

Toxic emotion events and emotion regulation of middle managers in a call centre

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COMMENTS

The reader is reminded of the following:

- the editorial style of this manuscript follows the guidelines of the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology (SAIJIP). The referencing in this mini-dissertation follows the format prescribed by the Publication Manual (6th edition) of the American Psychological Association (APA). This practice is in line with the policy of the Programme in Industrial Psychology of the North-West University (Potchefstroom) to use the APA style in all scientific documents as from January 1999; and
- the mini-dissertation is submitted in the form of a research article. The editorial style specified by the South African Journal of Industrial Psychology (which agrees largely with the APA style) is used, but the APA guidelines were followed in constructing the tables.

DECLARATION

I, Monique van Dyk, hereby declare that **Toxic emotion events and emotion regulation of middle managers in a call centre** is my own work and that the views and opinions expressed in this work are my own and relevant literature references as shown in the references.

Furthermore I declare that the contents of this research study will not be submitted for any other qualification at any other tertiary institution.

MONIQUE VAN DYK

NOVEMBER 2015

DECLARATION FROM THE LANGUAGE EDITOR



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06 November 2015

To whom it may concern

I, Marina van der Merwe, ID no. 680420 0110 087, state hereby that I am the editor of Monique Van Dyks' dissertation.

I completed a certificate in editing from the University of Pretoria and have more than 20 years' experience in the industry. I currently work as an editor (in a permanent position) at SITA (State Information Technology Agency), where I have been responsible for editing documentation for the last 15 years.

Best regards

Marina van der Merwe

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SUMMARY

Title: Toxic emotion events and emotion regulation of middle managers in a call centre.

Key words: Negative emotions; toxic emotions; toxic events; middle managers; emotion regulation

An increased number of organisations are faced with toxicity among their staff as a result of the ineffective regulation of negative emotions in the workplace (Frost, 2003). In the service industry, and especially in call centres, toxic events and emotions could become a concern, since this work environment is characterised by high levels of stress and time pressure, which may lead to burnout and depression in the long run (Rod & Ashill, 2013). Middle managers working in a call centre environment have to manage others while also being managed themselves; they have the added demand of working a highly stressful and performance-driven environment (Nel & de Villiers, 2004).

The above-mentioned events and working conditions in call centres trigger negative emotions in middle managers when they feel that they do not have enough resources to deal with the events (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). Opitz, Cavanagh and Urry (2015) argue that people have to diminish, amplify or modulate these negative emotions in order to focus on work goals and to ensure effectiveness in the workplace. If this regulation is ineffective, the negative emotions become toxic and place a psychological and emotional burden on the individual. The main objective for this study, therefore, was to explore the emotion events that lead to negative emotions in a call centre environment and to investigate the way in which middle managers regulate these emotions to establish whether the negative emotions and emotion events are toxic.

The research was explorative in nature; a qualitative design was used to achieve the research objectives. Participants were invited to participate in the research study on a voluntary basis, and they were selected by means of a purposive sampling method. Criteria that were used in the selection of participants were that participants had to be middle managers who are permanently employed in a call centre. Based on these criteria, a total population of 15 employees was included in the research study (N=15). Qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured interviews at a call centre in Pretoria, Gauteng.

The findings indicated that “*non-performance of subordinates*” and the conditions in the “*work environment*” were the emotion events that mostly lead to negative emotions. Other emotion events experienced within call centres included “*job demands from top management*”, “*faulty IT systems*” and “*conflict*”. The mostly reported negative emotions that resulted from these events were “*frustration*” and “*anger*”. Although some participants indicated that they employ “*situation modification*” and “*cognitive change*” that are effective in regulation negative emotions, most of the participants indicated that “*attentional deployment*” and “*response modulation*” were the main manners in which they regulated their negative emotions. The latter are very often ineffective and maladaptive, which indicate that most negative emotions and emotion events that middle managers experience in call centres are toxic.

Recommendations were made for application in the organisation as well as for future research.

OPSOMMING

Titel: Toksiese emosie-gebeure en emosiebeheer van middelvlakbestuurders in ‘n oproepsentrum.

Sleutelwoorde: Negatiewe emosies; toksiese emosies; toksiese gebeure; middelvlakbestuurders; emosiebeheer

‘n Toenemende aantal organisasies word met toksisiteit onder hul personeel, as gevolg van die oneffektiewe beheer van negatiewe emosies in die werkplek, gekonfronteer (Frost, 2003). In die diensleweringindustrie, veral in oproepsentrums, kan toksiese gebeure en emosies ‘n bekommernis raak, aangesien hierdie werkomgewing deur hoë stresvlakke en tydsdruk gekenmerk word, wat op die lang duur tot uitbranding en depressie kan lei (Rod & Ashill, 2013). Middelvlakbestuurders wat in ‘n oproepsentrumomgewing werk, moet ander bestuur terwyl hulle self ook bestuur word; hulle het ‘n bykomende vereiste, naamlik dat hulle in ‘n baie stresvolle en prestasie-gedrewe omgewing werk (Nel & de Villiers, 2004).

Die bogenoemde gebeure en werksomstandighede in oproepsentrums veroorsaak negatiewe emosies in middelvlakbestuurders wanneer hulle voel dat hulle nie genoeg hulpbronne het om die gebeure te hanteer nie (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). Opitz, Cavanagh, en Urry (2015) redeneer dat mense hierdie negatiewe emosies moet verminder, vergroot of moduleer ten einde op werkdoelwitte te fokus en effektiwiteit in die werkplek te verseker. As hierdie beheer oneffektief is, raak die negatiewe emosies toksies omdat dit ‘n psigologiese en emosionele las op die individu plaas. Die hoofdoel van hierdie studie was daarom om die negatiewe gebeure in ‘n oproepsentrumomgewing na te vors en die manier waarop middelvlakbestuurders hierdie emosies beheer, te ondersoek, ten einde vas te stel of die negatiewe emosies en emosie-gebeure toksies is.

Die navorsing was verkennend van aard, en ‘n kwalitatiewe ontwerp is gevolg om die navorsingsdoelwitte te bereik. Deelnemers is genooi om op ‘n vrywillige basis aan die navorsing deel te neem, en hulle is deur middel van ‘n doelbewuste steekproefmetode geselekteer. Kriteria wat in die seleksie van deelnemers gebruik is, is dat deelnemers middelvlakbestuurders moes wees wat permanent in ‘n oproepsentrum aangestel is. Gebaseer op hierdie kriteria is ‘n totale populasie van 15 werknemers by die navorsingstudie ingesluit.

(N=15). Kwalitatiewe data is deur middel van semi-gestruktureerde onderhoude in 'n oproepsentrum in Pretoria, Gauteng, ingesamel.

Die bevindinge het aangedui dat die *wanprestasie van ondergeskiktes* en die omstandighede in die *werkomgewing* die emosie-gebeure was wat meestal tot negatiewe emosie gelei het. Die negatiewe emosies wat die meeste as gevolg van hierdie gebeure gerapporteer is, is *frustrasie* en *woede*. Alhoewel sommige deelnemers *situasie verandering* en *kognitiewe verandering* gebruik wat effektief is in die regulering van negatiewe emosies, het die meeste van die deelnemers aangetoon dat *aandagontplooiing* en *reaksiemodulasie* die wyses is waarop hulle hierdie negatiewe emosies reguleer. Hierdie emosiebeheerstrategieë is heel dikwels oneffektief en wanaangepas, wat aandui dat meeste emosies en emosie-gebeure wat middelvlakbestuurders in oproepsentrums ervaar, toksies is.

Aanbevelings is gemaak wat in die organisasie toegepas kan word en wat ook in toekomstige navorsing gebruik kan word.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem Statement

Middle managers find themselves in a sandwich position, as they need to influence upwards as well as laterally and downwards (Rouleau & Balogun, 2011). Managers are expected to manage their own emotions as well as those of their employees (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008). Middle managers daily face events that may elicit certain emotions, of which some, if not most, include negative emotions. Negative emotions may become toxic when they are not regulated and managed regularly (Glasø & Vie, 2009). This state of affairs may create ambiguity in the regulation of emotions and how middle managers express these negative emotions. Emotions form an integral part of any management position. Wharton (2009) indicates that emotion work (an emotion demand of one's job requirements) is "the focus of the manager's efforts to express and regulate emotion and the consequences of those efforts" (pg. 147). During toxic events, for example, employees as well as the manager experience emotions that are memorable and frequently toxic (McColl-Kennedy, Patterson, Smith & Brady, 2009). These toxic emotions may include frustration, anger, fear and anxiety (Chu, 2014). The experience of these toxic emotions contributes to the challenges that middle managers face.

Managers in sales-driven call centres face various challenges, of which emotion demands are one of them (Harney & Jordan, 2008). Apart from these emotion challenges, the call centre environment is an added demand on middle managers' work lives (Taylor, D'Cruz, Noronha & Scholarios, 2013). Jenkins, Delbridge and Roberts (2010) indicate that the tension between efficiency and service in call centres is of utmost importance, which indicate that middle managers in this industry work in a performance-driven environment. For middle managers to be successful they should be aware of themselves and their own emotions, while also attending to the emotional needs of others and managing others' performance (Huy, 2002). The conclusion can be drawn that an investigation into emotion experiences that elicit negative emotions and the regulation of such emotions in middle managers turns out to be important.

Previous studies done in call centres have not dealt with the regulation of these emotions among middle managers. Among others studies, one done by Clarke, Hope-Hailey and Kelliher (2007) found that many studies on emotion work have focussed on encounters between front-line service staff and customers, but that research has neglected emotion

investigation of middle managers. While much research has been done on toxic emotions (Glasø & Vie, 2009; Frost, 2003; Davis and Gardner, 2004), little is known about middle managers' toxic emotions and, particularly, the emotion events that elicit toxic emotions and how it is regulated. Glasø (2009) therefore argues for further qualitative investigation of toxic emotions as well as investigation emotion events in the workplace, prior to developing interventions and measurements pertaining to toxic emotions. Gooty, Gavin and Ashkanasy (2009) argue that future emotion research on discrete emotions must be done in the natural contexts in which they appear. As middle managers continuously have to manage toxic discrete emotions, such as anger, fear and frustration, the regulation of these emotions becomes important since they influence motivation, behaviour and decision-making processes in the workplace (Włodkowski, 2011; Wegge, Van Dick, Fisher, West & Dawson, 2006).

Wegge *et al.* (2006) found that middle managers in sales-driven call centres volitionally have to present certain emotions and continually have to control themselves in order to enhance call operators' performance. Such emotion control can be very demanding at times. Huy (2002) thus proposes that managers who are aware of their own emotions and those of others, and who actively manage negative emotions, will likely adapt to any given environment. In order to study emotions in the context in which they appear, the Affective Events Theory (AET) can be used (Gooty *et al.*, 2009). According to the AET (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), events happening in the organisation are at the heart of our understanding of why these emotions are elicited, which will in turn help us to understand why middle managers portray certain attitudes and behaviours. However, middle managers differ in the way in which they respond and regulate specific negative emotion events (Glasø & Vie, 2009). Gross (2002) states that the well-being of individuals are "inextricably linked to their emotions" (pg. 281), thus indicating that the way in which they regulate their emotions does matter. He further indicates that emotions can do more harm than good when not regulated as emotions call forth a coordinated behavioural response tendency that influences the way in which individuals behave in the workplace. It is, therefore, not clear what approaches work best when individuals have to regulate their emotions (Gross, 2002).

Furthermore, the combination of a lack of strategic support, unattended emotions and a lack to regulate emotions may lead to undermining middle managers' scope to manage effectively (Houlihan, 2001). The investigation of middle managers' emotion events in call centres and

the regulation of these events and emotions thus become important. As a result, the present study explores the phenomenon of toxic emotion events and emotions and the emotion regulation thereof. This leads to the first section of this chapter that will conceptualise emotions, toxic emotions and events, followed by a discussion of the middle managers' role in the organisation, the emotions they experience and the regulation of these emotions and emotion events.

Emotions and toxic emotions

According to Shi, Liu and Zhang (2011), emotions refer to “a state of mind of individuals after some kind of incidents' stimulation or people's attitude experience towards objective things” (pg. 170). According to the circumplex model of emotion (Russell & Lewicka, 1989), emotions have a valence dimension. These emotions can be grouped in two categories, namely positive emotions (love, joy and surprise) and negative emotions (anger, sadness and fear) (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). The United States Army Research Institute for the Behavioural and Social Sciences (2012) states that in a work context, emotions can be a source of anger, distress, frustration and embarrassment, as well as a spring of pride, belongingness, fulfilment and excitement. These feelings derive from work-related events and interactions (Hareli & Rafaeli, 2008). For the purposes of this dissertation, literature will mainly focus on negative emotions. Taking this account, as well as the explanation of Shi *et al.* (2011) that emotions emerge as a reaction to an incident, one can argue that negative emotions can arise as a result of painful events.

According to Frost (2003), pain is something one can find in every organisation. From the pain encountered, one can obtain knowledge about management's functions and dysfunctions. This pain leads to negative emotions, which might become toxic. These negative emotions poison goodwill, trust and commitment. It can betray managers' hopes, reduce enthusiasm and diminish their sense of connectedness to their organisation and employees (Frost, 2003). In an organisation, conflict may arise between colleagues or between an employee and his or her supervisor. This, in turn, may lead to feelings of frustration and anger (Cole, 2014). It can thus be said that negative feelings, as a result of some organisational event, can have tremendous effects on the organisation. However, the following question needs to be asked: when do negative emotions become toxic?

Emotions such as frustration, embarrassment, sadness, anxiety and anger are not toxic. These emotions can, in fact, assist managers in coping with challenging situations and overcoming obstacles in their way (Glasø & Vie, 2009). It is therefore not the experience, but the regulation, for example suppressing these emotions, that makes them poisonous and toxic. Discreet negative emotions should therefore not be investigated without considering the context in which the regulation materialises (Gooty *et al.*, 2009). Frost (2003) states that toxic emotions are a sustained affective state that results from negative emotions. These emotions include three dimensions, namely psychologically recurring, disconnecting and draining. Frost's research also found that certain toxic events, for example incompetence, insensitivity and intrusiveness, might lead to toxic emotions if the negative feelings are not dealt with regularly. According to Glasø and Vie (2009), individuals who suppress their negative emotions report higher levels of depression and lower levels of life satisfaction. Depression and dissatisfaction as a result of a certain toxic event and source in an organisation may lead to toxicity in the workplace.

A previous study done by Davis and Gardner (2004) found that organisational cynicism is a source of toxic emotions. They found that "organisational cynicism is an attitude that one holds about his or her employing organisation." Another study further explains that cynicism comprise not only negative feelings that people bring to work, but is also shaped by the experiences in the work context, including consistently achieving poor results, layoffs, repeated failed change efforts, psychological contract violations and excessive executive compensation (Rubin, Dierdorff, Bommer & Baldwin, 2009). Managers who harbour high levels of cynicism towards their organisation may elicit feelings of anger and contempt, since they believe that the organisation lacks integrity and that decisions are based on a lack of sincerity (Davis & Gardner, 2004). If these emotions are not managed and regulated, it can become toxic to middle managers. Toxic emotions drain individuals' and entire organisations' vitality (Frost, 2004), which once again brings about the important role of middle managers and their emotion experiences.

Middle managers and emotion events

According to Mayar and Smith (2007), the most successful organisations are under constant pressure to improve their performance, and managers have an important role to play in bringing this about. They further state that organisations need to redefine the way in which

they view the role of middle managers, as this role is more than often left unsupported. Middle managers have a dual role to play in an organisation. They occupy a position in which they are both managing and being managed (Sims, 2003). This state of affairs leaves middle managers in the middle of the sandwich. Sims (2003) found that this sandwich position might lead to emotions of loneliness and isolation among managers. Brotheridge and Lee (2008) state that managers are expected to create and nourish relationships by effectively managing their own emotions as well as those of their subordinates. Managers need to be aware of the impact that their expressed emotions have on their work units' emotional climate, their employees' emotions, their effectiveness as well as that of their employees, in addition to the organisation's overall success. This leaves managers with a restricted emotional repertoire. They need to balance the needs of the organisation with the needs of their employees, while also being constrained in their expression of voice (Clarke, Hope-Hailey & Kelliher, 2007).

Brotheridge and Lee (2008) indicate that emotions serve as the context, content, process and result of managerial work. In most situations these emotions are expressed in a certain manner. Emotional labour is a term used to describe certain emotions that managers hide and display during their interactions with customers (Clarke, Hope-Hailey & Kelliher, 2007). This also refers to "emotion work", which involves the suppression or the expression of feelings. This research has also shown that in a change context, middle managers may be emotionally ambivalent about their role. O'Neill and Lenn (1995) illustrate that "the results portray a jumble of emotions. They dislike the ambiguity in their roles, which forces them to be agents of strategy for change and its potential victims as well". While this is true, managers are unable to express these negative emotions, since they fear being out of control (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008).

