Emotional labor strategies adopted by school psychologists

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Abstract

Based on the assumption that profession introduces specific particularities in the ways employees regulate emotions at work, different by organizational ones, we aimed at identifying particularities of school psychologists in adopting emotional labor strategies. A sample of 120 Romanian school psychologists completed three self-report scales on emotional labor. Results showed participants adopt a distinct strategy when regulating negative emotions. Factor analysis revealed that genuine acting and surface acting load the same bipolar factor. Results sustain the necessity to investigate the impact of profession on emotional labor performed by employees.

Keywords: emotional labor, deep acting, surface acting, regulation of negative emotions, school psychologists;

1. Emotional labor

Hochschild proposed the term emotional labor as ‘the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display’ (Hochschild, 1983/2003, p.7). This process involves an effort, conscious or not, to modify feelings according to organizational emotion rules. Emotional labor is the act of displaying appropriate emotions even if expressed emotion differs from the inner one (Ashfort & Humphrey, 1993). This act requires the employee to induce or suppress his or her inner feelings to be consistent with the emotional expressions that produce the desired state in clients.

As Guy and collaborators (2008) argue, emotional labor is an essential requirement for completing job tasks and is a prerequisite to quality public interactions. Emotional labor is a component of the dynamic relations between two persons, the employee and the client. From this perspective, emotional labor is similar to physical work, since both require skills and experience, and are submitted to external control. Displaying emotions consistent with emotional rules is not a private act made in a social context, it is
rather an act sold for a wage and controlled by the organization through trainings, organizational politics and surveillance (Groth, Henning-Thurau, & Walsh, 2006). Nowadays, emotional labor in not included in any formal job description, nor in the job evaluation criteria, it is not documented or assessed. Often, in human resources practices, emotional labor covers the term ‘interpersonal skill’.

Employees performed emotional labor when several antecedents occur and impose the necessity to regulate emotions. The organizational or professional emotional rules (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Truţa & Indreica, 2010), characteristics of the interaction situation between the employee and the client (Morris & Feldman, 1996), and personal determinants (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Brotheridge, 2006) predict the emotional labor strategies employees may adopt. When surface acting, employees simulate, if required, emotions that are not actually felt by changing their facial expression, their gestures to be consistent with emotional rules. Surface acting has two different forms: simulation of emotions considered as appropriate and suppression of inadequate ones (Brotheridge, 2006). Employees may also engage in deep acting, when they try to modify, through imagination or recalling of pleasant experiences, the inner feeling in order to be appropriate to organizational expectations. Surface acting is associated with increased levels of burnout and emotional exhaustion, while employees performing deep acting have higher levels of job satisfaction and feelings of fulfillment (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

1.1. Emotional labor in the work of school psychologists

Hochschild (1983/2003) argues that employees in jobs that imply the following characteristics perform emotional labor: direct contact with the client, the requirement to the employee to generate a certain emotional state to the client, allows employers to exert control over the emotional activity of the employee. Does the work of school psychologists meet these three characteristics?

Direct contact with the client is one of the core aspects of school psychologists’ work. The school psychologists interact daily in professional settings with the students, their parents or teachers. Their interactions last longer than usual client-employees interactions in services area. The efficiency of the school psychologists-client relation relies on the emotional state the former succeed to generate in the latter. Regarding the last condition, the emotional expressions of school psychologists are less controlled by organizational rules. The initial formal trainings and the socialization process alongside ethics codes regulate much stronger employees’ emotional expressions (Isenbarger & Zembylas, 2006).

2. Methodology of the research

Recent studies suggest that each profession introduce particularities in the ways employees regulate their emotions or particularities regarding antecedent factors. For example, in educational area, Zembylas (2005) analyzed ideological and cultural fundamentals of teaching profession as a specific determinant factor of emotional labor. Taking into consideration Zembylas’s analyses, we intend to study the particularities of emotion regulation in the work of school psychologists. In a previous qualitative study (Truţa & Indreica, 2010), we identified that school psychologists and those training in this profession follow specific emotional rules for regulating negative emotions. The study also revealed that regulating negative emotions is much more imperious for school psychologists than regulating positive ones, which are rather genuinely expressed. Therefore, the first hypothesis of our study is: school psychologists adopt different strategies for regulating positive and negative emotions.

The second hypothesis of our study surprises the relation between two demographical characteristics of participants and emotional labor strategies they adopt: use of emotional labor strategies by school psychologists differs depending on age and years in profession.
2.1. Instruments

An adapted version on a Romanian sample of Emotional Labor Scale - ELS (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003) was used to identify the frequency of engaging in deep acting and surface acting. The Alpha Cronbach coefficients for the two dimensions on the Romanian sample were .79 for deep acting and .72 for surface acting. Regulation of positive or negative emotions, either by simulation or by suppression of emotions, and authentically expressed emotions were measures with Discrete Emotions Emotional Labor Scale - DEELS (Glomb & Tews, 2004) adapted on a Romanian sample of students (Truţa, 2010). Genuine acting was measured with three items included in a self-report scale on job characteristics (JCS). The three items have a good internal consistency (α = .78) on the sample of Romanian students. The relative inconsistency between the conceptualization of emotional labor as measured by ELS (deep acting and surface acting as distinct dimensions) and DEELS (regulation of discrete emotions) determined us to use both instruments in this study.

