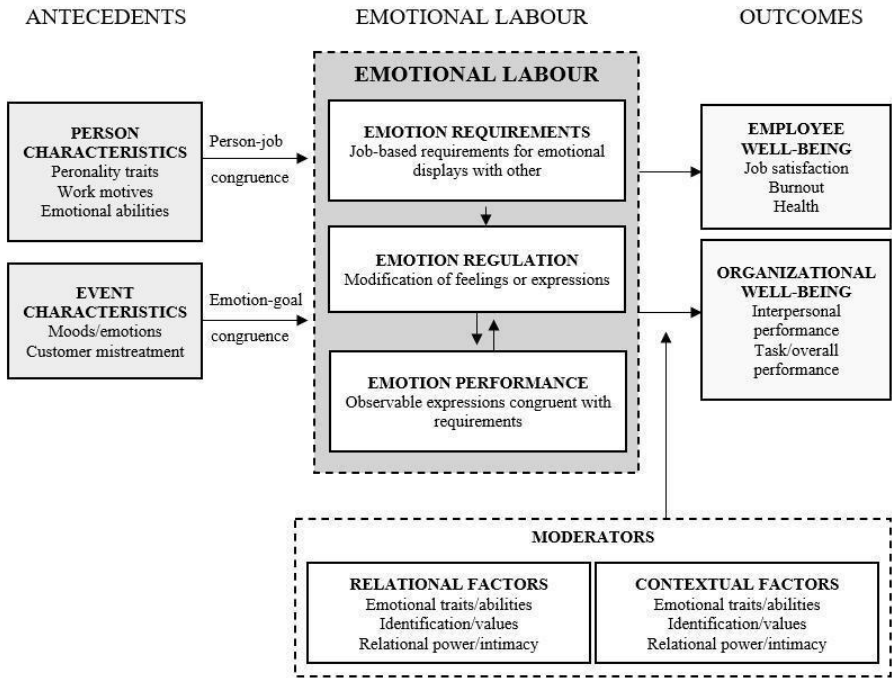
A growing body of research suggests that beliefs about emotions, understood as relatively stable everyday beliefs about the nature of emotions, their usefulness or harmfulness, and their controllability, play an important role in shaping both the selection and effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies (Becerra et al., 2020; Ford & Gross, 2018, 2019; Ortner et al., 2017). Unlike situational appraisals, these beliefs are relatively stable over time and influence how individuals interpret situations and regulate their emotions across different contexts (De Castella et al., 2018; Stillman et al., 2010; Tamir et al., 2007). Two belief dimensions have received particular attention. Controllability beliefs concern whether emotions are seen as malleable or fixed; people who hold an incremental (malleable) view tend to engage more reappraisal, persist longer in regulation, and report better well-being (De Castella et al., 2018; Ford & Gross, 2018, 2019; Tamir et al., 2007). A recent meta-analysis confirms that stronger malleability beliefs are reliably associated with greater use of adaptive regulation strategies and better psychological outcomes across clinical and non-clinical samples (Kim et al., 2024). Usefulness or value beliefs concern whether emotions are seen as helpful or harmful; valuing emotions has been associated with greater willingness to engage rather than suppress affect (Becerra et al., 2020; Ford & Gross, 2018; Trincas et al., 2016). Experimental and prospective evidence further suggests that even brief manipulations of such beliefs can change the strategies people deploy and the affective outcomes they experience (Gutentag et al., 2017; Stillman et al., 2010; Waizman et al., 2023). The Emotion Beliefs Questionnaire (Becerra et al., 2020) provides a validated self-report tool for assessing these dimensions in community samples, with good internal consistency and criterion validity. The dominant strand of this work, however, treats beliefs about emotions as a relatively stable input into regulation. What remains underexplored is whether, in real occupational settings, beliefs also evolve through accumulated professional experience and operate within the regulation episode itself, questions that motivate the present study.

1.4 From beliefs to emotional labour: an integrative framework

To connect beliefs about emotions to emotional labour in long-term B2B relationships, this study draws on Grandey and Gabriel's (2015) framework, which organises emotional labour around antecedents, regulation processes, and outcomes. This framework is useful because it allows beliefs about emotions to be positioned in relation to established elements of emotional labour without treating them as isolated attitudes. However, this study examines whether beliefs do more than function as stable antecedents. In long-term client relationships, beliefs may shape initial orientations toward emotional engagement, develop through accumulated professional experience, and become activated during specific emotionally demanding interactions. I therefore use Grandey and Gabriel's framework as an organising structure, without relying on the input-process-output label, and examine how beliefs about emotions operate across, rather than only before, the emotional labour process. This integrative framing also aligns with Gabriel et al.'s (2023) documented expansion of the antecedent model to include stable and dynamic individual differences beyond display rules, and with their call for longitudinal designs that

capture how emotional labour unfolds over time in non-service occupational contexts. The present study responds to these calls by examining beliefs about emotions in a long-term, relational, and under-studied occupational setting. Reviews and meta-analyses suggest that stress-management and mindfulness-based programmes can reduce exhaustion and improve well-being, but effects are often modest and may attenuate over time (Dreison et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2018; Hülshager et al., 2013; Weaver et al., 2019). See Figure 1 for a visual representation of Grandey’s integrated model of emotional labour (Grandey & Gabriel, 2015).

Figure 1 | Integrated model of emotional labour



Source: Grandey & Gabriel (2015)

2 Methodology

As this research is exploratory by its character, it is centred around the following research question: How do beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term client relationships? To address this question, the study uses a qualitative, interpretive design that investigates how beliefs about emotions are articulated and enacted in the course of building and maintaining long-term client relationships. This approach is especially appropriate for capturing the nuanced, subjective meanings that senior business development managers assign to their emotional labour at work, and it allows the analysis to move beyond testing predefined hypotheses toward exploring the complexity and diversity of emotional conduct in practice. Guided by this interpretive paradigm, I collected primary data through semi-structured interviews and analysed them using template analysis, a flexible method that accommodates both established theoretical models and inductively derived insights.

