



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Older worker, different actor? Linking age and emotional labor strategies

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 1 July 2009

Received in revised form 7 December 2009

Accepted 10 December 2009

Available online 20 January 2010

Keywords:

Emotional labor

Emotion regulation

Industrial gerontology

Customer service

Trait affect

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine how the age of service employees influences the emotional labor process. We integrate research on socioemotional selectivity theory and emotional labor to develop hypotheses concerning the relationships between age and specific emotional labor strategies (deep acting, surface acting, and expressing naturally-felt emotions). Consistent with our expectations, we found that age was positively related to the use of deep acting and the expression of naturally-felt emotions, and negatively related to surface acting. Further, we found that trait positive affect partially-mediated some of the age-strategy relationships.

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1. Introduction

Emotional labor is the compensated management of emotional displays in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). For example, an important part of the job that a customer service representative is paid to perform is showing the customer that he or she is caring, enthusiastic, and interested in helping. Emotional labor is a common part of many service occupations with important implications for effective customer service, job performance, and the continued well-being of the employee (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Consequently, a great deal of research has focused on the individual differences that predict emotional labor choices among service employees (e.g., Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey, 2000; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000).

Despite considerable interest in the role of demographic characteristics in the emotional labor process, particularly gender (e.g., Wharton & Erickson, 1993), no research to date has examined how age is related to the performance of emotional labor. This omission is noteworthy considering the growing numbers of older adults remaining in the workforce (American Association of Retired People, 2005; He, Sengupta, Velkoff, & DeBarros, 2005) or seeking bridge employment (Adams & Rau, 2004) at retirement age into entry-level jobs that frequently involve service components. Given that a large body of research indicates that affective experiences, emotion regulation motives, and emotion regulation ability change over the lifespan (Carstensen, 2006; Gross et al., 1997; Mroczek, 2001), we expect that age should be predictive of the emotional

labor strategies that service employees utilize when interacting with customers or clients.

To test this idea, we apply aging research on socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2006) and trait positive affectivity over the lifespan to develop hypotheses linking age to different emotional labor strategies. Using the dramaturgical perspective of emotional labor described by Hochschild (1983), we submit that older adults' choices among different strategies to regulate emotional expressions at work are shaped by (a) their motivational desires to downplay negative emotional experiences and enhance positive emotional experiences, and (b) changes in the experience of trait positive affect that accompany aging through the late 60s as predicted by SST. In the sections that follow, we begin by reviewing research on the dramaturgical perspective of emotional labor to clarify the strategies that we are focusing on in this study. We then turn to a review of SST to explain why we expect age-related changes in emotional regulation motives to be related to emotional labor. Lastly, we discuss research demonstrating trends in the experience of trait affect that suggest positive affectivity should be a mediating mechanism between age and emotional labor.

1.1. Emotional labor strategies: deep acting, surface acting, and expressing naturally-felt emotions

Most previous research has described two general acting strategies that employees utilize to bring about the emotional displays that are required by their employers (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Because this approach to understanding emotional labor positions the employee as an actor responding to organizational demands, Hochschild (1983) described it as the

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dramaturgical perspective. The first dramaturgical strategy, surface acting, involves managing only the observable emotional expression; the employee suppresses internal feelings and generates inauthentic displays consistent with the organizational demands. For example, a waiter faced with a table of indecisive diners might surface act by generating a fake smile despite his unchanged internal feelings of irritation over the delay. In past research, surface acting has been described as “acting in bad faith” (Grandey, 2000).

In contrast, the second dramaturgical strategy, deep acting, involves managing actual feelings. When deep acting, employees proactively change their feelings to elicit an authentic emotional display that is consistent with organizational requirements. For example, a tour guide who expects to interact with visitors soon might choose to deliberately reflect on positive thoughts to elicit a positive mood, which subsequently generates natural displays of happiness and enthusiasm. Deep acting has consequently been described as “acting in good faith” because the display is genuinely linked to underlying emotional experiences (Grandey, 2000).

Although both surface and deep acting can be functional responses to workplace demands (Côté, 2005), past research indicates that, in aggregate, these strategies yield different outcomes. Specifically, surface acting is generally related to undesirable outcomes for the employee and the organization; for example, several studies have found that surface acting is positively related to the different components of burnout (i.e., depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008; Zammuner & Galli, 2005) and providing poor or inappropriate affective delivery (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003). These outcomes are generally attributed to the continued effort that must be put into faking an emotion when surface acting. Conversely, deep acting is unrelated to many of these negative outcomes and is associated with more desirable states, including an enhanced sense of professional efficacy and affective well-being (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008). The pattern of findings reported in past research suggests that organizations stand to benefit by encouraging employees to deep act instead of surface act when customer interactions are necessary (Bono & Vey, 2005).

Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand (2005) expanded on the dramaturgical perspective by presenting a third “strategy”, which they called expressing naturally-felt emotions (NFE). They observed that employees sometimes naturally feel emotions consistent with organizational display demands and, in those circumstances, no additional “acting” would be required. Accordingly, natural emotions can sometimes be shown without any regulatory modification. Although research to date on expressing NFEs is extremely limited, Diefendorff et al.’s (2005) findings clearly indicate that it is a means of providing emotional labor that is conceptually and statistically distinct from surface or deep acting.

1.2. Socioemotional selectivity theory and emotional labor

SST is one of the most influential theories of lifespan development in recent aging research (Ready & Robinson, 2008). The central reasoning behind SST is that emotions, and especially positive emotional experiences, become more salient to people as they become older because they realize that their lifespan is finite. In an interest to derive the most pleasure from their remaining time, people become increasingly motivated to maximize the experience of positive emotions and minimize the experience of negative emotions as they age (Charles & Carstensen, 2007; Consedine & Magai, 2006; Ready & Robinson, 2008). Much research is supportive of this proposition, suggesting that the desire to regulate emotions to feel more positive grows over the lifespan (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004; Consedine & Magai, 2006). Additionally research indicates that adults develop both greater emotion regulation skill

as they age (Gross et al., 1997) and a biased tendency to filter out negative situational information (Mather & Carstensen, 2005), suggesting that older adults have both the motive and the ability to down-regulate negative emotional experiences in the interest of feeling more consistently positive (Carstensen & Turk-Charles, 1994).

Interestingly, some research on SST indicates that these changes in emotion regulation help older adults manage interpersonal situations more effectively. For example, Birditt and Fingerman (2005) found that older adults utilized more effective conflict management strategies than younger adults in tense interactions with both unfamiliar and well-known interaction targets. These gains in interpersonal effectiveness again suggest that older adults may approach customer service interactions and emotional labor differently relative to younger adults.

Despite the relevance of these changes in emotion regulation motives and ability for service employees, emotional labor theorists have not considered how the age-related changes described by SST align with the emotional labor strategies noted previously. We suggest that the emotion regulation motivations of older adults align with the emotional labor strategy of deep acting. In service settings, organizations typically call for integrative displays of positive emotions like happiness and enthusiasm (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Deep acting involves evoking these appropriate emotional displays by changing the emotions one is feeling to those that are consistent with the desired emotional display. Consequently, deep acting is a strategy that fits well with the natural motivational tendencies of older adults; they want to genuinely down-regulate negative emotions to feel more positive, and deep acting involves a genuine change from feeling negative or neutral to feeling positive to elicit a genuine, positive emotional display. We therefore expect that age and deep acting should be positively related; as people grow older, deep acting becomes a strategic orientation that is increasingly consistent with their natural emotion regulation motives.

Based on SST, a second strategy that should also be frequently employed with increasing age is the expression of naturally-felt emotions (NFE). Expressing NFEs occurs when the service employee happens to be feeling positive emotions consistent with the desired display, like happiness, so no additional regulation is required. Because older adults are more motivated to feel positive all of the time, including during their time at work, we again expect that age will be positively related to expressing NFE.

In contrast, we submit that surface acting should be negatively related to age. Surface acting involves merely faking the appearance of a positive emotion without changing the original, incompatible internal feeling. Given that SST research has demonstrated that older adults are motivated to down-regulate negative feelings (e.g., Carstensen, 2006), we find it unlikely that they would choose to simply fake positive emotions and continue feeling negative emotions inside, such as irritation or anxiety. This strategic orientation contrasts strongly with the motives described by SST, and we consequently expect that surface acting will be utilized less often by older adults.

To summarize, we expect main effects of age on emotional labor strategies due to changes in emotion regulation motives over the lifespan described by SST. However, SST also offers more specific indirect mechanisms through which age may influence emotional labor, such as increased positive affect. Because these changes in affect may complement the regulatory motives described by SST, we next present a rationale for how trait affectivity partially mediates the age-emotional labor relationships.

1.3. Trait positive affectivity as a mediator between age and emotional labor

In addition to the changes in self-regulatory motivations discussed previously, SST also posits that well-being may improve

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