Apart from a few studies found in the literature, research is limited as to which events elicit these negative emotions (which, when not regulated can become toxic) in middle managers. These studies indicated the following: Firstly, certain specific emotions that managers experience might arise during events such as radical organisational change (Huy, 2002) and everyday interpersonal interactions (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008). Secondly, Vince (2006) found that managers experience negative emotions such as fear regarding the security of their position. This created tension, leading to the managers undermining the effectiveness of their team members. Thirdly, in situations where middle managers were treated more favourably, Huy (2011) found that they could feel angry about other middle managers being mistreated.

Finally, managers, as service providers to customers, might experience feelings of dissonance and inauthenticity when they display emotions that they do not actually feel (Ashkanasy & Humphrey, 2011).

All of these emotions experienced by middle managers have to be recognised and acknowledged in an organisation. The invisibility thereof may lead to burnout or the alienation of managers who are left unsupported (Clarke, Hope-Hailey & Kelliher, 2007). What makes managers successful is their ability to find ways of diffusing the effects of toxic emotions and of managing and regulating the emotions as they arise.

Emotion regulation

According to Gross (1998), emotion regulation refers to “the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (p. 275). Gross (1998) mentions five forms of emotion regulation namely situation selection (approaching or avoiding certain people, places or objects), situation modification (active efforts to directly modify the situation so as to alter its emotional impact), attentional deployment (distraction, concentration and rumination), cognitive change (tendency to interpret events more positively than warranted) and response modulation (directly influencing physiological, experiential or behavioural responding). These emotion regulation strategies are crucial to managing, as a central part of leadership is to interact with followers and to deal with both pleasant and unpleasant emotions (Glasø & Einarsen, 2008).

However, for the purposes of building theory on middle managers’ emotion regulation, a more encompassing and recent view of emotion regulation as mentioned by Clarke and Salleh (2011), will be used in the exploration of emotion regulation in this study. They state that emotion regulation can be seen as the way in which individuals manage their emotions and how they deal with emotionally charged events. According to Glasø and Vie (2009), the manners in which individuals respond to their emotions differ; little research has been done on the degree to which different organisational events produce different toxic emotional and physiological experiences in the workplace.

At present, literature is limited to research on the regulation of organisational change events.

Although limited, it affords a starting point for understanding emotion regulation in natural contexts. Mayar and Smith (2007) acknowledge in their research, for example, that events such as change require challenging emotional involvement, including both the regulation of followers' emotions and their own. Huy's research, done in 2002, reveals that middle managers manage or regulate emotions during change. He identifies regulation processes such as forming self-emerging social support groups that attended to their emotional needs, while others emerged as entrepreneurs applying emotion management to drive change.

Literature also indicates that managers attend to toxic handlers. Glasø and Vie (2009) state that these people "step into toxic situations and take on, buffer, neutralise or heal toxic emotions." This emotion regulation technique enables middle managers to refocus their attention and efforts on getting the job done. To explore the phenomena behind toxic emotions and its sources, further investigation regarding emotion events and experiences is required. Current research on middle managers' emotional regulation is limited to a few organisational change studies. In addition, the literature on toxic emotions mostly provides examples but little information about the events that elicit these emotions and how it is regulated. Glasø and Vie (2009) found that toxic emotions might result in significant costs to both individuals and organisations. Therefore the prevention, management and regulation of toxic emotions are of utmost importance. Against this background, the research questions below can be formulated.

- How are toxic events and emotions, as well as emotion regulation conceptualised in the literature?
- What emotion experiences elicit toxic emotions in middle managers?
- What toxic emotions are derived from these experiences?
- How do middle managers regulate these toxic emotions and emotion events?
- What recommendations can be made for further research on toxic emotional events and emotion regulation?

1.2 Expected Contribution of the Study

1.2.1 Expected contribution to the individual.

The information gained from this research will describe how middle managers manage or regulate everyday emotion events that may arise in the workplace. The findings on emotion regulation may provide other middle managers with insights and understanding of managing their own emotions, as well as those of their employees. The findings may provide recommendations for further research on the topic.

1.2.2 Expected contribution to the organisation.

This study explored events in the workplace that lead to toxic emotions. The findings of this study will provide for interventions and solutions to problems pertaining to the managing of toxic emotions in the workplace. It will broaden executives' knowledge about and awareness of how middle managers perceive the working environment, enabling the organisation to attend to these problems and to find ways to rectify them.

1.2.3 Expected contribution to I/O psychology literature

The findings of the study will add to literature in the sense that it will broaden the existing knowledge about toxic emotions, emotion regulation and middle managers. The knowledge gained from this study about events leading to toxic emotions and the regulation thereof may provide a background for a questionnaire to quantitatively measure toxic emotion regulation strategies employed by individuals other than middle managers.

1.3 Research Objectives

1.3.1 General objective

The main purpose of the study is to explore the ways in which middle managers regulate toxic emotions that are the result of toxic events.

1.3.2 Specific objectives

- To explore how toxic events and emotions, as well as emotion regulation are conceptualised in the literature.
- To explore the emotion events that elicit negative emotions in middle managers.
- To explore the emotions are derived from these experiences.
- To explore how middle managers regulate these emotions.
- To explore the recommendations that can be made for further research on the regulation of toxic events in the workplace.

1.4 Research Design

1.4.1 Research approach

This study is conducted using a qualitative research approach. A qualitative design is used, as it not only provides a process of examining and interpreting data, but also of finding meaning, gaining knowledge and building on existing knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Joubish, Khurran, Ahmed, Fatima and Haider (2011), a qualitative approach will assist in gaining an understanding of people's attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and concerns, as well as insight how individuals feel and why they feel that way. This is a valid approach for the proposed study, as it answers questions about how middle managers are affected by events that elicit toxic emotions in them.

The theory or paradigm underlying the study is constructivism. This provides for an epistemological, ontological and methodological stance of the study. Constructivism adopts a hermeneutic methodology, which implies that the researcher should explore the multifaceted nature of the meaning that a participant attaches to a specific experience. Hermeneutics aims to obtain an understanding of the individual, self-awareness and the entire context of the situation (Bowling, 2009). Relativism, the ontology of constructivism, suggests that the researcher will gain understanding by means of the lived experience of the participant as well as the participant's interaction with his or her environment (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). The integrity and quality of the information gathered in this paradigm should be trustworthy and authentic.

Constructivism is, therefore, an appropriate study paradigm for the exploration of toxic emotions and events. The researcher aims to obtain trustworthy and authentic information from the middle manager's lived experience during a toxic event. The researcher focuses on how middle managers perceive reality and how they perceive the world around them (Doucet, Letourneau & Stoppard, 2010).

1.4.2 Research strategy

Phenomenology, as a methodology, suits the study best when considering the above-mentioned constructivist paradigm. According to Küpers, Mantere and Statler (2013), phenomenology views all human experiences as narrative from within and embodies these experiences in a context that involves people, cultures, environments and objects. This brings the researcher to the heart of understanding an individual's social reality. Wertz (2005) explains that phenomenological research involves descriptive access to the life-world situation in a certain environment as the participant experiences it.

Phenomenology provides for ways in which an individual's lived experience is embodied and emotional and in which the individual can focus on his or her immediate environment (Küpers *et al.*, 2013). This causes the researcher to understand the world in which individuals lead their daily work lives. Phenomenological data is gathered by using interviews that enable the participants to describe their experiences in the workplace.

1.4.3 Research method

1.4.3.1 Literature review.

A comprehensive literature review is conducted to find previous research on the toxic events and emotions, as well as middle managers' emotion regulation in call centres. The sources that are used are found by employing Google Scholar, Science Direct, EbscoHost and Mendeley. Sources will include accredited academic journals, books, published articles and reports.

Key words that are used during literature searches include middle managers, supervisors, emotions, toxicity, toxic emotions, emotion regulation, emotion labour.

1.4.3.2 Research setting.

The population of the proposed study is middle managers that are currently employed in a call centre in South Africa. The setting of the research is therefore a call centre in South Africa. Team managers, as well as line managers are interviewed confidentially at the call centre itself. If data saturation is not reached, a focus group interview will be facilitated at the specific call centre.

1.4.3.3 Entree and establishing researcher roles.

The HR practitioner of the call centre granted access to the research setting. A meeting with the HR practitioner and other relevant personnel is arranged to provide further information about the process and the purpose of the study. The role of the researcher is to interview the participants. The researcher guides and facilitates the interview process, during which the participant should be talking about their experiences, feelings and perceptions. While the researcher asks questions and records the conversation, the role of participants is to provide the information that is needed.

1.4.3.4 Sampling.

A non-probability sampling technique is used in the proposed study. Purposive sampling is conducted, as it provides for a specific feature, characteristic or topic of interest (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché & Delport, 2011). The researcher selects typical cases and participants for the study. The preselected criteria for the selection of participants are as follows:

- participants are middle managers; and
- participants work in a call centre that is sales-driven.

1.4.3.5 Data collection method.

As rich and in-depth information/data is required, the steps below are used to collect data.

a) Step 1: Pilot study

Prior to implementing the final process, a pilot is done on one or two participants who have the same characteristics as stated in the sampling section. A pilot study involves the pretesting of a particular interview schedule and increases the likelihood that the main study will be a success (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). Therefore a pilot study is a crucial element in this study.

b) Step 2: Semi-structured interview

Semi-structured interviews are conducted with the participants to obtain the information needed. De Vos *et al.* (2011) state that a semi-structured interview includes a set of questions that is determined prior to the interview. It allows for probing questions to be asked, as point of interests that are relevant to the study may arise. This type of interview schedule allows the participants to share their experiences and emotions and how they regulated it. Rapport is established with the participants before the interview commences. Apart from this, prior to the interview, appropriate definitions and explanations of toxic events, toxic emotions and emotion regulation are given to the participants, enabling them to understand the questions. The interview schedule includes the questions below.

1. Please think of the last negative emotion you experienced at work during the past two weeks.
2. Please describe the events that lead to the emotion.
3. How did the emotion event begin and who was involved?
4. How did the event end?
5. Why, would you say, did the event lead to the emotion?
6. What emotions did you feel after the event?
7. What did you feel driven to do during the event?
8. What did you actually do within the event?
9. During an emotion event, people often try to manage their emotions. How did you manage your emotions in that event? What actions did you take to control/manage the emotions?

c) Step 3: Focus group

If data saturation is not reached, a follow-up focus group interview will be conducted. Flick (2014) defines focus groups as “unstructured interviews with small groups of people who

interact with each other and the group leader, for the purposes to explore certain issues”. Arthur, Waring, Coe and Hedges (2012) state that focus groups are used to gather information from multiple perspectives about a topic in the emotive and interactive way. Although focus groups may elicit conflict, the group members may want to discuss a topic with others who share the same concern (Arthur et al., 2012). Data is therefore collected by means of a small group of middle managers at a call centre, where participants discuss experiences that elicit toxic emotions among them and how they regulated it.

d) Step 4: Field notes

Field notes are taken during the interviews and the focus group interview. This involves written accounts of verbal and non-verbal information obtained during the sessions (De Vos *et al.*, 2011). This assists the researcher in remembering when certain incidents happened and what was said. Field notes may also be used to describe how participants behave, interact, dress and move. Field notes can be written about a dialogue between people and it can be used as a reflective diary of the researcher’s own experiences during the interview or focus group (Mulhall, 2003).

1.4.3.6 Recording of data.

The data collection method entails interviews and potentially a focus group interview. The interviews are therefore recorded by means of a voice/tape recorder and transcribed a Word document. Participants’ permission is obtained to record the interview. The transcriptions are kept safe and private in a secure location in order to keep information confidential and anonymous. Apart from tape recording the participants’ interviews, field notes are also taken during and after the interviews to record non-verbal cues or body language.

1.4.3.7 Data analysis.

Content analysis is used to analyse the data obtained from the interviews. Bowling (2009) provides for a specific way in which content analysis should be conducted. Firstly, data is collected, then coded by a theme and, lastly, analysed with the purpose of presenting it. Flick (2014) proposes that, as a first step, the research question for analysing the material should be defined. This enables the researcher to define what he or she wants to do with the material obtained from the analysis (Flick, 2014).

Content analysis identifies emerging themes or categories the participant's experiences in the call centre. Prior to the analysis, interviews are transcribed to facilitate the easy identification and extraction of themes. Coding is a term used to identify differences and discrepancies in the subsequent interviews. Constant comparison is used while identifying certain themes in the data. For the analysis to be reliable, all field notes are also integrated and examined (Bowling, 2009). This also adds to the naming of categories.

Elo and Kyngäs (2008) identify the above-mentioned technique as inductive content analysis. The researcher reads through the data while using open coding to write down notes and headings in the text (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). All aspects of the content are written down in the margins with as many headings as necessary. The next step is collecting the headings to the coding sheets, where categories are generated and grouped under higher headings (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). During this stage, as Elo and Kyngäs (2008) point out, data is classified as "belonging to a particular group and this implies a comparison between these data and other observations that do not belong in the same category" (pg. 111). The researcher should decide, by means of interpretation, what to put in the same category. This is called abstraction and comprises the formulation of a general description of the topic. Bowling (2009) adds that the last step entails reporting and presenting the findings abstracted from the data.

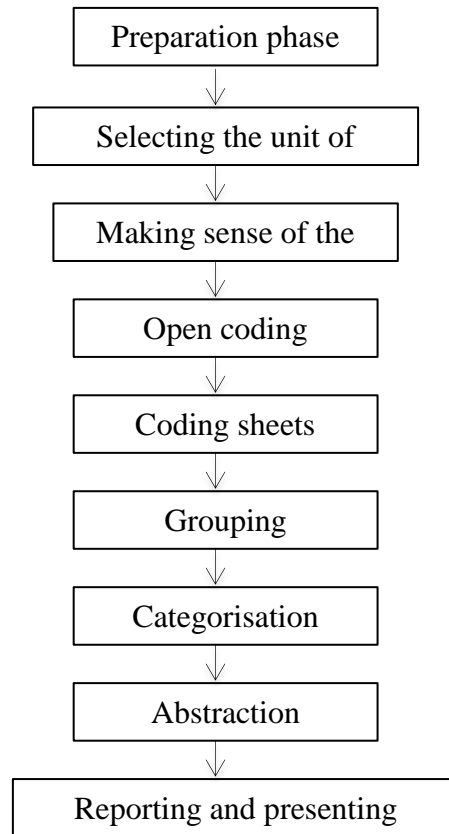


Figure 1. Preparation, organising and resulting phases in the content analysis process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008).

1.4.3.8 Strategies employed to ensure quality data.

Fossey, Harvey, McDermott and Davidson (2002) identify two types of criteria to ensure the quality of qualitative research, namely good practice in conducting the research and the trustworthiness of the interpretations made. The considerations that are in place to ensure the quality of the data are listed below.

a) Authenticity

The researcher should ensure that the participants' own words and quotes are honoured and the participants' individual constructions should be improved and expanded (Morrow, 2005). Fossey *et al.* (2002) further argue that individuals having experience in the events described should recognise the interpretations of the data.

b) Displaying integrity of findings

During the reporting of findings, the researcher's explanations and conclusions should be generated from and grounded in the data (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). It is crucial to be

transparent in the process of interpretation, since this will enable the audience to understand and gain insight into the process that led to the conclusions.

c) Coherence and dependability

The findings should always fit the data from which it was derived, and the multiple perspectives should be captured and respected (Fossey *et al.*, 2002; Morrow, 2005). The process, by means of which data is gathered and presented should be logical, structured and well documented (De Vos *et al.*, 2011).

d) Researcher reflexivity

The researcher's role should be transparent throughout the process, and the findings should change the researcher's understanding of the social phenomenon (Fossey *et al.*, 2002). Morrow further adds that researcher reflexivity "provides an opportunity for the researcher to understand how her or his own experiences and understandings of the world affect the research process" (pg. 253).

1.4.3.9 Reporting

According to Ritchie and Lewis (2003), the reporting stage is the final build-up of the process when analysing the data. The data is now aligned according to a structure that will convey the evidence obtained to the audience. This stage involves reanalysing and reassessing the data into a final package that will display the findings (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003).

The findings of the proposed study are reported in a qualitative writing style that describes the participants' experiences of emotional events. Zhang and Wildemuth (2005) argue that qualitative reporting does not require statistical significance; the report will uncover themes and categories that are important to the study. The findings are presented in a descriptive and interpretative manner that enables the researcher to gain an in-depth theoretical understanding of the phenomenon (toxic emotion events and regulation) being studied (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2005).

1.4.3.10 Ethical considerations.

Ethical issues pertain to how well the researcher treats the participants in the study and should be at the heart of the entire research process (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014). Fossey *et al.* (2002) state that ethics are intrinsic to the phenomenological approach of a qualitative study. This indicates that the participants' values and the personal nature of the interactions are integral to the research process.

