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ABSTRACT

This article examines how citizen-centered governance policies intersect with emotional labor and employee well-being in a frontline public service setting. The purpose of this study is to understand how governance reforms are experienced and enacted through everyday service interactions. Despite increasing attention to citizen-centeredness and public sector performance, there is still a scholarly need to examine the emotional consequences of these reforms for frontline workers, particularly in higher educational institutions. As a result, employee well-being is often treated as a secondary or individual issue rather than as a structural outcome of governance systems. Drawing on qualitative data from open-ended surveys, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions with registrar staff, service clients, alumni, and supervisors at a public university in the Southern Philippines, this study used thematic analysis to explore emotional experiences and service dynamics. The analysis identified three main themes: the centrality of emotional labor in shaping service quality, the role of system-level constraints in producing emotional strain, and the recognition by both staff and clients of the link between well-being and sustainable service delivery. This article contributes to debates on public administration and emotional labor by reframing emotional regulation as a policy effect. It highlights the importance of integrating employee well-being into citizen-centered governance frameworks.

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INTRODUCTION

This article is written in response to a growing concern that contemporary public sector reforms, while improving efficiency and responsiveness, are increasingly placing hidden emotional and psychological burdens on frontline employees. Across many governance systems, reforms framed around citizen-centeredness promise better service delivery, transparency, and accountability, yet often overlook the lived experiences of public servants who must operationalize these ideals on a daily basis. Existing scholarship has shown that policy reforms inspired by New Public Management and performance-based governance tend to intensify work demands, emotional regulation, and exposure to public scrutiny (Hood & Dixon, 2015). In the Philippine context, studies on frontline bureaucracy and public service work similarly demonstrate that administrative reforms often translate into increased workload, role strain, and emotional pressure for government employees, particularly in service-oriented agencies (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011; De Vries & Sobis, 2016). These pressures are rarely examined from the perspective of those positioned at the frontlines of service delivery, particularly in higher educational institutions. This article therefore questions dominant assumptions that citizen satisfaction can be pursued without parallel attention to employee well-being and organizational sustainability.

Debates on citizen-centered governance have long emphasized the importance of shifting public administration from rigid bureaucratic models toward more responsive, service-oriented systems. This shift is commonly associated with New Public Management and later public service reform movements, which promote efficiency, accountability, and customer-like treatment of citizens (Osborne, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). While these reforms have improved access and service quality in many contexts, scholars increasingly argue that they also generate unintended consequences, including work intensification, emotional strain, and managerial surveillance (Hood, 1991; Van de Walle, 2017). In parallel, research on employee well-being has expanded, highlighting how organizational pressures affect job satisfaction, mental health, and long-term performance (Diener et al., 2017). These debates reveal a central tension in contemporary governance: how to reconcile the demand for high-quality citizen services with the need to protect the psychological and emotional sustainability of public sector workers.

Within these broader debates, emotional labor has emerged as a particularly important concept for understanding frontline public service contexts. Emotional labor refers to the process by which employees regulate their emotions to conform to organizational expectations, often requiring them to display friendliness, patience, and empathy regardless of their internal feelings (Hochschild, 1983). In these frontline settings, emotional labor becomes highly visible as employees are expected to manage complaints, frustration, and institutional delays while maintaining professionalism. Research shows that sustained emotional regulation is strongly associated with burnout, emotional exhaustion, and reduced job satisfaction (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Burnout, in turn, undermines both employee health and service quality and organizational trust. These dynamics suggest that citizen-centered policies do not merely restructure service systems but actively reshape the emotional economy of public institutions.

Despite growing attention to emotional labor and burnout, a significant gap remains in how these concepts are applied into governance and policy analysis. Most studies treat employee well-being as a human resource issue. As a result, well-being is often framed as an individual responsibility, addressed through coping strategies or resilience training. This creates a blind spot in public administration scholarship, where citizen satisfaction is routinely measured, but employee suffering remains largely invisible. The big-picture problem, therefore, is that citizen-centered governance risks becoming ethically unsustainable: institutions demand emotional availability, patience, and constant positivity from workers without adequately addressing the organizational conditions that produce stress and burnout. Without reconceptualizing well-being as a governance issue, reforms may inadvertently erode the human foundations upon which effective public service depends.

