



We Keep Measuring Cognitive Load and Ignoring Emotional Load

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Opinion

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Cognitive ergonomics has done impressive work over the past few decades quantifying mental workload how many items a working memory can hold under time pressure, how interface complexity degrades decision accuracy, how alarm fatigue erodes vigilance in control room operators. I have relied on this literature extensively in my own work. But I have grown increasingly convinced that the field's near-exclusive focus on cognitive load has left a parallel and equally consequential variable underexamined: the emotional load that accompanies many of the same tasks we study for their cognitive demands.

Consider a call center worker handling complaint calls, an emergency dispatcher fielding a distressing call, or a nurse managing a difficult family conversation during a shift already stretched thin. Standard cognitive workload assessment tools NASA-TLX and its relatives, dual-task paradigms, physiological arousal measures capture some of what is happening in these moments, but they were built primarily around tasks like piloting and process control, where the dominant demand is information processing under time pressure. They were not designed with emotional labor as a first-class variable, and I think this shows in how poorly they capture the actual experience of jobs where emotional regulation, not information throughput, is the primary source of strain [1].

The concept of emotional labor itself is not new; sociologists have studied it since the 1980s, largely in service industry contexts. What strikes me is how little cross-pollination there has been between that literature and the psychology-of-ergonomics tradition that studies workload, attention, and decision-making in applied settings. The two fields ask adjacent questions — what makes a task hard on a person using almost entirely separate vocabularies, separate measurement instruments, and separate journals.

A dispatcher study is as likely to appear in an occupational psychology or sociology venue as in a human factors one, and the methodological conventions differ enough that findings rarely transfer cleanly across the boundary.

I think this separation has practical costs. Workplace interventions designed around cognitive load reductionsimplifying interfaces, reducing concurrent task demands, restructuring alarms are genuinely useful, but they do not address, and sometimes do not even acknowledge, the emotional component of strain in jobs where that component may be doing more damage than the informational one. A dispatcher's interface can be beautifully simplified and the job can still be corrosive if the emotional demands of the calls themselves are left unaddressed by the design process. Conversely, some interventions aimed at emotional support debriefing sessions, wellness programs are bolted onto a job design that has not been examined for whether its cognitive and procedural structure is itself a source of the emotional strain in the first place, for instance by leaving too little slack for a worker to emotionally regulate between demanding calls [2].

My proposal, and I say this as an opinion rather than a settled research program, is that ergonomics as a discipline should treat emotional load as a design variable with the same seriousness it treats cognitive load, particularly in service, care, and emergency-response occupations where it plausibly dominates. That means building assessment instruments that measure both together rather than as separate research traditions, and it means job design interventions that consider pacing and recovery time for emotional regulation as explicitly as they currently consider pacing for information processing [3].

I recognize the counterargument: emotional experience is harder to operationalize than reaction time or memory span, and there is a risk of the concept becoming too diffuse

to design against usefully. That is a fair caution, and it is exactly the kind of methodological problem the field is well equipped to solve, if it decides the problem is worth solving. I think it is.

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