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Service Masked in a Smile: Emotional Labor Across Cultures in the Service Economy

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Abstract: The 21st century environment we live in is undergoing a revolution in affect and feeling as feelings and emotion play a very important role in the workplace today. This paper examines a topic very relevant and important in the business world today with our service-driven economy: the concept of Emotional Labor. While “service with a smile” is the goal of most service driven occupations, the stress placed on employees to meet this organizational demand has been underscored. This is a theoretical paper on Emotional Labor (EL) and in this paper we build on the findings from prior research and examine the strategies that can be used and applied in the different settings in the business world to minimize the negative effect of emotional labor and also to understand its relationship to other variables.

Many service-oriented jobs involve high emotional labor as previous research has frequently found. In the cross-cultural context, given the global environment that we work in today the frequent intercultural encounters between people from different cultures results in even more emotional labor. More control and regulation of emotions is needed on the part of the individual in another culture compared to one’s own native culture. Previous cross-cultural research by the present authors done in several countries and other research by other authors have found that emotional labor plays a significant role in cross-cultural interactions. We examine how emotional labor (EL) relates to several outcomes in the workplace and also look at implications for applied research and practice in business organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Emotional Labor (EL)

A concept that has generated increasing interest in recent years is the construct of Emotional Labor. Emotional labor is a phrase coined by Hochschild (1983) that refers to emotional work that is done in the workplace and one which is forced on the employee to carry out the duties that is deemed necessary for a

job. In her seminal work with flight attendants, Hochschild (1983) has pointed out that many service occupations such as flight attendants, and public health workers demand certain displays of emotion from the employee that at times is dissonant with their true feelings and emotions. The discrepancy between actual felt emotions and the emotions they are forced to display can affect the psychological and social well-being of the employee. In these situations, they cannot truly express how they feel and their emotions in a sense become used and exploited by the organizations that they work and this is emotional labor (Bono & Vey, 2005; Diefendorff *et al.*, 2005; Hochschild, 2000).

In her seminal work Hochschild(1983)published a book called “The Managed Heart” and she focused on the emotional dimensions involved in work-related performance. In a large in-depth study she examined the emotional labor involved in the job of flight attendants. Other researchers also have agreed that emotional labor can be very exploitative and can alienate the employee (Morris& Feldman, 1996).Hochschild (1979) describes emotional labor as the process by which the employees tries to create a public “face”to deliver the appropriate service. For example a hospital employee is trained to be polite and professional, to engage their patientsand help them in their recovery process(Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Restaurant employees are also taught (Adelmann, 1995) and trained to be warm and friendly in order to increase business.

Emotions and the affective revolution

Historically, displaying emotions and feelings in the workplace have been looked at as inappropriate, and counterproductive disruptive in the organizational context(Mann, 1997; Humphrey, 2000). As Ashforth and Tomiuk (2000) point out there has always been a dichotomous struggle between what is viewed as emotionality versus rationality in an organizational context.At the end of the 20th century the service sector started to gain increasing importance to many organizations and the key to profitability. One important factor crucial to determining profitability was the quality of service and interpersonal communication between the service provider and customer. This interpersonal interaction is determined by the development of display rules that controls and shapes the display of employee emotions (Zerbe, Hartel, &Ashkanasy, 2000). Currently, given the affective and emotive environment, feelings play a more important role in interpersonal communication (Ashkanasy& Humphrey, 2011). When we examine the literature and research across several fields in psychology, sociology and education and management, terms such as state affect, trait affect, emotional intelligence, as well as emotional labor that we examine in this study are receiving increasing attention.

Emotional Labor and service oriented jobs

Jobs that require frequent interaction with others where the job duties require that you constantly “serve” the client in some manner can produce a high emotion labor environment. For example, let us examine the profession of teaching. As Hargreaves (2000; 2001) pointed out more than a decade ago, the trend today in education is that it is becoming more and more like a service industry.As educational institutions get less and less of public funding, and with more budget cuts and with the economic downturn, institutions become more reliant on self funding -students have become “consumers”. Further, as state and governmental funding continue to decline, educational institutions depend primarily on studentrevenue for their survival. Hebson *et al.* (2007) state that in this type of current environment and context, employees in the teaching profession are similar to other service employees. The same can be seen in other service oriented professions

where employees work as nurses, doctors, police officers, social workers, funeral directors, or any other profession where the employee works in an emotionally charged environment.

