Age, emotion regulation strategies, burnout, and engagement in the service sector: Advantages of older workers

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**Abstract**

Organizations face a progressively ageing workforce and jobs with direct customer contact are growing, creating challenging issues from a human resource management perspective. Drawing on socioemotional selectivity theory and lifespan development findings, this study focuses on the research gap in the service sector with regard to age, emotional labour, and associated positive and negative outcomes. Analyses using data from 444 service employees in Germany revealed age is negatively directly related to exhaustion and cynicism, and positively directly related to professional efficacy, as well as positively directly linked to engagement. Additionally, age predicts less burnout and more engagement indirectly through the use of the emotion regulation strategies surface acting and anticipative deep acting. This provides evidence against the general deficit hypothesis of age, which assumes a decline of employee skills and abilities with age. We find no evidence that older workers are worse than younger workers, with older workers using positive emotion regulation strategies, being more engaged and less burnt out.

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**Edad, estrategias de regulación emocional, burnout e implicación laboral en el sector servicios: ventajas en los trabajadores mayores**

Las organizaciones se enfrentan a una mano de obra cada vez más envejecida y los puestos de trabajo de contacto con el público, en aumento, están planteando problemas desde la perspectiva de gestión de los recursos humanos. Basándonos en de la teoría de la selectividad socioemocional y en los descubrimientos sobre la evolución de la duración de la vida, este estudio centra su atención en el vacío de investigación que hay en el sector público con respecto a la edad, el trabajo emocional y resultados asociados positivos y negativos. Los análisis con 444 empleados en el sector servicios de Alemania han puesto de manifiesto que la edad se relaciona de un modo directo negativamente con el agotamiento emocional y con el cinismo, así como positivamente con la eficacia profesional y también con la implicación laboral. Además, la edad predice menos burnout y más compromiso laboral indirectamente, a través de la actuación superficial y de la actuación anticipatoria profunda mediante la utilización de estrategias de regulación emocional. Este hecho es una prueba contra la hipótesis de déficit general de la edad, que supone que las destrezas y aptitudes de los trabajadores disminuyen con la edad. No hemos comprobado que los trabajadores mayores sean peores que los jóvenes; es más, utilizan estrategias positivas de regulación emocional, tienen una mayor implicación laboral y un menor burnout.

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The population of industrialised countries is changing with an increasingly ageing workforce. Along with changes in pension and retirement eligibility, this influences the age composition of the workforce, which means good knowledge of how age differences affect work variables is needed (Rauschenbach, Krumm, Thielen, & Hertel, 2013) to underpin human resource practices. Indeed, employment rates of older workers (aged 55–64) have already increased in Europe from 40.6 percent to 53.3 percent between 2004 and 2015 (Eurostat, 2016). However, although the employment rate of older workers has increased, many employers seem reluctant to hire older workers as reflected by the lower reemployment rate of these workers compared to the total workforce. Despite anti-age discrimination policies, there continues to be age-related stereotypes about abilities and performance declining after 50 years of age. Even HR Managers responsible for designing and implementing age-related policies often hold stereotypical views of older (and younger) workers (Parry & Tyson, 2009). Specifically, this perception may be due to the widespread deficit hypothesis, which assumes a general decline of skills, abilities, and performance of older workers. This general deficit hypothesis may not be accurate, as although physical skills and abilities (Maertens, Putter, Chen, Diehl, & Huang, 2012) and cognitive abilities (Lindenberger & Ghisletta, 2009) may deteriorate with age, older workers demonstrate advantages through knowledge and experience (Baltes, Freund, & Li, 2005) and attitudes, motivation, and performance (Ng & Feldman, 2008, 2010).

Social and emotional competencies are relevant to most jobs; however, they have found only limited attention in the discussion of older employee skills and abilities (e.g., Johnson, Holdsworth, Hoel, & Zapf, 2013). Social skills and abilities are especially relevant for the service sector where interactions with clients are frequent, and emotion regulation is a core social competence in such job roles. The importance of employees having good social competence skills is evident when considering the growth of the service sector and the worldwide increase in jobs that involve direct customer contact (Prati, Liu, Perrewé, & Ferris, 2009).

