

Faking it: A Conceptual Discussion on Emotional Labor, Emotional Dissonance and Emotional Intelligence

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Abstract

Emotional labor is a construct that is intertwined with the hospitality industry as employees are required to accommodate certain behavior or emotion to conform with the idea of providing excellent and sincere service to guests or customers. The concept of emotional labor will be further investigated and so does the implication of its utilization. In mentioning emotional labor, one would relate it with emotional dissonance as emotional labor has two forms which are surface acting and deep acting. The internal conflict between the inner feeling and displayed emotion is what termed emotional dissonance. The hospitality industry requires their employees to present their selves in a certain way as prescribed by each establishment. Thus, there are bound to be dissonances in the emotions of the employees. Previous literature also supports the idea of emotional intelligence playing a role in emotional labor with emotional labor having a positive relationship with emotional labor. Therefore, this paper is written with the idea of discussing conceptually the two variables and to explore Emotional Labor and Dissonance in detail; with elaboration of how emotional intelligence relates to them.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Emotional Dissonance, Emotional Exhaustion, Emotional Intelligence

Introduction

The hospitality industry prides itself as a niche business where the people are cared for and not only is it about the physical rooms, food and travel packages that you sell. Customers are referred to as guests to create a sense of closeness and to deliver service to match their expectation or go beyond is one of the key selling points of the hospitality industry. With that said, the employees are tasked with this responsibility of service delivery. The nature of the industry is such that employees are trained and told to behave in a certain

way whilst serving the guests, this alteration of behavior is rather synonymous with the term Emotional Labor (EL). As described by Hochschild (1983), EL suggests an individual to alter their state of being emotionally in order to comply with the establishments' standards and to adhere with the norms of an excellent service delivery. In the following excerpt the Hochschild describes EL in the setting of a flight attendant.

"This labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others-in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place. This kind of labor calls for a coordination of mind and feeling." (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7)

As the application of EL in the hospitality industry is prevalent, there are bound to be instances of dissonance or incongruity among the individuals tasked with the delivery of service. Previous authors (Phillips, Tsu & Julian, 2006; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Hochschild, 1983) concluded that this conflict of emotions may lead to various outward manifestations such as emotional exhaustion, stress, dissatisfaction, burnout and depression.

The industry also matches the three requirements of a job to be considered as EL. As seen from the following excerpt:

"Such jobs require what she terms "emotional labor" and have three things in common: (a) they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public, (b) they require the worker to produce an emotional state in the customer, and (c) they allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise some control over the emotional life of employees." (Spelman, 1985, p. 375). Therefore, this paper is written with the idea of discussing conceptually the two variables and to explore Emotional Labor and Dissonance in detail.

The Concept of Emotional Labor

Emotional Labor, though widely conceptualized has generally been accepted as a concept that consists of two characteristics which are namely, 1) surface acting and 2) deep acting as mentioned by Ang (2012) citing Kim (2008). Both are distinct methods of EL and the usage depends on the individual itself.

Surface acting refers to the service staff altering his or her emotions based on the requirement of the establishment or the situation. In laymen terms surface acting translates to them "faking it". Previous authors (Wu & Shie, 2017) discussed that this form of EL is the one that is associated with having adverse effects. This is since surface acting causes more friction as it requires the individual to react or behave emotionally to situations in line with the set standards-emotions that they may or may not feel. For example, hospitality employees are supposed to show empathy towards guests' problems or even staying calm even when they are berated by the guests. In those scenarios surface acting is just the employee projecting the feeling of empathy, concern or calmness on face level and they may not mean it. On the other hand, deep acting refers to the individual projecting the desired emotion but by invoking their inner feelings based on past experiences that comply with the required emotion. As compared to surface acting, deep acting is seen as a form of EL that is closer to projecting the real emotion due to the fact that the emotion displayed is in line with what is required and what the individual is feeling albeit still acting.

“Thus, while surface acting occurs at the expression level, deep acting occurs at the experiential level. The internal emotional state is altered, eliciting an external expression that is congruent with display rules.” (Wu & Shie, 2017, p. 57)

As mentioned, in its origin EL was described with having only two components (surface acting and deep acting), in a more recent literature (Wu & Shie, 2017; McCauley & Gardner, 2016) an additional idea or form of EL was added which is namely genuine emotion. Genuine emotion reflects the synchronistic nature of the required emotion and the projected emotion by the service employee with the added notion that they are really having the said feeling or emotion. In a sense there is no acting or faking in this situation.

