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Behind the Shadows: Exploring the Wellbeing Impacts on Staff in Dark Tourism Attractions

Introduction

Dark tourism, visitation to sites associated with death, disaster, and human suffering, has matured from an evocative label to a robust area of inquiry within tourism and hospitality studies (Lennon & Foley, 2000; Stone, 2006). While scholarship has primarily focused on visitor motivations, ethical considerations, and interpretive practices (Seaton, 1996; Light, 2017), far less attention has been paid to those who work daily within these emotionally charged environments. Front-of-house guides, interpreters, educators, curators, and security personnel routinely encounter narratives of tragedy and witness visitors' grief, anger, or, at times, insensitivity. This paper synthesises theory and evidence on the psychological, emotional, and social wellbeing implications for staff in dark tourism contexts. It situates these experiences within the frameworks of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995), and secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Figley, 1995), and integrates organisational perspectives such as the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). The analysis concludes with practical recommendations for trauma-informed management, staff support, and ethical operations.

Educational Drivers and Evolving Motivations in Dark Tourism

Recent findings by Magano, Fraiz-Brea & Leite (2022), have established that educated professionals or those with a desire to continuously inflate their knowledge of Dark tourism, has resulted in a substantive impact on inquisitiveness to explore the Dark Attraction Arena. Dark tourism also referred to as Thanotourism and Grief Tourism over several decades, has further encompassed sites such as Auschwitz, formerly a Holocaust Memorial Museum and Concentration camp, commemorating on the One million men, women and children who lost their lives, which cogitates on Human Tragedy and Natural Disasters (Hooper& Lennon, 2016). Therefore, it is recognised those individuals visiting places of Death and Trauma discontent is conducive to the large mass degree of classification and individualisation in the Dark tourism Sector (Stone, 2010).

Dark Tourism Context and the Invisible Workforce

Dark tourism spans a spectrum, from "light" entertainment-driven sites (e.g., themed attractions) to "darkest" locations such as genocide memorials and former prisons (Stone, 2006). Staff responsibilities vary, but commonly involve interpreting sensitive histories, facilitating remembrance, and managing

visitor conduct. These roles often require navigating complex ethical terrain, balancing fidelity to victims' experiences with accessible storytelling and visitor care (Sharpley & Stone, 2009; Light, 2017). In this context, staff are not neutral conduits; their affective performance is part of the visitor experience and the institution's moral stance. Yet position descriptions often understate or omit the intensity of the emotional work involved, which can render the "invisible" labour both unrecognised and unsupported (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000).

Emotional Labour: Empathy Under Constraint

Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labour as the regulation of feelings and expressions to fulfil job requirements. In dark tourism, employees are expected to embody empathy, solemnity, and professionalism, often in the face of visitors' visible distress, challenging questions, or occasional trivialisation (e.g., inappropriate photography). Two regulation strategies are salient. Surface acting entails suppressing irritation or sadness while displaying politeness and composure; deep acting involves aligning one's inner feelings with organisational display rules (Grandey, 2000). Both strategies can be costly. Surface acting is consistently associated with emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, whereas deep acting, while sometimes less harmful, can still drain resources when performed chronically in grief laden- contexts (Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

Dark tourism staff walk a tightrope between compassion and professional boundaries. Over-identification with victims or narratives can intensify empathic distress, increasing the risk of burnout, whereas excessive detachment may undermine ethical interpretation and visitor care (Figley, 1995; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). Complicating matters, visitors' reactions are unpredictable: some seek catharsis; others exhibit morbid curiosity; some challenge historical interpretations. Staff therefore expend cognitive and emotional effort to tailor responses while preventing escalation and maintaining dignity for victims (Light, 2017; Sharpley & Stone, 2009). When such emotional demands are high and resources (e.g., supervisor support, recovery time, training) are insufficient, the JD-R model predicts strain and health impairment (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

An emerging multidisciplinary approach to Dark Tourism is Affective Tourism which focuses on entwining together Tourism, Danger, and Conflict, however this can suppress emotions, visceral bodily responses, and corporeal experiences for travellers. and simultaneously prompt fear and anger for staff and tourists (Buda, 2015; Korsanie, 2020). This can exacerbate the situation, and emotions intensify in these perceived

danger zones of areas of death and result in enhanced Psychological and Physiological distress (Buda, 2015). Furthermore, continuous rumination on sadness, hostility, self-hatred, and emotional vulnerability presents higher self-awareness than in those who show no interest in visiting these educational places portrayed negative characteristic personalities (Magano, Fraiz-Brea & Leite 2022).