In recent years, there is also growing evidence that there is a high degree of turnover in these service driven professions. This is even more significant for employees who are in the early stages of their career. As many organizational psychologists and researchers in business management and organizational behavior have pointed out, turnover is a serious problem in any occupation, and high rates of turnover can significantly impact any organizational development and growth. Many researchers have pointed out that one reason for this quitting behavior in these professions could be the intrinsically emotional environment we encounter every day. Therefore, researchers need to acknowledge that emotional labor (EL) is a part of the organizational reality and what we need to do is to recognize the emotional nature of these professions and also acknowledge that EL can be a significant job stressor in the environment we live in today. Researchers point out that Emotional labor may be the highest in the initial period, over time this may vary, it may also be moderated by experience and learning and adjustment (Morris and Feldman, 1996).

Working across borders and EL

In this 21st century environment with increased globalization and workers being very mobile, individuals are working across borders as international employment and opportunities have opened up in many parts of the world (Schoepp, 2011). In any profession, this can be especially more challenging when you work across borders. When individuals have the additional challenge of adjusting to a new culture and also face the demands of EL. In a new country and a new culture, we are more likely to have problems in perceiving emotional display rules. Matsumoto (1990) found that in cultural groups, we are not good at perceiving individual emotions that are different from ours. Therefore, emotional regulation and emotional control and management of emotions will be more challenging when working across borders. Several studies done on expatriate adjustment including one done by the present author have found significant differences across cultures in terms of display rules and well their own expectations of emotion work. The present authors (Menon and Narayanan, 2015) found that there were significant differences, for teachers who worked across borders in the frequencies and types of emotional reactions to challenges on the job. There were significant differences in what stressors they perceived as EL and as well as differences the strains they faced and the strategies they used to deal with the stress.

Future research and recommendations

So given the importance of EL and the service oriented nature of many of these professions and the issues that employees have with working across borders how can future research advance the knowledge base and come up with recommendations for theory and practice. In this section we come up with several recommendations for future research given the small amount of studies on this subject and the need to understand better the role of emotional labor in service occupations especially when this is in a cross-cultural context.

In the following sections we discuss some recommendations for future research in some specific areas of EL.

Human resources, recruitment and orientation

From the human resource development perspective, those who are in these professions that are very service-driven need to be aware of what is EL and recognize the importance of how this can affect job performance. In the hiring and recruitment process, we can use realistic job previews (RJP) where we make individuals aware of the positive and negative aspects of EL especially for individuals who work across borders. Wanous (1994) has provided substantial research evidence to support the validity and usefulness of RJP's in the workplace. As employees prepare for overseas assignments this can be integrated in the orientation and training process and can be a major part of the recruitment process for high emotional labor jobs. We can also look at dispositional variables that are more predictive of job success in the high EL occupations and our selection and recruitment process can attract those individuals who have these characteristics. More basic and applied research could be done in these areas.

The moderating effects of dispositions and emotional control and regulation

Since many studies have found that display rules vary across cultures, the congruency of display rules across different cultures can be examined using a cultural framework such as one developed by Hofstede (2000). This can be utilized to understand how EL varies across different cultures to identify what is similar and different across these cultures. Specifically, we can examine if EL differs in cultures as a function of Hofstede's different dimensions of culture such as individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance. In a recent study on nurses (Mastricci & Hsieh, 2016) cultures high on the individualism index had nurses experience higher levels of emotional labor.

Even though there is a great deal of research on self-regulation and learning, there is considerably less research on emotional regulation and emotional labor. For example, when we examine the EL for teachers, there is an additional challenge in that many dispositional factors may moderate the relationship between EL and work outcomes and perceptions of the same event in the classroom may vary from one teacher to another. For example, as Sutton and Harper (2009) point out a student who may misbehave in class may make one teacher very angry, and another teacher sad. In a situation in the hospital, one doctor could get frustrated very easily with the patient's inability to follow directions, while another doctor could be very empathetic. Therefore, the role of dispositional factors also need to be considered in addition to the job environment.

