Linking emotion regulation strategies to affective events and negative emotions at work

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the use of specific forms of emotion regulation at work, utilizing Gross's [Gross, J. J. (1998). The emerging field of emotion regulation: An integrative review. Review of General Psychology 2, 271–299] process-based framework of emotion regulation as a guiding structure. In addition to examining employee self-reported usage of these emotion regulation strategies, we assessed the types of discrete negative emotions and negative affective events associated with their use. Results demonstrated that employees reported using a wide variety of emotion regulation strategies, and that each strategy tended to align with a distinct set of discrete negative emotions and affective events. These findings support expanding the focus of emotion regulation strategies at work beyond the deep acting (i.e., changing feelings) and surface acting (i.e., changing expressions) distinction. The results also suggest that focusing on specific strategies, rather than categories of emotion regulation, could enhance understanding of how employees manage their emotions at work.

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In her book, *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1983) formally articulated the idea that employees often get paid for controlling their feelings and emotional expressions, particularly when interacting with customers. Hochschild named this phenomenon *emotional labor* and identified two main strategies by which individuals manage their emotional displays: surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting has been described as "faking in bad faith" and involves expressing the organizationally-desired emotion and hiding an undesired emotion, whereas deep acting is considered to be "faking in good faith" as it involves changing one's felt emotion so that the emotional expressions naturally match display requirements (Grandey, 2000; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). Although these emotion regulation strategies predict a variety of individual and organizational outcomes (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002), some researchers have proposed that a broader, more detailed set of emotion regulation strategies (ERS) may better represent the ways in which individuals manage their emotions at work (e.g., Grandey & Brauburger, 2002). Guided by this view, we explored the use of several ERS derived from Gross's (1998) process model of emotion regulation in the work context. We also examined the negative emotions and events that were associated with the use of these ERS. Below, we outline our research questions and present a study that examines them.

1. Emotion regulation strategies

Although research on surface acting and deep acting has yielded valuable information (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005), emotion regulation is recognized as being more complex and multifaceted than this

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distinction would suggest (e.g., Gross, 2002). Gross (1998, 2002) proposed a process-oriented model of emotion regulation by theorizing that emotions may be regulated by (a) altering the stimulus or perceptions of the stimulus (antecedent-focused regulation), or (b) altering the response to the stimulus (response-focused regulation). Gross (1998) further divided antecedent-focused emotion regulation into four categories (situation selection, situation modification, attentional deployment, and cognitive change), resulting in five ERS categories.

Situation selection involves choosing to approach or avoid certain stimuli (people, places, or objects) as a way to regulate felt emotions. For example, employees may choose to avoid people who tell offensive jokes that upset them, or choose to be around people who make them feel good. Once individuals are in a situation, they may engage in *situation modification*, which involves changing the situation so as to alter its emotional impact on oneself. For example, an employee who is serving two customers at once may ask a fellow employee to assist one customer so as to prevent the occurrence of negative emotions that could result from role overload or serving an impatient customer.

Attentional deployment and cognitive change are used after an event has occurred but before a full-blown affective reaction (Gross, 1998). *Attentional deployment* involves focusing one's attention away from the emotion-provoking event or target by using techniques such as distraction (i.e., turning attention away from a situation), concentration (i.e., becoming absorbed in a different activity), or positive refocus (i.e., doing something enjoyable). For example, after a difficult customer interaction, an employee may think about fun plans for the evening or look at pictures of a family vacation in order to lift his/her mood. Alternatively, the employee may decide to work on an enjoyable task or a task in which he/she can become absorbed. *Cognitive change* strategies focus on reappraising or reinterpreting situations so as to modify their subjective meaning, thereby altering the emotional impact of the situation on the person. Cognitive change strategies include techniques such as perspective taking (e.g., considering how another person feels), cognitive re-framing (e.g., thinking about how a situation could be worse) and reappraisal (i.e., interpreting a situation differently). Hochschild's (1983) example of an employee thinking of difficult customers as small children needing help is an example of cognitive change. Other examples include considering a conflict situation from the other person's perspective or re-framing a failure situation as a learning opportunity.

After individuals experience an emotion, they may attempt to change their emotional displays using response modulation. *Response modulation* is comprised of two distinct, but related strategies: faking unfelt emotions and concealing felt emotions. For example, an employee who is angry at a customer may express no emotion so as to conceal what is felt. Alternatively, an employee who is affectively neutral may simulate a smile so as to appear enthusiastic. Individuals also may use both strategies together, such as when an employee is depressed but covers it with a smile in front of customers (Grandey & Brauburger, 2002).

Grandey (2000) proposed that deep acting and surface acting are roughly equivalent to antecedent-focused and response-focused emotion regulation, respectively. However, we see at least two points of departure between the framework proposed by Gross's (1998) and that by Hochschild (1983). First, and perhaps most obviously, Gross (1998) argued for four distinct antecedent-focused ERS, whereas deep acting is characterized as a general strategy in which effort is put forth to change one's emotions, rendering the different antecedent-focused strategies as being functionally-equivalent. Second, close examination of the definitions of deep acting and surface acting reveal that they are laden with motives (e.g., Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987), whereas the ERS in Gross's (1998) framework are not. Specifically, deep acting indicates a sincere attempt to meet the emotional display requirements, whereas surface acting is a cynical attempt to do so. The implication is that anytime employees fake or suppress emotions they are being cynical and anytime they make an effort to change their feelings they are being sincere. However, it seems quite reasonable that individuals can use any ERS for a variety of reasons (e.g., individuals can suppress feelings for sincere or cynical reasons).

Although recent theoretical treatments of emotion management at work have incorporated Gross's (1998) categories of ERS (e.g., Grandey & Brauburger, 2002), no empirical work has examined strategies from all five categories in a work context. In the present study, we examined whether and, to what extent, employees use ERS from Gross's categories in organizational settings, as well as the emotions and events associated with their use.

2. Emotion regulation, affective events, and discrete negative emotions

A key issue that we wished to understand is which ERS employees use at work. We identified two studies that examined the frequency of use of a large number of ERS (Thayer, Newman, & McClain, 1994; Totterdell & Parkinson, 1999). Thayer et al. (1994) investigated strategies for handling bad moods in non-work contexts and found large differences in their frequency of use. Totterdell and Parkinson (1999) found differences in the use of specific ERS in a sample of teacher trainees. However, these studies did not assess or compare ERS that are explicitly derived from Gross's (1998, 2002) five categories (e.g., no response modulation strategies were examined in either study). As a first step in understanding the frequency of use of these strategies at work, we pursued the following research question.

Research Question 1: Which ERS do employees report using most often?

The second main purpose of this study was to understand the circumstances associated with the use of ERS at work. As described by Grandey and Brauburger (2002), affective events at work and the emotions experienced by individuals should be the most proximal determinants of emotion regulation. This basic notion—occurrences at work impact feelings, and these feelings impact a variety of outcomes—is outlined in detail in Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) Affective Events Theory. Recent