Service organisations have expectations of customer-employee interactions with the aim of engendering customer satisfaction. Display rules are often in place that dictate how employees are meant to behave within a service encounter and which emotions are appropriate for employees to show (Ekman, 1973). Display rules are believed to increase strain on employees (e.g., Rohrmann, Bechtoldt, Hopp, Hodapp, & Zapf, 2011) and interacting with customers is thought to be psychologically draining (Walsh & Bartkowski, 2013). The literature on emotional labour has shown that service workers use a substantial number of emotion regulation strategies (Cho, Rutherford, & Park, 2013) to try and meet display rules (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005). Emotional labour is described as having ‘human cost’ and the requirement of employees showing positive emotions can deplete resources, hinder task performance, and threaten well-being (Grandy, Rupp, & Brice, 2015).

This study addresses the need to focus on a broader working lifespan (Scheibe & Zacher, 2013) regarding emotional labour, age, burnout, and engagement in the service sector. Our main question is: are older workers not as good at emotional labour due to a decline in social competencies, as suggested by the deficit hypothesis? Or, as we argue, older workers have social competencies that facilitate emotional labour, thus reducing the likelihood of emotional exhaustion linked to “people work” (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002) and the potential for stress related absence and turnover. We expect this study to enhance understanding of the benefits of an ageing workforce in the context of service work, thus adding value to human resource practices, such as selection and recruitment, and training.

In order to investigate this, we first present the emotional labour concept and develop hypotheses on age and emotion regulation. In a second step, we introduce the concept of burnout and engagement and present hypotheses on the links between age, emotion regulation, and burnout/engagement. In a final step, we propose that emotion regulation strategies may mediate the relationship between age and burnout and engagement. The study is cross-sectional; however, the design is not inappropriate as age cannot be reverse caused.

**Emotional Labour Strategies**

Hochschild (1983) described two main types of emotional labour strategies: surface acting, where employees alter their outward expression to ‘fake’ emotions but their inner feelings remain unchanged, and deep acting, which involves employees changing their inner feelings to feel and display the appropriate emotion. Grandey (2015) details how both field and lab based studies typically report surface acting as ‘bad’ for individual’s well-being and deep acting as ‘good’ for job related outcomes. Most papers when discussing deep acting refer to situational deep acting (e.g., Hochschild, 1983), where the strategy is developed in the situation itself and the employee tries to influence their emotional response during the interaction. However, employees sometimes use anticipative deep acting by emotionally preparing for a situation prior to the interaction, e.g., a nurse thinking about a seriously ill patient, which may increase her ability to show an appropriate emotion or her feelings of sympathy, before the interaction starts, or where group talks and songs are used in meetings to help increase positive emotions (Nisley, Taylor, & Butler, 2002). In this paper we differentiate between such situational and anticipative deep acting (von Gilsa, Zapf, Ohly, Trumpold, & Machowski, 2014). While surface acting is a response-focused emotion regulation strategy with regulation after the emotion has already developed, deep acting is antecedent-focused with regulation before an emotion fully develops (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1999a; Hulshgeger & Schewe, 2011).

The faking of emotions, as seen in surface acting, is related to less pleasant customer interactions (Hulshgeger & Schewe, 2011). Customers can detect the superficial nature of surface acting leading to dissatisfaction with the service encounter (Zapf, 2002). Surface acting is shown to have direct links with turnover (Goodwin, Groth, & Frenkel, 2011; Scott & Barnes, 2011), indirect links to turnover through emotional exhaustion (Chau, Dahling, Levy, & Diefendorff, 2009), and a significant negative influence on organisational citizenship behaviours (Prentice, Chen, & King, 2013). Service workers report more contentment with their authenticity and performance when they deep act rather than surface act (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Compared to surface acting, deep acting should serve to reduce the gap between expected (via display rules) and displayed emotions, and thus lead to more positive employee experiences. The aim of deep acting is to bring felt emotions in line with required emotions. Hulshgeger and Schewe (2011) reported a positive relationship for deep acting and performance, and research into emotional labour generally agrees that only deep acting is related to enhanced task performance (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Deep acting changes emotions into positive ones, which should mean fewer negative consequences for well-being (Gabriel, Daniels, Diefendorff, & Greguras, 2015; Hulshgeger & Schewe, 2011).

A number of studies have looked at customer outcomes (Grandey, 2003; Groth, Henning-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009; Henning-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006) with results showing a negative relationship with surface acting, and a positive relationship with deep acting, on outcomes such as service quality, customer orientation, and loyalty intentions. These effects can be explained by the customers’ evaluation of how authentically they are being treated by the employee’s emotional display (Yagil, 2012).
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