



The big five, emotional exhaustion and citizenship behaviors in service settings: The mediating role of emotional labor

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ABSTRACT

Emotional labor has been widely studied because of its association with emotional exhaustion. Individual differences in emotional labor however, have attracted less research attention. This study examined the mediating role of emotional labor in the relationship between the big five, emotional exhaustion and organizational citizenship behaviors. Using structural equation modeling it was found that emotionally unstable individuals tended to surface act and this was associated with increased emotional exhaustion. In contrast, agreeable and extraverted individuals engaged in more deep acting and this had a positive association with self-reported citizenship behaviors. The implications of the results for future research and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Emotional labor, which Grandey (2000, p. 97) defined as “the process of regulating both feelings and expressions for organizational goals”, is integral to service workers, including professionals, sales representatives and front-line service providers (Hochschild, 1983). Prior research has found emotional labor is related to emotional exhaustion (Bono & Vey, 2005), making its study a research priority (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Daus, 2002). However, the influence individual differences have on emotional labor is not well understood. Judge, Woolf, and Hurst (2009) concluded that personality differences were important in understanding the differential impact of emotional labor on employees working in service roles. If so, this has important implications for the selection of employees who interact with customers.

Some studies have found a relationship between the big five (i.e., extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, emotional stability, openness to experience) and emotional exhaustion in jobs high in emotional labor (e.g., Bakker, Van Der Zee, Lewig, & Dollard, 2006; Cano-Garcia, Padilla-Muñoz, & Carrasco-Ortiz, 2005; Zellars, Perrewé, & Hochwarter, 2000). A relationship has also been found between personality and organizational citizenship behaviors (OCBs) (Borman, Penner, Allen, & Motowidlo, 2001; Ilies, Fulmer, Spitzmuller, & Johnson, 2009; Organ & Ryan, 1995), that is, “individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organiza-

tion” (Organ, 1988, p. 4). OCBs can be differentiated depending on whether the beneficiary is an individual, such as helping a colleague (OCBI), or the organization, such as working extra hours (OCBO) (Williams & Anderson, 1991). Here, we test whether surface and deep acting mediate the relationship between the big five, emotional exhaustion and OCBs, as shown in Fig. 1. We examine the big five because they are critical to job performance in service settings (Barrick & Mount, 2005; Forero, Gallardo-Pujol, Maydeu-Olivares, & Andrés-Pueyo, 2009; Mount, Barrick, & Stewart, 1998).

According to Grandey (2000), emotional regulation is necessary in service settings because employees are required to express emotions that are consistent with norms, or organizational rules, about the appropriate emotional display for the situation. Recent research has primarily focused on understanding the emotion regulation strategies of surface and deep acting (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). Surface acting occurs when individuals modify their outward emotion and body language to conform to rules without changing their inner feelings, while deep acting involves efforts to change internal feelings to match the display (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting may still be needed when deep acting to prevent any remaining negative feelings from showing in an employee's facial expression (Grandey, 2003). A good person-job fit should mean there is less need for an employee to surface or deep act, as they are more likely to spontaneously experience the required emotions.

Extraverts, who are outgoing, talkative and sociable, have less need to surface act as they naturally experience positive emotions during service interactions (Barrick & Mount, 2005). They should also find it easier to deep act (Cheung & Tang, 2009) and be less emotionally exhausted than introverts (Judge et al., 2009).

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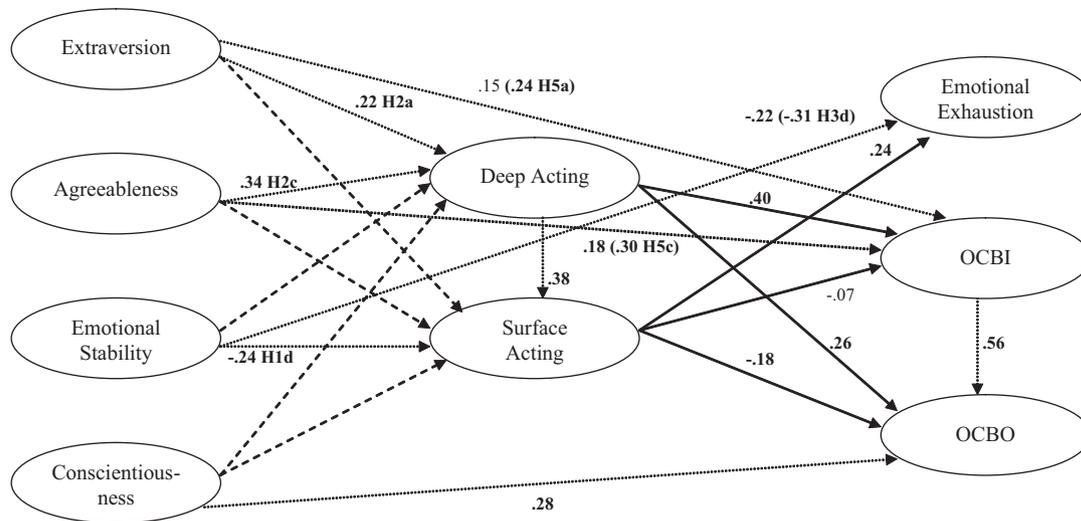