2.1 Research Paradigm

This study is grounded in a qualitative, interpretive research paradigm, chosen for its suitability in exploring the nuanced, subjective experiences of senior business development managers. Rather than seeking objective generalisations, the interpretive approach aims to understand how participants make sense of their emotional labour and the beliefs that shape their actions within real-world business contexts (Madill & Gough, 2008; Willig, 2014). Language is treated as a tool for conveying both direct and nuanced accounts of experience, and the research process is designed to capture the complexity of participants' lived realities (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

Ontologically, the study adopts a critical realist stance, which recognises that while an external reality exists, understanding of it is always mediated by social context, human interpretation, and language (Maxwell, 2012). This perspective allows for the investigation of underlying mechanisms, such as beliefs about emotions, that influence observable behaviours, while acknowledging that these mechanisms are interpreted through the lens of participants' unique experiences. Epistemologically, the research aligns with contextualism, which holds that knowledge is co-constructed by researchers and participants and is shaped by the specific social and organisational environment in which it is produced (Willig, 2014). This approach ensures that the findings are sensitive to the complexities of the Czech business context and reflect the interplay between individual meaning-making and broader cultural or organisational norms. By combining interpretivism, critical realism, and contextualism, this paradigm enables a rich, contextually grounded exploration of how beliefs about emotions inform emotional labour in long-term, relationship-driven business roles.

2.2 Participants and Sample Size

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit senior business development managers with substantial experience in strategic B2B roles. Participants were identified through professional networks and contacted directly or via mutual connections to ensure their expertise and relevance to the research focus (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). A total of 12 participants (9 men and 3 women) took part in the study, all holding high-level business development positions in Czech organisations. Each participant's responsibilities included devising business strategies and achieving revenue targets, ensuring a relatively homogeneous sample of professionals engaged in long-term, relationship-driven client management.

All participants were native Czech speakers employed in the Czech Republic, which helped to maintain cultural and contextual consistency and minimise the influence of cross-cultural differences on emotional labour experiences. While the sample was not gender-balanced, the age range of 30 to 51 years, combined with extensive professional expertise, provided a robust basis for exploring beliefs about emotions in this occupational context. All interviews were conducted between January and November 2022. Further participant details including industry, job title, gender, age, and years of sales experience are presented in Table 1. The sample size of 12 was deemed sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, as no new themes emerged after the eighth interview. This aligns with qualitative research standards, where depth and relevance of data are prioritised over breadth (Mason, 2010), and with recent evidence that code saturation can occur within 9 to 12 interviews in focused qualitative studies (Hennink et al., 2017).

For anonymisation, each participant was assigned an identifier (R1–R12), which is used when presenting quotations in the results tables and text.

Table 1 | Participants’ Profiles

ID	Job Title	Industry	Gender	Age	Years of Sales Experience
R1	Sales Manager	SaaS	F	30	> 05 years
R2	Associate Director	Management Consulting	M	51	> 20 years
R3	Regional Business Development Lead	Financial Services	M	44	> 20 years
R4	Associate Manager	Management Consulting	M	34	> 15 years
R5	Global Head of Sales	SaaS	M	49	> 20 years
R6	Director for Special Projects	Financial Services	M	35	> 15 years
R7	Global Manager	Financial Services	M	38	> 10 years
R8	Senior Key Account Manager	Manufacturing	M	31	> 05 years
R9	Head of Sales	Financial Services	M	42	> 10 years
R10	Business Development Director	Financial Services	M	43	> 15 years
R11	Business Development Manager	Financial Services	F	47	> 20 years
R12	Engagement Manager	Management Consulting	F	36	> 10 years

Source: author

2.3 Data Collection

Primary data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with senior business development managers. This method was chosen for its ability to balance structure with flexibility, allowing for both comparability across participants and the emergence of unanticipated insights (Hopf, 2004). Each interview was conducted in Czech with participants’ informed consent and was audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Interviews lasted between 36 and 62 minutes, with an average of 48 minutes.

The interviews followed the Problem-Centred Interview (PCI) approach, which emphasises dialogical and discursive interaction and encourages participants to share their experiences spontaneously (Witzel & Reiter, 2012). This approach supported a deeper exploration of complex topics such as emotional labour. The PCI format also allowed me to adapt the sequence and depth of questions as new themes emerged, while maintaining a focus on the research objectives. The interview guide was structured around established components of emotional labour models, including work motivation, emotional abilities, event characteristics, and emotion regulation strategies.

Direct questions about beliefs regarding emotions were intentionally omitted. Instead, the study adopted an interpretive approach, observing whether and how participants naturally articulated beliefs about emotions in the course of describing their experiences. This strategy enabled the identification of underlying beliefs without priming or biasing participant responses. All interviews were transcribed verbatim in Czech for analysis. To preserve the nuances of meaning, transcripts were analysed in the original language, with selected quotations translated

into English for presentation in this article. All participants were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of their participation.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis proceeded in two main phases, combining inductive and deductive strategies to ensure both openness to new insights and alignment with established theory (King, 2012; Brooks et al., 2015). First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim in Czech to preserve the nuances of participants' language. In the initial phase, I engaged in open coding of the transcripts, reading them line by line and assigning short, descriptive codes to segments related to emotional labour, emotion regulation, and implicit or explicit beliefs about emotions. These initial codes captured both participants' own formulations (in vivo codes) and more interpretive labels for recurrent patterns in how they described demands, reactions, and justifications.

After several transcripts had been coded in this way, I compared and refined the initial codes, grouping overlapping labels, clarifying definitions, and clustering related codes into preliminary categories. This iterative comparison across cases helped to distinguish codes that described similar underlying ideas and to separate codes that captured distinct phenomena. In particular, segments that had initially been coded under broad labels such as "beliefs about emotions" were re-examined and recoded into more differentiated categories. For example, distinguishing beliefs about the value of emotions from beliefs about the controllability or learnability of regulation.

