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Emotion regulation and its correlates in bank service jobs

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To what extent, in what context and with what psychological consequences do service workers regulate their emotions so that they are in line with their job requirements? To answer these questions 112 Italian men and women working at various banks at the counter or as consultants were administered a questionnaire comprising several scales, and questions on sociodemographic and work-related variables. The results showed that Emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Grandey 2000) is a relevant variable of bank service jobs: Workers perform both (a) surface acting, i.e., control the expression of their emotions vis-à-vis a client so that they are contextually appropriate (for example, they smile to an annoying client), and (b) deep acting, i.e., try to actually feel the required emotion; (c) feeling genuine emotions, i.e., effortlessly feeling the required emotions, also is a frequent experience of bank employees. Emotional exhaustion was correlated positively with surface acting, and negatively with genuine emotions; it implied less Life satisfaction, and Positive affect, but more Negative affect. Workers that reported enjoying a role balance were more satisfied with their life than those who experienced role overload, and were less emotionally exhausted. No significant differences between men and women were observed on most measures, whereas job-experience, and duration and frequency of client-interactions influenced Deep acting, Emotional exhaustion, and Role overload.

Keywords: EMOTION REGULATION, SERVICE JOBS, WELL-BEING

1. Introduction

In a customer service society, where products provided to clients are at least in part intangible, organizations need to focus greater attention on the quality of their services, including the quality of customers' interaction with the service provider. As recent studies confirm, customers's evaluation of interpersonal aspects of their interaction with the provider contribute to define their judgements of service quality; this evaluation, in turn, tends to reflect employees' feelings about their job and their organization (e.g., Pugh 1998; Rafaeli & Sutton 1987). *Emotional labour* (EL), a concept denoting processes of *emotion regulation*, originally developed by Hochschild (1983), may be defined as the employee's management of emotions in order to display emotions that are congruent with job requirements in his/her interaction with customers vocally and/or face-to-face. Such emotional norms are defined by organizations in order to induce positive states in customers, thus maximizing the probability of positive judgements of service quality. Workers are often explicitly instructed and/or trained about their job emotional requirements, and the organization controls the quality of employees' emotional service performance. EL implies both not showing job-incongruent *felt* emotions (e.g., anger with an annoying client; one's own happiness during an interaction with a sick hospitalized patient), *and* actually expressing job-congruent emotions (e.g., smiling at the annoying client; expressing concern for the patient's health). Not all service jobs require EL to the same extent, nor with the same frequency, nor require displayed emotions of the same nature. For instance, front-line employees, such as receptionists or bank-counter workers, typically need to express positive emotions (e.g., friendliness), but need to do so for brief durations, whereas medical personnel (nurses, doctors), often needs to express constant empathy in addition to positive emotions, and 'control-role jobs', such as workers' supervisors and bill collectors, might need to alternate expressing negative, in-control emotions such as anger, contempt, indignation, and positive ones such as encouragement, pride, and satisfaction (e.g., Best, Downey & Jones 1997).

To the extent that felt emotions conflict with job-congruent ones, we might hypothesize that workers will experience emotional *dissonance* (or emotional discrepancy), and that expressing job-congruent emotions will imply emotional *labour*, effort (Morris & Feldman 1996; Grandey 1998; Kruml & Geddes 1998). Emotional labour may be performed in different ways, that is relying on different processes that have different psychological costs: *Surface Acting* is the effort involved in simply *acting* as though one feels emotion X (e.g., smiling; putting on an happy or a sad mask, as required), whereas *Deep acting*, hypothesized to be an opposite dimension, involves “pumping up” to actually feel the required emotion X. Finally, if workers spontaneously feel the required emotions, then they can just express their *Genuine emotions*, and no effort or dissonance is involved. The extent, nature and frequency of emotional dissonance and labour might be hypothesized - congruently with results obtained in recent studies (e.g., Grandey 1998; Morris & Feldman 1996) - to influence workers’ psychological well-being, for instance causing emotional exhaustion, and to vary as a function of job-related variables, such as frequency and duration of client-interaction, job-involment, role overload, years spent in the present-job, and of personal variables such as gender and civil status. These hypotheses were tested in a study with bank employees whose job implied client-interactions.