Ritchie *et al.* (2014) state that the most important ethical consideration regarding the early design stages is that participants should provide informed consent and that participation should be voluntary and free from coercion or pressure. Informed consent involves that sufficient information be provided to the participants, enabling them to make a fully informed decision about whether or not they want to participate in the study. This also leads to the concern of deception, in which case the researcher deliberately misinforms, misleads or withholds information from participants (Struwig & Stead, 2001). In this research, the researcher ensures that all-important information is provided to the participants prior to the interviews.

As the data for this study is gathered from interviews, it is important to note that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants are respected throughout the entire study. A particularly intimate and disclosing environment may be set for interviews, raising the issue of how to leave participants feeling at ease and comfortable (Ritchie *et al.*, 2014).

The privacy of participants is respected throughout the process. Their identity is held anonymous by changing their names and keeping all information in a secure location. Any quotes used in the reporting stage are disclosed with the permission of the person being quoted.

1.5 Chapter Division

The chapters in the mini-dissertation are presented as below.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Research article

Chapter 3: Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

1.6 Chapter Summary

In chapter 1, the problem statement and research objectives were presented, followed by an explanation of the research design. Finally, a brief overview of the chapters to follow was presented.

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CHAPTER 2

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Toxic emotion events and emotion regulation of middle managers in a call centre

Abstract

Orientation: Emotions are increasingly gaining importance in organisational behaviour and it is, to a great extent, a part of the modern organisational life. However, research is lacking with regard to the investigation of the regulation of negative emotions in the workplace and how emotion events can turn toxic when not regulated effectively.

Research purpose: The main purpose of the study was to explore the emotion events experienced by middle managers, followed by the negative emotions as a result of the emotion events. The researcher also aimed to explore the different ways in which middle managers regulate these negative emotions.

Motivation for the study: A large part of an ordinary day at work is dealing with one's own emotions, as well as those of others. These emotions are the result of emotion events in the workplace. Moreover, the effects of negative emotions are stronger than those of positive emotions, and when these negative emotions are not regulated effectively, it may turn toxic in both the individual and the organisation. This calls for an investigation the toxic emotion events that lead to negative emotions, as well as the regulation thereof, to establish whether these events and emotions are toxic.

Research design, approach and method: A qualitative research design was used to explore the toxic events that middle managers experience; a purposive sampling method was applied to select the sample. Data was collected by conducting interviews with 15 ($n=15$) middle managers working in a call centre. Content data analysis was applied to analyse the data.

Main findings: Most of the participants indicated that they experience frustration, anger and anxiety as negative emotions in the call centre environment. These negative emotions are mainly the result of their subordinates' non-performance, as well as the work environment of a call centre itself. Other emotion events included job demands from top management, insufficient job resources and conflict. Most of the participants reported attentional deployment and response modification as ways of regulating the negative emotions. These can, in most instances, be seen as maladaptive strategies, which indicate that the events and emotions experienced by participants in this study are very often toxic.

Practical/managerial implications: Investigating emotion events and the regulation of negative emotions will assist in gaining a deeper understanding of toxic emotions, providing organisations with insight into the core of toxicity's origins, leading to appropriate interventions being developed to rectify toxic emotions and events.

Contribution/value-adding: This study will contribute to research on toxic emotions and the causes of toxicity in the workplace. Further research studies are required in this regard.

Keywords: Negative emotions; toxic emotions; toxic events; middle managers; emotion regulation

INTRODUCTION

Emotions are deeply rooted in every aspect of organisational life (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012). Various studies (Brown, Cron & Slocum, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; So, Achar Han, Agrawal, Duhachek & Maheswaran, 2015) since 1979 demonstrated the increased role of emotions and the importance thereof in the workplace. The fundamental research of Hoshchild in 1979, as an example, indicates that employees' work does not only involve mental and physical work. She found in her study that flight attendants' emotions play a significant role in their work, considering that they have to hide their true feelings, and sometimes display emotions that they do not necessarily feel, in order to please their customers. For that reason employees' work cannot be fully described by only describing the physical aspects of their work.

Furthermore, Brown, Cron and Slocum argued in 1997 that emotions are "a powerful psychological force that can affect behaviour and performance" (pg. 39). Emotions can also lead to more optimal decisions and goal-directed behaviour, as it activates distinct coping strategies (So *et al.*, 2015). Zapf (2002) applied the sociological construct in psychology and linked it to organisational behaviour. He prefers the term "emotion work" to describe an employee's regulation of emotions towards displaying organisationally desired emotions. Zapf and Holz (2006) state that emotion work implies the display of desired emotions even in unpleasant situations at work. A large part of one's daily work is dealing with one's own emotions, as well as one's interaction with others (colleagues and customers). Goran and Negoescu (2015) found that emotions are an important element of professional success and that an individual's emotional state has an effect on his or her work and performance.

The importance of studying emotions at work as part of organisational behaviour can be found in Brief and Weiss' research (2002). They found that "people's thoughts, feelings, and actions affect the organisations in which they work" (pg. 280). Their research indicates that the moods and emotions that employees experience at work have an influence on their job satisfaction. Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) investigated how work-affective events lead to affect-driven behaviours. They found that events leading to sadness or anxiety are strongly related to turnover intentions and feelings of wanting to avoid or withdraw from the work environment.

It is thus evident that the emotions that employees bring to work, whether it is derived from work-related or domestic events will have an effect on their organisational behaviour (Jonker & Van der Merwe, 2013). These emotions and emotion events, among others, can predict absenteeism and turnover intention (Brief & Weiss, 2007) as well as job satisfaction, decision-making, teamwork, leadership and job performance (Jonker & Van der Merwe, 2013). The importance of studying emotions at work is evident in its link to important organisational outcomes. Moreover, Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) provide a basic notion that occurrences at work impact feelings, and these feelings in turn have an impact on a variety of outcomes, as outlined above.

Although a number of studies found that events at work could have positive emotional content (Avey, Wernsing & Luthans, 2008; Gruber, 2011), research tends to indicate that emotions at work are more often than not more negative. Miner, Glomb and Hulin (2005) found that the effects of negative emotions are, in general, five times stronger than the effects of positive emotions. Negative emotions, such as jealousy, spite, anxiety and anger, may have a potentially destructive effect on employees' well-being (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012). Barclay and Kiefer (2014) state that negative emotions are negatively related to job performance. In other words, negative emotion events at work will result in decreased job performance.

In order to increase performance, the field of effective leadership should become more aware of the importance of emotions in the workplace (Mikolajczak, Balom, Ruosi & Kotsou, 2012; Weinberger, 2009; Sayegh, Anthony & Perrew, 2004). It is crucial for leaders and managers to become aware of these emotions. Effective leadership involves the understanding and management of feelings, moods and emotions in the self and others (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012). Mikolajczak *et al.* (2012) found that managers who possess high emotional

intelligence have great managerial competencies, high team efficiency and, as a result, their subordinates are less stressed.

Furthermore, research has shown that middle managers are often paid a salary for controlling their emotional expressions as well as their feelings (Hoshschild, 1979; Eberly & Fong, 2013). As middle managers have to influence upwards as well as downwards (Wilson, 2011), they often have to suppress their true feelings and detach themselves from situations in order for them to be successful (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002). Mikolajczak, *et al.* (2012) argue that good managers are often expected to be attuned to their own as well as their subordinates' feelings and that they should be able to put these feelings aside when having to make important decisions. Managers working in a sales environment, especially in the service industry such as call centres, experience stress that may translate to role stress, which in turn has a negative impact on performance (Mulki, Jaramillo, Goad & Pesquera, 2015).

Being under pressure to perform and deliver results elicits certain negative emotions such as anxiety, fear and anger, in managers. These emotional arousals have the capacity to either enhance or undermine effective functioning (Thompson, 1994). As these negative emotions can become toxic when not regulated effectively (Frost, 2003), investigating emotion events and emotions among middle managers becomes important. Toxic emotions refer to negative emotions that weigh down on an individual and that they feel psychologically unresolved (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). The above evidence calls for the need to investigate and explore the events leading to toxic emotions in managers.

However, in exploring the toxic emotion events to which middle managers are exposed, a few research issues can be identified.

The *first* research issue relates to the importance of studying negative emotions in the workplace. A wealth of research is already available pertaining to positive psychology. Paul and Carg (2014) found that resilience, subjective well-being, hope and optimism are essential to work performance. Foster, O'Brien and Korhonen (2012) hypothesise that specific positive techniques, such as identifying individual strengths in times of challenge, will lead to enhanced performance. In addition, research shows that positive emotions extend one's attention span and flexibility (Wadlinger & Isaacowitz, 2006). It also allows employees to acquire personal resources and withstand obstacles (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh & Larkin,

2003).

However, while placing a much emphasis on positive psychology and previous research on positive emotions, the field neglected a focus on negative emotions in the workplace. Gooty, Gavin and Ashkanasy (2009) argue that positive emotions cannot be studied in isolation from negative emotions. Different processes drive each emotion and they produce different outcomes as a result. Also, Västfjäll and Gärling (2006) raise the concern that more attention should be paid to negative emotions in the workplace. Additionally, Romani, Grappi and Dalli (2012) found that research ignored people's negative emotions towards certain stimuli and suggest that this gap should be addressed since negative emotions, just as positive emotions, predict people's decision-making processes. Each of these emotions has a different outcome or result.

According to Gooty, *et al.* (2009), anger, for example, might lead to counterproductive work behaviours, whereas fear of failure might keep an employee from tackling a specific project. Gross (2002) found that these emotions call forth a behavioural response tendency that influences the way in which individuals behave in the workplace. When not regulated and managed effectively, negative emotions can become toxic and poisonous (Glaso & Vie, 2009). Frost (2003) found that toxic emotions could lead to depression and low job satisfaction. This state of affairs brings about the importance of emotional awareness among managers. In addition, managers have to be aware of and control their emotions in order to enhance their subordinates' performance (Wegge, Van Dick, Fisher, West & Dawson, 2006).

Secondly, in order to build on emotion experience research, one has to investigate the natural contexts in which emotions emerge (Gooty, Gavin & Ashkanasy, 2009). Although laboratory studies are important, investigating emotions in their natural context is extremely valuable. By studying employees in their natural work setting, one could gain important insight into employees' emotions and their regulation thereof during daily life events, outside controlled settings (Roque & Versissimo, 2011). Studying emotions at work and determining the events that lead to those emotions will allow for natural responses to felt emotions to come to the open (Gooty, Gavin & Ashkanasy, 2009). Although management have been connected with emotions in a number of emotional intelligence studies (Tolegenovaa, Madaliyevaa, Jakupova, Naurzalinab, Ahtayevaa & Taumyshevab, 2015; Sy, Tram & O'Hara, 2006; Mikolajczak, Balom, Ruosi & Kotsou, 2012), the specific content of events and emotions that

are experienced at work have not been studied sufficiently. Kennedy and Vining (2007) mention that this is important because emotions are “crucial to effective, clear thinking, wise decisions, and are critical considerations in solving problems” (pg. 46), which are all inherent requirements of a manager’s position. Furthermore, emotion event research done in call centres is limited to call centre agents only. Little research is available that focuses on the emotion events of middle managers in a call centre environment. A call centre is characterised by the tension between efficiency and service (Jenkins, Delbridge & Roberts, 2010). The emotional demands on employees working in this environment are extremely high (Harney & Jordan, 2008), which calls forth the need to investigate the content of emotional events that lead to employees’ emotions. Janse van Rensburg, Boonzaier and Boonzaier (2013) found that long working hours, as a means to reach target, render high absenteeism, high turnover and negative health outcomes.

The *third* research issue is that middle managers have to regularly regulate their negative emotions effectively. This is the essence of the current study, since the lack of effective emotion regulation might lead to toxicity in both the organisation and the individual. Regulating one’s emotions at work forms an integral part of managerial work, considering that they enlist emotion to support adaptive, organised behavioural strategies (Thompson, 1994). Emotion regulation is the processes by which one manages one’s emotions (Koole, 2009). Aldoa, Hoeksema and Schweizer (2010) state that employees modulate their emotions at both a conscious and unconscious level in order to respond appropriately to a given situation. Emotions, as mentioned earlier, have to be regulated and dealt with effectively.

In the service industry, especially in in call centres, this can turn out to be a very difficult task. In a call centre, a telephone is the means by which a service is provided to clients, and keeping them satisfied demands more than only product performance (Nel, 2004). Therefore the requirement to regulate one’s emotions plays a central role. (Zapf & Holz, 2006). Jordan and Lindebaum (2015) argue that managers will relate to their followers more effectively if they possess the ability to regulate their emotions and vary this emotion regulation in a specific situation. Chu (2014) found that finding strategies to cope with toxic emotions is important since they can have “harmful effects on individuals such a lowering their self-confidence, hope and self-esteem, thereby threatening work morale and performance, eventually harming the organisation itself” (pg. 954).

As a means to address the issues outlined above, the researcher's first aim will be to obtain information about typical emotions experienced in a call centre and how prevalent/common negative emotions are among middle managers in this environment. When exploring these negative emotions, Gooty *et al.* (2009) argue that the researcher should focus on discrete emotions. Discrete emotions are individual-specific, short-term emotional reactions to a stimuli (Lindebaum & Jordan, 2012). Moreover, discrete emotions are intense and are invariably triggered by specific work events (Totterdell & Niven, 2014). The proposed study will aim to build on this argument by investigating specific emotional reactions (emotions) to emotion events in a call centre.

Prior to developing interventions to rectify negative emotions, and in order to gain a deeper understanding of them, it is important to explore the events that lead to such an emotion. For this reason, and to gain insight the specific events that lead to negative emotions, the Affective Event Theory (AET) can be used (Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002). The theory explains that work environment features influence employees' attitudes by way of an affective route by determining the occurrence of positive or negative affective work events (Vie, Glasø & Einarsen, 2012). These events lead to negative and positive affective reactions. Furthermore, the AET proposes "that affective reactions may have immediate influence on work actions and may influence work attitudes and cognitive-driven behaviours over time" (Grandey, Tam & Brauburger. 2002; pg. 32). In other words, investigating the events that lead to toxic emotions will lead to the understanding of why managers behave in a certain manner (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996), which in turn affects performance and the bottom line (Jordan & Troth, 2009).

In attempt to understand how middle managers regulate their emotions, the process model can be used to identify the strategies that the participants employ to regulate their emotions (Opitz, Cavanagh & Urry, 2015; Gross, 1998). This model focuses on emotion regulation choice (Thiruchselvam, Blechert, Sheppes, Rydstrom, & Gross, 2011) and suggests that the intensity of the felt emotion will have an influence on emotion regulation. According to Gross (1998), the process model can differentiate emotion regulation five categories. Situation selection and modification is when people choose the situations in which they get involved or change the aspects of the situation in which they are already involved. Employees can also apply attentional deployment or cognitive change, where the employees deploy their attention away from the situation or change the emotional meaning of the situation by

reinterpreting aspects of the situation. Response modulation is when individuals manipulate their emotional response, such as their facial expressions. Mulki, Jaramillo, Goad and Pesquera (2015) explain that an awareness of effective emotion regulation strategies will enable individuals to reduce intra- and interpersonal conflict. An in-depth investigation these emotion regulation strategies that middle managers apply will, therefore, assist the researcher in understanding why certain individuals, who experience the same emotions as their colleagues, have better work relationships and higher job performance.

This study is an attempt to redress the shortcomings in literature, as it investigates the specific events that lead to negative emotions. It also attempts to identify the negative emotions that are elicited among middle managers in call centres as a result of toxic events. Middle managers, as already mentioned, play a dual role of influencing upward and downward. The manner in which they regulate their emotions thus becomes important. This study, lastly, investigates the different regulation strategies that middle managers employ to regulate their emotions effectively. Against this background, the research objectives that follow were formulated.

The general objective of the study is to explore the ways in which middle managers regulate negative emotions as a result of toxic events. The specific objectives include the following:

- to explore how toxic events and emotions, as well as emotion regulation are conceptualised in the literature;
- to explore the emotion events that elicit negative emotions in middle managers;
- to explore the emotions derived from these experiences;
- to explore how middle managers regulate these emotions; and
- to explore the recommendations that can be made for further research on the regulation of toxic events in the workplace.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of these constructs, the next section describes and conceptualises the constructs.

Literature review

Middle managers and emotions

Middle management can be a difficult position to hold, as middle managers have to listen to top management while responding to the bottom employees (Wilson, 2011). They have to influence upward, downward and horizontally (Burgess, 2013). Burgess (2013) found that middle managers act as a link between senior managers and lower-level employees, while also managing other managers. They find themselves in the middle of the scalar chain of authority from senior managers to the managerial ranks, to individual workers (McConville, 2006). Heckscher (1995) defines middle managers in simpler terms as “those below the general manager’s executive team and above the level of supervisor” (p. 9).

For the purpose of this chapter (research article) middle managers can be viewed as those people in an organisation, as part of a clear hierarchy management chain, who are involved in delivering a service, who are responsible for at least one subordinate level and who report to one superior level above them in the hierarchy.