In the second phase, I adopted template analysis as the primary analytic method (King, 2012; Brooks et al., 2015). An initial coding template was constructed using Grandey and Gabriel's (2015) three-stage framework of emotional labour (antecedents, regulation processes, and outcomes) as higher-order domains, supplemented by sensitising concepts from the literature on beliefs about emotions, such as controllability and usefulness beliefs. The preliminary inductive categories from the open coding were then mapped onto this template, either by assigning them to one of the three stages or, where necessary, by adding new subcategories. This template served as a flexible organising structure rather than a fixed coding scheme and was revised repeatedly as new patterns emerged in the data.

As further transcripts were coded using the evolving template, some codes were merged, split, or re-labelled to better reflect participants' accounts, and new codes were added where the existing structure did not adequately capture the data. During this process, I also noted that some codes described how beliefs themselves changed through experience rather than simply reflecting stable predispositions; these codes informed the distinction between beliefs as antecedent orientations and beliefs as dynamic intermediaries that recalibrate emotional engagement over time. Through this iterative process of applying and modifying the template, the analysis converged on three overarching themes that describe the role of beliefs about emotions in senior business development managers' emotional labour: beliefs as antecedents of emotional labour, beliefs as dynamic intermediaries that develop through experience, and beliefs as elements of emotional labour itself enacted in real time. Each theme comprises several sub-themes that represent more specific patterns in how participants understood and regulated their emotions; these themes and subthemes are presented with supporting quotations in the Results section.

Throughout the analysis, I used analytic memos to document coding decisions, reflections on emerging interpretations, and potential links between beliefs and particular regulation strategies. These memos, together with repeated checking of coded segments against the full transcripts, provided an audit trail that enhances the transparency and trustworthiness of the findings (Maxwell, 2012). Template analysis is well suited to this combination of theoretically informed and data-driven coding, as it allows a priori structures to be integrated with inductively developed themes in a systematic yet flexible way (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012).

3 Results

Template analysis of the 12 interview transcripts produced three overarching themes and 11 sub-themes, summarised in Table 2. As described in Section 2.4, the analysis combined Grandey and Gabriel’s framework with inductive coding, allowing belief-related patterns that did not fit the initial antecedent category to be retained and further developed.

Across the data, beliefs about emotions did not behave as a single kind of construct. They appeared at three interconnected levels of emotional labour. Theme 1 captures beliefs as antecedents, relatively stable, dispositional inputs that shaped how respondents oriented themselves toward emotional demands before any specific interaction. Theme 2 captures beliefs as dynamic intermediaries, views about emotions that respondents described as having shifted over the course of their careers and that now recalibrate how they engage emotionally with clients. Theme 3 captures beliefs as elements of emotional labour itself, cognitive prompts, justifications, or points of friction that operate inside the regulation episode, in real time, during emotionally demanding interactions. The theoretical implications of this three-level pattern are developed in the Discussion.

In this section I present the patterns captured in each theme. I also name the respondents whose accounts most clearly articulate the essence of each sub-theme and note where I observed contrast or variation across the sample. Two illustrative quotations per sub-theme are reproduced in Tables 3–5. Respondent labels (R1–R12) correspond to the participant profiles in Table 1. The sample skews male (9 of 12) and is concentrated in financial services, management consulting, SaaS, and manufacturing. Where I observed that a pattern was voiced primarily by male or female respondents, or primarily within a particular industry, I note this in the prose. However, the broader implications for transferability and the gendered framing of certain patterns are revisited in the following chapter.

Table 2 | Overview of themes and related sub-themes

Theme	Sub-Theme
Beliefs about Emotions as Antecedents of Emotional Labour	Emotions are Professional Asset
	Emotions are Professional Liability
	Beliefs About the Learnability of Emotional Regulation
	Moral Framing of Emotions
Beliefs About Emotions as Dynamic Intermediaries	Beliefs Reframing Emotional Demands
	Beliefs Shaping Emotional Strategy Adaptation
	Beliefs as Translators of Experience into Regulation
	Beliefs as Buffers Against Stress
Beliefs about Emotions as Part of Emotional Labour Itself	Beliefs Guiding Real-Time Emotional Adjustments
	Beliefs as Justifications for Effort
	Beliefs Triggering Emotional Conflicts

Source: author

3.1 Theme 1: Beliefs about Emotions as Antecedents of Emotional Labour

The first theme groups beliefs that respondents brought into their work rather than developed within it. Respondents articulated these beliefs as settled views, sometimes as professional philosophies, sometimes as personal codes, that pre-shaped how they read emotionally demanding situations before they entered them. In the language of the analytical template, these are the antecedent inputs of the emotional labour process. The four sub-themes I identified differ in what respondents believed about emotions: that they are useful (1.1), that they are risky (1.2), that they can be learned to be managed (1.3), or that they carry moral weight (1.4). What is striking across these four sub-themes is that respondents occupying very similar roles (senior B2B managers in mid-career or later) held strongly opposing views, and that those views did not always sort with industry, age, or gender in the ways one might expect.

Table 3 | Quotations illustrating theme Beliefs about Emotions as Antecedents of Emotional Labour

Subtheme	Quotation
Emotions are a Professional Asset	"I always say that emotions are tools. If you can connect with a client emotionally, you've already won half the battle." (R5) "I've found that showing genuine enthusiasm or concern creates trust. People can tell when you're authentic. And that in the ends helps the business the most." (R1)
Emotions are Professional Liability	"Work is work. If you bring emotions into it, you're opening yourself up to unnecessary stress. I personally think that emotions don't belong into professional settings." (R9) "I've seen too many people get burned because they let emotions affect their actions. That's why I always try to base my decisions and behaviour purely based on facts. Emotions can be so misleading." (R3)
Beliefs About the Learnability of Emotional Regulation	"I used to struggle with staying composed, but I've developed techniques that work for me, like taking a deep breath before reacting. I think you just develop this over time as part of experience." (R8) "I've had to learn how to regulate my emotions over the years. It didn't come naturally, but experience taught me." (R7)
Moral Framing of Emotions	"I don't believe in faking excitement just to close a deal. If I don't believe in what I'm selling, I shouldn't be selling it—that's just basic integrity." (R11) "I believe in being honest, but also in being responsible with emotions. If I let frustration show in a negotiation, I'm not just hurting myself—I'm hurting the deal, the company, and my team." (R10)

Source: author

Emotions are Professional Asset

Several respondents framed emotions as professionally useful: not tolerated despite their riskiness, but actively recruited as instruments of client work. R5 (Global Head of Sales, SaaS) articulated this most directly, describing emotions as "tools" for connecting with clients and treating emotional engagement as something that, in his account, "won half the battle" before any commercial argument was made. R1 (Sales Manager, SaaS) made a related but subtly different claim: not that emotions win, but that authenticity is reliably perceived by clients, and

that this perception is what eventually compounds into business outcomes. The two accounts share a starting belief but diverge in mechanism: R5 emphasised emotional connection, R1 emphasised emotional truth. In both, the belief was described as something they came to work with, not something they constructed in the moment.