This paper aims to examine how citizen-centered policies intersect with emotional labor and employee well-being in a frontline public service setting. Using the registrar's office at a public university as a case study, the research explores how employees experience policy-driven demands for efficiency, courtesy, and responsiveness. Specifically, it investigates how staff interpret and manage emotional expectations, how these expectations affect their mental and emotional health, and how organizational structures shape their capacity to cope with stress. The paper draws on qualitative data from surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions. It seeks to generate grounded insights into everyday governance practices. This paper centers the lived experiences of public servants as a critical lens for understanding the real consequences of citizen-centered reforms.

Here, we suggest that emotional labor should be treated not merely as an interpersonal skill but as a structural outcome of governance systems. We argue that citizen-centered policies actively produce emotional demands that function as hidden forms of labor, shaping how public servants perform professionalism, care, and institutional loyalty. By integrating emotional labor theory with the Job Demands–Resources model, this paper contributes to a growing body of work that conceptualizes well-being as an organizational and policy issue (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). The article also extends everyday governance scholarship by showing how routine administrative practices can generate subtle forms of stress, fatigue, and moral strain. In doing so, it reframes public service as a technical and managerial process, and as an emotional and ethical field where power, responsibility, and human vulnerability intersect.

This paper has four parts. It begins by reviewing key literature on citizen-centered governance, emotional labor, burnout, and employee well-being, situating the study within broader debates in public administration and organizational studies. It then outlines the methodological approach, including the qualitative design, data sources, and analytical strategy. The third part presents the empirical findings, focusing on staff experiences, client feedback, and the emotional dynamics of frontline service delivery. The final part offers a discussion and conclusion, linking the findings to theoretical frameworks and drawing out implications for policy, leadership, and organizational reform.

CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL GROUNDING

Research on citizen-centered governance and employee well-being has increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding how public service reforms reshape everyday work experiences in frontline institutions. The field of public administration plays a role in examining how governance models affect service efficiency and human dimensions of organizational life, particularly in sectors where public interaction is constant. Scholars argue that reforms inspired by New Public Management and public value frameworks have transformed citizens into service users and public servants into service providers, with performance, responsiveness, and satisfaction as core metrics (Osborne, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015; Van de Walle, 2017). At the same time, organizational studies highlight that work is not merely technical but emotional and relational, shaped by norms of professionalism, care, and emotional expression (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). This body of work establishes that governance reforms cannot be fully understood without considering their emotional and psychological consequences for those who implement them.

Despite its importance, the field continues to face challenges such as conceptual fragmentation and an overemphasis on performance indicators at the expense of worker experiences. Scholars have pointed out several persistent limitations, including the tendency to treat employee well-being as a secondary outcome (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017; Diener et al., 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Much of the literature prioritizes institutional efficiency, citizen satisfaction, and managerial accountability, while emotional strain, stress, and burnout are framed as individual problems (Hood, 1991; Van de Walle, 2017). This has produced a skewed knowledge base in which organizational success is measured through output metrics, leaving the emotional costs of service delivery largely invisible. As a result, researchers struggle to explain why service quality may improve on paper while employee morale and sustainability deteriorate in practice.

Recent studies have focused on emotional labor, burnout, and psychological capital as key mechanisms linking governance reforms and employee outcomes. The current state of research shows growing empirical evidence that emotional regulation is a core feature of public service work, particularly in high-contact administrative environments. Studies demonstrate that surface acting is strongly associated with emotional exhaustion, while deep acting can foster engagement and resilience (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). At the same time, scholars applying the Job Demands–Resources model show that job resources such as autonomy, fairness, and supportive leadership can buffer the negative effects of emotional strain. Empirical studies in the Philippine public sector similarly report high levels of emotional exhaustion and burnout among frontline workers, including nurses and public school teachers, driven by workload pressures, emotional demands, and limited institutional support (Labrague et al., 2018; David et al., 2021). These trends reflect a shift toward more psychologically informed analyses of public service work, moving beyond purely institutional or managerial perspectives.