As part of the dual role previously mentioned, Alamsjah (2011) states that middle managers need clear strategy or direction from top management. If middle managers share an understanding of the organisation’s culture, they will achieve more success (Alamsah, 2011). Middle-level managers should always support the operational levels’ initiatives; however, it can become a difficult task to communicate issues and new ideas to top management (Burgess, 2013). Apart from being managed, middle managers also have the challenge of managing others. Managerial work entails the challenge of persuading others to hold a particular opinion or follow a particular course of action (McConville, 2006). Middle managers experience increased pressure when subordinates resist management. Braithwaite, Westbrook and Mallock (2007) state that this may lead to an increased “workload in a particular area and divert their attention from preferred work goals” (pg. 41).

The above-mentioned is an example only of one event that may elicit a variety of emotions in middle managers. Emotions are central to the quality of a middle manager’s work performance. Emotions form part of the context, content, process and the result of a middle

manager's daily work activities (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008). Nel and De Villiers (2004) found that emotional competencies are what set star performers apart from average performers. According to Kennedy and Vining (2007), emotions have an influence on decision-making processes as well as on conflict situations, which are both crucial to managerial work.

To be emotionally aware of one's own and others' emotions is the core to maintaining effective and appropriate relationships with fellow workers. Jordan and Troth (2004) state that these enhanced relationships will in turn lead to better information exchange, team decision-making and team performance. Our emotions and affective thinking lead to our behaviour. Managers, thus, have the opportunity to change their behaviour to achieve better results once their emotional awareness is raised. A person's emotions, while working, vary substantially over time (Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann & Wood, 2013). Middle managers may experience a jumble of emotions such as loneliness, isolation, anxiety, anger, stress, regret and jealousy (Brotheridge & Lee, 2008; Fisher, *et al.* 2013; Huy, 2001; Zineldin & Hytter, 2012).

An organisation has to recognise and acknowledge all these emotions that middle managers experience. Previous studies have dealt with subordinates' emotions as a result of ineffective management, and how they regulate these emotions (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012). Limited research has been done on the emotions of middle managers and how they deal with their own emotions, those of their subordinates and, lastly, those of their managers.

Call centres

Middle managers working in a call centre very often carry a heavier emotional load than middle managers working in other industries. These managers have to manage others while they are being managed themselves, with the added demand of working in a performance-driven environment. In addition, their salaries depend on the performance of their subordinates (Nel & De Villiers, 2004; Holman, Wall, Clegg, Sparrow & Howard, 2002).

Taylor and Bain (1999) define a call centre as “a dedicated operation in which computer-utilising employees receive inbound – or make outbound – telephone calls, with those calls processed by an automatic call distribution system, or perhaps by a predictive dialling system” (pg. 102). This definition distinguishes call centres from other industries, as it

explains how technology mediates the customer-employee relationship technology (Holman, *et al.*, 2002). Call centres are very often characterised by high stress levels, limited career growth and a lack of motivation (Nyaga, 2014).

Nel and De Villiers (2004) state that managers working in a call centre are affected by unique demands as part of their daily work activities. Constant technological changes, opposition from clients and working in shifts are their reality. In order for managers to be successful in this environment, they have to adapt to fast-changing circumstances, as well as anticipate and deal with client complaints (Nel & De Villiers, 2004). Flemming and Sturdy (2011) also state that call centre employment is micro-managed and highly monitored and that the environment is characterised by targets, rigid customer service and performance appraisals. Other characteristics of and cause for absenteeism and high turnover are unsupportive management and poor working conditions (Rose & Wright, 2005; Nyaga, 2014). Nyaga (2014) consequently states that effective management in call centres should include “listening to employee suggestions, providing training and relevant support and improving the ‘people attitude’ of managers and supervisors” (pg. 5).

The unique environment of call centres and the distinctive management style that it requires all pile extra emotional demands on managers working in call centres. Call centre work necessitates employees to readjust and coordinate on a daily basis. Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002) found that this type of work is likely to have possible negative effects on the psychological and affective well-being of employees. Considering that time pressure is constantly increased, while performance remains of utmost importance, this environment may lead to high stress levels which, in turn, can very easily lead to burnout (Rod & Ashill, 2013). Customers can also bring other tensions to this environment by being abusive and infuriating in terms of their demands (Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002). These circumstances and events taking place in call centres will certainly elicit certain emotions in employees and managers, with most of them being negative.

Toxic emotions

Previous research (Goran & Negoescu, 2015) encountered difficulty in identifying one single definition for emotion, and researchers could not agree on a single definition for this phenomenon. Shi, Liu and Zhang (2011), however, define an emotion as “a state of mind of

individuals after some kind of incidents' stimulation or people's attitude experience towards objective things" (pg. 170). A negative emotion can therefore be defined as a negative state of mind after a certain situation or event. It is a negative attitude experience with respect to objective things.

Emotions have a valence dimension that explains the extent to which an emotion is positive or negative (De Hooze, 2014). Emotions can therefore take on a positive valence or a negative valence. In addition to that, Vlasenko, Philippou-Hübner, Prylipko, Bock, Siegert and Wendermuth (2011) state that emotions can also be divided into high arousal emotions (anger, anxiety and joy) and low arousal emotions (sadness and boredom). Arousal can be described as the experience of restlessness, excitement and agitation, and it manifests itself in heightened overt and covert bodily activities that lead to action (Tannenbaum & Zillmann, 1975).

Although some researchers found that inherent negative feelings might be a good thing (Västfjäll & Gärling, 2006; Jabbi, Swart & Keysers, 2007), negative emotions can have adverse and severe outcomes for individuals, both personally and professionally. Sadness, anxiety or anger, when not regulated, can lead to depression. Kiefer and Barclay (2012) mention that this can become toxic because it "consumes an individual's psychological resources, reduce an individual's capacity to completely respond to the demands of the job and diminish their ability to attend to their job" (pg. 603). Negative emotions can consume an individual's physical and mental resources, especially when individuals cannot express them (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). Negative states, such as anxiety, depression and fear, have long been known to reduce people's attention (Frederickson, 2001).

Negative emotions are thus not toxic in essence. These emotions only become toxic when they are not regulated and dealt with effectively and regularly (Frost, 2003). Negative emotions, for instance fear or anxiety, may lead to long-term negative consequences such as anxiety disorders and exhaustion. When people get angry at work and they do not express these emotions or deal with them, it may lead to negative outcomes such as decreased performance, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and other personal problems (Graham, Huang, Clarke & Helgeson, 2008). Frost (2003) explains that negative emotions become toxic when an experience weighs down on a person and he or she negatively anticipates a reoccurrence. When individuals do not resolve their negative emotions, it leads to toxicity

because they “place a psychological and/or emotional burden on the individual, diminish the individual’s sense of belonging, and require additional resources to be devoted to resolving the problem or shift attention away from work” (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). As a result of such experiences, employees sometimes disengage from their social network or colleagues and their mental and physical energy levels become exhausted or depleted (Frost, 2003). These toxic emotions are direct reactions to events happening in the workplace that are of personal relevance to the individual. Kiefer and Barclay (2012) state that these emotions are likely to occur when events are seen as life-threatening or when employees do not have enough resources available to deal with the event.

Emotion events

Emotional occurrences impact on employees’ feelings; these feelings, in turn, influence their effectiveness in the workplace. In addition, emotional states or events are intense and short-lived (Grandey, Tam & Brauburger, 2002) and have the potential to recur more than once (Morgen, Ludlow, O’Leary & Clarke, 2010). Emotion events lead to negative or positive feelings; they are triggered by an interaction between work and identity. They start when a feeling is triggered and end when the feeling is dealt with (Morgen, Ludlow, O’Leary & Clarke, 2010).

As mentioned earlier, the Affective Events Theory (AET) demonstrates that the work environment leads to specific work events, which lead to specific emotions, which ultimately impact on work attitudes and behaviours (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Totterdell and Niven (2014) explain clearly that the theory “focuses on how affective experiences unfold in response to events at work” (pg. 5). The theory also places emphasis on studying the episodic structure of discrete emotions (Totterdell & Niven, 2014). Payne and Cooper (2001) ascertain that the AET emphasises events as a casual influence on emotions and that emotions have an immediate impact on performance. When emotions are aggregated over time, they may have an impact on the overall feelings one has about one’s job (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) found that negative events elicit more psychological, affective and behavioural activity than positive events; therefore negative events are more likely to lead employees to regulate their emotions.

Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) found that intrapersonal relations with customers, co-workers and managers form a large part of affective events in the workplace. The most significant event was related to customers, which suggests that negative emotions may not always originate in workplace circumstances. Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) also found that extra-organisational sources, such as customers, might be a predominant cause of irritation for employees in a customer-contact position. Additionally, Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann and Wood (2013) found that middle managers experience negative emotions when subordinates do not reach their performance targets and when task performance is not optimum.

A good example of an event that elicits negative emotions is when managers are unfair in the distribution of duties (Diefendorff, Richard & Yang, 2008). In addition to Diefendorff's research, other research shows that employees might feel frustrated, annoyed and offended when workplace incivility is allowed (Sidle, 2009). According to Loi, Loh and Hine (2015), incivility is low-intensity or rude behaviour at work with the intent to harm another employee; it constitutes the violation of workplace norms for mutual respect. Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) found that "supervisors and co-workers incivility and intrapersonal conflict creates anger, which can spiral over time overt hostility and aggression" (pg. 37).

Workplace bullying may lead to toxic emotions, which in turn lead to high turnover in the organisation (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2012). Bullying in the workplace includes intimidation, exclusion, harassment and mistreatment (Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra & Vega, 2009). Matthiesen and Einarsen (2007) define bullying as "a situation in which one or more persons systematically and over a long period of time perceive themselves to be on the receiving end of negative treatment on the part of one or more persons, in a situation in which the person(s) exposed to the treatment has difficulty in defending themselves against this treatment" (pg. 735). Ortega *et al.* found that workplace bullying is related to the emotions of fear (worried and afraid), anger (angry, stressed and upset), sadness (depressed, stressed, defenceless and alone) and shame. Bullying can lead to an abusive work environment, which leads to a loss in productivity, an increase in absenteeism and high turnover (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2012).

Workload may also lead to a jumble of negative emotions. Experiencing high work overload is strongly linked to negative emotions (Wegge, Van Dick, Fisher, West & Dawson, 2006).

High job demands can produce negative emotions when time is short and employees are required to work overtime. Having to juggle roles can also elicit negative emotions in employees (Totterdell & Niven, 2014). Unjust treatment, disrespect, public humiliation and job incompetence will likely lead to anger in employees (Grandey, Tam & Brauburger, 2002). Individuals encounter events that might provoke toxic emotions on a daily basis. These situations, however, do not always allow one to express the perceived emotion (Mauss, Cook & Gross, 2006). How people deal with and handle these emotions have consequences for their psychological and physical well-being.

Emotion regulation

The above-mentioned emotions and events are part of our daily lives. Opitz, Cavanagh, and Urry (2015) argue that employees often have to diminish, amplify or modulate their emotions when these emotions interfere with work goals such as maintaining a certain level of efficiency at work. How do people cope with negative emotions and events? Do they manage them, deal with them or disregard them? This is where the concept of emotion regulation comes into question. Gross (1998) proposes that people can either control (consciously) how they respond to their emotions or they can handle them automatically (unconsciously). As previously mentioned, it is crucial for people in a working environment to be aware of their emotions, as this influences the overall success of an organisation (Kennedy & Vining, 2007). Regulating one's emotions differs from emotion management and emotion handling, which brings about the importance of defining emotion regulation.

According to Campos, Walle, Dahl and Main (2011), two views must be kept in mind when trying to understand emotion regulation. The first view is to hold an intrapersonal opinion, as is defined by Gross (1998). Gross (1998) states that emotion regulation “is the ways by which people influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how these states are experienced and expressed” (pg. 274). The second view takes on the challenge of explaining how people regulate their emotions when they interact with other people. Emotion regulation in this regard involves the management of conflicting goals – a conflict between the goals of one person and those of another, and sometimes a conflict between the goals of a single person (Campos, *et al.*, 2011). Other findings that attempted to explain emotion regulation define it as the neural, cognitive and behavioural or action processes that sustain, amplify or attenuate the experienced emotion (Izard, Woodburn, Finlon, Krauthamer-Ewing, Grossman

& Seidenfeld, 2011). In simpler terms, this means that people cognitively respond to or manage their emotions by taking action and finding ways to deal with these emotions.

All of the above explanations and descriptions funnel down to a simpler way of defining emotion regulation as the manner in which people manage their emotions and how they deal with emotionally charged events (Clarke & Salleh, 2011). People respond to their emotions in different ways and prefer different strategies when events elicit these emotions in them. Take fear as an example. When people experience fear, they have the urge to escape. However, when they feel angry, they have the urge to attack. Fredrickson (2001) found that people do not invariably act out these urges when experiencing these emotions.

According to Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema and Schweizer (2009), individuals respond to their emotions in either an adaptive or a maladaptive way. Firstly, adaptive emotion regulation strategies include reappraisal and problem-solving. Reappraisal means seeing a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in non-emotional terms (Gross, 2002). Individuals can change the way they think about an emotional event in order to change the emotional impact of the event. Problem-solving can be seen as planning a course of action to solve a problem by modifying or eliminating stressors (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema & Schweizer, 2009). These strategies have positive outcomes such as enhanced self-control, interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being (Goldin, McRae, Ramel & Gross, 2008), as well as reduced emotional eating and other psychological disorders (Evers, Stok & De Ridder, 2009).

Secondly, suppression and avoidance are maladaptive emotion regulation strategies. Suppression is a response strategy whereby the individual deliberately reduces the expression of his or her emotions or shows no expression at all when in an emotional state (Evers, Stok & De Ridder, 2009). Goldin, McRae, Ramel and Gross (2008) further state that expressive suppression is “a strategy directed toward inhibiting behaviours associated with emotional responding, for example facial expressions, verbal utterances and gestures” (pg. 577). Although this way of responding to one’s emotions reduces the outward expression of emotions, it is maladaptive because it is less effective in reducing the emotion in the long run. Avoidance includes avoiding one’s thoughts, emotions, sensations, memories and urges. Aldao, Hoeksema and Schweizer (2009) found that avoidance has negative outcomes such as mood disorders and substance abuse. In contrast, some individuals brood over their emotions because they want to understand and solve their problems. Rumination can very often lead to

negative thinking and depression, since one's attention is focused on the emotional situation, the depressive symptoms thereof and the implications of those symptoms (Koster, Lissnyder, Dereckshan & Raedt, 2010). Although individuals feel that ruminating on their mood will help them to understand themselves better, these thinking patterns are negative, evaluative and judgemental (Rude, Maestas & Neff, 2007).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research approach

This study took on a qualitative approach, which provides a process of examining and interpreting data to find meaning, gain knowledge and building on existing knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This approach allows the researcher to obtain access to the life-world situation as the participant experiences it (Wertz, 2005). This approach suits the current study, as it aims to unpack toxic emotions and events experienced by middle managers.

Constructivism was used as the paradigm underlying the study. This included a hermeneutic methodology, as the researcher explored the multifaceted nature of the meaning that a participant attached to a specific experience. Hermeneutics aims to obtain an understanding of the individual, self-awareness and the entire context of the situation (Bowling, 2009).

Research Strategy

A phenomenological research strategy and design was used to gather and analyse data. Phenomenology describes the meaning of experiences and aims to understand human behaviour through the participants' accounts of experiences in the form of informal conversations and interviews (Creswell, 1998). The researcher gains an understanding of the phenomenon through the lived experience of the participant, as well as through the participant's interaction with his or her environment (Denzil & Lincoln, 2011). This study consisted of a small number of participants, and the aim was to derive the patterns and relationships of a middle manager's daily work environment, thus making this design appropriate.

Research Method

Research Setting

The participants who participated in the study were middle managers currently working in a call centre in Pretoria, Gauteng. Middle managers within the call centre were interviewed confidentially at the call centre, where board rooms and interview rooms were explicitly booked for these interviews.

Entree and establishing researcher roles

Participants were invited to participate in the research on a voluntary basis. A letter describing the nature and the purpose of the research was sent to one middle manager, through whom the researcher gained access to the rest. The process was explained to the rest of the middle managers in the call centre, providing them with all the relevant information they needed to decide about whether they want to participate in the research or not. After gaining the participants' consent, interviews were conducted at a time and place that were convenient for both the researcher and the participant. (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The role of the researcher was to interview the participants. The researcher guided and facilitated the interview process, during which the participant provided inputs about their experiences and feelings within the call centre. While the researcher asked questions and recorded the conversation, the role of participants was to provide the information needed.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to select the study population. De Vos, Strydom, Fouché and Delport (2011) state that this method is used when the researcher thinks critically about a specific feature or characteristic of the respondent prior to selecting research participants. The criterion for this research was that participants needed to be middle managers working in a call centre. Based on this criterion, a small sample of 15 employees (keeping saturation point of responses in mind) was selected. The sample consisted of some middle managers working in the sales department and some working in retention. These participants are all working under extreme pressure in a target-driven call centre in which this study was conducted.

Descriptive information of the participants is given in table 1.