What was distinctive about this sub-theme was its relational framing. Respondents who saw emotions as an asset almost always justified the view by reference to long-term client relationships rather than to single interactions: trust accumulated over months, recovery after a difficult negotiation, the slow build of rapport over repeated meetings. None of the respondents who articulated this belief framed it transactionally. The asset view was also voiced almost exclusively by SaaS and consulting respondents; no one in financial services framed emotions as primarily useful, a contrast I return to below.

Emotions are Professional Liability

A contrasting set of respondents described emotions as inherently disruptive, even dangerous, in professional settings. R9 (Head of Sales, Financial Services) was the most categorical: “emotions don’t belong into professional settings.” R3 (Regional Business Development Lead, Financial Services) reasoned in similar terms but anchored the view in negative observations. He had “seen too many people get burned”, rather than in a categorical principle. The result was the same: a default preference for emotional restraint, presented not as effortful performance but as the right way to do the job.

Two patterns are worth noting. First, this sub-theme was almost entirely voiced by male respondents in financial services, the densest cluster in the sample. Whether this clustering reflects industry norms, gendered expectations, or sample composition is a question I cannot adjudicate from the data and that I take up explicitly in the limitations. Second, the liability framing was rarely portrayed as a constraint on the speaker. Respondents described it as a settled professional preference, not as a display rule they wished they could break. In this sense the belief did not merely shape strategy in a single interaction, it set the baseline emotional climate of the role itself.

Beliefs About the Learnability of Emotional Regulation

A third sub-theme concerned beliefs not about emotions in general but about respondents’ own capacity to manage them. R8 (Senior Key Account Manager, Manufacturing) described regulation as a craft developed over time, complete with personal techniques such as “taking a deep breath before reacting.” R7 (Global Manager, Financial Services) made a similar but more reflective claim, that regulation “didn’t come naturally” that experience taught it, and that the learning was uneven. Respondents who held this belief tended to talk about themselves as improvable rather than as already-skilled, and to attach the improvability to specific occupational milestones. A difficult first major client, a high-stakes negotiation that did not go well, the gradual accumulation of senior-level exposure. Importantly, this sub-theme is conceptually separate from the asset/liability split, as respondents who saw emotions as risky could still believe they had learned to manage them well, and respondents who saw emotions as useful did not always claim mastery. The belief is about controllability, not about valence, and the data show the two travel together less often than one might assume.

Moral Framing of Emotions

Finally, several respondents articulated a value-based view, that certain emotional displays were inherently right or wrong, regardless of whether they served the deal. R11 (Business Development Manager, Financial Services) drew the line at performed enthusiasm: "If I don't believe in what I'm selling, I shouldn't be selling it, that's just basic integrity." R10 (Business Development Director, Financial Services) drew it elsewhere. Not at performed positive emotion, but at leaked negative emotion. For him, showing frustration in a negotiation was not honesty, it was harm done to the deal, the company, and the team. Both framings are moral, but they target different acts. One prohibits faking up, the other prohibits leaking down.

What this sub-theme adds to Theme 1 is a second axis of antecedent belief alongside usefulness and controllability: beliefs about the moral permissibility of certain emotional displays. The same person could hold strong views on both axes simultaneously, and the moral axis might sometimes override the instrumental one. A respondent who saw emotions as a professional asset could nonetheless refuse to deploy them dishonestly.

Read across the four sub-themes, antecedent beliefs functioned as relatively stable starting positions. They explained why respondents in comparable roles, facing comparable demands, took up emotional labour so differently from the outset. The Discussion examines how these starting positions relate to specific regulation strategies and to the broader literature. Here, I report that the starting positions exist and vary in identifiable ways.

3.2 Theme 2: Beliefs About Emotions as Dynamic Intermediaries

Where Theme 1 captures starting positions, Theme 2 captures movement. Respondents repeatedly described their current views about emotions as the result of revisions: things they used to think had not survived contact with the work. Crucially, what shifted was not simply their strategy, the choice between a deep act and a surface act in a given moment, but the belief layer underneath the strategy. The four sub-themes record different kinds of movement: a change in how emotional events are read (2.1), a change in how much emotional energy is invested (2.2), a change in how much an emotional event hurts in the first place (2.3), and a change in the general principles by which respondents now navigate the work (2.4).

Overall, Theme 2 shows that respondents did not arrive at their current emotional approach by simply choosing strategies in isolation, but by gradually revising their underlying views of emotional work through repeated professional experience.