Emotional Labor and the Consequences of its Utilization

As mentioned previously several authors (Phillips, Tsu & Julian, 2006; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Hochschild, 1983) supported the idea that EL will produce adverse effect when it is utilized. Pandey (2018) agreed with this notion stating that, “when sustained for long (EL) may have detrimental effects not only for the employee well-being but also for the organization.” (Pandey, 2018, p. 1). A number of authors relates emotional labor with emotional exhaustion which is one of the precursor to job burnout (Ang, 2012; Lee & Ok, 2012; Blau, Bentley & Eggerichs-Purcell, 2012; Handelsman, 2012). With that said, the very same authors reported that one of the two forms of emotional labor have a significantly positive relationship with exhaustion (this will be discussed in a later section of the paper).

The concept of emotional exhaustion first come to prominence from the work of Maslach and Jackson (1981) in their instrument Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), which emotional exhaustion is one of the dimensions measured to determine burnout. In its core, emotional exhaustion is defined as the sense of fatigue emotionally that derives from either work or personal conflicts and continuous exposure to emotional exhaustion has been linked to burnout (Schaufeli, Leiter & Maslach, 2009) as mentioned previously. Emotional exhaustion has been covered by various authors spanning several settings and outcome.

With all that has been said about the effect of emotional labor, a review of previous literatures (Kinman, 2009; Zapf, 2002) reveal that there are those who are with the opinion that emotional labor has positive impacts. This provides a different view on emotional labor itself as most of the literature are skewed to the negative outcomes of emotional labor. In his review Zapf (2002) stated that: “Three lines of arguments support the beneficial effects of emotion work: (1) emotion work reduces potential negative effects of work; (2) emotion work induces positive emotions; and (3) emotion work fulfils needs and expectations.” (Zapf, 2002, p. 262)

In further elaboration of the three arguments, Zapf (2002) describes the idea that through emotional labor, work or the job task would be easier as it would be predictable due to the “scripted” nature and based on the guidelines set by the establishment. He further commented that through prolonged usage of the emotional labor the individual’s psychology might be tricked into believing the emotion displayed and lastly through necessity of the job, emotional labor may lead to personal or career advancement by instill a sense of pride and competency in being able to “fake” or act a certain behavior.

Out of the three components of EL, only surface acting and deep acting has the element of internal conflict, as genuine emotion as it is described projects real and honest emotion. There also seemed to be a distinct difference between surface acting and deep acting.

Surface Acting vs. Deep Acting

Although as discussed previously; EL as a whole, affects the individual adversely, studies have shown that surface acting and deep acting may have differing outcomes. In relation with job burnout, surface acting was noted to be positively related while it is the opposite for deep acting (Wu and Shie, 2017). While in a study conducted to examine the relationship between EL and Emotional Exhaustion, Ang (2012) gathered that surface acting is positively related to emotional exhaustion while deep acting is negatively related as is shown in following result,

“The results indicated that surface acting and deep acting were significant predictors of emotional exhaustion (see Table 2). Surface acting was positively linked to emotional exhaustion ($\beta = 0.22$; $p = 0.02$), whereas deep acting negatively predicted emotional exhaustion ($\beta = -0.16$; $p = 0.07$). The ANOVA table shows that the model as a whole was significant ($F = 3.68$, $p = 0.03$). The variance in emotional exhaustion explained by the two acting processes was at 8%.” (Ang, 2012, p. 121)

In a study conducted by Blau, Bentley and Eggerichs-Purcell (2012), they reported that surface acting is much more detrimental to the individual as compared to deep acting. Citing that surface acting is significantly negative related to job satisfaction and the overall health or wellbeing of the respondents to their study. The study also concluded that surface acting has a significant positive relationship with work exhaustion supporting results from other studies (Lee & Ok, 2012; Handelsman, 2012; Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt & Meenks, 2005).

