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Associations of personality and emotional intelligence with display rule perceptions and emotional labour

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Abstract

Emotional labour has been widely studied and is of considerable interest in relation to outcomes such as sense of accomplishment and burnout. There is a growing interest in individual differences in emotional labour and in organisational display rule perceptions. Personality and emotional intelligence (EI) are relevant to this, but their effects have been examined in a relatively small number of publications. The present study extends this literature by examining associations amongst personality, EI, display rule perceptions and emotional labour in a group of 247 undergraduate students. Surface acting (SA) was found to be positively correlated with Neuroticism and negatively correlated with Extraversion and Conscientiousness, whilst deep acting (DA) was positively correlated with Agreeableness and Extraversion. Positive display rule perceptions were correlated with Extraversion and negative display rule perceptions with Neuroticism. EI was unrelated to DA but negatively associated with SA and positively associated with positive display rule perceptions. Structural equation modelling showed that EI partially mediated the effect of personality on SA. The personality correlations were similar to previous results. For EI it appears that high-EI individuals are less likely to make use of the emotionally superficial SA strategy; this may be related to their superior emotion regulation capabilities.

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1. Introduction

The term emotional labour describes the process in which employees display particular emotions (which may not correspond to the emotions they are actually experiencing) in response to job-related expectations of appropriate emotional behaviour (Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild's study focussed on airline cabin crew and debt collectors, but requirements for appropriate emotional displays have been identified across a wide range of occupations, for example health-care professionals (Martínez-Iñigo, Totterdell, Alcover, & Holman, 2007; Montgomery, Panagopolou, & Benos, 2005), teachers (Näring, Briët, & Brouwers, 2006) and university lecturers (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). It is known that the requirements for emotional display (emotional display rules) vary between occupations and organisations and that individuals also differ in their perceptions of what these display rules are.

There are different ways in which individuals can produce the emotional impression required in their particular working environment. Much of the discussion of these differences has been framed in terms of the strategies of surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA). SA involves simulating the required emotion without actually feeling it, whilst possibly also suppressing real and less appropriate feelings. DA involves the individual modifying and managing their emotions in order to produce the required ones. Because DA involves an attempt to actively manage actual emotions whereas SA involves the manipulation of appearances only, these two approaches have been contrasted as “faking in good faith” vs. “faking in bad faith” (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Both SA and DA involve conscious and effortful processes but it has been argued that the genuine nature of the attempt to feel the appropriate emotion that underlies DA also allows positive outcomes such as feelings of accomplishment and enhanced identification with the work role (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). The emotional effort associated with SA means that it would be expected to be consistently associated with occupational stress, emotional exhaustion and burnout, whereas the balance of costs and benefits associated with DA suggests that such associations would be liable to be weaker and context-dependent. Studies of the associations of SA and DA have been consistent with this view, with SA being found to be positively associated with emotional exhaustion and negatively with sense of accomplishment, whilst DA has been found to be positively associated with sense of accomplishment and either unrelated to emotional exhaustion (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Brotheridge & Lee, 2002, 2003; Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2007), or with an association which becomes non-significant when the effects of surface acting are taken into account (Grandey, 2003). Another possible emotional labour strategy is the expression of naturally-felt emotion, where the employee is able to naturally feel the required emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005). This mechanism overlaps with and seems to be hard to distinguish from that of unconscious emotion regulation (Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005), since the outcome of unconscious regulation should be the experience of the required emotion as natural. In this case the benefits of emotional labour are obtained without any cost in conscious effort so that, as found by Martínez-Iñigo et al. (2007), automatic emotion regulation is expected to be negatively related to emotional exhaustion.

The type of emotion that employees are expected to show in the workplace is determined by the emotional display rules of the organisation. In the most common type of workplace situation (one where positive emotional interactions with customers are expected) positive display rules cover expectations to show positive emotions, whilst negative display rules cover expectations to conceal

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