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Emotional Labor

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Umbrella Summary

Emotional Labor

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is emotional labor?

Emotional labor is “the management of feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” as necessary at work (Hochschild, 2012, p. 50). Thus, people engage in emotional labor when they ensure their facial expressions and body language match what is expected for the job (Grandey, 2000). Clear display rules (e.g., always smile, show empathy, stay neutral, seem stern) are most typically seen within service industries (e.g., customer service, protective services, law enforcement).

People accomplish this adherence to display rules through *surface acting*—managing the expression of emotions—or through *deep acting*—managing the experience of emotions (Hochschild, 2012). That is, people can either fake the emotion or try to feel what they are supposed to exhibit. Jobs may require people to show certain emotions (e.g., look like you are enjoying yourself) or suppress certain emotions (e.g., never let them see you sweat), but the goals are the same: create “the proper state of mind in others,” in order to improve workplace interactions and organizational outcomes (Hochschild, 2012, p. 30).

Emotional labor is typically measured by assessing the (a) frequency with which individuals use emotional labor on the job, (b) whether surface or deep acting is used, and (c) whether individuals feel they are expected to express positive emotions or suppress negative emotions. There are several measures that are more commonly used to assess these various aspects of emotional labor. Example items from these measures include:

- ▷ Frequency: “On an average day at work, how frequently do you display specific emotions required by your job?” (Brotheridge & Lee, 1998)
- ▷ Surface Acting: “I put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way.” (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005)
- ▷ Deep Acting: “I work at developing the feelings inside of me that I need to show to customers.” (Diefendorff et al., 2005)
- ▷ Display Rules: “This organization would say that part of the product to customers is friendly, cheerful service.” (Grandey, 2003)

Why is emotional labor important?

Emotional labor is important because it is moderately associated with job satisfaction and burnout and modestly related to job performance (Kammeyer-Mueller, Rubenstein, Long, Odio, Buckman, Zhang, & Halvorsen-Ganepola, 2013). In addition, emotional labor is moderately associated with turnover intentions (Mesmer-Magnus, Dechurch, Wax, & Anderson, 2012), though the connection to actual turnover is unknown. People who engage in emotional labor at work are more likely to have good job performance ratings but also to feel burned out and unhappy in the job.

This is especially true when the emotional labor strategy is surface acting. For example, surface acting is associated with burnout, whereas deep acting is not (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Similarly, using surface acting is associated with lower job satisfaction but is not associated with job performance. Deep acting, on the other hand, is associated with higher job performance but not job satisfaction. Thus, the negative consequences of emotional labor are more likely with surface acting than with deep acting. This may be due to the incongruence between emotions and actions when one employs surface acting versus the congruence when someone employs deep acting (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012).

Why contributes to emotional labor?

Meta-analytic research on emotional labor has thus far focused on assessing factors that are merely associated with emotional labor, not on causal relationships. However, there are many additional factors that are associated with emotional labor and seen as potential influencers (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), which may help agencies with hiring and training that could mitigate the potential consequences of emotional labor. These factors fall into three categories: perceived expectations, personality, and supervisor behaviors.

Perceived Expectations

Employees' perception that their organization expects them to use specific facial expressions and body language with customers is associated with surface and deep acting (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013). Specifically, perceived negative display rules (i.e., the perception that the organization expects employees to suppress negative emotions) are more strongly related to surface acting than deep acting. Perceived positive display rules (i.e., the perception that the organization expects employees to demonstrate positive emotions), on the other hand, are more strongly related to deep acting than surface acting.

Personality

As with organizational expectations, personality relates differently to surface and deep acting (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Individuals who score high on neuroticism and negative affectivity (i.e., people who generally think negatively) are more likely to employ surface acting. Those who score high on conscientiousness, positive affectivity,

openness to experience, extraversion, and emotional intelligence are more likely to engage in more deep acting and less likely to engage in surface acting.

Supervisor Behaviors

Perceived supervisor support is modestly related to emotional labor (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Again, the relationship is different depending on the strategy employed. Those who perceive more supervisor support are more likely to use deep acting and less likely to use surface acting.

QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Emotional labor is moderately associated with lower job satisfaction, higher burnout, and higher turnover intentions.
- ▶ Emotional labor is modestly associated with higher job performance.
- ▶ The connection between emotional labor and potential outcomes depends on the type of emotional labor strategy used (i.e., surface vs. deep acting).
- ▶ Surface acting is associated with higher burnout, but deep acting is not.
- ▶ Surface acting is associated with lower job satisfaction, but deep acting is not.
- ▶ Deep acting is associated with better performance ratings, but surface acting is not.
- ▶ When people believe they are expected to express or suppress certain emotions, they are more likely to engage in surface and deep acting.
- ▶ Personality characteristics and supervisor support may influence the type of emotional labor that is used and, thus, the extent of potential negative consequences such as lower job satisfaction, burnout, and intent to turnover.
- ▶ Practitioners and researchers who would like to assess emotional labor should consider using measures from Brotheridge and Lee (1998), Grandey (2003), or Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand (2005). In some cases, minor adaptations would be needed to make them suitable for child welfare employees.

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