Various authors offered a different perspective; Hur, Moon and Jung (2015) conducted a study on the response of customers towards employees displaying emotional labor – specifically displaying surface acting or deep acting. The study found that although surface acting reported non-significant negative relationship with customer satisfaction, but deep acting produced a significant positive relationship with customer satisfaction. Still noting that there is a difference in result if both surface acting and deep acting are scrutinized individually. While in a study on zoo guides by researchers Van Dijk, Smith and Cooper (2011), they reported that perception on the emotional labor of the guides by the visitors relate to the visitor’s outcome i.e. whether they will practice word of mouth, the assessment of the elaboration provided, their attitude on conservation and evaluation of the whole guide experience. The results of the study were that perception of guides deep acting relates positively with visitor outcomes while the perception of guides surface acting was reported to have a negative relationship with visitor outcomes.

When examined in detail emotional labor holds various results and although deep acting is considered to be the “safer” of the two, it is still acting and has that element of

incongruency. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand this conflict or dissonance in the felt emotion and displayed emotion.

Emotional Dissonance

Emotional dissonance; in a review of past literatures (Philips, Tsu & Julian, 2006; Van Dijk & Brown, 2006) is defined as the conflict or difference between the internal feelings felt and the one that is desired or required to project, usually set to conform with the norms or set standard by either a certain establishment or even by society. In the case of the hospitality industry, the employees are required to provide excellent service with each and every guest that they encounter even when they do not mean it. They are also to project sincerity in their handling of guests binding them to a certain code of conduct and may cause friction with their inner feelings.

A review of the previous literatures reveals that there are three views when deliberating about emotional dissonance. Emotional dissonance has been described to be: 1) an antecedent emotional labor; 2) a component of emotional labor; and 3) a result of emotional labor (Van Dijk & Brown, 2006; Rubin, Tardino, Daus & Munz, 2005; Zapf et al., 1999).

As emotional dissonance resides on the idea of conflict of individual's feeling and their displayed emotion, the way a person regulates their emotion is vital. Regulating one's emotion refers to the emotional intelligence that one has. The following section will explore this concept of emotional intelligence in detail.

The Element of Emotional Intelligence in Emotional Labor

Emotional intelligence is a concept developed by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and further investigated by a several authors (Stewart, 2008; Bar-On, 1997; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Goleman, 1995). The definition of emotional intelligence varies but generally it is defined as the ability of a person to identify and control their emotion and of others in order to be better emotionally and cognitively (Mustapha, Salman & Radzi, 2012; Stewart, 2008). On the other hand, Herpetz, Nizielski, Hock and Schuetz (2016) in their study on "The Relevance of Emotional Intelligence in Personnel Selection for High Emotional Labor Jobs" reported that applicants with better understanding of emotions affected their performance in interviews and role-play positively but at the same time affected their performance in group exercises negatively.

Previously it has been described that emotional labor may produce positive outcomes and one of it is the fulfillment of needs and expectation. Zapf (2002) explained that individual's emotional intelligence would enhance their ability to producing the appropriate emotional response thus enhancing their "acting". This is supported by the review of emotional labor among leaders by Humphrey, Pollack and Hawver (2008) where the effectiveness of a leader to perform emotional labor is enhanced with emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

In the pursuit of understanding emotional labor further, several authors have explored the various façade of emotional labor. As emotional labor deals with individual's ability,

questions could be asked whether emotional labor and its usage or outcomes are unique to different segments of individuals, such as whether it is gender-centric or whether it relates to the level of position or job. To conclude, various angles have been discussed pertaining to emotional labor, emotional dissonance and emotional intelligence. Further study on emotional labor should be conducted especially in an industry that is centered on the ability of employees to maintain certain mannerism such as the hospitality industry. At the time of writing, the number of literature discussing emotional labor in a Malaysian setting is still lacking and this is also true in relation to the hospitality industry in Malaysia. This gap in the knowledge provides a platform for future research on the subject matter. Questions such as whether culture has any effect on the relationship of emotional labor and emotional dissonance, whether emotional intelligence of the employees has a part in mitigating the exhaustion caused by emotional dissonance and whether there are differences in the results if we were to compare between those who front liners and those who are on a managerial position. The idea that emotional labor has a positive impact should also be addressed in a more recent setting. All of these could be the foundation for future researches.

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