Table 4 | Quotations illustrating theme: Beliefs About Emotions as Dynamic Intermediaries

Subtheme	Quotation
Beliefs Reframing Emotional Demands	"Early in my career, I used to take client pushback personally. Now I actually see it as part of the deal. If I got frustrated every time someone challenged me, I wouldn't last a week in this industry." (R8) "I used to feel like I had to constantly prove myself, and that made every bit of feedback feel like a judgment. Now, I take a step back and try to see what the other person is actually trying to communicate." (R1)
Beliefs Shaping Emotional Strategy Adaptation	"When I started, I really tried to be emotionally present with every client. But after a while, I learned that not every interaction deserves that energy. Now, I choose more carefully where to invest emotionally." (R11) "When I was younger, I believed staying neutral, almost emotionless, made me look more professional. But over time, I've realised that showing genuine emotion builds stronger connections. Now I feel more comfortable being expressive, when it fits the moment." (R5)
Beliefs as Buffers Against Stress	"I've learned that stress doesn't mean I have to feel bad. I can be under pressure and still stay steady. That's just how I've come to see it." (R7) "I believe emotions are manageable. Especially in chaos. That belief helps me not get pulled in every time something goes south." (R10)
Beliefs as Translators of Experience into Regulation	"I used to think I had to be emotionally available all the time. That it was part of being committed. But looking back, I can see how unsustainable that was. These days, I believe you have to be selective. That's something experience taught." (R3) "There was a time when I thought pushing emotions aside was the only way to survive in this industry. But after years of working in this environment, I've come to believe that choosing when to show emotion, and when not to, is a skill. And that belief definitely didn't come overnight." (R9)

Source: author

Beliefs Reframing Emotional Demands

Several respondents described having come to interpret recurring emotional events differently than they once did. R8 narrated the trajectory most clearly: client pushback, in his early years, "felt personal"; now it was "part of the deal", and the change in how he read the situation reduced the regulatory effort it required. R1 told a structurally similar story but with a different content: she had moved from treating client feedback as judgment to treating it as communication. In both cases the respondents were not describing a tactic they had learned to deploy in difficult moments; they were describing a change in the meaning of those moments.

What was distinctive about this sub-theme is that respondents rarely used the word "belief" while describing it. The shift surfaced through contrasts ("early in my career... now..."), not through explicit articulation. The belief level was inferred from the consistency of the contrast across cases, not from any single quotation.

Beliefs Shaping Emotional Strategy Adaptation

A second sub-theme concerned how much emotional energy respondents now considered appropriate to invest. The data here are interesting because the trajectory was not uniform. R11 had moved from full emotional presence with every client toward a more selective stance, describing the earlier approach as unsustainable. R5 had moved in the opposite direction: from forced neutrality, which he had once equated with professionalism, toward more authentic expressiveness, having decided over time that genuine emotion built stronger connections.

What unites these opposing trajectories is that respondents described their current stance as the product of a revised belief, not of a tactical preference. Neither described their younger approach as a mistake of execution; both described it as a mistake of understanding that they had since corrected. This is what makes the sub-theme an intermediary belief rather than a strategy choice: the belief is what shifted, and the strategy followed.

Beliefs as Buffers Against Stress

A third sub-theme captured beliefs that reduced the felt intensity of stressful events before regulation began. R7 articulated this directly: “Stress doesn’t mean I have to feel bad.” R10 made a complementary claim, that emotions are manageable “especially in chaos”. In both cases respondents were not describing how they recovered from a stressful event but how they had come to experience stressful events as less acute in the first place. The buffering effect is therefore different in kind from a regulation strategy. It lowers the input, not just the response.

Most respondents were quick to note that this belief had not always been available to them. It was, in their telling, the residue of repeated exposure to high-pressure work, not a temperament. The buffering, in other words, was earned.

Beliefs as Translators of Experience into Regulation

Finally, respondents described general beliefs about emotions that they had distilled from years of work and that now served as guiding principles. R3 described the distillation in terms of selectivity: he had once been available all the time, but had come to believe one had to choose. R9 described it in terms of skill: he had once equated suppression with survival, but had come to believe that the genuine craft was knowing when to show emotion and when not to. Voiced beliefs were reflective rather than reactive. It was about lessons their careers had pressed into them, which operated at a longer time horizon than any single client interaction.

3.3 Theme 3: Beliefs about Emotions as Part of Emotional Labour Itself

The third theme is the one I find empirically most interesting and theoretically least settled. It captures beliefs that did not sit upstream of emotional labour and did not evolve gradually alongside it. Instead, they appeared inside the regulation episode, in the heat of an exchange. Respondents described accessing them in the moment, as cognitive shortcuts that prompted an adjustment, as motivational rationales that kept them going when the labour became costly, or as flashes of value-conflict that made the labour harder. The three sub-themes capture these three modes of in-the-moment operation respectively. An overview of the subthemes and supporting quotes is presented in Table 5 below.

Table 5 | Quotations illustrating theme: Beliefs about Emotions as Part of Emotional Labour Itself

Subtheme	Quotation
Beliefs Guiding Real-Time Emotional Adjustments	"I knew he was being unfair, but I just nodded and let him finish. There was no point in escalating. It would've just made things worse." (R10) "There are moments when I feel irritated, but I try to listen more than I talk. It usually helps me keep things from going sideways." (R7)
Beliefs as Justifications for Effort	"There are definitely moments when I feel drained, especially after back-to-back meetings. But I keep showing up with energy because I know that how I come across can set the tone for the whole conversation." (R5) "Even when I get really frustrated, I try to stay supportive. I believe it's not about me, it's about helping them (the client) feel heard so I can move forward." (R1)
Beliefs Triggering Emotional Conflicts	"I don't like pretending to be cheerful when I'm not. It feels fake, and I always walk away from those calls feeling a bit disconnected from myself." (R11) "Sometimes I want to show that I'm frustrated, but I know it would make things worse. Still, I'm left wondering if I'm being too passive, like I'm not standing up for myself." (R8)

Source: author

Beliefs Guiding Real-Time Emotional Adjustments

Several respondents described short, almost formulaic statements that they called up in difficult interactions to recalibrate what they were showing. R10 described nodding through unfair treatment because escalating "would've just made things worse"; R7 described listening more than talking when irritated, framing this as a way to keep things "from going sideways". The beliefs operating here are not elaborate philosophies. They are short, portable statements ("this isn't personal", "I need to be the composed one", "there's no point") that respondents reached for when their felt emotion did not match what the situation required of them.

What distinguishes this sub-theme from a regulation strategy is that respondents described the belief as having arrived in the moment, fully formed, rather than having been deliberately constructed in real time. The belief did the cognitive work; the strategy followed.

Beliefs as Justifications for Effort

A second sub-theme captured beliefs that held the labour in place when it became costly. R5 reported persisting with high energy after back-to-back meetings because of a settled view that "How I come across can set the tone for the whole conversation." R1 described staying supportive even when frustrated because the interaction was "not about me". What is happening here is not mood repair or strategic choice; it is moral and motivational scaffolding. The respondents were tired, frustrated, or both, and they kept going because of a belief about why the work mattered, a belief activated precisely when the labour threatened to fail.