Leadership Lens on Emotional Labour and Staff Support

Empathy within leadership is inherently complex, particularly within dark tourism settings where historical trauma, cultural sensitivities, and conflicting visitor expectations intersect. As Tomilenovic (2010) and Dresler (2023) emphasise, empathetic leadership cannot be disentangled from cross-cultural understanding and the wider Notion of Peace embedded within the tourism industry. Leaders are required to navigate multiple layers of cultural meaning, historical pain, and social responsibility. This complexity means empathy is not a simple emotional response, but a context-dependent leadership competency that must be consciously developed, critically examined, and ethically applied.

Tucker's (2016) distinctions between Non-Reflected, Unsettled, and Unreflective Empathy highlight the risks of poorly calibrated emotional engagement. Non-Reflected and Unsettled Empathy can prompt leaders to step back and engage in conscious reflection—recognising the emotional weight carried by both staff and visitors. However, Unreflective Empathy, where leaders absorb emotions without critical processing, can produce counterproductive states such as guilt, shame, or emotional paralysis. In the context of dark tourism, this is particularly problematic, as leaders must maintain clarity, ethical judgement, and emotional boundaries to effectively support staff navigating traumatic content.

Balancing the commercial and educational imperatives of dark tourism further complicates leadership responsibilities. On one hand, operational success relies on visitor numbers, revenue generation, and efficient management. On the other, the educational mission requires emotional sensitivity, ethical interpretation of tragedy, and respect for communities still carrying the weight of historical trauma. Cyril (2020) argues that this tension places leaders at a crossroads where commercial pressures should never overshadow the moral and emotional obligations inherent in interpreting sites of trauma.

Compassion Fatigue: Costs of Chronic Caring

Compassion fatigue describes the erosion of empathy and the emergence of emotional exhaustion arising from prolonged exposure to others' suffering (Figley, 1995). Although widely studied among health and

helping professionals, its mechanisms resonate in dark tourism where staff repeatedly witness grief, narrate atrocities, and hold space for traumatised visitors. Symptoms can include irritability, reduced capacity for empathy, sleep disturbance, and disengagement from work once perceived as meaningful (Figley, 1995; Jenkins & Baird, 2002). Compassion fatigue is not a personal failing; it is a predictable occupational risk where empathic engagement is central to the role and organisational systems for recovery are underdeveloped.

Meaningfulness at work, such as honouring victims or fostering critical remembrance, can buffer these risks by providing a sense of purpose and moral coherence (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Yet meaning alone is not sufficient if workloads are high, breaks are irregular, or peer debriefing is absent. Without structural support, individual coping strategies may amount to “plasters on bullet holes,” leaving staff to privately absorb the emotional shock of their labour.

Secondary Traumatic Stress and Vicarious Trauma

Secondary traumatic stress (STS) refers to PTSD like symptoms arising from indirect exposure to trauma, such as hearing ‘-survivors’ accounts or recounting graphic histories (Figley, 1995; Bride, 2007). Manifestations—intrusive imagery, avoidance, hyperarousal—may spill over into personal life, making it difficult to “switch off” and increasing sensitivity to distressing news (Bride, 2007; McCann & Pearlman, 1990). In dark tourism, STS risks can be elevated by repetitive storytelling of violent events, immersive exhibitions, sensory installations (e.g., soundscapes, recreations), and direct contact with bereaved visitors.