2. Method

2.1 Experimental Material, Data analysis. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire - developed and pre-tested with 10 bank employees - that, in addition to personal and job information questions (e.g., age, number of working years, frequency and duration of interactions with clients), comprised eight scales, adapted from the existing literature (see Results section) that measured, in addition to Emotional labour, variables hypothesized to be related to it, such a Life satisfaction, Emotional exhaustion, and Affect. Answers were analyzed in various ways (e.g., chi square statistics for checklist answers; analyses of variance), as detailed in the Results section. We can only briefly mention here that each administered scale, originally developed and/or tested with a different population, was subjected to a varimax-rotation factorial analysis. The obtained results usually confirmed the original solutions - main results and notable exceptions will be reported. Variables that did not obtain significant differences between groups, as it had been hypothesized (e.g., effects of gender on emotional labour) will be discussed only to the extent necessary to better understand and interpret the reported results.

2.2 Subjects, Procedure. Questionnaires - given to subjects in a sealed envelope - were administered to bank employees of an Italian north region through trade-union organizations. A total of 112 subjects, 59 males and 53 females, completed the questionnaire (out of 250; return rate: 45%). Subjects were mostly in their thirties (age range 25-35 years: 62%; total age range: 25-56 years), living with a partner (60%; 12% lived alone), with at least 13 years of education (81%; 11% had a university degree), and working in about equal proportions at the counter (46%) or as financial consultants (53%). Of the subjects that reported that they had had a specific client-interaction training (50% of the sample), most (86%) judged it useful.

3. Results

3.1 Dimensions of Emotional labor, and their psychological correlates. A factorial analysis of subjects’ Emotional labour scale ratings (see table 1 for details) confirmed the existence of three factors, namely *Surface acting (SA)*, *Deep acting (DA)*, and *Genuine emotions (GE)*; however, with respect to Grandey’s (2000) hypotheses and results, individual item loadings on the factors showed some changes. *Surface acting* explains the highest variance (30%), and has the greatest congruity with the original scale; it is uniquely measured by 4 items, e.g., “Put on a “mask” in order to express the right emotions for the job”. *Deep acting*, viceversa, explains 10% of the variance; although it is measured by 4 items (loadings > .35), including “Work hard to feel the emotions that I need to show to others”, two cannot be considered as they load significantly

other factors too, namely SA and GE¹. Finally, the *Genuine emotion* factor explains 16% of the variance, loading significantly 4 items, e.g., “React to customers emotions naturally and easily” and “Try to actually experience the emotions that I must show”, including however also one originally supposed to measure SA, “Put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way”. In sum, Italian bank service employees report both feeling job-congruent emotions effortlessly, as well as performing both shallow and in-depth labour on their emotions as relevant parts of their job characteristics. As we shall now report, emotional labour tends to be significantly related, either directly or indirectly, to most variables hypothesized to be relevant (see tables 1-3), i.e., it has significant implications for employees’ psychophysical well-being.

Table 1. Means of, and significant correlations between, main subjective dependent variables

	% Var.	Mean	EXH	PA	NA	LS	SA	DA	GE
JIN Job Involvement	56.1	2.1		.31 ^b					
RO Role Overload	40.0	4.6	.61 ^b						
RB Role Balance	19.0	4.2	-.22 ^a	.36 ^b	-.36 ^b	.67 ^b			
EXH Emot. Exhaustion	62.9	2.9		-.22 ^a	.40 ^b	-.24 ^b	.23 ^a		-.20 ^a
PA Positive Affect	19.2	2.9				.24 ^a		.21 ^a	.31 ^b
NA Negative Affect	11.7	2.1				-.31 ^b			
LS Life Satisfaction	66.7	3.8							
SA Surface Acting	30.3	2.5						.21 ^a	
DA Deep Acting	10.0	2.5							
GE Genuine Emotions	16.2	2.9							

