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Is all support equal? The moderating effects of supervisor, coworker, and organizational support on the link between emotional labor and job performance

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Abstract This study was designed to examine the moderating roles of perceived supervisor, coworker, and organizational support in the relationship between emotional labor and job performance in the airline service context. A sample of flight attendants working for one major airline company in South Korea participated in this study. The flight attendants' official job performance data were provided by the airline company. For data analyses, a series of hierarchical moderated regression analyses were employed. The results showed differential moderation effects of the three sources of support at work. Specifically, the positive relationship between deep acting and job performance was strengthened by perceived supervisor and coworker support. The negative relationship between surface acting and job performance was exacerbated by perceived supervisor support, indicating the reverse buffering effect. Perceived organizational support showed only main effects on employee performance with no moderation effects.

Introduction

Over the past decade, emotional labor has been a popular research topic among service academics because of the nature of service jobs requiring responding to guests with a smile at all times. Many service work settings have been used by researchers studying emotional labor: retail shops, hotels, restaurants, cruise ships, airline, and tour companies (Duke et al., 2009; Hur et al., 2015; Lee and Ok, 2012; Lee et al., 2015; Pizam, 2004; Seymour, 2000; Van Dijk et al., 2011). Emotional labor, ''the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display'' (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7), significantly influences both individual and organizational outcomes, ranging from

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employees' physical/psychological well-being to their job satisfaction and job performance (e.g., Brotheridge and Lee, 2003; Hur et al., 2015; Morris and Feldman, 1997).

Since the concept was formulated, researchers have debated its sub-dimensions (Brotheridge and Lee, 2003; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Morris and Feldman, 1997) and its antecedents and consequences (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Grandey, 2000; Pugliesi, 1999; Schaubroeck and Jones, 2000). Although the sheer number of articles on emotional labor has grown, most of them have focused on direct relationships involving predictors and outcomes of emotional labor. Little work has been conducted to examine moderating variables between employees' emotional labor and their work outcomes (Duke et al., 2009). In particular, there appears to be a need to explore under what conditions employees' emotional labor increases or reduces job performance.

Following in the footsteps of previous studies (Chen et al., 2012; Duke et al., 2009; Grandey, 2000; Hur et al., 2015; Nixon et al., 2011), we believe that the situation in which employees work can function as a moderator in the link between emotional labor and employee outcomes. One of the salient moderators identified is social support perceived by employees from various entities in the company. Workplace social support emanates from multiple sources, such as supervisors, coworkers and employing organizations (Kossek et al., 2011). For instance, Abraham (1998) suggested that workplace social support (i.e., supervisor, coworker, and organizational support) can attenuate the harmful effects of stress caused by emotional labor, pointing to the moderating effects of workplace social support on the relationship between emotional dissonance and job satisfaction. Studies by Duke et al. (2009) and Nixon et al. (2011) showed perceived organizational support to be a moderator between emotional labor and several job outcomes in retail service firms and a mobile phone company respectively. More recently, Chen et al. (2012) presented interactions between perceived supervisor support and emotional labor in the hotel work setting. However, coworker support has received less attention in the workplace support literature than has supervisor or organizational support (Ng and Sorensen, 2008). Similarly, the possible moderating role of perceived coworker support has been neglected in the emotional labor literature.

According to Leavy (1983), while workplace social support has been widely discussed in the literature, the concept of social support itself remains loosely defined. Furthermore, many studies have used the constructs of supervisor, coworker, or organizational support without providing a clear distinction between them. For example, perceived coworker support and perceived supervisor support have often been combined into a single variable in the examination of social support effects (e.g., Ducharme and Martin, 2000; Karatepe, 2010), despite supervisors and coworkers playing different roles in assisting frontline employees (Susskind et al., 2007). Furthermore, there is also a conceptual confusion between perceived supervisor support and perceived organizational support, with supervisor support being sometimes used as a proxy for organizational support (e.g., Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Therefore, we have attempted to fill the gap in the literature by examining the moderating roles of three types of support (e.g. supervisor, coworker and organizational support) on the emotional labor–job performance link within the same study.

Overall, the objectives and contributions of this article are three-pronged. First, it broadens the understanding of emotional labor and its outcomes by including the various sources of support as moderators within the same study. To make up for the missing but much-needed information on the moderating role of perceived coworker support in the emotional labor literature and to rule out any conceptual confusion between the various sources of support, this study included all three major support entities (organization, supervisors and coworkers) in the workplace and treated them independently in the proposed model. To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to introduce these three important sources of social support in one study with emotional labor as a stressor. By addressing this issue, this study may develop a clearer understanding of the effects of workplace social support on the emotional labor and job performance link. Second, we took into consideration the differences between the two acting modes of emotional labor (i.e., deep acting and surface acting), and hypothesized interactions between the three sources of support and each acting mode to provide a more comprehensive view on the roles of different support moderators. Finally, following Hochschild (1983), this study used flight attendants from one airline company in South Korea as study subjects. A dataset of fight attendants in South Korea, characterized as a strong collectivist culture (Hofstede et al., 2010), may provide an opportunity for cultural comparison in contrast to Western individualism.

In summary, this study is designed to answer the following three research questions: (1) do work-based sources of support function as moderators between contact employees' emotional labor and job performance in the airline service context?; (2) what are the differences between the three work-based support moderators?; and (3) can we conclude that the three sources of workplace social support are unique and distinctive entities? The following section explores the relevant literature and presents the proposed hypotheses.

Literature review and hypotheses development

Emotional labor and its consequences

Hochschild (1983) coined the term *emotional labor* after observing the tendency of flight attendants to express socially desirable emotions in a job situation in compliance with the display rules of the organization. The act of displaying socially-desired emotions has been argued to be a form of ''emotional labor'' since it demands an effort on the part of employees to manage their emotional expression or change their inner feelings in order to facilitate task effectiveness and employee effectiveness (Hochschild, 1983). Although there are many definitions of emotional labor in the literature, the regulation of feelings and expressions at work are the common understanding of the concept (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Emotional labor requires employees to use emotion regulation strategies at work for resolving emotional dissonance