Table 1

Characteristics of the Participants (N=15)

Item	Category	Frequency
Gender	Male	10
	Female	5
Age	20 - 25 years	0
	25 - 29 years	11
	30 - 35	3
	35 - 40	1
Race	White	4
	African	2
	Coloured	2
	Asian	2
	Indian	5
Language	English	12
	Afrikaans	2
	Sepedi	1
	isiZulu	0
	Sesotho	0
	Setswana	0
	isiXhosa	0
Marital Status	Single	7
	Married	7
	Divorced	1
	Widowed	0

Table 1 indicates that the study population consisted of 10 male participants and five female participants. All participants were between the ages of 25 and 40 years, with 11 participants in the age group 25 to 29 years, three in the age group 30 to 35 years and one in the age group 35 to 40 years. Participants were from various races, including four white and two black participants, two coloured, two Asian and five Indian participants. More than half of the population who participated in the study speaks primarily English, while only two speak

Afrikaans and one's home language is Sepedi. Seven of the participants were single, seven were married and only one was divorced.

Data collection

The researcher obtained written permission and ethical clearance from the North-West University's Human Research Ethics Committee to conduct the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in two phases. The first phase was implemented prior to the final process by means of three pilot studies. This was the pre-testing phase for determining the applicability of the interview schedule (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001) in exploring the emotion events of middle managers working in a call centre. The same criterion used to identify the population for the study was used to identify the three participants for the pilot study. This was done to ensure that the questions in the interview schedule were relevant and applicable.

The findings from the pilot study showed that participants did not always fully understand the questions. Since the interviews were semi-structured, it was easy to state the questions differently and in a way that made it easier for the participants to respond. Valuable and relevant information was obtained all through the process of probing and questioning when points of interest arose (De Vos *et al.*, 2011).

The purpose of the research was also explained, as well as the purpose of using a tape recorder and how the information would be used. The participants' agreement and consent were obtained prior to recording their responses.

After the completion of the pilot study, a semi-structured interview schedule guided the researcher in the one-on-one interviews. Interviews were conducted with the 15 participants, which formed part of the final phase of data collection. The semi-structured one-on-one interviews allowed the participants to share their experiences and emotions as middle managers working in a call centre, as well as how they choose to regulate these emotions (Delpont & Roestenburg, 2011). When points of relevance to the study arose during the discussion, the researcher probed and explored these topics in more depth. Data saturation was reached in the semi-structured interviews, as no new information resulted from the data received (Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles & Grimshaw, 2009). If

it so happened that data saturation was not reached, a follow-up focus group would have been conducted with the participants who took part in the interviews.

Recording of data

The participants were recorded by means of a voice/tape recorder and their responses were transcribed into an excel document. The participants' permission, via consent, was obtained prior to the recording. The information is kept safe in a secure location to ensure the confidentiality of the information obtained.

Data analysis

All semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed an Excel spreadsheet. The purpose was to provide a qualitative analysis of the emotion events and emotion regulation of middle managers working in a call centre. Content analysis was used to extract desired information from verbal material by systematically and objectively identifying specific characteristics of the material (Reis & Judd, 2000). In simpler terms, Struwig, Struwig and Stead (2001) describe qualitative content analysis as the gathering and analyses of any written content. This enables the reduction of a large body of qualitative information to a smaller and more manageable form of representation.

The ultimate goal of content analysis is to make replicable and valid conclusions from data to its context. This will provide knowledge and new insights, as well as a representation of facts and a practical guide to action (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). Inductive content analysis was done because of the limited former knowledge about the specific emotion events and emotion regulation used among middle managers working in a call centre.

Firstly, the researcher read through the data gathered in order to make sense of the data. After deciding on what should be analysed, the units of analysis were selected, namely negative emotions, emotion event and emotion regulation. These units were condensed and assigned a code (Sjöberg, Schönning & Salzmänn-Erikson, 2015). The aim and research questions guided the researcher in choosing the content to be analysed. In other words, initial coding involved going back to the research questions to enable the researcher to identify themes relevant to the purpose of the study (Flick, 2014).

The next step was to organise the data by means of open coding, where the researcher identified differences and similarities in the subsequent interviews (Bowling, 2009). Codes that expressed meaning were broken down and grouped the themes based on their differences and similarities. Likewise, sub-themes were built by classifying the content as belonging to a particular theme (Elo & Kyngäs, 2007). In simpler terms, statements with shared meaning were grouped together according to central themes and categorised according to sub-themes. By means of interpretation, the researcher decided which codes to put under the same theme or sub-theme.

This process was monitored and reported in as much detail as possible, as well as truthfully, in order for future researchers to replicate the findings. The validation and modification step involved validating the data where necessary by listening to the audio recordings again and by revisiting participants where necessary. Reliability of the data was ensured by an inter-coder agreement between two individuals (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The data was coded independently, without access to the results of the other coder.

Finally, the researcher explored the properties of themes, uncovered patterns and tested these against the entire body of data (Bradley, Curry & Devers, 2007). The last step involved identifying themes that were common to most of the interviews and reporting on their prevalence in the research findings. These findings are presented in the following section.

In order to ensure the quality of the data, the researcher used participants' authentic words and quotes to report on the findings (Morrow, 2005). In addition to that, the findings of the study are grounded in data in order to ensure that integrity and transparency are displayed (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Likewise, the data gathering and presentation were based on a logical and structured process. Finally, the researcher's perspective of emotion events and emotion regulation among middle managers changed through the course this research, which indicates that the researcher did not approach the research with predetermined opinions and perspectives.

Strategies employed to ensure the quality of data

Two types of criteria were used to ensure the quality of data, namely good practice in conducting the research and the trustworthiness of the interpretations made (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002). Furthermore, the researcher ensured that the participants'

exact words were used within the analysis (Morrow, 2005). All conclusions were generated from the data in an attempt to enable the reader to gain insight into the process which led to the explanations and conclusions. The findings within the study fit the data from which it is derived and the data gathered is structured and well-documented, captured within an excel document. Finally, the researcher remained transparent throughout the process. The researcher gained a deeper understanding of middle managers' experiences regarding toxic emotions (Fossey *et al.*, 2002).

Reporting

The findings of the study are reported in a qualitative style and are aimed at describing the participants' experiences regarding emotion events within a call centre environment. The reporting does not have any statistical significance, as it takes on a qualitative style. Instead it uncovers themes and subthemes that are applicable to the study. The findings describe and interpret the data gained and enable the reader to gain an in-depth understanding of the emotions and events experienced within a call centre.

Ethical Considerations

Firstly, as the data for this study was gathered from interviews, it was of utmost importance to ensure that the anonymity and confidentiality of participants was respected throughout the entire study. The privacy of participants is respected throughout the process. Secondly, their identity is held anonymous by changing their names and keeping all information in a secure location. Thirdly, participant's provided informed consent prior to the interview and participated voluntarily. The informed consent form contained sufficient information in an attempt to enable them to make a fully informed decision about whether or not they wanted to participate in the study.

FINDINGS

After all the interviews have been conducted, transcriptions were analysed to determine the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data. An overview of the results is presented in table 2 in an attempt to address the general objective of the study.

Table 2

Negative emotion events, negative emotions and emotion regulation

Emotion event	Associated emotion regulation	Associated negative emotion
Non-performance of subordinates		
1. I would say a slight anxiety and a little bit of disappointment in my team	Participants indicated that they solve the problem that causes the emotion event (situation modification)	Frustration Anxiety Sadness
2. Obviously it's frustrating when you can't get them on the same lines that you are on.	Most the participants reported that they take a smoke break to get away from the situation (attentional deployment)	Anger
3. I feel negative when my team does not make target and that is also anger.		
4. I have a specific consultant that doesn't take criticism very well. He has a very short temper so basically you communicate a procedure to all the consultants and he just feels like he is exempt from the instruction that needs to be followed.	Some participants indicated that they think differently or positively about the emotion event (cognitive change)	
Insufficient job resources		
1. The one thing is not being able to give the consultant the information they need	Participants indicated that they solved the problem by escalating the matter to upper management (situation modification)	Frustration Anger
2. Our system is not responding and we are unable to work. You've got all the consultants breathing down your neck they can't work. And you need to sort it out. You get frustrated.	A particular participant reported that having a drink after work, just to get away from the situation, really assists in managing the emotion (attentional deployment)	
3. Our reports are not working, which means that these are the report we pay our advisors on.	Another participant indicated that she changes her attitude and believes that	

	the situation will turn itself around	
4. Because we have been having system constraints and we don't know how we are going to be paying our consultants, as well as ourselves.	(cognitive change)	
Job demands from top management		
1. You know what makes me feel very angry? The fact that I'm a manager but I get treated as if there is not trust from my side. So I have never ever given the company any reason to doubt me. Not once.	A few participants mentioned exercise as an emotion regulation strategy (attentional deployment) Suppress the desired actions in order to do the job (response modulation)	Anger Frustration Sadness
2. You get a lot of pressure in terms of stats and being monitored on a daily basis, over and above being monitored on a weekly and monthly basis.		
Conflict		
1. No, no, it was consultants pushing each other because they felt the other one was not abiding by the rules and getting information to forward himself to get the sale and to put himself in an advantage position.	Participants indicated that they need to turn their attention away from the situation and calm down (attentional deployment) A particular participant reported that he keeps his emotions intact and that he does not generally display the felt emotion in order to keep it professional (response modulation)	Anger Sadness
2. An advisor. We got to a point where we really locked heads because we have very similar personalities. He is being straightforward, wanting me to understand his point and me wanting him to understand my point.		
Work environment		
1. Because obviously this is a high-	Participants reported that they are	Frustration

	pressured environment and you work with daily targets and you work on monthly targets. Meeting daily targets might sometimes lead to frustration.	required to suppress their emotions to propagate professionalism (response modulation)	Anxiety
2.	Obviously it's frustrating when you can't get them on the same lines that you are on.	Participants avoid or walk away from the emotion event (attentional deployment)	
3.	Look, we work in a very, very, very competitive environment and it's also very 'cut-throat		
4.	I think that this is automatically a high stress environment due to the urgency and the clients. They want assistance now plus you have a system that is not current functioning.		

Table 2 represents the outcome of the general objective of the study. The main aim of the study was to explore the ways in which middle managers regulate their emotions in the event of experiencing negative emotions. This provided insight the effectiveness of emotion regulation among middle managers, which in turn revealed whether the emotion events in a call centre are toxic.

As can be seen from table 2, middle managers employ situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive change in order to regulate the frustration, anxiety, anger and sadness that resulted from the non-performance of subordinates. Situation modification involves changing the situation in order to alter the emotional impact on oneself, whereas cognitive change refers to the reinterpretation of the subjective meaning of a situation as a means to see an emotion event in non-emotional terms (Gross, 1998). Participants reported that they experienced frustration and anger when they have insufficient resources to do the job effectively. In attempt to regulate these emotions, they also employed situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive change. Attentional deployment involves a deliberate attention away from the emotion-eliciting event (Gross, 1998). Demands from top management were another emotion event experienced by the participants, and they

indicated that attentional deployment and response modulation were the manners in which they were able to regulate their emotions. The most associated negative emotions with this event were anger, frustration and sadness. Response modulation refers to the display of one's emotions, such as suppressing or expressing the emotion (Diefendorff, Richard & Yang, 2008). In addition, attentional deployment and response modulation were employed to regulate anger and sadness that resulted because of conflict in the workplace. Participants reported that the characteristics of the work environment itself lead to frustration and anxiety. Attentional deployment and response modulation were employed to regulate these emotions.

It is evident from table 2 that response modulation and attentional deployment are the most commonly used mechanisms among middle managers to regulate emotion. The implications of using these mechanisms will be discussed later in this chapter. In addition, the following section will provide more in-depth insight into the meaning and interpretation of the findings contained in table 2. Themes and sub-themes were subtracted in an attempt to address the objectives of this study. The key findings are illustrated by means of the participants' direct quotations.

Table 3 illustrates the different emotion events that middle managers experience on a daily basis and which results in felt negative emotions.

Table 3

Emotion events

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
Non-performance of subordinates	Demotivation	<i>"A specific consultant in my team was very demotivated in terms of being at work."</i>
	Vision misalignment	<i>"The thing is you tend to believe that people have the same train of thought as you but in actual fact they don't understand where you are coming from."</i> <i>"Obviously, it's frustrating when you can't get them on the same lines that you are on."</i>
	Not meeting target	<i>"Yesterday I had a consultant that didn't meet target."</i>

		<i>"I feel negative when my team does not make target."</i>
	Not abiding by rules	<i>"One was not abiding by the rules and getting information to forward himself to get the sale and to put himself in an advantage position."</i> <i>"You communicate a procedure to all the consultants and he just feels that he is exempt from the instruction that needs to be followed."</i>
Insufficient job resources	Lack of information	<i>"The one thing is not being able to give the consultant the information they need."</i> <i>"You must give those answers and you are not always communicated to timelessly to be able to give answers to the questions that your consultant have."</i>
	Faulty systems	<i>"Our system is not responding and we are unable to work."</i> <i>"Our reports were not working, which means that these are the reports we pay our advisors on."</i> <i>"We were having system constraints."</i>
Job demands from top management	Close monitoring	<i>"You get a lot of pressure in terms of stats and being monitored on a daily basis, over and above being monitored on a weekly and monthly basis"</i>
	High demands	<i>"I didn't meet my daily target from my manager."</i> <i>"Then you have your superior that expects you to filter information down to your staff."</i>
	Manager distrust	<i>"You know what makes me angry? The fact that I am a manager and there is not trust from my general manager."</i>
Conflict	Manager-follower conflict	<i>"We got to a point where we really locked heads because we have very similar personalities."</i>

	Between colleagues	<i>"It was consultants pushing each other"</i>
Work environment	High pressure	<i>"There are a lot more under pressure and a lot more target driven. The pressure we deal with daily and the responsibility you carry ... It's huge."</i> <i>"Part of my job is tight deadlines, working under pressure."</i>
	High stress levels	<i>"I think this is automatically a high stress environment due to the urgency and the clients."</i>
	Emotional	<i>"It's a roller coaster environment so there is all sorts of emotions in this place."</i> <i>"It's a roller coaster, it's up and down."</i>
	Long working hours	<i>"Working in a call centre is mostly a 12-hour day. The work hours are from 08:00 to 17:00 but it doesn't stop at 17:00. Most days it's 08:00 to 08:00."</i> <i>"Sometimes you are required to or get phone calls from work on a Saturday, which is my family time."</i>
	Competitive	<i>"Look, we work in a very, very, very competitive environment and it's also very cut-throat."</i>

Table 3 indicates that middle managers experience negative emotions when their subordinates do not perform. Middle managers have the challenge of managing their subordinates, with added pressure when subordinates resist management (Braithwaite, Westbrook & Mallock, 2007). *Non-performance of subordinates* encompasses any kind of demotivation of subordinates, subordinates' misalignment with the manager's vision, subordinates not meeting target and subordinates not adhering to the company rules. The participants mentioned that non-performance of subordinates lead to a jumble of emotions. These findings are confirmed by the participants' responses as reported in table 3.

Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann and Wood (2013) found that middle managers experience negative emotions when performance targets are not reached and when task performance is not optimum. In light of the above, it can be concluded that middle managers have an emotionally demanding task in managing their subordinates.

The participants also indicated that *insufficient job resources* lead to felt negative emotions. Insufficient job resources include any lack of resources that hinders middle managers from performing their daily tasks. This includes a lack of information and faulty systems. Call centres' main business is driven by computer and telephone-based technologies. Interaction with customers takes place together with the use of display screen equipment and inputting of information (Janse van Rensburg, Boonzaier & Boonzaier, 2013). Participants in the current study confirmed that it is frustrating when these systems are not in place, as it results in them not being able to continue with their daily work. Employees working in call centres are very dependent on system design, infrastructure, connectivity and reliability in order to perform optimally (Baraka, Baraka & Gamily, 2015). It can become very frustrating and anger-provoking if these systems are not in place and/or in working order.

Additionally, participants indicated that the demands from top management also resulted in negative emotions. This theme encompasses any form of very high demands, manager distrust and close monitoring by upper management. One participant indicated that it is difficult to convey information from top management to her subordinates. Wilson (2011) found that managers have a difficult position to hold since they are managers but they also have to listen to and carry out tasks dictated by upper management. Participants in the current study experienced negative emotions as a result of receiving demanding tasks from their managers. Heavy workload was also evident as a cause of negative emotion from the participant's responses. Job demands can produce negative emotions when time is short and employees are required to work overtime (Totterdell & Niven, 2014).

The minority of the participants indicated that *conflict* was also a cause of negative emotions. Conflict in terms of this study included conflict between the manager and his or her followers and conflict between colleagues. Incivility and rude behaviour at work are the violation of workplace norms for mutual respect (Loi, Loh & Hine, 2015), while intrapersonal conflict creates anger and can lead to hostility and aggression among employees (Grandey, Tam &

Brauburger, 2002). Participants' remarks about conflict situations in the call centre environment confirm this statement.

