



Individual differences and emotional labor: An experiment on positive display rules[☆]

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ABSTRACT

We experimentally examined relationships between positive display rules, personality, emotional labor, and subjective performance in a work-sample task. Sixty-five students participated in a call-center simulation where they acted as insurance sales representatives. The work-sample task required interacting with a confederate acting as a customer. Departing from previous emotional labor research, we examined display rule explicitness and subjective performance in a controlled setting. We found that extraversion negatively predicted surface acting, whereas emotional stability and self-monitoring positively predicted surface acting. The positive display rule condition positively predicted deep acting, which further predicted subjective performance in the form of observer-rated positive emotional displays.

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1. Introduction

Hochschild (1983) described emotional labor as, “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (p. 7). This ‘management of feeling’ is important because employees’ expressed emotions can impact subjective performance (Pugh, 2001). Employees use certain strategies to manage their emotions, such as surface- or deep-acting, influencing evaluations of their performance (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). Research has focused on situational and individual differences that may impact performance by influencing which emotional labor strategy employees choose. Previous research has established the importance of situational influences, such as emotional display rules, in explaining the relationship between emotional labor and performance (e.g., Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). In addition to situational influences, Judge, Woolf, and Hurst (2009) suggested placing greater focus on individual differences in studying emotional labor. Yet, studies exploring individual differences and emotional labor have seldom examined situational factors, making it difficult to determine the relative impact of individual differences and situational factors. Studies examining situational factors have focused on individuals’ perceptions of their environment (e.g., Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005) as opposed to objectively present situational cues.

1.1. The current study

Currently, there is a need for alternative research methods investigating emotional labor (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). The investigation of emotional labor has been achieved predominantly through survey research. Few relationships found in the literature have been subject to experimental manipulation. In particular, few studies manipulate the explicitness of display rules. Researchers have examined the relationship between display rule perceptions and emotional labor (e.g., Diefendorff et al., 2005), yet few explore relationships with objectively present display rules. In addition, individual differences have not been examined in relation to emotional labor and display rules in this context.

We investigated emotional labor and individual differences, specifically personality traits extraversion, neuroticism, and self-monitoring, in combination with display rules. Positive emotional display rules, a situational cue, were examined experimentally in a hypothetical work-sample task. The work-sample task was a simulation where participants acted as insurance company call-center representatives interacting with a customer via telephone. We examined performance subjectively, through others’ evaluations of participants’ emotional displays. We explored whether personality predicted emotional labor, beyond the situational cue, as well as the impact emotional labor had on performance.

1.2. Emotional labor

Emotional labor is commonly conceptualized as involving emotional regulation. Emotional regulation refers to the “process by which individuals influence the emotions they have, when they

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have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Gross, 1998, p. 275). Grandey suggested two emotional regulatory strategies are employed when performing emotional labor, surface- and deep-acting. Grandey (2000) describes surface acting as modifying expression by displaying emotion that is not felt or suppressing true feelings. When an employee begrudgingly holds a smile while interacting with a rude customer, they are surface acting. Deep acting involves altering an emotional state by attempting to feel the emotion displayed (Grandey, 2000). An employee considering a rude customer as ‘under stress’ in order to maintain a positive display is deep acting. Naturally felt emotion has recently been included in several conceptualizations of emotional labor (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Glomb & Tews, 2004). Naturally felt emotion refers to expressions that are consistent with felt emotion (Glomb & Tews, 2004). We examined emotional labor in the form of surface acting, deep acting, and naturally felt emotion.

1.3. Display rules

Emotional labor studies often focus on display rules (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), which are standards for appropriate emotional display on the job (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003). Display rules can be implicit or explicit and are generally developed and conveyed socially (Zapf, 2002). Explicit display rules refer to concretely conveyed rules about appropriate emotions, such as ‘we offer service with a smile’ written in a job description (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). Implicit display rules are ‘unwritten rules’ conveyed through societal or organizational norms (Zapf, 2002). Employees are generally discouraged from expressing negative emotions (negative display rules) and encouraged to display positive emotions (positive display rules) (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003).

Display rules may require employees to invest more energy and attention to their expressions, which may impact their performance (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). Here, we were particularly interested in positive display rules because, in contrast to negative display rules, positive display demands are known to vary across occupations (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). For example, those in human service occupations are required to be more friendly and sympathetic compared to those in clerical or labor occupations (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002).