These justifications were never described as performances of professionalism for an audience. They were internal, and respondents were specific that the belief was what made continued effort feel possible rather than depleting.

Beliefs Triggering Emotional Conflicts

A third sub-theme is, in effect, the inverse of the second. Some beliefs did not support emotional labour; they obstructed it. R11 described feeling “disconnected from herself” after pretending to be cheerful, experiencing the requirement to perform positive emotion as a small self-betrayal. R8 described the opposite friction: he had masked frustration in a tense interaction and was “left wondering” whether he had been “too passive”, whether he had failed to stand up for himself. In both cases a personal value, honesty in R11’s case, self-respect and in R8’s collided with the display the situation required.

The cost respondents described was not the energetic cost of suppression but a moral residue: a sense that the labour, although successful in its immediate task, had been performed against something they cared about. This is the version of emotional labour that respondents most often described as “sticking with them” after the interaction ended.

3.4 Synthesis across themes

Read together, the three themes show that beliefs about emotions operate at three interconnected levels of emotional labour: as antecedent orientations, as evolving intermediaries shaped by experience, and as elements enacted within the regulation episode itself.

Antecedent asset-liability and moral beliefs predisposed respondents toward different mixes of deep acting and surface acting, dynamic beliefs supported shifts from suppressive to more reappraisal-based engagement over the course of a career, and within-episode beliefs functioned as online decision rules, justifications, or sources of dissonance during concrete client interactions. This three-level pattern provides the empirical basis for the study’s central contribution, namely refining Grandey and Gabriel’s framework by showing how beliefs about emotions structure emotional labour in long-term B2B relationships.

4 Discussion

This study set out to examine how beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term client relationships. The findings show that beliefs about emotions do not operate as a single kind of construct or only at a single point in the regulation process. Across the 12 cases, beliefs about emotions appeared at three interconnected levels of emotional labour. As antecedents that pre-shape orientations toward emotional demands, as dynamic intermediaries that recalibrate engagement through accumulated experience, and as elements activated inside specific regulation episodes. Read against existing emotional labour research, this three-level operation of beliefs is not where the literature currently locates them. In what follows I interpret each level in turn, then identify three theoretical contributions, the practical implications I can responsibly draw from the data, and the limitations that bound those claims.

4.1 Interpretation of findings

Antecedent beliefs do more than predict strategy choice. They constitute the professional stance from which emotional labour begins. Existing research on emotion beliefs has established a robust association between malleability and usefulness beliefs and the regulation strategies people choose (Becerra et al., 2020; Ford & Gross, 2018, 2019; Kim et al., 2024; Tamir et al., 2007). The most recent empirical test in this tradition (Johnston et al., 2025)

confirms that emotion beliefs predict the strategies people deploy and that the controllability dimension carries particular weight. What the data add is that, in senior B2B work, antecedent beliefs are not isolated cognitive predictors fed into a regulation process. They are the settled professional stance from which the regulation process begins. R5 and R1 did not select emotional engagement as a tactic for a given client; they walked into the relationship believing emotions are instruments of long-term trust. R9 and R3 did not select restraint as a tactic, they rather walked in believing emotions do not belong in the work at all. The belief is therefore not best modelled as an input that varies across encounters but as a relational baseline that varies across people, a finding that extends the input-modelling assumption common in the emotion-belief literature into a stance-level construct visible only in long-term professional contexts. A second extension concerns moral framing as a fourth belief dimension. The belief literature has settled around two principal axes: controllability (Ford & Gross, 2018; Kim et al., 2024; Tamir et al., 2007) and usefulness/value (Becerra et al., 2020; Trincas et al., 2016). The data make visible a third axis that the dominant instruments do not capture, the beliefs about the moral permissibility of emotional displays. R11 prohibited faking up on integrity grounds, and R10 prohibited leaking down on responsibility grounds. Both beliefs are normative rather than instrumental, and neither maps neatly onto malleability or usefulness. Trincas et al. (2016) gestured toward belief specificity in showing that different emotion beliefs predict different regulation strategies, but the specific moral dimension I observed has not been theorised in the emotional labour literature. This adds a measurement and theoretical agenda that I take up in section 4.2.

Beliefs operate as dynamic intermediaries that revise themselves through accumulated professional experience. Tamir et al. (2007) and Ortner et al. (2017) document that implicit theories of emotion are associated with regulation choices and well-being. Tamir et al. (2007) also show that implicit theories of emotion, held as stable inputs before a major life transition, can predict emotional and social outcomes nearly a year later. The experimental literature (Gutentag et al., 2017; Stillman et al., 2010; Waizman et al., 2023) establishes that even brief manipulations of emotion beliefs can alter strategy use, demonstrating that beliefs are at least short-run malleable. Yet this malleability has been examined primarily under controlled, short-term conditions. My findings extend this evidence in two ways. First, the revisions respondents described did not occur in a single transition or a brief manipulation. They accumulated across years of high-stakes client interactions. R8 came to read pushback as part of the deal, R1 came to read feedback as communication, and R11 and R5 moved in opposite directions on emotional expressiveness. Second, what shifted was not strategy selection, but the belief beneath the strategy. Respondents narrated their younger approach as a mistake of understanding they had since corrected, and the new strategy followed from the new belief, not the other way around. This pattern extends Tamir et al.'s (2007) account by specifying the occupational mechanism by which belief change occurs in adult professional life: repeated relational episodes in which the prior belief produced a cost that the worker absorbed and then re-interpreted. It also speaks directly to the call by Gabriel et al. (2023) for emotional labour research that captures longer time horizons and individual-difference dynamics that the cross-sectional service literature cannot reveal. A subset of beliefs operates inside the regulation episode itself. Diefendorff and Gosserand's (2003) control-theory account anticipated that internal standards would matter during regulation. What the data add is the specific cognitive form this real-time work takes. Short, portable belief statements (this isn't personal; I need to be the composed one; there is no point) that respondents reached for when felt emotion did not

match what the situation required. These statements are not strategies in the deep-acting/surface-acting sense (Grandey, 2000; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). The respondents described them as having arrived in the moment, fully formed, and as having done the cognitive work that the strategy then enacted. The data also surface a less examined function of beliefs that justify continued effort when emotional labour becomes costly (R5, R1), and beliefs that obstruct emotional labour by colliding with personal values (R11, R8). The cost of this last type was not energetic depletion of the kind documented in the surface-acting meta-analytic record (Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019), but a moral residue that respondents described as sticking with them after the interaction ended. Locating these phenomena inside the regulation episode rather than upstream of it extends Diefendorff and Gosserand's (2003) framework by specifying which internal standards are activated, in what form, and with what consequences for the labour itself.