The *work environment* itself is a major contributor to the negative emotions felt by middle managers; the participants stated that the pressures of the work environment lead to these negative emotions. In general the participants reported that the call centre environment is characterised by high pressure, high stress levels, long working hours, and competition, and that it is highly emotional. One participant mentioned that the pressure he deals with and the responsibility in the environment are enormous. Rod and Ashill (2013) confirm this. Their study found that the call centre environment may lead to high stress levels and burnout due to time pressure. The call centre environment is characterised by daily targets and rigid performance appraisals (Flemming & Sturdy, 2011). One participant in the current study confirmed this and reported that the environment is highly pressured and that she had weekly and monthly targets. Another participant mentioned that the environment is a roller-coaster of emotions. Previous research also found that this type of environment adds emotional demands to the work lives of middle managers (Taylor, D'Cruz, Noronha & Scholarios, 2013).

It can thus be concluded that these results are consistent with literature and that the emotion events in call centres are the cause of many negative emotions. However, the study's findings suggest that the call centre environment and the non-performance of subordinates are the major contributors to the negative emotions that middle managers experience. According to Nel (2004), the unique emotional demands that this environment places on managers, ask for the ability to adapt to fast-changing circumstances and technology, the ability to maintain good employee relationships and the ability to effectively deal with the high demands in this environment. Collins and Jackson (2015) further suggest that work environments that are perceived to be demanding or stressful could have an impact on managers' psychological resources to such an extent that they find it difficult to regulate their emotions and behaviour.

The participants in the study indicated that the negative emotions they most frequently experienced in the call centre environment as a result of these emotion events were anger, frustration, sadness, disappointment and anxiety.

Table 4

Negative Emotions

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
High arousal emotions	Anger	<p><i>"It's anger and it's negativity because it infuriates me for them not doing what they are supposed to do."</i></p> <p><i>"You know what makes me feel very angry? The fact that I'm a manager but I get treated as if there is no trust from my side."</i></p>
	Anxiousness	<i>"Stress, anxiety, nervousness. A lot. You experience a lot of emotions in this environment."</i>
	Frustration	<p><i>"So it's constant deviation from your thought pattern, which is the most frustrating part."</i></p> <p><i>"It was frustrating because you are sitting there and not doing anything."</i></p>
Low arousal emotions	Sadness	<p><i>"I did feel a bit sad at first because he thought it was because of me"</i></p> <p><i>"Well, I was sad. It was sad but some of these things I am kind of used to."</i></p>
	Disappointment	<i>"I would say a slight anxiety and a little bit of disappointment in my team."</i>

Vlasenko, *et al.* (2011) distinguish between high arousal emotions and low arousal emotions. In this study, *high arousal emotions* consisted of anger, anxiousness and frustration. Some participants indicated that they experienced anger in the call centre environment whereas others indicated that they felt anxious. Anger can be seen as a powerful emotion that results from an assumed hindrance, threat or injustice, which will orientate the individual to eliminate the stimulant (Biaggio, 1989). Kugler, Neeman and Vulkan (2014) state that anxiousness is a feeling of threat when individuals experience dread and are hyper vigilant. Furthermore, anxiety can be interpreted as a signal that the environment is uncertain and uncontrollable (Raghunathan, Pham & Corfman, 2006). A Kiefer and Barclay (2012) state that anger can be experienced in different ways and as a result of different experiences. Different remarks made by participants in the proposed study confirmed this statement. Two

participants felt anger when their subordinates were not meeting standards. Additionally, one participant mentioned that his general manager makes him angry when he shows no trust in him, as can be seen in table 4.

Frost (2003) found that this anger could betray managers' hopes, reduce enthusiasm and diminish their sense of connectedness to their organisation and employees. Graham, Huang, Clarke and Helgeson (2008) found that the performance of people who do not deal with their anger might decrease in value and that their interpersonal relationships might become dysfunctional to some extent. One participant stated that he experienced a lot of felt emotions, especially anxiety. Fear and anxiety may have severe long-term implications that include anxiety disorders and exhaustion (Graham, Huang, Clarke & Helgeson, 2008).

Most of the participants indicated that they experience frustration as a negative emotion as part of their daily work. Frustration is defined by Amsel (1992) as "a temporary state that results when a response is nonreinforced in the presence of a reward expectancy" (pg. 1). One of the participants mentioned ineffective IT systems as the cause of frustration, while others stated that it is their subordinates not meeting their daily and/or monthly targets. McConville (2006) confirms the latter. He found that managerial work entails the challenge of persuading others to hold a particular opinion or to follow a certain course of action. According to Glasø and Vie (2009), frustration could become toxic if a person neglects to regulate the emotion effectively.

On the other hand, *low arousal emotions* included sadness and disappointment. Raghunathan, Pham and Corfman (2006) argue that "feelings of sadness are interpreted as a signal that a source of reward has been lost" (pg. 597). Sadness and/or disappointment can lead to depression, which can result in toxicity in an organisation (Västfjäll & Gärling, 2006). One participant mentioned that he already felt depressed. He later mentioned that this was because of his disappointment in his team. Based on the results illustrated in table 3, it can be concluded that middle managers experience a jumble of emotions in their daily work lives. The section below explores how managers in this demanding environment regulate these events and emotions.

Table 5 represents the emotion regulation strategies of the process model that participants mentioned during the semi-structured interviews.

Table 5

Emotion Regulation

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
Situation selection	Avoidance	<i>"Honestly, I just don't do the job."</i>
Situation modification	Reprimand non-performance	<i>"You obviously have to reprimand people that are not doing their job." "When someone does something wrong we discuss it in a team."</i>
	Problem-solving	<i>"Firstly you will see what the problem is and you find a solution for the problem. You need to evaluate how you are going to fix the problem." "I got one of the general managers of IT and he sorted it for me in five minutes."</i>
Cognitive change	Reappraisal	<i>"You take that as constructive criticism and in retrospect to yourself and motivate yourself to get back on." "You have to take that negative emotion and turn it a positive."</i>
	Emotional detachment	<i>"So you kind of eventually learn that the more you remove your emotions out of you do, the more consistent you become." "I really don't have time to stay angry or dwell on an emotion."</i>
Response modulation	Suppression	<i>"I felt like I wanted to yell but I didn't." "You can't carry your emotions on your face so you have to have a smile on your face while having red ears and a beating heart."</i>
	Expression	<i>"Me, I am very blunt with my people. If I feel you have done something wrong, I will show you." "They will see the look on my face that I am not nice."</i>

Theme	Sub-theme	Response
Attentional deployment	Attention away from the situation	<i>"I normally walk away."</i> <i>"I just get away from the situation and calm myself down."</i>
	Attention towards the situation	<i>"I will confide in my husband and tell him the details of what happened and what I am feeling."</i>
	Smoking/drinking	<i>"I'll just go outside and have a smoke."</i> <i>"I'll get home and smoke like 10 cigarettes."</i> <i>"We, as the management team, after work, quickly go out for speed drinking."</i>
	Exercise	<i>"I gym, that's my release. I'll go and blank out for an hour or two."</i> <i>"Well, I don't have my own gym at home but I do have a stress-out in my garage ... I'll punch things and punching bags."</i>

Table 5 indicates that *situation selection* consisted of only avoidance. Only one participant mentioned that, if he could, he would avoid the situation that is causing the negative emotion. This is where individuals choose the situations in which they want to get involved (Gross, 1998). In most work environments it is seldom possible to avoid emotion events, which may provide an explanation for the low response rate on this sub-theme. This is especially true in in call centres where employees constantly have to reach targets, provide rigid customer service and where performance is constantly monitored (Flemming & Sturdy, 2011). There is rarely an opportunity in a call centre to avoid emotion events.

Some participants employed *situation modification* as a means to regulate their emotions. This theme included problem-solving and reprimanding misbehaviour. A number of participants in the study mentioned problem-solving, and their responses indicated that they had action plans in place to modify the situation or, in some instances, eliminate the stressor. This is an effective way of regulating one's negative emotions. It allows the individual to think about a certain situation before employing maladaptive styles of emotion regulation while also creating an opportunity to employ effective ways of regulating the emotion (Desrosiers, Vine, Curtiss & Klemanski, 2014).

Furthermore, participants indicated that they sometimes change the way they think about an emotion event (*cognitive change*). Cognitive change encompasses any kind of reappraisal of and emotional detachment from the emotion-eliciting situation. The impact of an emotion event can be altered positively by reframing the emotional experience, as the participants in the study indicated. One participant mentioned that he deliberately changes the way he thinks about an emotion event.

Most of the participants mentioned that they employ *attentional deployment* as a means to regulate their emotions. This includes the deliberately drawing attention away or towards the situation, as well as drinking, smoking and exercise. Most of the participants selectively directed their attention away from the emotional situation by means of physical exercise, walking away from the situation or taking a five-minute break from the situation. According to Ferri and Hajcak (2015), this form of emotion regulation is very effective in reducing the negative affect of the emotion event. The current study confirms this statement; a participant stated that she has to get away from the situation in order to focus on the goals at hand.

Apart from the above, most of the participants indicated that they apply *response modulation* when regulating their emotions by either expressing or suppressing their emotions. Evers, Stok and De Ridder (2009) suggest that suppression involves the elimination of expression when confronted with an emotional event. One participant mentioned that the environment requires of her to reduce or suppress her emotional expressions. It might interfere with their goals and effectiveness at work if managers do not modulate their emotions in this way (Opitz, Cavanagh & Urry, 2015). Another participant confirms this in his response by explaining that he has to find ways to reach his goals. Additionally, one participant explained how he has to modify his emotions in response to specific situations. These responses serve as evidence that managers working in call centre have to, more often than not, suppress their emotions in order to function optimally. However, prior research shows that deliberately suppressing the outward expression of emotions may at times be ineffective, since this choice of action does not reduce the negative emotion (Gross, 1998).

Finally, some of the participants did not only employ one specific emotion regulation strategy. One participant indicated that she sometimes has to suppress her emotions (response modulation), while she must, at other times, walk away from the event causing the negative

emotion (attentional deployment): *“I also have to keep it together in front of my boss because if he doesn’t see that, I am incompetent in my job. I have to, basically, play cool ... I’ll walk away and get a smoke. I’ll go to the balcony and have a smoke, until I get to the car and vent with my husband.”* Opitz, Cavanagh and Urry (2015) confirm this statement when they suggest that people might sometimes “employ multiple emotion regulation strategies to the same events to ensure regulatory success” (Pg. 456). Another participant employed response modulation, attentional deployment and cognitive change: *“The thing with us is that you’ve got to be able to handle our emotions when you speak to someone. It’s pointless to shout, scream and throwing a scene ... You need to just take a five-second break to gather your emotions and give a very vague response, if I can call it that. So it’s taken at your own interpretation. How you take it is up to you. And to manage the perception of how it’s taken is major.”*

DISCUSSION

Outline of the results

Previous research has illustrated the importance of emotions in the workplace (Brown, Cron & Slocum, 1997; Brief & Weiss, 2002; Goran & Negoescu, 2015). Zineldin and Hytter (2012) make the statement that emotions are rooted in all aspects of organisational life. The reason might be the fact that emotions are regarded as an important element of professional success (Goran & Negoescu, 2015). Although a wealth of research has been done on positive psychology and positive emotions (Paul & Carg, 2014; Foster, 2012), Romani, Grappi and Dalli (2012) identified the importance and need for researching negative emotions; they found that focus should be drawn to addressing the gap in studying negative emotions.

A lack of research pertaining to the events that lead to negative emotions still remains. Gooty, Gavin and Ashkanasy (2009) suggest that emotions should be studied in the natural contexts in which they occur. Negative events are a large part of the daily work lives of employees working in a call centre. Rod and Ashill (2013) describe this environment as target-driven and characterised by high stress levels and burnout. The emotion events as integral part of this environment have the potential to lead to toxicity when the emotion elicited is not

regulated effectively (Frost, 2003). Current research on emotion investigated emotions, emotion events and emotion regulation independently and not as an important process to prevent toxicity in the workplace.

The general objective of this study, therefore, was to explore the toxic emotions and events experienced by middle managers working in a call centre, as well as to investigate the different ways in which they regulate these felt emotions. The results of this research will now be reviewed and compared to the literature. The findings will now be discussed according to each research objective.

To explore the ways in which middle managers regulate negative emotions, as a result of toxic events (general objective)

Firstly, the findings indicated that situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive change were employed in order to regulate negative emotions stemming from the non-performance of subordinates. Although attentional deployment can very often be ineffective in regulating negative emotions (Bardeen, Tull, Stevens & Gratz, 2014), situation modification and cognitive change are seen as adaptive ways of reducing the impact of the negative emotion (Chambers, Gullone & Allen, 2009). Likewise, the emotions resulting from insufficient job resources are also regulated by means of situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive change. From these findings, a conclusion can be drawn that the non-performance of subordinates and insufficient job resources are not a toxic event in this specific call centre. This can be reported by reason of the ineffective regulation of the negative emotion.

Secondly, attentional deployment and response modulation were employed to regulate the negative emotions that resulted from job demands from top management, conflict and the work environment itself. These emotion regulation strategies are more often than not seen as maladaptive and ineffective in reducing the negative emotion in the long run (Bardeen, *et al.*, 2014; Graham, Huang, Clarke & Helgeson, 2008; Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). Frost (2003) found that an emotion event becomes toxic when it is not regulated effectively. This suggests that job demands from top management, conflict and the work environment in this call centre may likely be toxic to the middle managers and the overall organisation. The majority of negative emotion events and emotions are regulated by means of ineffective strategies, and

organisations need to be aware of the impact that this might have on the well-being of their employees and the bottom-line.

To explore the events that elicits negative emotions in middle managers

Morgen, et al. (2010) conceptualise an emotion event as coloured by a positive or a negative feeling that is triggered by an interaction between work and identity; it begins when a negative feeling is triggered and ends when the feeling has been dealt with. Firstly, most of the participants in this study indicated that they experienced negative emotions when their subordinates did not meet targets or when they did not abide by company rules. The findings of a study done by Fisher *et al.* (2013) suggest that middle managers experience negative emotions when performance targets are not reached and when subordinates' performance is not optimum. This may imply that the responsibility of managers to manage their subordinates might, more often than not, lead to negativity and demotivation among these managers, which in turn could lead to disengagement. Managers' workloads increase when subordinates resist management, since they have to divert their attention away from their work goals to attend to their subordinates (Braithwaite, Westbrook & Mallock, 2007). A conclusion can thus be drawn that this may have severe negative implications for the organisations, as performance is negatively affected by means of decreased productivity.

Secondly, based on the findings of this study, a lot of frustration and anger resulted from the IT systems that were not in proper working condition. The findings of a study done by Baraka, Baraka and Gamily (2015) indicate that managers working in call centres are very dependent on the connectivity and reliability of the systems that are used as part of their daily work. At a managerial level, the implications of this event, specifically in a call centre environment, could be that managers are not able to track their subordinates' performance, thus disabling them to reward their employees accordingly. Ultimately, this may have a negative influence on the morale of the organisation. The findings of this study are also confirmed by Katcher (2015), who found that a lack of information would lead to frustration among employees. He further indicates that this may lead to the deterioration of an organisation's products and services.

Thirdly, a large number of participants indicated that they experienced negative emotions when the tasks they received from top management were too excessive. According to Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008), an event that elicits negative emotions in employees is when supervisors are unfair and unreasonable in the distribution of duties. In addition, Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) state that unjust treatment by supervisors will likely lead to individuals experiencing negative emotions such as anger. A heavy workload is one of the most frequent negative events experienced in any workplace (Dasborough, 2006). A heavy workload is likely to lead to burnout, which is toxic and damaging to the organisation. Also, a heavy workload may lead to negative outcomes such as the exhaustion of one's mental and physical resources, leading to low levels of energy, fatigue and various health problems (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006). The hypothesis can be formulated that the top management's demands may lead to burnout among staff, which generally translates into high turnover and decreased productivity. Supervisors, therefore, need to be aware of the impact of their actions on the well-being of their subordinates. Upper-management's distrust was also an event mentioned by participants. Mackenzie (2010) mentions that workplace trust is critical in management and that distrust may result in negative work attitudes, which may prevent the optimisation of employee skills and knowledge.

Fourthly, only a few participants in the current study mentioned conflict in the call centre as a negative emotion event. Vollmer (2015) found that conflict between a supervisor and a follower has negative consequences, such as conflict spilling over to employees' personal lives. Additionally, any conflict at work creates a negative perception of one's work experience and is very likely to have an impact on one's experiences in the non-work domain (Vollmer, 2015). Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) state that incivility and interpersonal conflict between colleagues create anger, which can ultimately lead to aggression and hostility. The current study confirms this statement; a participant mentioned that she feels angry and sad when her subordinates locked heads. It can be interpreted that any conflict in the workplace has an impact on the work lives, and very often the personal lives, of managers. When the emotions stemming from the conflict are not managed effectively, it might lead to work-life imbalance.