While these studies provide valuable insights, they also reveal important limitations. Critics have argued that the current scholarship tends to isolate emotional labor and burnout from broader governance structures, treating them as occupational phenomena (Van de Walle, 2017; Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Many studies rely on standardized survey instruments that capture emotional states but fail to situate them within institutional cultures, policy regimes, and everyday administrative practices. Moreover, much of the literature is produced in Western contexts, raising concerns about theoretical transferability and cultural bias when applied to Global South public institutions (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). As a result, emotional labor is often analyzed at the micro level, while the macro-level role of governance reforms in producing emotional demands remains under-theorized.

What remains underexplored, however, is the everyday interface between policy ideals and emotional realities in frontline administrative settings. Although scholars acknowledge that service reforms intensify work demands, few studies examine how policy discourses of responsiveness, courtesy, and efficiency translate into lived emotional obligations for staff. This gap is especially pronounced in higher educational institutions, where registrars and academic service workers occupy a critical but understudied position in governance systems. Existing research tends to focus either on student satisfaction or on managerial reforms, leaving the emotional experiences of administrative staff analytically marginal. This creates a narrow understanding of governance that overlooks how emotional labor becomes embedded in policy implementation.

Much of the existing literature draws on emotional labor theory and the Job Demands–Resources model to explain how workplace demands affect employee well-being. One influential framework in this area is Hochschild's concept of emotional labor, which conceptualizes emotion as a form of labor regulated by organizational norms and market logics (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey & Melloy, 2017). Complementing this, the Job Demands–Resources model provides a flexible structure for analyzing how job demands such as workload, emotional regulation, and time pressure interact with resources such as autonomy and support (Demerouti et al., 2001; Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). While these frameworks are widely used, they are often applied in organizational psychology without sufficient engagement with governance and policy analysis, limiting their explanatory power in public administration contexts.

Methodologically, research in this field has relied heavily on quantitative surveys and psychometric instruments to measure burnout, engagement, and emotional labor. Most studies employ cross-sectional designs, which allow for statistical generalization but also limit causal and contextual interpretation. While these approaches generate valuable correlations, they tend to abstract emotional experiences from institutional settings and policy environments. Qualitative studies, though fewer, offer richer insights into how workers interpret emotional demands and navigate organizational expectations (Grandey & Melloy, 2017). However, such studies are often treated as supplementary, reinforcing a methodological hierarchy that privileges measurement over meaning and experience.

Across these studies, several themes emerge. A cross-cutting issue identified in the literature is the persistent disconnect between governance reforms and the lived emotional realities of frontline public service work.

While dominant frameworks emphasize performance, efficiency, and citizen satisfaction, they consistently under-theorize how these policy ideals are translated into everyday emotional obligations for workers. Emotional labor and burnout are widely recognized, yet they are most often treated as individual or occupational phenomena rather than as structurally produced outcomes of governance regimes. Methodologically, the prevalence of survey-based and cross-sectional studies further abstracts emotional experience from institutional and policy contexts, limiting explanatory depth. These patterns reveal a significant conceptual and empirical gap in current scholarship, namely the absence of integrative analyses that link governance models, organizational practices, and emotional labor in everyday administrative settings, particularly within under-researched Global South institutions.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design, drawing on constructivist traditions in social research that conceptualize social reality as produced through everyday practices, interactions, and meaning-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative approach is particularly suited to examining how public servants interpret, experience, and make sense of citizen-centered governance in their everyday work, as it allows researchers to explore relational, emotional, and context-dependent phenomena that cannot be adequately captured through standardized measures alone. Instead of treating emotional labor and well-being as abstract variables, this design enables an analysis of how these experiences are socially produced and negotiated within specific organizational settings. The study therefore prioritizes interpretive depth over statistical generalization, generating context-sensitive insights grounded in participants' narratives and reflections.

