The present study investigates the relationship between the emotional labor strategies surface acting and deep acting and organizational outcomes, specifically, employees’ overall job performance and turnover. Call center employees from two large financial service organizations completed an online survey about their use of surface and deep acting. Their responses were matched with supervisors’ ratings of overall job performance and organizational turnover records obtained 9 months later. Results indicate that surface acting is directly related to employee turnover and emotional exhaustion and that the relationship between surface acting and job performance is indirect via employee affective delivery. Deep acting was not linked to these outcomes. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed from the perspective of emotional labor theories.
beyond prior research that either used broad measures of emotional labor (Duke, Goodman, Treadway, & Breland, 2009) or used self-report (Totterdell & Holman, 2003) or laboratory-based measures of performance (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007) to examine the link between specific emotional labor strategies and core job performance in an applied setting. The mediating roles of emotional exhaustion and affective delivery are also explored.


Building on Hochschild’s (1983) work, Grandey (2000) developed a comprehensive conceptual framework of emotional labor that draws on emotion regulation theory (Gross, 1999). The model suggests that employees’ emotional labor strategies will result in several well-being outcomes for individuals (increased job satisfaction and reduced burnout and stress) and organizations (improved employee performance and reduced turnover).

Although there is considerable empirical evidence illustrating the effects of emotional labor on employee well-being outcomes, the relationship between emotional labor and organizational outcomes has received far less empirical attention, despite strong theoretical support for such a link (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983; Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Indeed, a strong assumption underlying organizations’ requirement that employees display positive emotions is that such sincere emotional displays (or good ‘affective delivery’) are believed to result in favorable organizational outcomes including increased employee and customer retention, higher employee performance, and ultimately, improved organizational performance (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Given this theoretical justification, the present research contributes to the emotional labor literature by examining the links between the emotional labor strategies of surface and deep acting and two critical organizational outcomes: employees’ overall job performance and turnover behavior. In addition, we go beyond Grandey’s (2000) predictions and examine affective delivery (i.e., the authenticity with which an employee expresses required emotions) and emotional exhaustion as two key mediators of these relationships. Furthermore, this study makes an important methodological contribution by using actual rather than self-reported measures of turnover and performance. With few exceptions (Chau, Dahling, Levy, & Diefendorff, 2009), research linking emotional labor to turnover, employee well-being (e.g., stress and burnout) and to performance have relied on employee self-reports (e.g., Abraham, 1999; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Côté & Morgan, 2002; Pugliesi, 1999; Totterdell & Holman, 2003) or proxies such as the number of errors committed in a laboratory as a substitute for job performance (Sideman & Grandey, 2007). We utilize three independent sources of data—employee self-reports, supervisor ratings of job performance, and organizational turnover records—in order to examine the relationship between emotional labor and organizational outcomes. This approach reduces the potential effects of common method bias on the results, and improves on previous research by concentrating on two rather than a single dependent variable. The overall conceptual model guiding the present research is illustrated in Fig. 1.

2. Emotional labor and employee performance

Employee performance—the actions and behaviors that are controlled by the individual and contribute to the goals of the organization (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002)—is an important construct since it often informs reward and discipline decisions. In a service work context employee performance refers to both tangible service delivery and intangible aspects such as interpersonal behavior and emotional display (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Bowen & Schneider, 1988). Emotional labor strategies are particularly important in the context of customer service, because employee behavior during service delivery (e.g., empathy, responsiveness) is often perceived by customers as the most critical aspect of service quality (Bitner et al., 1990). In particular, employees’ positive emotional displays are typically central to the customer service experience (Bailey, Gremler, & McCollough, 2001) and are associated with favorable customer evaluations (Mattila & Enz, 2002; Tsai & Huang, 2002). Given this centrality, and

Fig. 1. Theoretical model and study hypotheses.
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