Lastly, most of the participants experienced negative emotions as a result of the demands and stress that form an integral part of the work environment. This proposed association is established in literature, as Rod and Ashill (2013) found that the call centre environment

itself is characterised by high stress levels and, ultimately, burnout due to time pressure and daily targets. In addition to that, the findings of a study done by Totterdell and Niven (2014) suggest that working overtime is strongly linked to negative emotions. According to Mulki, Jaramillo, Goad and Pesquera (2015), managers working in a sales environment such as call centres, experience stress that may translate into role stress, which in turn has a negative impact on performance. This role stress may consume the employee's psychological resources and reduce his or her capacity to respond to the demands of the job (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). The above serve as evidence that this chain of events forms a destructive cycle in which the environment causes stress and the stress in turn leads to diminished capacity to perform tasks. In this cycle, emotion regulation is of utmost importance to ensure that tasks are performed effectively.

To explore the emotion events that elicit negative emotions in middle managers.

The findings of this study indicated that most of the participants stated that they experienced frustration and anger on a daily basis. Literature confirms this finding. According to Deery, Iverson and Walsh (2002), employees working in call centres, with its strain of constantly working with people, may experience intense negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety. In addition, Brotheridge and Lee (2008) identify anger, stress and frustration as some of the negative emotions experienced by middle managers. Anxiety was also mentioned in the participants' responses as a negative emotion. According to Vlasenko, *et al.* (2011), frustration, anger and anxiety can be grouped under high arousal emotions. The practical implications of these results are that managers need to be aware of their emotions and the impact thereof on their subordinates and the organisation, as these may have severe consequences for expected outcomes. The findings of a study done by Kiefer and Barclay (2012) suggest that anger and anxiety can lead to depression, which makes these emotions toxic.

Furthermore, the effects of negative emotions are five times stronger than the effects of positive emotions (Miner, Glomb & Hulin, 2005). The reason for this might be that negative emotions are strongly related to a destructive effect on the well-being of employees, which in turn is negatively related to job performance (Zineldin & Hytter, 2012; Barclay & Kiefer, 2014). A conclusion can thus be drawn that it is of utmost importance for management to find interventions to regulate these negative emotions. This will have a direct impact on the well-

being and the retention of employees, and will result in a decrease in counterproductive behaviour in the workplace.

To explore how middle managers regulate these emotions

Emotion regulation is the manner in which people manage their emotions and how they deal with emotion events (Clarke & Salleh, 2011). The ways in which people do this differ according to the intensity of the emotions, as well as the environment in which they find themselves. Firstly, only one participant mentioned avoidance of the emotion-eliciting situation as a way of regulating the negative emotion. The findings of a study done by Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) report that situation selection is the emotion regulation strategy that participants tend to use least. Situation selection is when individuals remove themselves from the situation or avoid the situation that elicits the negative emotions in them. The reason for it being used least is that it is seldom possible to avoid emotion events in an environment where there is constant pressure to perform and deliver results. In such environments, emotions form part of the daily work life.

Secondly, participants in this study indicated that they used problem-solving in order to change their approach to the negative feelings before they turn toxic. According to the Process Model of Gross (1998), people employ situation modification when they change the aspects of the situation in which they are already involved. Problem-solving involves planning a course of action to solve a problem by modifying or eliminating stressors (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema & Schweizer, 2009). This is a very adaptive way of regulating one's emotions because you alter the core of the negative emotion to turn it a positive. The implication of this is that managers can enhance their self-control, interpersonal relationships and psychological well-being (Goldin, McRae, Ramel & Gross, 2008). It is advisable for organisations to implement interventions to encourage employees and managers to find ways of solving problems in order to reduce the negative consequences of emotion events. This type of emotion regulation will prevent the emotion event from becoming toxic, which will not only ensure a healthy work environment, but also might improve productivity and problem-solving and decision-making skills among workers.

Thirdly, the participants in this study indicated that they regulate their emotions by changing the way they think about an emotion event. Cognitive change involves altering the emotional

meaning of the emotion event by reinterpreting aspects of the situation (Gross, 1998). This is also called reappraisal, which Gross (2002) defines as seeing a potentially emotion-eliciting emotion in non-emotional terms in order to change the emotional impact of the event. Ochsner and Gross (2004) indicate that cognitive change is a strategy frequently used in everyday life.

Participants indicated that this strategy assists them in keeping their focus on their goal. Thompson (1994) indicates that “optimal emotion regulation can be regarded as a process: the enlistment of strategies that permit flexibility, quick reappraisals of emotionally provoking situations, access to a broad range of emotions, and efficient goal directedness” (pg. 46). Therefore, middle managers who regularly employ cognitive change after an emotion event will likely be more goal-directed. Chambers, Gullone and Allen (2009) identify various benefits of cognitive reappraisal, including the down-regulation of intense negative emotions and the increased sense of meaning, since it inherently accesses value representations. The impact of this on an organisation is evident, as managers who employ adaptive emotion regulation strategies are more likely to stay goal-directed and motivated. It can be interpreted that managers who employ cognitive change will also be effective leaders to their subordinates, guiding them to stay motivated, goal-directed and optimistic in the face of difficulties. In order to reduce toxic events and emotions in the workplace, it is suggested that organisations should create an awareness of the benefits of employing cognitive change as an emotion regulation strategy.

Fourthly, the findings of this study indicated that a large number of participants did not express their emotion when feeling angry or frustrated. According to Gross (1998), response modulation is the process whereby individuals influence their emotional responses by either expressing or suppressing their emotions, for example through their facial expressions or behaviours. Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) found that hiding (suppressing) one’s emotions is most often associated with anger. Grandey, Tam and Brauburger (2002) also found that supervisors faked their emotions in order to keep their customers and subordinates happy. This could be due to the nature of the work environment, since call centre work involves customers and hiding one’s true feelings is related to professionalism. Employees often have to display desired emotions, even in unpleasant situations (Zapf & Holz, 2006). Prior research shows that deliberately suppressing the outward expression of emotions may at

times be ineffective, since this choice of action does not reduce the negative emotion (Gross, 1998).

Suppression may reduce the outward expression of one's emotions; however, it is maladaptive because it is less effective in reducing the negative emotion in the long run. The implications for the organisation in this regard include decreased performance, dysfunctional interpersonal relationships and other personal problems (Graham, *et al.*, 2008). Koster *et al.* (2010) suggest that this in turn can lead to negative thinking and depression, which again lead to the emotion becoming toxic to both the organisation and the individual.

Finally, attentional deployment was the emotion regulation strategy that participants reported most often. This strategy involves drawing one's attention away from the emotion event. Opitz, Cavanagh and Urry (2015) conceptualise attentional deployment as the means by which people draw their attention towards or away from the emotion-eliciting event. Attentional deployment is a major mechanism of emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007). The research findings of a study done by Bardeen, *et al.* (2014) indicate that this strategy can be associated with higher levels of anxiety. Increased anxiety may lead to anxiety disorders and exhaustion, which, in turn, lead to burnout. According to Kiefer and Barclay (2012), this behaviour becomes toxic because it places an emotional burden on the individual. It can be concluded that constant, deliberate attention away from the emotion event will lead to a decrease in the organisation's productivity and performance, as there is no focus on and motivation for solving the problem at hand. It may also mean that employees do not deal with their negative emotions, which will turn toxic in the long run.

Conclusions

The general objective of the study was to explore the toxic emotion events and regulation in a call centre environment. The work environment itself, as well as the demands that form part of it, is a major contributor to the negative events that middle managers experience. Performance is of utmost importance in a call centre, which in turn may lead to more stress and a highly pressured environment in which work should be done. The felt emotions resulting from these events included anxiety, frustration and anger. Another emotion event was the participants' non-performance, including a misalignment with their managers' vision, non-performance in terms of targets, demotivation and subordinates not adhering to rules.

Many of the participants indicated that they experienced negative emotions due to a lack of information or when IT systems are faulty. Demands from top management, as well as upper management's close monitoring, resulted in emotions such as anger and anxiety. Conflict was reported as an emotion event that is rather common in a call centre environment. This included conflict between colleagues as well as conflict between the manager and his or her subordinates. Although all of these events elicited a variety of negative emotions in middle managers, most of the participants indicated that they enjoy the challenge of working in such a stressful environment.

Based on the Process Model for emotion regulation, only one participant indicated that he prefers not to get involved in the emotion event, which indicates that employees rarely employ situation selection as a means to regulate their emotions. An emotion regulation strategy that is common among middle managers is situation modification, whereby most of the participants indicated that they usually attempt to solve the problem that creates the emotion event in order to reduce the emotional impact of the situation. In addition, cognitive change is a very effective emotion regulation strategy employed by some participants, allowing these middle managers to change the way they think about an emotion-eliciting situation. This strategy increases an individual's sense of meaning and prevents psychological disorders (Chambers, Gullone & Allen, 2009; Evers, Stok & De Ridder, 2009). However, most of the participants indicated that they employ attentional deployment and the suppression of their emotions as ways of managing and regulating their negative emotions. These forms of emotion regulation lead to negative outcomes, since it does not reduce the negative emotion over time (Gross, 1998). The way in which these emotions are regulated can be seen as maladaptive and ineffective, which ultimately leads to the negative emotion becoming toxic (Frost, 2003). It can thus be concluded that most middle managers working in a call centre environment experience toxic emotions and events since the regulation of negative emotions is ineffective.

Limitations

Firstly, the study was conducted among middle managers working in a call centre environment in Pretoria. Therefore the findings cannot be generalised to include all industries or other provinces in South Africa. Further experiential investigation is required in this regard. Samples from other geographical areas are therefore also called for.

The sample size of participants who took part in this study did not include an equal number of males and females, making the gender ratio imbalanced. Most of the participants were Indian, indicating that the findings cannot be generalised to all races. The sampling should be more diverse by including more women and participants from other races. Most of the participants were in the age group 25 to 29 years. More participants from other age groups should be included in the study to ensure a representative sample with regard to age.

Lastly, the study consisted exclusively of middle managers and did not consider the perceptions of their subordinates or upper management. One should thus be cautious to make any generalisations in this regard. Incorporating the opinions of subordinates and supervisors in the study can enhance a holistic perspective.

Recommendations for Future Research

It is suggested that further research should expand this research by exploring how certain emotions are linked to specific emotion events. The current study focused on the emotions, emotion events and emotion regulation irrespectively. Additionally, a study of toxic emotions should be done extensively in South Africa across all organisations and industries. In order to obtain a holistic perspective, subordinates and supervisors should also be included in middle management research. Future research could also focus on the effectiveness of each emotion regulation strategy in order to obtain a better understanding of the sources of toxic emotions.

Recommendations for the Organisation

This research provided an in-depth understanding of the origins of toxic emotions within the organisation. This could assist employers to be proactive in preventing low morale and decreased performance within the workplace. In addition, the findings included data about how middle managers deal with and manage their emotions. Organisations can use these findings in an attempt to promote effective emotion regulation strategies within the workplace. Organisations can also benefit from educating their employees on effective and adaptive ways of regulating one's emotions. Training in emotional intelligence is recommended to all organisations, especially for managers. This will allow managers to

effectively regulate their own emotions, as well as enable them to identify and manage the negative emotions of their subordinates.

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CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3 Conclusions, limitations and recommendations

The purpose of this chapter is to draw conclusions about the empirical study that are aligned with the general and specific objectives. The limitations of this study will also be discussed, followed by recommendations for the organisation and for future research.

3.1 Conclusions

A great deal of one's job in the workplace is dealing with one's own emotions. Zineldin and Hytter (2012) found that emotions are deeply rooted in every aspect of organisational life. The emotions that employees experience at work have an impact on the organisation in which they work (Brief & Weiss, 2002). In addition it serves as a predictor of professional success in the workplace (Goran & Negoescu, 2015). Although a number of previous studies found that events at work could have positive emotional content (Avey, Wernsing & Luthans, 2008; Gruber, Oveis, Keltner & Johnson, 2011), research in general tends to indicate that emotions at work are more often negative. These negative emotions may become toxic if they are not regulated and managed consistently (Glasø & Vie, 2009). Gavin and Ashkanasy (2009) argue that emotions should be studied in the context in which they transpire in order to gain a better understanding of these toxic emotions and the regulation thereof. In addition to that, the Affective Events Theory states that the work environment and emotion events at work lead to specific negative emotions (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). As a means to ensure that these emotion events do not turn toxic, Frost (2003) indicates that effective emotion regulation becomes of utmost importance.

The general objective of this study was therefore to explore the ways in which middle managers regulate negative emotions as a result of toxic events. The overall finding with regard to middle managers' lived experiences of emotion events and emotion regulation indicated that situation modification, attentional deployment and cognitive change were employed to regulate the negative emotions that resulted from emotion events such as non-performance of subordinates and insufficient job resources. These strategies are effective in regulating the experienced negative emotions (Chambers, Gullone & Allen, 2009; Goldin, McRae, Ramel & Gross, 2008). Aldoa, Nolen-Hoeksema and Schweizer (2009) found that, except for attentional deployment, these ways of regulating one's emotions are adaptive. These strategies have the potential to lead to healthy outcomes, including enhanced self-control and interpersonal functioning. In other words, organisations should implement

interventions that promote situation modification and cognitive change as means to create a workforce that thrives in psychological well-being and performance. Although the emotions derived from these events are negative, the regulation thereof was effective, indicating that it is unlikely for these emotion events to turn toxic.

However, in contrast to the above, job demands from top management, conflict and the work environment also resulted in negative emotions, which were mostly regulated by means of attentional deployment and response modulation. These types of emotion regulation strategies can be seen as maladaptive and ineffective in the long run, since it does not deal with the current emotion event (Bardeen, et al., 2014; Graham, Huang, Clarke & Helgeson, 2008; Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). Maladaptive emotion regulation strategies result in employees experiencing sadness, depression and fatigue. The conclusion can be drawn that these emotions may lead to exhaustion and burnout in the workplace, which in turn have damaging consequences such as high turnover, poor performance and a decrease in the psychological well-being of employees (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006).

Frost (2003) indicates that negative emotions only turn toxic when they are regulated ineffectively. The participants mostly employed response modulation and attentional deployment as emotion regulation strategies. These strategies will be discussed in more detail later. As such, and in light of the above finding, it can be concluded that most emotion events in a call centre can turn toxic due to the ineffective and maladaptive regulation of the felt negative emotions.

The first specific objective of this study was to determine how toxic events and emotions, as well as emotion regulation, are conceptualised in literature. Firstly, emotion events can be conceptualised as emotional occurrences that impact employees' feelings. Feelings, moods and emotions influence an employee's effectiveness at work. Likewise, an emotion event can be seen as an intense and short-lived experience (Grandey, Tam & Brauburger, 2002) that leads to negative or positive feelings; it is activated when a feeling is triggered, and ends when the feeling is dealt with (Morgen, Ludlow, O'Leary & Clarke, 2010). Every work environment induces specific events, which in turn lead to certain emotions - either positive or negative (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). However, Diefendorff, Richard and Yang (2008) found that negative events elicit more psychological, affective and behavioural activity than positive events. Therefore employees will more likely regulate negative emotions than they

would positive emotions. If negative emotions are not regulated effectively and regularly, the event, as the source of the emotion, becomes toxic. Examples of toxic events include bullying, insensitivity and incompetence (Totterdel & Niven, 2014).

According to Shi, Liu and Zhang (2011), a negative emotion can be seen as a negative state of mind resulting from a certain situation/event. Negative emotions, such as frustration and anxiety, are not in itself toxic. It is therefore not the experience that makes the emotion toxic but rather the ineffective regulation thereof (Glasø & Vie, 2009). Frost (2003) views toxic emotions as negative emotions that weigh a person down, causing him or her to anticipate a reoccurrence. A toxic emotion is a sustained affective state as a result of a negative emotion. When individuals suppress or avoid their emotions, it might lead to continuous sadness or anxiety, which in turn leads to low life satisfaction and depression, which are the core of toxicity.

Finally, emotion regulation is essential in avoiding toxicity in the workplace. For the purpose of this study, emotion regulation can be seen as the manner in which people manage their emotions and how they deal with emotionally charged events (Clarke & Salleh, 2011). Employees often find themselves in situations where they have to diminish, amplify or modulate their emotions in order to stay focused on their goals and to maintain a certain level of effectiveness at work (Opitz, Cavanagh & Urry, 2015). It is thus evident that employees need to be aware of and acknowledge their emotions and that they have to find ways of regulating these.

The second objective of this study was to explore the emotion events that elicit negative emotions in middle managers. Five themes of negative emotion events emerged from the data during data analysis. These themes included the *non-performance of subordinates* (10), *insufficient job resources* (4), *job demands from top management* (7), *conflict* (3) and the *work environment* (11). The *non-performance of subordinates* was one of the highest reported emotion events in this study. The participants working in the call centre reported these events as including subordinates not adhering to rules, vision misalignment, demotivation and subordinates not meeting their targets. Braithwaite, Westbrook and Mallock (2007) found that these events lead to an increased workload on middle managers, because they have to direct their attention away from their own work goals while attending to their subordinates' concerns. Consequently, a constant focus on solving their subordinates'

problems might cause middle managers to become demotivated and disengaged from their work (Braithwaite, Westbrook & Mallock, 2007). It can be concluded that the organisation's productivity and performance will be affected. Another inference is that organisations might start experiencing high turnover due to dissatisfaction and a lack of motivation among middle managers. Research done by Fisher, Minbashian, Beckmann and Wood (2013) confirms this conclusion. It is suggested that call centre managers pay more attention to policies that pertain to targets, as well as create awareness of both the company's and the manager's vision.