The study adopted a case study design, as it best suited the aim of examining how citizen-centered governance is enacted and experienced within a specific institutional setting. Case study research is particularly useful for investigating contemporary social processes in real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly defined. This design allows for an intensive, holistic examination of organizational practices, relationships, and meanings. Following Yin (2018) and Stake (1995), the case study approach was used to generate analytically rich and theoretically informed insights. The registrar's office was treated as an instrumental case, providing a lens through which broader issues of emotional labor and governance could be explored. This design is well suited to policy-oriented research that seeks to understand how reforms operate at the level of everyday institutional life.

Likewise, the registrar's office was chosen because it represents a frontline administrative unit where citizen-centered policies are highly visible and routinely operationalized. Registrar offices play a critical role in mediating institutional rules, academic regulations, and student expectations, making them key sites for examining emotional labor and service dynamics. The setting is characterized by high transaction volumes, frequent face-to-face interactions, and strong expectations of efficiency, courtesy, and responsiveness. Additionally, public universities are embedded within national governance frameworks, including Civil Service Commission regulations and

anti-red tape reforms. This institutional context makes the site particularly relevant for analyzing how national policy discourses are translated into everyday emotional and organizational practices.

Participants included registrar staff members, student service clients, alumni respondents, and supervisors from related government agencies, selected through purposive and snowball sampling. Inclusion criteria required participants to have direct experience with the registrar's services, either as service providers or service users. Purposive sampling was used to identify key informants with in-depth knowledge of administrative processes, while snowball sampling enabled the recruitment of additional participants through referrals. This approach is appropriate for qualitative research that seeks information-rich cases. The registrar staff were selected based on their frontline roles and length of service, while clients and alumni were included to capture diverse perspectives on service delivery. Supervisors from external agencies were interviewed to provide triangulation and institutional perspectives on governance practices.

Data were collected through a combination of surveys with open-ended questions, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and a focus group discussion. Data collection took place over multiple periods, including a registrar-client satisfaction survey conducted from February 2023 to June 2024, an emotional labor and workplace well-being survey from October to November 2023, interviews conducted in November 2023, and additional institutional inputs gathered in early 2025. The data collection process involved the use of instruments designed to elicit participants' reflections on emotional demands, workplace stress, service interactions, and perceptions of organizational support. Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to narrate experiences in their own terms while still addressing key thematic areas (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The registrar-client satisfaction survey provided qualitative feedback on service quality, staff demeanor, and institutional processes. The focus group discussion facilitated collective reflection among staff, generating insights into shared experiences and organizational culture. This multi-method strategy strengthened the study by capturing both individual and collective dimensions of emotional labor and governance.

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analysis involved several stages, beginning with repeated reading of transcripts and open-ended responses to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were then generated manually, focusing on significant statements related to emotional demands, stress, coping strategies, and perceptions of service quality. These codes were subsequently clustered into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across participants' narratives. Thematic analysis was chosen because it allows for flexibility, theoretical sensitivity, and interpretive depth, making it well suited for qualitative studies of organizational experiences. Themes emerged inductively from the data, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in participants' lived realities.

A limitation of this method is its reliance on a single institutional case, which restricts the generalizability of the findings. While the approach was appropriate for generating rich, context-specific insights, it cannot produce statistically representative conclusions about public sector employees more broadly. Additionally, the use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of

social desirability bias, where participants may underreport negative experiences or present themselves in a favorable light. As Flyvbjerg (2006) notes, case studies prioritize depth and contextual understanding over broad generalization, which is both a strength and a limitation. Nevertheless, the study's aim was not to generalize but to offer analytically transferable insights that can inform theory and policy discussions on emotional labor and citizen-centered governance.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings of the study, which sought to examine how citizen-centered policies intersect with emotional labor and employee well-being in a frontline public service setting. The primary research focus was on understanding how staff and clients experience service delivery at the registrar's office, particularly in relation to emotional demands, service quality, and workplace stress. These data provide descriptive accounts of everyday interactions, emotional experiences, and organizational practices, offering insight into how policies are enacted in routine institutional life. Tables 1 and 2 below present the thematic analysis of the open-ended survey data, summarizing key patterns in registrar service feedback and client satisfaction comments. These tables provide an overview of the dominant themes and illustrative quotes that structure the empirical findings discussed in this section.