Vicarious trauma, a related construct, highlights more enduring shifts in worldview and self-concept following sustained empathic engagement with trauma material (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). For staff, this might manifest as heightened cynicism about institutions, reduced trust, or emotional numbing. Crucially, these effects are not inevitable; organisational buffers—training, supportive supervision, manageable caseloads of emotionally intense tasks—can mitigate risks (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; SAMHSA, 2014).

Social Dynamics and Visitor Management

Wellbeing is also shaped by the social interface with visitors. At memorial sites, staff may encounter tears, silence, or anger; at “lighter” dark attractions, they may confront sensationalism or inappropriate humour.

Both ends of the spectrum can be taxing: co-regulating a distressed visitor requires empathy and time, whereas boundary setting with insensitive behaviour demands assertiveness and calm. Repeated micro-conflicts (e.g., asking visitors to stop photography) contribute to emotional load and moral stress, especially when policies are ambiguous or unevenly enforced (Light, 2017; Stone, 2006).

Additionally, public-facing staff may be targeted for broader societal tensions (e.g., debates over historical responsibility or contested memory). When institutional messaging, exhibit design, and staff training are misaligned, individuals can feel exposed bearing the brunt of visitor dissatisfaction without adequate authority or scripts to respond. Such misalignment accelerates strain and erodes psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999).

With a more recent interest in moral emotions in dark tourism, tourists and staff working within the area of discussion, albeit it for financial job survival, or as a tourist with a desire to fulfil their inquisitive and educational experience, all Homo Sapiens, still requires the same level of emotional and empathetic support (Grimwood, Caton, & Cooke, 2018). Encompassed with moral meanings, values and judgement, dark tourism sites are recognised as ethical communities and advocates of loyal, trustworthy, and honest behaviours (Stone, 2009; Biran, Poria & Oren 2011; Bolin, 2012).

Conversely this is exacerbated with the wellbeing of young adults and children as history and geography trips are now embedded in the education curriculum and this could have a prodigious long-term impact on minors (Magano, Fraiz-Brea & Leite 2022). Previously the morality and impact have been centred around adult experiences, and research on youth tourism has been limited, but due to the larger number of students and families taking their children to these educational site, it is an area of interest, conducive to its invaluable positive educational experience (Dresler, 2023).

Organisational Factors: The JD-R Lens

The JD-R model posits that job demands (e.g., high emotional intensity, time pressure, conflict) deplete energy and trigger strain, whereas job resources (e.g., autonomy, supervisor support, training, recovery opportunities) foster engagement and buffer demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Applying JD-R to dark tourism suggests a dual strategy:

1. Reduce or re-design demands

- Limit consecutive high intensity- interpretive shifts; rotate staff between emotionally heavy and lighter duties.
 - Clarify policies for visitor conduct and equip staff with enforcement protocols to reduce ambiguity and moral distress (Light, 2017).
 - Ensure adequate staffing levels to avoid time pressure that truncates compassionate interactions.
2. Increase resources
- Provide reflective supervision, structured peer debriefs, and access to confidential counselling (SAMHSA, 2014).
 - Offer training in trauma-informed communication, emotional -self-regulation-, and conflict de-escalation (Hülsheger et al., 2013; SAMHSA, 2014).
 - Cultivate a learning climate with high psychological safety so staff can voice concerns and near misses- without fear (Edmondson, 1999).

Evidence Informed- Individual and Team Strategies

Structural interventions remain essential, but research also highlights the value of targeted, individual skills that help staff manage emotional demands. Brief mindfulness and emotion-regulation practices, for example, have been shown to reduce surface acting and emotional exhaustion by helping people notice and tolerate difficult feelings rather than suppress them (Hülsheger et al., 2013). Similarly, “micro-recovery” strategies, such as taking short, protected breaks, maintaining hydration and nutrition, or having brief exposure to nature through plants or outdoor views, support sustained self-regulation across demanding shifts (Trogakos & Hideg, 2009).

Peer support also plays an important role when approached with care. Supportive, non-forensic debriefing that focuses on validation, signposting resources, and creating a sense of connection, without requiring staff to recount graphic details, can strengthen team cohesion while avoiding the harms associated with compulsory critical-incident debriefing (Rose et al., 2002). In addition, using pre-formulated “boundary scripts” can help staff set compassionate, consistent limits in challenging moments. These prepared phrases reduce cognitive load and ensure clarity, particularly in emotionally charged situations.