Legend

% Var: Percentage of variance explained by the dimension measured by the indicated (sub)scale; probability: ^a $p > .05$; ^b $p > .001$. The constructs, originally developed by the mentioned authors, were measured on the following interval answer scales. Job Involvement (JIN): 6 out of the original 10-item scale (e.g., Most of my interests focus on my job), partially validated also cross-culturally (e.g., Kanungo 1982; Kanungo & Misra, 1988); 1-6, Disagree-Agree scale. Role Overload (RO) and Role Balance (RB): two independent factors measured respectively by 6- and 4-item (e.g., RO: I don’t have enough time for myself; RB: I try to get totally involved in everything I do) scales adapted from Marks e MacDermid (1995); 1-6, False-True scale. Emotional Exhaustion (EXH): 9-item subscale of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson 1981), already validated in Italy; 1-5, Never-Often scale. Affective and judgemental aspects of psychological well-being are measured by three scales: Positive Affect (PA) and Negative Affect (NA), respectively measured by 4 and 3 items, inspired by the Panas test (Watson, Clark & Tellegen 1988); for each emotion (e.g., happiness; shame) subjects reported its frequency, on a 1-5, Never-Always scale; Life Satisfaction (LS): a well-validated 5-item scale (e.g., My life conditions are excellent), developed by Diener et al. (1985); 1-6, Disagree-Agree scale. Surface Acting, Deep Acting, and Genuine Emotions are subscales of an original 10-item Emotional labor scale (Grandey, 1999, 2000; Brotheridge and Lee 1998); 1-5, Never-Often scale.

More specifically (table 1), both Deep acting and Genuine Emotions correlate positively with Positive affect, i.e., with a greater frequency of emotions such as happiness in subjects' life². In turn, workers who report a higher frequency of Positive affect also report greater Job involvement. Surface Acting correlates instead positively with Emotional Exhaustion (EXH), a salient component of burnout, as shown in many studies, including several Italian replications

¹ Because a few items hypothesized to measure Deep acting (DA) load on other Emotional labour dimensions, a finding replicated in parallel studies with Italian bank, hospital, and post-office employees (e.g., Zammuner 2000), and because DA positively correlates with Surface acting, the DA factor seems to have a somewhat ‘unclear’ meaning for the tested subjects and needs to be better operationalized in future studies.

² Half of the sample was asked to report emotions thinking about the last two *working* weeks, half to report them in relation to the last two weeks but *excluding* emotions felt in their job. The results showed that, in comparison to ‘private-life subjects’, ‘*working* subjects’ reported less frequent Excitement ($M = 3.0$ vs. 2.4 , $t = 2.8$, $p < .01$), Affection/love ($M = 4.0$ vs. 2.6 , $t = 6.5$, $p < .01$), and Joy ($M = 3.1$ vs. 2.53 , $t = 2.7$, $p < .01$). Subjects had also been asked to report their felt emotions’ intensity, but, as subjects did not report it whenever a given emotion was reported as “never felt”, the frequency of missing data made it unfeasible to analyze this dimension further.

(e.g., Carli, Pedrabissi & Santinello 1994; Pierro & Fabbri 1995; Sirigatti et al. 1988); the Genuine Emotions factor correlates instead negatively with it. Emotionally exhausted tend in turn to be employees who, in comparison to their not-exhausted workmates, experience less Role Balance and greater Role overload, feel more Negative Affect but less Positive affect, and express lesser Life satisfaction (Life satisfaction correlates positively with Role balance, and, not surprisingly, with Positive affect; it correlates negatively with Negative affect).