2.2. Participants

A sample of 120 school psychologists, working in schools from 10 regions of Romania voluntarily participated in the study. At the moment of data collection, all participants had at least six months experience in profession (with a maximum of 16 years and a mean of 5.8 years), the youngest participants was 24 years old and the oldest 56. None of the participants was working as accredited psychotherapist.

3. Result

Since emotional labor strategies were measured through different instruments, we obtained nine different scores as indicators of use frequency for emotional labor strategies. Exploratory factor analysis with principal component method was used to reduce the number of variables used as indicators of emotional labor strategies, after normalization of several variables with severe positive asymmetry.

Table 1. Factors loading for emotional labor strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>F1</th>
<th>F2</th>
<th>F3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genuine acting (JCS)</td>
<td>-.837</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface acting - simulation (ELS)</td>
<td>.804</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surface acting - suppression (ELS)</td>
<td>.751</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions suppression (DEELS)</td>
<td>.729</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotions simulation (DEELS)</td>
<td>.604</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotion genuine acting (DEELS)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.783</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative emotions suppression (DEELS)</td>
<td></td>
<td>.621</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive emotion genuine acting (DEELS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.706</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deep acting (ELS)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.679</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Variance explained</td>
<td>36.862</td>
<td>18.359</td>
<td>16.104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KMO</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.637</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Genuine acting and surface acting, with its two different forms – simulation and suppression of emotions, load the same bipolar factor, for which we will further use the label authenticity of emotional
expression. Genuine acting and surface acting of positive emotions are opposed strategies situated on the same continuous. School psychologists regulate positive emotions, by either simulating them or by suppressing them, using the same strategy opposed to genuine acting.

Authentic expression and suppression of negative emotions load the same factor, which suggest that school psychology adopt a specific strategy when confronted with negative emotions. We name this factor regulation of negative emotions, even though simulation of negative emotions was not included in factor analysis since it did not meet normality assumption. The third factor is loaded by authentic expression of positive emotions and deep acting. The factor structure reveals than genuine acting is not a distinct strategy of emotional labor, loading different factors according to the valence of regulated emotions.

The second hypothesis of the study was tested by using the factors scores obtained after variables reduction through factor analysis. In the sample, 57.57% of the participants had more years in fieldwork than in profession, which support the analysis of age and years in profession as non-overlapping variables. Since the profession of school psychologist was enacted in Romania in 1996, many persons entered this occupational area after a long period in another profession. Multivariate variance analysis was use to test the impact of age/ years in profession on the three factors identified after factor analysis.

The assumption of covariance matrix homogeneity was not met, therefore we used the value of Pillai Trace test to interpret Manova results.

Regarding age, we obtained a significant value of Pillai Trace of .332 (F(6,228) = 7.556, p ≤ .001). The intensity of the relation is a small one (η² = .16). Age introduces significant differences in adoption of emotional labor strategies, but its effects are small. Age significantly influences the strategy for regulating negative emotions (F = 14.18, p ≤ .001, η² = .19) and deep acting (F = 8.43, p ≤ .001, η² = .12). Younger school psychologists (under 30 years old) regulate more frequent negative emotions, while those over 30 years old regulate more frequent in deep acting. Use of genuine acting and surface acting are not influences by aging.

Years in profession has an even smaller influence on adoption of emotional labor strategies (Pillai Trace = .170, F(6.230) = 3.558, p ≤ .01, η² = .09). The analysis of the impact of years in profession on each of the three strategies revealed also a small effect (F = 5.02, p ≤ .01, η² = .08 – for authenticity of expressed emotions and F = 5.67, p ≤ .01, η² = .08 – for deep acting). Employees with more than 3.5 years in profession have a higher tendency to deep acting, while those with less than 3.5 years in profession engage more often in surface acting.

4. Discussion

The sample of school psychologists we investigated registered differences regarding emotional labor dimensions compared with others professional categories studied so far. Surface acting, deep acting and genuine acting are traditionally investigated as main dimensions of emotional labor, but our study reveals that, for school psychologists, surface acting load the same bipolar factor as genuine acting. Genuine acting is not a distinct strategy for emotion regulation at work. School psychologists reported this strategy only when opposed with surface acting. This result raises many questions regarding the consciousness of emotion labor school psychologists perform. They seem not to recognize the effort embedded in acting consistent with emotional rules, but does this means that school psychologists automatically regulate their emotions or that emotional labor is part of their professional identity, as Zembylas (2005) suggests?

The identification of a distinct strategy for regulating negative emotions surpasses the traditional perspective on emotional labor, which focuses on the management of emotions and does not consider the valence of regulated emotions. Still, further empirical investigations are strictly necessary in order to validate a re-conceptualization of emotional labor dimensions depending on discrete emotions.
Thirdly, regarding the impact of age and years in profession on emotional labor strategies adopted by school psychologists, results indicate that authenticity in expressing emotions varies depending on years in profession, regulation of negative emotions varies depending on age, while both age and years in profession have an impact on deep acting. Data did not allow us to test the combined effect of the two variables, an issue that deserves further research.

If employees engage more frequently in deep acting while aging and gaining experience, as other studies show (Dahling & Perez, 2010), how can organization reduce the negative consequences associated with surface acting for younger and less experienced employees? Solutions may stand in initial training programs oriented on development of efficient emotion regulation strategies, such as those focused on antecedents. Mentoring could be another solution. Learning from an experienced employee might help young and inexperienced school psychologists to better regulate their emotions.

References


