Original article

Service with style and smile. How and why employees are performing emotional labour?

Servir les clients avec le sourire et avec style. Comment et pourquoi les employés effectuent le travail émotionnel ?

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction. – Three main emotion regulation strategies (naturally felt emotions, reappraisal and emotion suppression) have been identified among customer service agents. Each has an important impact on employees’ attitudes. Yet, employees are likely to combine these strategies in what we call emotion regulation styles.

Objectives. – Two studies aimed at identifying the emotion regulation styles used by customer service employees and at linking these styles to organizational consequences and motivation to perform emotional labour.

Method. – Two studies (n1 = 147 and n2 = 195) evaluated the use of these strategies. Measures of job attitudes (satisfaction, affective commitment and intention to quit) were taken, as well as measures of motivation to perform emotional labour.

Results. – Six styles were identified; four were common to both studies. Globally, employees classified as suppressors (use of emotion suppression only) or as non-regulators (no strategy used) reported lower levels of job satisfaction and affective commitment toward their organization compared to employees who used a flexible style (use of all three strategies) or an authentic style (use of reappraisal and expression of the naturally felt emotions). Employees adopting an acting style (use of emotion suppression and reappraisal) or a reappraising style (marked by preferential use of reappraisal) obtained results located between the non-regulating and the suppressing styles on one hand, and the authentic and the flexible styles on the other hand. Employees adopting a suppressing or a non-regulating style also manifested lower levels of motivation to regulate their emotions.

Conclusion. – Results suggest that employees use a dynamic range of styles, which differ in their associated consequences.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les études antérieures identifient trois stratégies principales de régulation émotionnelle adoptées par les agents de service (expression naturelle des émotions, réévaluation de la situation et suppression émotionnelle). Chacune a des conséquences importantes sur les attitudes des employés. Pourtant, les employés sont susceptibles de combiner ces stratégies de façon à former ce que nous appelons des styles de régulation émotionnelle.

Objectifs. – Deux études visent à identifier les styles de régulation utilisés par les employés de service à la clientèle et à les relier à des attitudes au travail et à la motivation à s’engager dans le travail émotionnel.

Méthode. – Deux études (n1 = 147 et n2 = 195) ont évalué l’utilisation des stratégies mentionnées. Des mesures attitudinales (satisfaction au travail, engagement affectif, et intention de quitter) ont été prises, ainsi que des mesures pour apprécier la motivation des employés à réguler leurs émotions.
The main role of customer service employees is to offer products and services that fill customers’ needs and make them feel positively toward the organization (Pugh, 2001). As customer service employees work to achieve this goal, they are expected to display enthusiasm, which is why many organizations establish emotional display rules (Hochschild, 1983), such as serving customers with a smile and suppressing negative emotions toward them (Diefendorff, Erickson, Grandey, & Dahling, 2011; Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005; Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005). In order to comply with these rules, employees must use emotion regulation strategies; in other words, they must perform what has been termed emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000).

Employees can use various strategies to regulate their emotion expression. Surface acting is the modification of the observable aspects of an emotion irrespective of the employees’ subjective feelings; it focuses on emotional responses (Grandey, 2000). Deep acting is the effort to match subjective feelings with expressed emotions; it focuses on the antecedents of emotions (Grandey, 2000). Employees can also spontaneously feel and express the emotions prescribed by their organization. When they do so, they express their naturally felt emotions (Cossette & Hess, 2012; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserd, 2005).

Past studies on emotional labour have not focused on the interrelations between these three strategies. Even though all these strategies are used to comply with emotional display rules, they greatly differ in the manner by which they achieve this goal: some strategies involve acting on emotion antecedents; others involve controlling emotional response tendencies (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998); and then there are those that involve monitoring the match between felt and expressed emotions on the one hand and the match between felt emotions and display rules on the other (Diefendorff & Gosserd, 2003). In this paper, we raise the following question: Do employees only use one emotion regulation strategy or do they use several while interacting with customers?

The emotional labour literature offers an ambiguous answer to this question. Only two studies address this question. Sutton (2004) suggests that a majority of teachers use at least two emotional labour strategies. For example, they may use some combination of attentional deployment, cognitive change, modification of the observable aspects of emotions, etc.; however, Sutton’s study does not indicate whether there are combinations among these strategies. The other study by Gross and John (2003), suggests that persons use either reappraisal or emotion suppression, which are conceptually close to deep acting and surface acting respectively (see Grandey, 2000). The contradicting results from these two studies and the lack of research on this topic raise the following questions:

- Do customer service employees combine different emotion regulation strategies? and;
- If they do, which specific combinations do they use?

These two questions are important, not only for emotional labour theory, but also for practitioners. From a theoretical point of view, answering them would improve understanding of the Gross (1998) emotional regulation model dynamic. From a practical point of view, it is possible that certain combinations are more beneficial than others, both for employees and for organizations. If it is in fact true that they are more beneficial, relevant action plans could be put in place, such as personnel selection, training management, performance management, etc.

Continuing on from Sutton and by Gross and John, the first goal of the present study is to identify emotional regulation styles. We define an emotion regulation style as a dynamic use of different emotion regulation strategies in different contexts. In other words, an emotion regulation style consists of the repertoire of strategies that customer service employees use to regulate their emotions.

The second goal is to relate these styles to job and organizational attitudes. Previous studies have mainly focused on the consequences of emotion regulation strategies (see Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). To provide emotional labour theory with a firmer foundation, it is important to link emotion regulation styles with outcomes relevant to employee attitudes such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intention to quit the job (Goodwin, Groth, & Frenkel, 2011; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011).

The third goal is to understand the link between the motivations of employees and their emotion regulation style. Some researchers maintain that emotional labour consists of motivated acts (Cossette, 2014; Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008). From this perspective, emotional labour can be seen as motivated by a desire to avoid negative consequences or to obtain positive consequences (Diefendorff & Croyle, 2008), or it can be seen as motivated by reasons related to the internalization of emotion display rules (Cossette, 2014). Two studies focusing on the motives underlying emotion regulation have contradicting results: one study suggests that motivation is positively associated with both surface acting and deep acting (Gosserd and Diefendorff, 2005), whereas the other suggests that motivation is positively related to deep acting and naturally felt emotions, but negatively related to surface acting (Cossette & Hess, 2012). The next three sections present the relevant literature on employee emotion regulation at work, on the consequences of emotion regulation strategies, and on the reasons for using them.

1. How emotional labour is performed by employees

Studies focusing on emotional labour have emphasized two strategies: deep acting and surface acting. Deep acting is an antecedent-focused strategy (Grandey, 2000) that aims to change the perception that employees have of the situation. This is achieved through perspective taking (e.g., reappraising the
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