For example, an individual who is high in self-monitoring may use different strategies compared to others. There is considerable work in the self-monitoring literature (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) that suggests that for high self-monitors emotional regulation will be less stressful than a low self-monitor. Researchers could follow up on the work Sutton (Sutton, 2004; Sutton & Harper, 2009) to examine emotional regulation strategies of individuals working in another culture taking into consideration such dispositional factors.

Since the emotional experience itself may vary, future researchers should attempt to understand what are conditions of EL that are similar and different across specific cultures, and what are the strategies used to cope with these challenges. Also, studies should look at moderating factor at individual levels factors that go beyond just the culture.

Emotional intelligence

An important line of research that has become very popular and significant in the study of emotion in recent years in the construct of emotional intelligence. This area of research has focused on how individuals regulate, control and manage their emotions. The focus has been dispositional and research has examined how individuals who are high on emotional intelligence (EQ) have had better outcomes in a variety of settings. (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1995; Mayer *et al.*, 2008). Although there have been some studies done relating emotional intelligence to emotional labor, there is a dearth of research on this subject in the cross-cultural context. There are so many moderating variables across cultures that could be examined and we could try to understand how emotionally intelligent individuals deal with high emotional labor jobs in different cultures and the strategies they use. In an emotional-laden environment, individuals may feel frustrated, angry, sad, upset and have a number of negative feelings that are inappropriate to vent and release given the display rules of a given culture. This suppression of emotions and emotional expression and emotional regulation is again culture-specific and can greatly vary across cultures. In many Asian and eastern cultures the cultural norms of how to display and express emotions may vary greatly from western cultures. This can change the relationship between EL and EQ. There is a great need for future studies to look at this relationship.

Furthermore, recent research on emotional intelligence suggests that there is a darker side to emotional intelligence, in that high EQ can sometimes be related to negative outcomes in addition to positive outcomes (Kilduff, Chiaburu, & Menges, 2010). For example, if the individual is very high on empathy, a major dimension of emotional intelligence, this may make the individual more sensitive to cues from others and this excessive empathy may result in additional stress because of the inability to express or display appropriate emotions thereby increasing the EL of the individual. This kind of research is particularly relevant in cross cultural contexts where display rules and cultural norms may be different from our own.

Emotional regulation

Another line of research that is closely related to emotional labor, is the construct of emotional regulation. Several studies have been done on this subject by Gross (1998; 2001; 2002) and there is a wealth of information on the emotion regulation process. Gross (1998) has developed a process model of emotional regulation that provides us with a framework for understanding emotional regulation. The goal of this model is to understand the basic process of how emotional regulation works and what strategies people use to regulate their emotions. For example, this model discusses the process by which we select strategies to deal with emotional challenges. This could include strategies such as confrontation or avoidance, conflict resolution, distraction or rumination. Several such strategies are discussed and the conditions under which we use them. In a recent meta-analysis (Peña-Sarrionandia, Mikolajczak, & Gross, 2015), there has been an attempt to integrate emotional intelligence and emotional regulation research to help us better understand how individuals deal with their emotions. Several propositions have been offered for future research to better understand the emotional process by integrating the research on emotional intelligence and emotional regulation. We suggest that many of these recommendations could be applied one step further by adding to the role of emotional labor and specifically understand how these variables combine to predict work outcomes in specific cultural contexts.

Cultural intelligence

A construct closely related to emotional intelligence that looks at how effectively individuals In fact some authors have suggested that cultural intelligence in the essential intelligence required in the 21st century (Livemore, 2011) given the global economy and the workplace diversity. This is a relatively new construct developed by Earley and Ang (2003). Cultural intelligence is particularly relevant when we work with individuals from other cultures. The present authors (Menon & Narayanan, 2011; 2015) have done several studies and found that cultural intelligence was very predictive and useful in relating to several outcomes especially in the cross-cultural context. It can be defined as the individuals capability to function and manage effectively in culturally diverse settings.