Management and Policy Implications

Effective organisational support for staff working in emotionally demanding environments begins with thoughtful job design and meaningful recognition. This includes explicitly incorporating emotional labour into job descriptions, recruitment processes, and performance frameworks, ensuring that emotional competence is recognised as a core professional skill and rewarded accordingly (Grandey, 2000). Staffing models also need to be calibrated to reflect predictable fluctuations in demand—such as anniversaries or school holidays—and to ensure that surge capacity is available during these peak periods.

Training and supervision form another essential pillar of support. Staff benefit from both pre-service and ongoing development in trauma-informed practice, compassion-fatigue literacy, and awareness of secondary traumatic stress warning signs (SAMHSA, 2014; Figley, 1995). Beyond technical instruction, reflective supervision provides a structured space for integrating case discussion, ethical considerations, and wellbeing planning, moving beyond a purely operational focus to one that supports emotional resilience.

Robust support infrastructure is also critical. This may involve offering confidential counselling or employee assistance programmes staffed by professionals experienced in trauma-adjacent work. Alongside formal services, organisations can cultivate peer support networks and appoint wellbeing champions who can signpost resources, model healthy practices, and help normalise help-seeking among colleagues.

Ethical visitor management plays an important role in safeguarding staff wellbeing as well. Clear and visible policies on respectful conduct and photography, combined with training in scripted and rights-based enforcement, help ensure consistent practice. In addition, thoughtful interpretive design—such as orientation spaces, gradual exposure to challenging material, and reflective exit areas—can help guide visitors’ emotional trajectories, reducing the extent to which staff must act as the sole regulators of visitor distress (Light, 2017).

Finally, monitoring and continuous learning help embed resilience into organisational systems. Tracking both leading indicators (such as near-miss reports, conflict frequency, and break adherence) and lagging indicators (including sickness absence and turnover) enables early identification of pressure points. Involving staff in post-event reviews not only refines protocols but also strengthens psychological safety by creating opportunities for shared learning and open reflection (Edmondson, 1999).

Community-Centred Wellbeing Approaches

Protecting the mental, emotional and social wellbeing of staff managing or operating within sites associated with disaster, trauma and catastrophic death is fundamental to the long-term welfare of employees (Jordan & Prayag, 2022). This strong centred Local Community Approach provides an additional layer of support to those on the front line of dark tourism, which helps cushion the intensity and emotional cushions constructing an extra layer of support to those actively involved, ensuring that individuals with a front line connection and involvement to the dark attractions are supported within the intensity and traumatic experience of their job, and not exploited (Stone, 2013). Fostering a shared sense of belonging and resilience builds a community of trust and transparency, thus workers have an added layer of protection, which supports their psychological limitations and builds on their individual strengths and well-being within a fostered family support mechanism (Stone, 2013).

Limitations and Future Research

Empirical research specifically focused on dark tourism staff remains relatively sparse compared to visitor centric- studies. Future work on this research will employ mixed methods to examine prevalence and predictors of STS and compassion fatigue among distinct roles (guides vs. curators), evaluate the effectiveness of trauma informed- interventions, and explore cultural and organisational variability across the dark tourism spectrum (Light, 2017; Stone, 2006). Longitudinal designs will clarify causal pathways between emotional labour strategies (surface vs. deep acting), resource availability, and wellbeing outcomes.

Conclusion

Staff in dark tourism attractions perform complex, ethically charged emotional labour at the intersection of history, memory, and public engagement. The risks of compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress are real but not inevitable. Framing the work through emotional labour theory and the JD-R model underscores a central lesson: wellbeing is a function of task demands relative to available resources. Trauma-informed-, ethically aligned organisations, those that recognise, resource, and redistribute emotional labour, can protect staff while enhancing interpretive quality and visitor care. In doing so, they honour not only the pasts they steward but also the people who carry those stories into the present.

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