Display rules prescribe the appropriate emotions to display, and explicit display rules, because they make emotional demands overt, should increase the likelihood emotional displays are regulated (Diefendorff et al., 2005). Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) found perceived demands to express positive emotions positively related to surface- and deep-acting. Gosserand and Diefendorff (2005) found that display rule perceptions positively related to surface acting. In addition, they found stronger relationships between display rule perceptions and surface- and deep-acting when employees were more committed to display rules. Diefendorff et al. (2005) found that positive display rule perceptions positively related to deep acting. Display rules place increasing demands on individuals to maintain certain emotional displays (Diefendorff et al., 2005). In order to adhere to display rules individuals utilize emotional labor strategies, and when a positive display rule is explicit individuals should engage in more emotional labor.

H₁: Participants presented with an explicit positive display rule will engage in more surface- and deep-acting than participants in the control condition.

1.4. Individual differences

Individual differences are often seen as antecedents to emotional experiences (Gross, 1999), and may influence the preferred

emotional labor strategy (Diefendorff et al., 2005). For instance, some individuals are predisposed to experience more positive affective states and others more negative affective states (Grandey, 2000). Thus, some individuals need to exert more effort to make a particular emotional display (Grandey, 2000). Differences in affect were examined here by focusing on extraversion and emotional stability. Previous studies have examined extraversion and emotional stability as indicators of positive and negative affectivity, respectively (e.g., Griffin, 2001). These traits have been consistently related to affectivity and provide a link between the five-factor model and affect (Griffin, 2001). Further, research has suggested that extraversion and emotional stability are tied to the way individuals regulate their emotions (John & Gross, 2007).

Extraverts tend to be positive, outgoing, and sociable, whereas introverts tend to be quiet and reserved (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Extraverts have a natural tendency to experience more positive emotions, suggesting they rarely need to simulate positive emotion and instead tend to express emotion naturally (Diefendorff et al., 2005). Conversely, introverts may be inclined to withdraw and hide their feelings from others (John & Gross, 2007).

Emotionally unstable individuals tend to be anxious, tense (Barrick & Mount, 1991), and experience more negative emotions (Diefendorff et al., 2005). They also tend to be poor regulators of their emotions (John & Gross, 2007), and may rely on less effective strategies to modify their expression (Austin, Dore, & O’Donovan, 2008). In order to conform to display rules, emotionally unstable individuals may be less likely to express emotions naturally and more likely to fake emotions (Diefendorff et al., 2005).

Individual differences in self-regulation may also impact individuals’ choice of emotional labor strategy. Grandey (2000) suggested that self-monitoring, the degree to which individuals regulate their self-presentation (Snyder, 1974), may relate to emotional labor. According to Grandey, high self-monitors attend more to emotional cues and are willing to alter their emotional expression. Given high self-monitors often alter their behavior to adhere with situation-specific rules (e.g., display rules) they may feign emotion more frequently (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). With these relationships in mind, we examined extraversion, emotional stability, and self-monitoring in relation to emotional labor.

Extraverts, because they enjoy social interaction, should have little need to fake positive emotions. Several studies have found extraversion to negatively relate to surface acting (Austin, Dore, & O’Donovan, 2008; Diefendorff et al., 2005). Similarly, positive affectivity has been found to negatively relate to surface acting (Beal, Trougakos, Weiss, & Green, 2006; Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005; Judge et al., 2009). Findings are not uniform, however; Bono and Vey (2007) found no relationship between extraversion and surface acting. Extraverts’ comfort during social interaction has also been demonstrated; Diefendorff et al. (2005) found extraverts expressed more naturally felt emotions, suggesting they are comfortable being genuine during social interaction. Given extraverts are inclined to experience more positive emotions, they should find it easier to express emotion naturally and have less need to fake emotions.

H₂: Extraversion will relate positively to (a) naturally felt emotion and (b) negatively to surface acting.

Emotionally unstable individuals are more anxious and stressed during interactions, making it difficult to experience positive emotions (Kiffin-Petersen, Jordan, & Soutar, 2011). They may need to fake or alter their feelings to maintain positive displays by engaging in more surface- and deep-acting. Several studies have found less emotionally stable individuals engaged in more surface acting (Austin, Dore, & O’Donovan, 2008; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Kiffin-Petersen et al., 2011). Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) found negative affectivity, a related variable, positively related to surface acting. However, Beal et al. (2006) found no

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