Table 1. Registrar Service Feedback – Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Illustrative Quotes
Accommodation & Helpfulness	Staff were described as kind, approachable, and patient in assisting clients.	"They are very accommodating." / "The faculty are kind and patient."
Efficient Processing	Transactions such as credential requests were handled quickly and in an orderly manner.	"Fast and easy transaction." / "Everything was in order."
Impact of Smiling & Kindness	Smiles and kindness created a positive atmosphere and improved client experience.	"Smiling gives a positive vibe." / "Staff volunteered to photocopy my diploma."
Negative Behavior	Some staff were perceived as rude, impatient, or frustrated, affecting client comfort.	"Staff are slow and rude." / "I received pinabundak nga tubag."
System & Process Issues	Complaints about delays, unclear queues, and lack of clear instructions.	"System was not systematic; long queues even after paying."

Suggestions for Improvement	Calls for more staff, customer service training, and clearer instructions.	"Add more staff to avoid exhaustion." / "Steps should be posted on walls."
Leadership Influence	Positive role modeling by the Registrar improved staff attitudes and office atmosphere.	"The Registrar himself proved to be exceptionally helpful."

Table 2. Registrar-Client Satisfaction Survey – Thematic Analysis of Open-Ended Comments

Theme	Description	Participant Comment
Accountability & Timeliness	Concerns about slow or incomplete staff work.	"Some requests were already due but papers were not prepared."
Emotional Sensitivity	Clients asked for more empathy and understanding from staff.	"I hope the front-liners would be more sensitive."
Respectful Interaction	Desire for courteous and caring communication.	"Be respectful and caring."
Communication Tone	Concerns about rude or indifferent staff responses.	"Avoid sounding rude."
Office Ambience	Suggestions to improve waiting areas and comfort.	"Improve the ambiance of the waiting area."
Efficiency in Document Release	Requests for faster turnaround of documents.	"Make the releasing of documents faster."
Organizational Communication	Need for clearer updates and instructions.	"Give updates when there are delays."
Digital Integration	Calls for automation and online transactions.	"Hope to have a paperless system where requests can be done online."
Fairness & Consistency	Concerns about favoritism and uneven treatment of clients.	"Some students are entertained faster than others."
Professionalism & Courtesy	Reports of rude or unapproachable staff.	"Some staff were very rude in answering queries."
Process Efficiency	Suggestions for queue systems and better organization.	"Please have a number system, especially during enrollment."
Positive Service Experience	Appreciation for fast, courteous, and efficient service.	"The service is already very satisfying."

Emotional labor and service performance

The first major pattern in the data relates to emotional labor and its central role in shaping perceptions of service performance. Across the dataset, staff demeanor emerged as a highly visible and frequently mentioned aspect of service delivery. Participants consistently described frontline employees in terms of friendliness, patience, and accommodation. Many respondents emphasized that how staff behaved emotionally, particularly through smiling and polite communication, strongly influenced their overall assessment of service quality. This pattern appeared across student, alumni, and client responses, suggesting that emotional performance is a core expectation embedded in everyday service encounters at the registrar's office.

Several participants provided direct descriptions that illustrate this theme. Common statements included, "they are very accommodating," "the faculty are kind and patient," and "smiling gives a positive vibe." Other respondents noted that staff went beyond formal duties, with comments such as, "staff volunteered to photocopy my diploma" and "they explained everything calmly." These accounts describe emotional behaviors as concrete features of service delivery. Participants repeatedly referenced tone, facial expression, and interpersonal warmth as indicators of professionalism and effectiveness in the office.

Additional evidence shows that emotional labor was not evenly distributed across all staff interactions. Some respondents noted differences in service experiences depending on the time of day, workload, or specific staff members encountered. While many interactions were described as pleasant, others were framed as emotionally strained, with clients perceiving fatigue or irritation in staff behavior. This suggests that emotional performance fluctuates and is shaped by situational conditions such as queue length, system delays, and volume of transactions. Emotional labor, therefore, appears not as a static trait but as a variable and context-dependent dimension of service work.