Participants also reported *insufficient job resources* as a negative emotion event that they encountered in the call centre. This included a lack of any resources that middle managers might require to do their work effectively. Participants particularly mentioned faulty IT systems and a lack of information. Baraka, Baraka and Gamily (2015) indicate that employees working in a call centre are very dependent on system design, connectivity and the reliability of systems in order to perform optimally. According to Rothman (2014), a lack of job resources will hinder organisational commitment and motivation. This motivational process includes devotion to one's work as well as vitality. It can be concluded that a lack of resources needed to do one's job will lead to a disengaged and demotivated workforce (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004). More specifically, a lack of information and faulty systems will lead to any organisation suffering a decrease in the quality of its output. Consequently, employees may develop feelings of job insecurity and anxiety due to a decrease in productivity, which may negatively influence the morale of the organisation as a whole (Heery & Salmon, 2000). One participant in the study reported that she was considering applying for alternative jobs due to the lack of resources, which again leads to increased turnover for the organisation.

Job demands from top management was another negative emotion event reported by participants in the call centre. This theme includes close monitoring, all situations in which the top or general manager funnels job demands down to the middle managers, as well as their distrust in them to carry out their tasks. Totterdell and Niven (2014) suggest that job demands lead to negative emotions when limited time is a factor or when managers have to work overtime. In the current study, most of the participants mentioned that they have to work overtime. A heavy workload may have various harmful consequences, such as the exhaustion of one's mental and physical resources, which may result in low energy levels,

various health problems and fatigue (Bakker & Demerouti, 2006). Furthermore, a lack of trust and recognition from upper management has the potential to break down good working relationships, resulting in negative attitudes towards work. While high job demands will lead to a drained workforce, distrust from management may result in disengaged and disconnected employees. According to Frost (2003), an inference can be drawn that these events may create toxicity in the workplace.

In addition, participants also experienced *conflict* as an emotion event that elicited negative emotions in them. This theme included any conflict between colleagues, as well as conflict between a manager and his or her subordinates. A conflict event includes any situation at work that violates workplace norms of mutual respect (Loi, Loh & Hine, 2015). Conflict can result in stress in the working environment (Dasborough, 2006) that can spiral down to hostility and aggression among employees (Grandey, Tam & Brauburger, 2002). What is more, unhealthy conflict can turn into workplace bullying or vice versa. Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra and Vega (2009) indicate that stress due to conflict leads to fear, anxiety, sadness and shame. It can thus be concluded that the maladaptive regulation of these emotions may lead to an abusive work environment, which may lead to a loss in productivity and increased absenteeism. It is therefore essential for organisations to be aware of the consequences of conflict, as well as the ineffective regulation of the derived emotions, in order to prevent toxic events.

Participants described the *Work environment* in a call centre as highly target-driven, emotional, competitive and characterised by time pressures and high stress levels. Nyaga (2014) found that call centres are characterised by high stress levels, limited career growth and a lack of motivation. As performance is of utmost importance in a call centre, the call centre environment itself places extra emotional demands on employees, leading to high stress levels, which may ultimately lead to burnout (Rod & Ashill, 2013). Participants in this study reported that they experienced the call centre environment as a constant emotional roller coaster. On the basis of the above, it can be concluded that the call centre environment, along with the demands that come with it, leads to a jumble of emotions that require effective emotion regulation in order to prevent toxicity in the workplace. Toxic emotions are a direct reaction to events taking place in the workplace. If organisations do not pay attention to the conditions of the working environment and the associated emotions, employees might disengage from their social networks and, on top of that, their physical energy levels might

become depleted (Frost, 2003).

The third specific objective was to explore the emotions derived from these experiences. Five subthemes of negative emotions were identified during data analysis. These included *anger* (7), *anxiousness* (5), *frustration* (8), *sadness* (4) and *disappointment* (3). Frustration, anger and anxiety were categorised under the theme *high arousal emotions*. Frustration and anger was mostly the result of subordinates not adhering to rules or not meeting targets. While anger could reduce managers' enthusiasm and diminish their sense of connectedness to the organisation (Frost, 2003), an ongoing feeling of frustration may lead to an individual's failure to engage in his or her work, since it is recurring, draining and disconnecting (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012). In addition, Frederickson (2001) found that anxiety has the capacity to narrow people's attention. It can be concluded that anxiety, frustration and anger can become toxic over a period of time because it reduces an employee's capacity to complete tasks and consumes and individual's psychological resources (Kiefer & Barclay, 2012).

Only a few participants in the study reported feeling sad and disappointed (low arousal emotions) as a result of emotion events. Although this is not a main concern in this study specifically, organisations have to be aware of the consequences of sadness and disappointment when they are not regulated effectively. Västfjäll and Gärling (2006) found that it could lead to depression in the long run, making the negative emotion toxic. In this study, one participant mentioned that he already felt depressed. It can thus be concluded that it is of utmost importance for any organisation and middle manager to recognise negative emotions in the workplace. Such recognition will prevent absenteeism and high turnover. It will also ensure the psychological wellbeing of employees as well as increased performance.

The fourth objective was to explore how middle managers regulate these negative emotions. The themes for regulating these emotions were identified by using the Process Model of emotion regulation (Gross, 1998). Only one participant reported to employ *situation selection* (1), which indicates that he prefers to avoid a situation if the event elicits certain negative emotions within him. It is rather unusual for employees to successfully avoid emotion-eliciting situations in a call centre environment. Due to the highly pressured environment and strict targets, with performances being closely monitored, it can be concluded that middle managers is rarely afforded an opportunity to avoid emotion events.

Participants also reported that they regulate their emotions by means of *situation modification* (7). This included all responses whereby participants attempted to solve the problem with the intention of changing the emotional impact of the emotion event. Desrosiers, Vine, Curtiss and Klemanski (2014) state that problem solving allows the middle manager to think about the situation instead of employing ineffective emotion regulation strategies. In addition to this, problem solving has positive outcomes, including enhanced self-control, interpersonal functioning and psychological well-being (Goldin, McRae, Ramel & Gross, 2008). It can be concluded that regulating emotions in this manner will prevent the emotions from turning toxic. Organisations should implement interventions and create awareness of the beneficial outcomes of situation modification as a means by which to regulate one's emotions.

In addition, participants reported to employ *cognitive change* (5) as a strategy to regulate their negative emotions. This included all situations in which participants reported to change the way they think about an emotion event. This theme comprised emotional detachment and reappraisal, which are defined as seeing a potentially emotion-eliciting situation in non-emotional terms (Gross, 2002). Reappraisal is effective since it increases an individual's sense of meaning (Chambers, Gullone & Allen, 2009) and it prevents psychological disorders such as emotional eating (Evers, Stok & De Ridder, 2009). Moreover, regarding an emotion event in non-emotional terms will keep employees motivated and focused on their goals. Therefore, in order to avoid toxicity, it is suggested that middle managers employ cognitive change as a way of regulating negative emotions.

Most participants reported *response modulation* as a manner in which they (middle managers) regulate their emotions. Response modulation refers to the influence that individuals have over their emotional response, such as expressing or suppressing the emotion. In the current study, most participants reported to suppress their emotions following an emotion event. Although Opitz, Cavanagh and Urry (2015) suggest that this is effective because it prevents an interference with work goals and effectiveness at work, it proves ineffective over a period of time, as it does not reduce the negative emotion itself (Gross, 1998). This may lead to constant negative thinking without expressing the emotion, which in turn may lead to depression and dysfunctional interpersonal relationships (Koster, Lissnyder, Dereckshan & Raedt, 2010). It can be concluded that negative emotions resulting from emotion events might become toxic when regulated by means of response modulation.

The participants reported *attentional deployment* (14) as the most used emotion regulation strategy. This indicates that most of the candidates chose to direct their attention away from the emotion-eliciting situation. Avoiding a situation can very often lead to increased levels of anxiety (Bardeen, Tull, Stevens & Gratz, 2014) and negative outcomes such as mood disorders and substance abuse (Aldao, Hoeksma & Schweizer, 2009). The reason being that employees draw their attention away from the emotion event by smoking or drinking in an attempt to forget about the event. This strategy has severe outcomes for the organisation, including absenteeism, high turnover and decreased performance. It can be concluded that attentional deployment as a means of regulating one's emotions will more often than not lead to toxicity in both the individual and the organisation.

Based on these findings it can be concluded that most of the participants regulated their emotions in a maladaptive manner (avoidance and suppression). Although these ways of regulating one's emotions reduce the impact of the current emotion event, it is less effective in reducing the emotion in the long run (Goldin et al., 2008). According to Frost (2003), these ways of regulation can lead to toxicity since it is rendered ineffective. Suppression and avoidance lead to a sustained negative affective state that is recurring, draining and disconnecting (Gross, 1998).

The final objective of this study was to provide recommendations for future research and for the organisation. This objective was achieved and is presented in the remaining sections of the manuscript.

3.2 Limitations of the research

As can be seen in chapter 2 (research article), this study obtained meaningful and valuable results. However, the limitations discussed below should be considered in contextualising the results mentioned in the section above.

Firstly, an innate limitation of a qualitative research design is that the reliability is weakened by its dependence on the insights and competence of the observer (Carr, 1994). Assessing reliability is therefore difficult. In addition, the researcher's responsibility in qualitative research could be extended due to the research-subject relationship. Researchers could have

difficulty in separating their own perspective and experiences from those of their subjects. Another limitation is that ambiguities, which are inherent in human language, could arise in data analysis (Atieno, 2009). For example, red can mean different things to different people, thus creating confusion when analysing data.

Secondly, a limited number of participants participated in the study. Although data saturation was reached after interviewing 15 middle managers, the statistical analysis of results was limited as a result of the small sample size. With regard to the setting, only one call centre was identified for selecting the sample. This may limit the applicability of the findings to the culture and dynamics of the specific call centre. The research only incorporated the responses of the middle managers; as such, the opinions of subordinates or supervisors were not solicited in the research. The findings of the study may thus lack a holistic perspective.

Thirdly, 73% of the sample represented the age group 25 to 29 years. For that reason, the sample in future research needs to include more participants from the other age groups to ensure a representative sample with reference to age. The sample comprised twice as much males than females. The sample should include a balanced number of males and females to ensure the generalisation of the study's findings.

Furthermore, the sample consisted only of middle managers working in one call centre in Gauteng. This call centre was mainly sales-driven, limiting the applicability of the findings to only a sales environment. Consequently, the findings cannot be generalised across all call centres in South Africa.

Lastly, the researcher did not consider the intensity of the negative emotion when conducting the study. The intensity of negative emotions will most definitely have an influence on the emotion regulation strategy that employees choose to employ. Emotion intensity relates to the differences in the selection and implementation of emotion regulation.

3.3 Recommendations

3.3.1 Recommendations for the organisation

The advantage of this research is that it leads to a deeper understanding of the negative emotions that employees experience in a call centre environment, as well as of the emotion events that lead to these emotions. It is important for researchers to go back to where negative emotions originate in order to adopt a proactive approach in preventing low morale in the workplace. This information can assist organisations in understanding why employees behave the way they do. The work environment could be optimised in an attempt to address the negative events identified in this study.

This study also provides insight into the regulation of these negative emotions and how middle managers deal with emotion events. Organisations need to take note of this information to assist them in understanding which emotion regulation strategies are effective in preventing toxicity in the workplace. This will improve the well-being programmes in organisations, as well as their employees' quality of life. In addition, the information obtained in this study can assist in addressing internal threats with which call centres are confronted, such as absenteeism and high turnover.

An interesting finding was that participants experienced negative emotion, such as anger, as a result of unfairness and manager distrust. Participants felt that their own managers would trust other employees more than them. For example, while some participants would be allowed to access confidential systems, others would not have access at all. It is recommended that organisations take action to ensure that all their employees are treated in the same way and are given equal rights in the workplace. Not paying attention to the above may consequently result in conflict between employees.

It is also recommended that organisations create awareness among middle managers on the subject of effective and adaptive strategies for emotion regulation. Equipping them with the necessary knowledge will enable them to make sound decisions when faced with negative emotion events. Examples of effective emotion regulation strategies can be provided as well as the benefits of these. The consequences of not regulating emotions can also be provided, including the effects of toxic emotion and events.

Another recommendation is related to the fair distribution of duties. It is suggested that organisations regularly revise job roles and responsibilities among staff to ensure that the entire organisation is provided with sufficient information regarding job profiles. This will prevent confusion and role ambiguity among employees. Additionally, it is recommended that organisations have adequate performance review systems in place to ensure that employees are recognised and rewarded for overtime and good performance.

Lastly, training in emotional intelligence is recommended to all organisations, especially for managers. This will allow managers to effectively regulate their own emotions, as well as enable them to identify and manage the negative emotions of their subordinates. This proactive intervention can prevent the experience of negative emotions from spilling over into daily work activities, which may turn toxic in the long run. Workplace counsellors and industrial psychologist could be employed to assist with the above.

3.3.2 Recommendations for the future research

Firstly, only broad categories of emotion events emerged from the data gathered in this study, and associated emotions and regulation strategies were established. However, the study is limited in the sense that it only explored emotion events in general and did not determine a comprehensive connection of the specific events with the regulation strategies. It is therefore recommended that researchers build on the findings of emotions events leading to toxic emotions, by exploring specific events and their associated emotion regulation strategy. The findings of this research can also serve as a background to quantitatively measure toxic emotions, as it provides knowledge about how these emotions develop.

It is evident from the findings of this study that individuals apply avoidance strategies. It is recommended that future researchers divide emotion regulation into avoidance and approach strategies in order to determine which category may turn negative emotions into toxic emotions. Future research could also assess the effectiveness of each emotion regulation strategy; it would be useful to establish which strategies are effective for achieving organisational outcomes such as job performance and well-being.

The topic of toxic emotions and events has not been fully researched in South Africa. Data should be gathered from various organisations and industries in order to build on toxic emotions research. It may also be beneficial to research not only middle managers' perceptions of their experiences, but to also obtain their subordinates' and colleagues' opinions in order to get a more holistic perspective of the emotion events experienced in the workplace.

The knowledge gained from this research should be shared with all organisations. The findings on emotion regulation can assist organisations in identifying interventions to rectify negative emotions before they turn toxic. This will enable middle managers to deal with their emotions before it negatively affects other aspects of their work and life.

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ANNEXURE A: LETTER TO REQUEST PARTICIPATION

INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Research

TOXIC EMOTION EVENTS AND REGULATION OF MIDDLE MANAGERS IN A
CALL CENTRE

Name of Researchers

Monique van Dyk; Prof. Cara Jonker

It is important to read this statement before you agree to participate in and commence with this research study. It states the purpose, benefits, risks and procedures of the research study. This is a voluntary study and your rights to participate or withdraw are described.

Explanation of procedure

This research is aimed at exploring the toxic emotions and the regulation of these emotions of middle managers working in a call centre. Participants will be required to attend an interview of approximately 60 minutes and to complete a biographical questionnaire. Each interview will be recorded by means of a digital voice recorder. The researchers will explain the process in detail and facilitate the discussion. The information obtained will only be used for the research study, as a means to assist with the analysis of the data needed and to draw conclusions relating to the purpose of the study.

Risks and discomforts

No intentional risk or harm is anticipated as a result of this study. The research focuses on the emotions that middle managers experience in a call centre. There is a possibility that the recording of the interview may cause you discomfort due to the emotional nature of the questions. In order to manage this, the strictest ethical guidelines for confidentiality will be followed. The researchers are trained in interviewing skills. The researchers will aim to create an encouraging and positive atmosphere so that the participants will not feel any discomfort. In addition to this, there are no anticipated adverse outcomes expected. If a participant feels that he or she needs further counselling, the contact details of appropriate professionals will

be provided.

Benefits

No intended benefits relating to participation are intended.

Confidentiality

Your participation is completely voluntary and you can withdraw at any given time without any explanation. All information used will be treated in strict confidence and will not affect you in a negative way or by any way affect future treatment. Your participation in this project will be anonymous, as a coding system will be employed to ensure confidentiality

Withdrawal without prejudice

Participation is voluntary and if you choose not to participate, you will not be impacted on or treated negatively.

Costs or payments

There will be not costs involved in participating in this evaluation process. No payments will be received for participation.

Questions

For any enquiries, participants can contact Monique van Dyk or Prof. Cara Jonker directly by e-mail.

Agreement

I confirm that I have read and understand the instructions of this research programme. Your signature indicates that you agree to these terms and to take part in this study.

Name of participant

Date

Signature of participant