Fig. 1. Standardized parameter estimates for the mediation model of surface and deep acting. Note: Bolded paths indicate constrained relationships for mediation. Bolded beta values represent significant standardized path coefficients ($p < .01$). Values in parentheses are path coefficients when the bolded paths are constrained to zero. Significant and non-significant relationships for Model 2 are shown by the dotted and dashed lines respectively.

Extraversion was positively related to deep acting and negatively related to surface acting among part-time employed students (Austin, Dore, & O'Donovan, 2008; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005). Tan, Foo, Chong, and Ng (2003) also found extraversion was positively related to facial displays of positive emotions (e.g., smiling) among cashiers.

People who are high in conscientiousness are careful, dependable, hard-working and organized and, as a result, tend to perform better, irrespective of their occupation (Barrick & Mount, 1991, 2005). Given the diligence with which conscientious people approach their work roles, it seems plausible they would work hard at deep acting in order to modify their inner feelings so as to actually experience a required emotion (Grandey, 2000). However, studies of conscientious employees are somewhat mixed, suggesting they may be more inclined to surface act, than deep act (Austin et al., 2008; Diefendorff et al., 2005).

Agreeableness is considered to be a critical personality attribute of employees who interact with customers (Barrick & Mount, 2005; Mount et al., 1998). Since agreeable people genuinely care about other peoples' well-being, they are more likely to be empathic about customer needs through deep acting and to have less need to surface act. Their more trusting and forgiving nature may lead to the development of mutually rewarding and satisfying relations with their customers. However, two studies have found agreeableness was positively correlated with surface and deep acting (Austin et al., 2008; Diefendorff et al., 2005).

A person who is emotionally unstable tends to be anxious, insecure and tense (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Prior studies have shown emotionally unstable people are more likely to surface act during interactions, presumably because it is more difficult for them to change their feelings (Austin et al., 2008; Cheung & Tang, 2009; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Tan et al., 2003). Individuals high in neuroticism may also find it difficult to cope with the stress associated with negative events with customers and, thus, also experience difficulty displaying positive emotions (Tan et al., 2003).

Tan et al. (2003) argued there is no theoretical reason why openness to experience should be related to the regulation of positive emotions, such as smiling at customers. Prior studies by Diefendorff et al. (2005) and Austin et al. (2008) found no relationship between openness to experience and emotion regulation. Given the lack of theoretical and empirical support we do not hypothesize a relationship between openness to experience and emotional labor.

Emotional exhaustion is a significant component of job burnout and is often a consequence of 'people work' (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). A recent meta-analysis found surface acting is associated with emotional exhaustion (Bono & Vey, 2005). Hobfoll's (1989) conservation of resources theory has been suggested as a possible explanation for this (Brotheridge & Lee, 2003). Because surface acting requires a person to consciously alter their outward emotional display at the same time they are experiencing another emotion, greater emotional dissonance is involved than with deep acting (Martínez-Inigo, Totterdell, Alcover, & Holman, 2007). In jobs involving frequent and prolonged contact with customers, a person's emotional reserves can become depleted, especially when they receive little emotional support. A self-reinforcing and self-defeating cycle may eventuate in which an employee misguidedly continues to surface act to try and preserve their energy.

Personality may be an important influence on whether employees practice surface acting and therefore, experience emotional exhaustion. Although neuroticism has been found to be related to nurses' (Zellars et al., 2000) and counselors' (Bakker et al., 2006) emotional exhaustion, the mechanisms by which it influences exhaustion has received less research attention. Introverted, unconscientious, disagreeable and emotionally unstable employees are less able to experience positive emotions during service encounters and, therefore, have more need to surface act. Their increased surface acting may be associated with increased emotional exhaustion.

There is also little research into the mechanisms by which personality influences OCBs (Ilies et al., 2009), despite the performance of OCBs being critical to organizational effectiveness (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000). In service settings, the extent to which an employee engages in surface and deep acting may influence whether they perform OCBs. Halbesleben and Bowler (2007) suggested that, as an employee becomes emotionally exhausted from surface acting, they may increase their performance of OCBs as a way to obtain social support. The benefits of helping colleagues, for example, may outweigh the energy expenditure. However, it is also possible employees who expend considerable effort in surface acting in high emotional demand jobs may be less willing to engage in OCBs due to the perceived energy involved. Salami (2007) found a negative relationship between surface acting and OCB and a positive relationship between deep acting and OCB in a study of public servants. Deep acting may engender a good mood at work because the person actively tries

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