The three-level pattern was made visible specifically by the long-term B2B context. The emotional labour literature has accumulated overwhelmingly in short, scripted service settings (Grandey, 2015; Grandey & Gabriel, 2015; Grandey & Sayre, 2019; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019). In those settings, antecedent beliefs are observable, but belief revision over years and within-episode belief activation are not, because the temporal horizon of the encounter is too short and the scripting too tight. *Senior business development work supplies all three conditions simultaneously: long enough relational arcs for revision to occur, demands complex enough for value-conflict to surface in real time, and discretion broad enough for the manager's own beliefs, rather than externally imposed display rules, to govern conduct* (Anaza et al., 2018; Karantinou & Hogg, 2001; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011). The three-level pattern is therefore not a Czech finding or a B2B finding in any narrow sense. It is a finding made visible by a setting that combines the conditions Gabriel et al. (2023) identify as under-represented. The sufficient relational continuity for belief revision to occur, emotional demands complex enough for value-conflict to surface, and a non-service context in which worker discretion governs conduct rather than organisational scripts.

4.2 Theoretical Contribution

I situate the study's contribution along three concrete claims, each of which extends rather than reproduces existing findings.

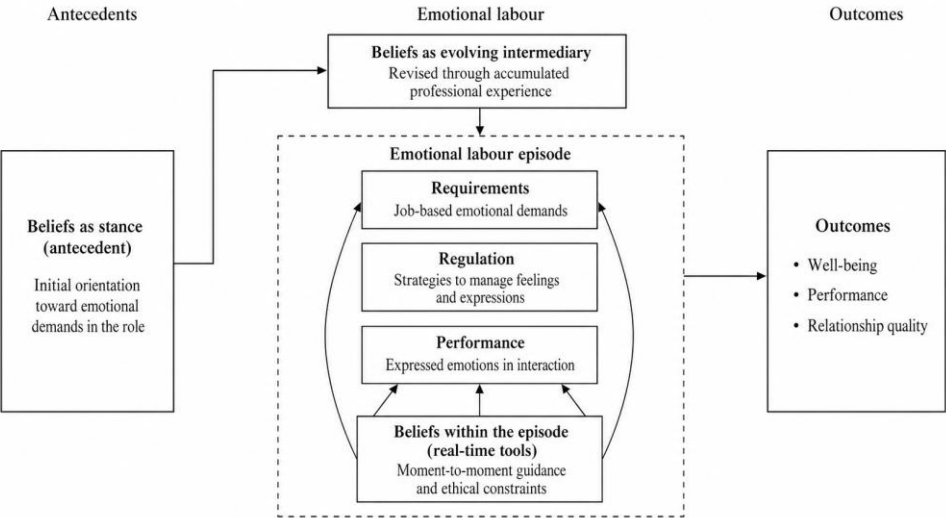
Contribution 1. Beliefs about emotions are a multi-level construct in emotional labour. The dominant treatment in the belief literature is to model beliefs as stable individual-difference inputs into regulation (Becerra et al., 2020; Ford & Gross, 2018, 2019; Johnston et al., 2025; Kim et al., 2024). This study extends that treatment by demonstrating, in a single occupational sample, that the same construct operates at three levels. Firstly as a stance respondents bring to the role, secondly as a layer that revises itself across the career, and thirdly as a real-time component of the regulation episode. Refining Grandey and Gabriel's (2015) framework, I propose that beliefs about emotions should be theorised as cross-cutting rather than antecedent-only. Meaning located before, across, and within the regulation episode. The stance-level finding, the trajectory of revision finding, and the within-episode finding are each individually consistent with isolated strands of the existing literature, but their co-occurrence in the same sample is not, and bringing this co-occurrence into attention is the contribution.

Contribution 2. Moral framing is a candidate fourth belief axis alongside controllability and usefulness. The Emotion Beliefs Questionnaire and its empirical tradition (Becerra et al., 2020;

Ford & Gross, 2018; Kim et al., 2024; Tamir et al., 2007; Trincas et al., 2016) capture variation along controllability and usefulness. In this study respondents articulated a third dimension, beliefs about whether specific emotional displays are morally permissible, that operated independently of, and sometimes overrode, the instrumental dimensions. This is closest in spirit to Trincas et al.'s (2016) argument for belief specificity, but the specific moral content I observed (prohibitions on faking up and on leaking down) is not, to my knowledge, represented in current measurement instruments. I therefore propose moral framing as a candidate fourth belief axis warranting psychometric development and integration into models of emotional labour, especially in occupational settings where authenticity carries professional weight.

Contribution 3. Long-term, relationally embedded B2B work is a productive scope extension for emotional labour theory. Gabriel et al. (2023) argue that the field has been constrained by the prevalence of short, scripted service samples, and call for longitudinal research and expansion into the non-service contexts where emotional labour is increasingly consequential. The B2B-marketing literature has described relationship-driven sales and consulting work primarily through the lens of trust, rapport, and chemistry (Anaza et al., 2018; Karantinou & Hogg, 2001; Tähtinen & Blois, 2011), with limited explicit theorising of the worker's emotion regulation. This study brings these two literatures into contact, and shows that this context surfaces emotional-labour phenomena, belief revision over years, in-the-moment belief activation, and moral residue from the labour itself, that the dominant short-encounter paradigm cannot easily observe. The contribution is therefore both substantive (three new phenomena) and scope-extending (a setting in which the broader theory becomes more complete). Figure 2 provides a visual summary of this multi-level positioning of beliefs before, across, and within the regulation episode.