In sum, the obtained correlational results confirm that emotional labour has significant implications for employees' psychophysical well-being - as testified by its relationships with burnout, affect, job-role balance versus overload, and life satisfaction in general. In other words, the extent to which employees perform emotional labour, and its nature (i.e., acting on one's emotions vs. spontaneously feeling the job-required emotions) have implications that reach much beyond the 'here and now', i.e., that simply determine how customers judge quality service, and how the employee/employer perceives and judges the quality of the ongoing interaction. Emotional labour instead 'activates' a complex net of direct and indirect links with variables that altogether define how employees feel toward their own work on a more long-term basis (e.g., role overload, job involvement), as well as how they live their life in general, i.e., what kind of emotions they are most likely to feel, and how much satisfied they are with their life.

3.2 Effects of independent variables on Emotional labour and other measures. Let us now consider the effects due to independent variables. A major finding is that, contrary to our hypotheses on gender differences (e.g., women were expected to engage more than men both in Deep and Surface acting), men and women did not usually differ in their dependent-variables scores. Other personal and job-related variables that did not generally differentiate subjects were their age, civil status, whether they had had specific interaction training, presence of children, and job role (i.e., financial consultant vs. working at-the-counter).

Table 2. Differences between employee groups (defined by Working Years, Job Years, and Frequency and Duration of client-interactions) according to their mean scores on Role Overload, Emotional Exhaustion, and Deep Acting (N=112; probability: ^t p>.10; ^a p>.05; ^b p>.01)

	N Ss	ROLE OVERLOAD		EM. EXHAUSTION		DEEP ACTING	
		Mean	F value	Mean	F value	Mean	F value
N Working Years							
1-10 = A	40	4.2		2.5			
11-17 = B	37	4.9	5.06 ^a , A-B	3.1	4.97 ^a , A-B		
18-34 = C	34	4.9	0.30 ^a , A-C	3.0	0.42 ^a , A-C		
N Years in Present Job							
1-3	53	4.3	3.06 ^t	2.7	2.64 ^t	2.2	4.38 ^a
4-10	40	4.9		3.1		2.8	
Interact. Frequency: Clients per Day							
1-20	55	4.9	3.62 ^a	3.1	0.04 ^a		
21-200	55	4.3		2.6			
Interact. Duration: in Minutes							
2-10	67	4.3	0.27 ^a	2.7	0.135 ^t	2.3	1.47 ^a
11-60	43	4.9		3.1		2.7	

Significant effects were instead obtained more frequently in relation to important job-related variables, namely frequency and duration of client-interactions, and work experience (table 2). **Deep Acting** - the more difficult-to-activate regulation process, and one that requires greater motivation in order to be successfully performed - is more frequent for employees who hold their present job since at least 4 years, and engage in longer-lasting client interactions. In other words, actually working at one's own emotions to make them job-congruent is an emotional 'skill' that develops with experience on the job, and is the more necessary the longer the interaction with a client (just imagine the difficulty, and frustration, of having to fake happiness several times in a day, for more than just a few seconds!). However, these same job variables also

imply a greater *Emotional Exhaustion*. In other words, experience is of great help in performing one's job according to job-requirements, but such performance taxes psychological resources and might be quite stressing in the medium-long run. Congruently with this interpretation, *Role overload* is higher in the same employee group, namely in those who, *not* at the beginning of their career, are daily engaged in unfrequent but long-lasting client-interactions. (Job novelty, possibly eliciting enthusiasm, energy, etc., and the lesser task complexity that might characterize "beginners" job roles, are likely to be helping factors against role overload). An analysis, moreover, of financial consultants' scores, i.e., of those employees most likely to be involved in longer, more demanding interactions, showed that those who report lesser Role Overload, as well as more frequent *Surface acting*, do not have children (respectively, RO: 4.6 vs. 5.2 for consultants who do have children; $t = 2.3, < .05$; SA: 2.7 vs. 2.3; $t = 2.1, < .05$). The latter results, considering moreover that Surface acting, as reported above, correlates positively with Emotional Exhaustion (see table 1), confirm that emotional labour is a process that, as it happens with most regulation processes, has costs in addition to benefits, a conclusion that clearly holds also for those instances in which workers just pretend feeling job-congruent emotions, i.e., perform Surface acting. On the whole the results might thus be interpreted as indicating on the one hand that client-interaction features - i.e., their frequency and duration - define the nature of emotional labour employees are most likely to perform, on the other hand that the frequency of deep and shallow acting, as well as their psychological costs, are influenced by other personal and work-related variables, such as role overload (itself a function of the characteristics of other salient social roles the individual has, including the costs of his/her family role; see Wharton & Erickson 1999), and the extent to which the person has the needed psychological resources to engage in emotional labour (i.e., s/he is or is not emotionally exhausted).