System constraints and organizational frictions

The second major pattern concerns system-level constraints and organizational frictions that affect both service quality and staff behavior. A significant portion of the dataset highlights procedural issues such as long queues, unclear instructions, slow document processing, and inconsistent communication. These concerns appeared frequently in open-ended survey responses and were echoed in interviews with staff and supervisors. Participants described the service system as "not systematic," "confusing," or "delayed," indicating that organizational processes play a substantial role in shaping everyday service experiences.

Supporting data include statements such as, "system was not systematic; long queues even after paying," "some requests were already due but papers were not prepared," and "give updates when there are delays." These responses focus on procedural aspects of service delivery. Clients expressed frustration with waiting times, lack of information, and unclear transaction steps. These descriptive accounts suggest that system inefficiencies

are a prominent feature of the service environment and are highly visible to service users.

Further evidence shows that organizational constraints also affect staff experiences. In interviews and focus group discussions, employees described heavy workloads, limited staffing, and pressure to meet service targets. Staff noted that during peak periods, such as enrollment or graduation, they experienced physical fatigue and emotional strain due to the volume of requests. These conditions were associated with reduced capacity to maintain consistent emotional performance. Thus, system constraints appear as technical issues and as contextual factors that shape emotional labor and interaction quality.

Perceived stress and well-being of staff

The third major pattern relates to perceptions of stress and employee well-being. Both staff and clients made explicit references to exhaustion, emotional fatigue, and the need for support systems. Staff described feeling tired, overwhelmed, and mentally drained, particularly during periods of high demand. Clients, on the other hand, often acknowledged these pressures, expressing concern for staff welfare and suggesting improvements such as additional personnel and better working conditions.

Supporting data include client comments such as, "add more staff to avoid exhaustion," "I hope the front-liners would be more sensitive," and "they look tired but still try to help." Staff reported experiences of physical fatigue, emotional strain, and difficulty maintaining work-life balance. These accounts are descriptive indicators of stress and burnout, reflecting everyday challenges faced by employees in sustaining emotional and professional performance under demanding conditions.

Additional evidence suggests that perceptions of well-being are closely linked to organizational support and leadership. Several respondents noted that leadership behavior influenced staff morale and office atmosphere. One participant stated, "the Registrar himself proved to be exceptionally helpful," while others highlighted the importance of clear communication and supportive management. These data points describe leadership as a contextual factor associated with emotional climate and staff experiences, indicating that well-being is not solely an individual issue but is shaped by institutional relationships and practices.

Across the dataset, several overlaps between themes were evident. Many participants mentioned emotional labor and system constraints within the same accounts, describing how procedural delays affected staff mood and interaction quality. For example, clients linked long queues with perceived impatience, while staff connected heavy workloads with emotional exhaustion. These overlaps indicate that emotional performance, system efficiency, and well-being are interconnected dimensions of service delivery.

Some divergent or outlier cases also emerged. A small number of respondents reported consistently positive experiences despite high workloads, describing staff as "always helpful" and "never rude." Conversely, a few participants described strongly negative encounters, emphasizing rude behavior even when systems were functioning efficiently. These cases highlight variation within the dataset and suggest that service experiences are not uniform. They demonstrate that while general patterns exist, individual

interactions and situational factors produce diverse outcomes in everyday service encounters.

DISCUSSION

As earlier presented, three main findings emerged. First, emotional labor, particularly the expectation to remain accommodating, patient, and consistently friendly, plays a central role in shaping perceptions of service quality. Second, system-level constraints such as delays, unclear procedures, and heavy workloads significantly affect both staff behavior and client experiences. Third, both employees and service users recognize the emotional strain faced by frontline workers and link staff well-being to the sustainability of service delivery. These findings matter because they directly address the core research question of how governance reforms are experienced in everyday institutional life. The results show that they operate through emotional expectations and interpersonal performances, making employee well-being a central, not peripheral, dimension of public service governance.