Figure 2 | Theoretical contribution to standard model of emotional labour



Source: author

4.3 Practical contributions

The practical implications I draw here are framed as cautious suggestions warranted by respondent accounts, not as established interventions tested in this study. Most importantly I

would suggest treating beliefs about emotions as a development target, not only a screening variable. Several respondents described emotional regulation as a craft they had developed through repeated exposure, and several respondents described their current working beliefs as lessons their careers had pressed into them. If belief revision is occurring informally across long careers, organisations may be able to shorten and structure that revision through reflective onboarding and coaching that surfaces incoming managers' beliefs about emotions, rather than relying on tenure to do the work. The experimental evidence that emotion beliefs might be at least in short-run malleable (Gutentag et al., 2017; Stillman et al., 2010; Waizman et al., 2023) is consistent with this possibility, though intervention design and evaluation in occupational samples remains an open empirical question.

Another suggestion would be to address the moral layer of emotional labour explicitly. The respondents who described emotional conflicts did not report that the cost of the labour was energetic depletion. They reported a moral residue that lingered after the interaction. Practical responses to emotional labour in client-facing roles have tended to focus on stress, exhaustion, and engagement (Hülshöger & Schewe, 2011; Lee & Madera, 2019). The data suggest that, in long-term relational work where authenticity and professional identity are at stake, leadership-development practice may benefit from naming and discussing the moral dimension of emotional displays explicitly. For example, by helping managers articulate their own boundaries on faking up and leaking down before those boundaries are tested in a live negotiation.

Another suggestion would be to recognise that the senior B2B role places three distinct demands on belief about emotions at work. The three-level structure has a practical corollary. Incoming managers might rely primarily on antecedent beliefs they bring to the role, mid-career managers might benefit most from support in revising beliefs that have not survived contact with the work, and all managers, regardless of tenure, might at times rely on within-episode beliefs as cognitive shortcuts during high-stakes interactions. Generic emotion-regulation training does not differentiate between these. A staged developmental approach that names the level being addressed may be more effective than a single training format.

4.4 Limitations and future research

This study is not statistically generalisable, nor is it directly replicable. It draws on 12 in-depth interviews with senior business development managers in the Czech Republic, analysed using template analysis (Brooks et al., 2015; King, 2012). The findings should be read as the development of theoretical claims, not as estimates of population-level prevalence. The sample size is consistent with code saturation in focused qualitative work (Hennink et al., 2017; Mason, 2010), and thematic saturation was reached after the eighth interview, but readers should treat the three-level model as a hypothesis structure to be tested in larger and more diverse samples, not as a confirmed empirical regularity.

The sample is predominantly male (9 of 12). This is a substantive limitation rather than a formal one. The literature on emotional display rules and their differential application by gender is well established (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton, 2009), and several of the patterns I observed concentrated in male respondents, particularly the framing of emotions as a professional liability and the responsibility-based prohibition on leaking negative emotion. I cannot adjudicate from the present data whether these patterns reflect industry norms in Czech financial, gendered expectations about emotional display in senior B2B roles, or sample composition. It is plausible that the asset framing of emotions, which appeared primarily in SaaS and consulting and was

articulated by both male and female respondents, would surface differently in a more gender-balanced or female-majority sample, for example, with greater visibility of the relational and care-oriented components that the present sample described in less developed terms. This is a topic for future work.

The design is cross-sectional and based on retrospective self-report. Respondents narrated trajectories of belief change across long careers, but I did not observe those changes occurring. Recall and self-presentation almost certainly shape how respondents reconstructed earlier views. A longitudinal or career-history design in which belief change is tracked prospectively would strengthen the dynamic-intermediary claim, and a within-episode design, diary, experience-sampling, or video-recall, would strengthen the within-episode claim by capturing belief activation as it occurs rather than as it is later remembered. The sample is concentrated in financial services, management consulting, SaaS, and manufacturing. The patterns I observed varied with industry, most clearly, the asset framing was absent in financial services and the liability framing concentrated there. This is a finding worth replicating, but it also bounds the transferability of the conclusions to other B2B contexts, and especially to settings outside Central Europe with different professional norms around emotional display.

As of directions for future research, I see three lines of work that follow naturally from the above. First, the moral framing axis warrants psychometric development and integration into existing belief instruments such as the Emotion Beliefs Questionnaire (Becerra et al., 2020); the data identify the construct but do not measure it. Second, prospective and longitudinal designs are needed to test the dynamic-intermediary claim that beliefs revise themselves through accumulated relational episodes, building on the evidence in Tamir et al. (2007), in which beliefs were assessed at a single time point, and Ortner et al. (2017), and the experimental evidence in Gutentag et al. (2017), Stillman et al. (2010), and Waizman et al. (2023). Third, gender-balanced and cross-industry replication is needed to assess whether the three-level pattern holds beyond the present sample, and whether the moral residue I observed in two cases generalises to the broader experience of emotional labour in long-term relational work.

Conclusion

This study examined how beliefs about emotions shape the emotional labour of senior business development managers in long-term client relationships. The findings show that beliefs operate at three interconnected levels of emotional labour: as antecedent stances, as evolving intermediaries revised through accumulated experience, and as elements activated within specific regulation episodes. This three-level operation extends the dominant treatment of emotion beliefs as stable inputs into regulation, identifies a candidate fourth belief axis (moral framing) alongside controllability and usefulness, and shows that long-term, relationally embedded B2B work surfaces emotional-labour phenomena that the prevailing short-encounter paradigm cannot easily observe. The practical implications I can responsibly draw are cautious: belief work belongs in leadership development, the moral dimension of emotional labour deserves explicit attention, and a one-size training format is unlikely to address all three levels at once. The study's primary limitation is that its findings are not statistically generalisable; the three-level model is offered as a hypothesis structure for subsequent quantitative and longitudinal testing rather than as a confirmed regularity.

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