Table 3. 'Positive constellation' and Diversified constellation' of Role overload, Role balance, and Life satisfaction scores as predictor of Surface acting, Job involvement, Positive Affect, and Negative Affect scores

'Constellation'	N	Surface acting	F	Job Involvement.	F	Positive affect	F	Negative affect	F
Positive: low RO, High RB, high LS	25	2.23	1.74*	3.48	.07*	3.21	.44*	1.84	3.63*
Diversified: high RO, low RB, low LS	87	2.58		3.03		2.81		2.21	

3.3 'Positive constellation', and 'Diversified constellation' as predictors of Surface acting, Job involvement, and Positive Affect. The results reported up to now evidence a complex pattern of relationships between the measured variables. In order to be able to interpret more unambiguously and with greater confidence the most relevant results that were obtained, a new analysis was carried out by comparing employees characterized by a 'Positive-feature constellation' (PC), that is, by low scores on Role overload, and high scores on Role balance and Life satisfaction (respectively, PC: < 4.5 RO, > 4.6 RB and LS), a constellation that groups only 22% of the entire sample, with employees not so characterized, that is, defined by a 'Diversified-feature constellation' (DC: > 4.5 RO, < 4.6 RB and LS), the remaining 78% of the sample. The constellation was tested as a predictor of the most important Emotional Labour dimension, namely Surface acting, and of Job involvement, Positive Affect and Negative Affect. The obtained results (see table 3) showed that the two groups do consistently differ along the to-be-predicted variables. Namely, employees characterized by low Role overload, and high Role balance and Life satisfaction, the 'Positive-feature constellation', are more involved in their job than employees characterized by the 'Diversified-feature constellation', perform Surface acting less often, feel more frequently Positive emotions, and and Negative emotions less frequently.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Although we cannot say with certainty whether it is the paucity of hedonically pleasant feelings (in their job, and/or in their lives), including a low degree of job involvement or a high degree of role overload, that causes employees to conform to service emotional requirements at the shallowest level, or whether the causal chain goes in the opposite direction, the results obtained from this analysis, coupled with those that were reported earlier on, confirm that emotional/motivational factors play a very important role within organizations as regards employees' performance quality. The most educated guess we can make is that emotional/motivational factors are likely to work both ways, i.e., inducing both 'vicious loops' and 'virtuous loops'. An example of the former might be the following: uninvolvement in one's job causes shallow rather than deep acting; surface acting in turn makes customer-interactions more unpleasant, tiring, etc. than it would be otherwise, so that the employee becomes emotionally exhausted; the organization's evaluation that the employee's quality of client-interactions is poor leads to job-role changes, reproaches, etc; and so on. Substitute positive features to the negative ones just outlined and you will get an example of the latter (e.g., involvement in one's job causes deep rather than shallow acting, making interactions go smoothly, inducing supervisors' praise, etc.; and so on). The conclusion to be drawn from this study is that emotional labour is a component of service job-roles whose complex positive and negative implications need to be considered with attention by any organization that cares both for its service quality, and for its employees' psychophysical well-being.

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