Interpreting emotional labor in citizen-centered service

The first major pattern highlights emotional labor as a structural feature of frontline service work. The expectation that staff must remain consistently polite, smiling, and accommodating suggests that emotional expression has become an informal performance standard within citizen-centered governance. Emotional labor here functions as a form of invisible work that sustains institutional legitimacy and client satisfaction. This aligns with Hochschild's (1983) original argument that emotions are commodified within organizational settings and regulated according to institutional norms. In the registrar's office, emotional labor is not merely an individual coping strategy but an embedded requirement of professional conduct. Grandey and Melloy (2017) similarly argue that emotional regulation is a form of emotion management shaped by organizational rules. From this perspective, citizen-centered reforms can be understood as producing emotional obligations, where friendliness and patience become part of what it means to perform "good governance" in everyday practice.

The second pattern concerns system constraints and organizational frictions, which shape how emotional labor is performed and sustained. Delays, unclear processes, and heavy workloads undermine staff capacity to maintain consistent emotional performance, resulting in visible emotional fatigue and strained interactions. This suggests that emotional breakdowns are not simply individual failures but structural outcomes of organizational conditions. The Job Demands–Resources model offers a useful lens here, as it emphasizes how high demands combined with limited resources lead to exhaustion and disengagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Job resources such as autonomy and supportive leadership are critical in mediating the relationship between emotional demands and employee well-being. In this study, system inefficiencies increase emotional demands while limiting available resources, producing a context where emotional labor becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

One unexpected finding was the degree of emotional awareness expressed by service users themselves. Many clients recognized employee fatigue and explicitly linked service quality to staff well-being. This challenges dominant assumptions in public administration that citizens behave primarily as demanding consumers of public services. Instead, the data suggest a more relational dynamic, where empathy and recognition of emotional strain coexist with expectations of efficiency. This contrasts with classic New Public Management narratives that frame citizens as rational, utility-maximizing clients (Hood, 1991). It also complicates Van de Walle's (2017) argument that citizen satisfaction frameworks tend to individualize responsibility for service outcomes. The presence of empathy in client narratives suggests that citizen-centeredness does not always produce adversarial relationships but can also generate solidaristic understandings of institutional strain. The findings largely support existing research on emotional labor and burnout in public service contexts. Previous studies (such as Maslach & Leiter, 2016) consistently show that frontline workers are required to regulate emotions as part of professional performance, often at the cost of psychological well-being.

Challenging dominant narratives of governance

The study challenges dominant public administration narratives that frame citizen-centered reforms primarily as positive and progressive governance innovations. Much of the literature celebrates these reforms for enhancing transparency, efficiency, and responsiveness (Osborne, 2006; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). In contrast, the findings suggest that such reforms also externalize emotional costs onto frontline workers, effectively shifting responsibility for policy success onto employees' emotional performance. This contradicts policy-oriented studies that treat implementation problems as technical or managerial issues. While existing work tends to emphasize system design and institutional capacity, this study foregrounds emotional experience as a central outcome of governance reforms. The results therefore complicate optimistic accounts of citizen-centeredness by revealing its hidden emotional consequences.

Theoretically, these findings extend emotional labor theory by situating it more explicitly within governance and policy frameworks. The study conceptualizes it as a structural outcome of citizen-centered governance. Emotional regulation becomes a policy effect, produced through institutional norms, performance indicators, and service ideologies. This extends the Job Demands–Resources model by highlighting that policy discourses themselves generate emotional demands, not just organizational tasks (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). The study thus introduces the idea of emotional governance, where emotions function as a regulatory mechanism through which policies are enacted, evaluated, and legitimized in everyday institutional life.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of qualitative, interpretive approaches in examining governance and well-being. While much of the existing literature relies on large-scale surveys and psychometric instruments, this research shows how open-ended responses and interviews capture emotional nuance, moral reasoning, and institutional meanings that are often lost in quantitative designs. Thematic analysis allowed for the identification of patterns that cut across staff and client narratives, revealing

emotional dynamics embedded in routine interactions. As Braun and Clarke (2006) argue, thematic analysis is particularly useful for exploring complex social phenomena that involve meaning, identity, and experience. This suggests that future research on public service governance would benefit from greater methodological pluralism that combines measurement with interpretive depth.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to examine how citizen-centered policies intersect with emotional labor and employee well-being in a frontline public service setting. Its primary aim is to understand how governance reforms are experienced, interpreted, and enacted by both service providers and service users in everyday institutional life. Focusing on the case of a registrar's office at a public university in Mindanao, the study explored how emotional expectations, organizational processes, and service demands shape work experiences and service interactions. By centering the perspectives of frontline staff and clients, the research moved beyond formal policy analysis to capture the lived realities of governance. In doing so, the study sought to contribute to a more human-centered understanding of public administration, where emotional experiences are recognized as integral to policy implementation and service delivery.