We recommend that we integrate the research on cultural intelligence, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation and future studies can gain a better understanding on how these constructs relate to EL in specific contexts and environments.

Longitudinal designs

It is also possible that emotional labor may vary over time, and could decrease with adjustment and adaptation and this can be examined by longitudinal studies. Gross (2002) has pointed out that emotional regulation is neutral and that is what allows individuals to effectively perform their jobs. For example, this neutrality allows surgeons to perform their jobs and funeral directors to be neutral in a highly charged emotional environment. Teachers may also learn display rules and the appropriateness of these rules to the specific cultural norms. Bonanno (2001) states that if these display rules become internalized there will be less dissonance between feelings and behavior and less EL. It is reasonable to expect that over time, employees acculturate to this experience and EL reduces over time. There have been few studies that have specifically examined this subject, and longitudinal studies can be very useful in this context. For example, is EL a stressor only in the initial period of employment and this becomes less of a problem as the teachers get acculturated to the new culture? Since many researchers have pointed out that though teaching is an emotionally intense profession that is intrinsically motivating and rewarding (Hargreaves, 2000) there may be a point where EL becomes less stressful.

Emotional Labor in groups and teams

While most research have focused on employees as the definition of the term emotional labor lends itself to what is demanded in the workplace based on Hirschfeld's (1983) original conceptualization of emotional labor, future studies should examine EL at a group level of analysis in addition to just the individual level. With the globalized nature of work in many business organizations today, working with teams and groups who are very diverse is a major part of one's job requirement. In many instances these individuals in these work teams are highly dependent on one another to successfully complete tasks. Working with and managing teams requires special skills and abilities and in a highly emotional laden environment (Ashkanasy, & Daus, 2002) this can create EL at a group level. Although there have been a few studies that have examined EL at a group level, most of the studies on EL have been done at the individual level of analysis.

When you work with cross-cultural teams it is crucial for us to gain a better understanding of how group and team level EL is different from individual level EL. We should also examine how the EL at the

individual level can impact the team and how team level EL impact the individual. There is a dearth of research in this area and more studies are needed to examine these constructs both within a specific culture and across teams that work with different cultures. Questions can address what is the mutual effect of team members EL? How does this affect the climate or culture within the work team, Future research should examine these complex relationships using innovative research designs, and studies can be done at a micro and macro level of analysis.

The episodic nature of emotional labor and resource depletion

The continuous episodes of EL is a stressor on employees that draws on their regulatory resources. Some researchers have pointed out that one of the most stressful consequence of EL is the episodic nature of how it occurs. In a typical employee's day, many episodic events of emotional labor may be continuously encountered. Based on the resource depletion theory, a emotional labor increases this depletes one's available resources (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). These authors believe that human beings have at one time limited psychological resources to help regulate their behavior at a given moment. Each time we use these resources to regulate a behavior, subsequent demands of EL will be harder to regulate as these resources dwindle. This could explain why there is high burnout in the service professions and there is emotional exhaustion as there is no more capacity for regulation. Some researchers have recently looked at break activities (Troughakos *et al.* 2008) and the effect of breaks on emotional regulation. Having lunch breaks and breaking up the tasks seems to have positive outcomes such as positive emotional displays. There are many areas of research on resource depletion and emotional labor and the episodic nature of stress that remain unexplored and such future research will greatly enhance the knowledge base both in theory and practice.

To summarize in this paper, we have described the importance of emotional labor and its relevance in the 21st century given the service driven environment we live in. In the cross-cultural context this paper has identified a many important areas that future research can focus on, there are many more areas that still need to be examined that we have not addressed in this paper. There is an exciting opportunity for cross-cultural researchersto tap into this area of emotional labor and throw insights on this very important subject that is very relevant for emotional research in this 21st century global business environments. Demand for service is very high in this competitive global environment and expectations such as "service with a smile", "the customer is always right" have created very challenging emotional environments. We have offered a number of ideas and approaches for the future for research on emotional labor that might be useful for applied research in these business environments.

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