The findings reveal three key insights. First, emotional labor is a central and highly visible component of service performance, with friendliness, patience, and accommodation functioning as informal standards of professionalism. Second, system-level constraints such as heavy workloads, procedural delays, and limited resources significantly shape both staff behavior and client experiences. Third, both employees and service users recognize the emotional strain faced by frontline workers and link employee well-being to the sustainability of service quality. This research showed that citizen-centered governance does not operate solely through technical processes or managerial rules, but through emotional expectations and interpersonal performances. Service delivery, therefore, emerges as an emotional practice as much as an administrative one.

The study contributes to scholarship by reframing emotional labor as a structural outcome of governance reforms. One of the main conceptual implications is the idea that citizen-centered policies produce emotional regimes, where emotions become regulated, evaluated, and instrumentalized as part of institutional performance. By integrating emotional labor theory with governance analysis, the study extends existing frameworks such as the Job Demands–Resources model and situates them within public administration contexts. This conceptual move highlights how policies shape organizational structures and emotional conduct, moral expectations, and relational dynamics in everyday public service work.

Beyond academic debates, these results have important implications for public sector practice and policy. For policymakers and practitioners, this research highlights that improving service quality cannot rely solely on efficiency targets, performance indicators, or procedural reforms. Emotional sustainability must be treated as a core dimension of institutional capacity.

Frontline employees require technical training and organizational conditions that support emotional well-being, including adequate staffing, realistic workloads, and supportive leadership. Recognizing emotional labor as legitimate work also opens space for more ethical and humane governance models, where care for employees is seen as integral to caring for citizens.

By engaging with existing scholarship, this study addresses the gap in public administration research that often overlooks the emotional consequences of governance reforms. In extending previous work on emotional labor and burnout, this research demonstrates that citizen-centered policies actively generate emotional demands that are unevenly distributed across organizational hierarchies. While earlier studies tend to focus on policy outcomes or citizen satisfaction, this study foregrounds the emotional experiences of those who implement policies on the ground. In doing so, it contributes to a more critical and reflexive understanding of governance, where success is measured not only by outputs but also by human sustainability.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The study focuses on a single institutional case, which limits the generalizability of the findings to other sectors or governance contexts. Emotional dynamics may differ across organizations with different cultures, resources, and policy environments. The reliance on self-reported data also introduces the possibility of social desirability bias, where participants may underreport negative experiences or present themselves in favorable ways. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the data captures emotional experiences at a specific moment in time. These limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted as analytically transferable, offering depth and insight.

We recommend that public institutions integrate employee well-being into policy design and evaluation frameworks. One practical step moving forward is to institutionalize support mechanisms such as mental health programs, peer support systems, and regular workload assessments. Leadership training should also emphasize emotional awareness, empathy, and relational management, recognizing that managerial behavior shapes emotional climate. Additionally, service reforms should be accompanied by participatory feedback mechanisms that include staff voices, ensuring that emotional demands are acknowledged and addressed. Future research could build on this study by conducting comparative analyses across sectors and by adopting longitudinal designs to track emotional dynamics over time.

This research underscores the importance of viewing public service as an emotional and relational field. The study reminds us that policies do not merely organize procedures; they shape feelings, expectations, and moral responsibilities. Citizen-centered governance, when pursued without attention to emotional sustainability, risks reproducing hidden forms of labor and institutional exhaustion. A truly responsive and ethical public administration, therefore, must recognize that the quality of service depends on how citizens are treated and on how those who serve them are cared for.

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