Emotional Labor: Coping or Controlling Customer Aggression?

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Profile

I am a doctoral Student (Organizational Behavior Area) at the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad (India). My areas of interest fall into emotions in organization and organizational identification. Having worked for several years in industry, I have experienced the power of emotions and identification in organizations. Presently, I am exploring the influence of organizational identification on employee behavior.
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ABSTRACT

Organizations are increasingly dependent on their customers for their survival and growth. This has led organizations not only to treat their customers in a pleasant and affective manner but also react to their aggressive behaviors with non-aggressive and even courteous behavior. The existing literature treats emotional labor as a coping strategy against customer aggression and neglects the effect of emotional labor on customer aggression. The present paper challenges this stand taken by literature and argues that emotional labor is not merely a coping mechanism but is a powerful tool to control customer aggression. The paper furthers the argument that women are better than men service providers in influencing customer aggressive behavior. This paper has strong implications for organizations, as it stresses that organizations in service sector should give importance not only to the display of appropriate emotions but also the manner in which these emotions are managed by the service employee. With increasing importance of women employees it is inevitable for organizations to change sex roles.

Keywords: Emotional labor, Surface acting, Deep acting, Customer aggression, Gender

INTRODUCTION

Economic liberalization coupled with globalization saw the rise of new “post-Fordist” industries (the knowledge economy, the service sector, tourism, and culture industries). For example, the present share of service sector in the Indian GDP, accounts for more than half as compared to 15% in 1950. The relative intangibility, heterogeneity, perishability and inseparability of production of service from its consumption (Cowell (1984) in Lashley (1998)) distinguish the service sector from other sectors. These characteristics create difficulty for customers to isolate service quality from the quality of the interaction during service delivery (i.e. service interaction). As a result, customers’ evaluation of service interaction, rather than just the separate product (service) being delivered, becomes central to the evaluation of the overall service experience (Korczynski 2001). It is becoming increasingly clear that successful management of emotions by employees plays a critical role for the organization. For example, Schneider & Bowen (1985) argued that the way in which service is delivered is perceived as important for the survival and success of the organization. Schultz, Hatch & Larsen (2000: 1) argued that emotional expressiveness is becoming part of the experience of doing business among the organizations. As women in organizations are constructed around emotionality and men around rationality (Parkin 1993: 170), gender becomes central to the organizations in this new economy (Perrons et al. 2005). Also, there is a
gradual shift from performance of physical labor to the skilled performance of emotional labor (Erickson & Ritter 2001). Emotional labor is the expression of appropriate emotions to influence the customers. It is a distinctive form of labor, different from physical or mental effort. As it deals with managing the emotions, Wharton (2005) argued that jobs involving emotional labor may be more gender-typed than other type of jobs. Consistent to the above discussion, Perrons (2004: 136) empirically shown that post-Fordist economy is associated with increasing feminization of the labor force.

Studies in different contexts have shown that the manner in which employees present themselves to customers, including the emotions they display during interactions contribute to customers’ perception about the organization and the quality of its products (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Morris & Feldman 1996; Zapf 2002), customers’ affect (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul & Gremler 2006; Pugh 2001), customers’ evaluation of service quality (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Morris & Feldman 1996; Pugh 2001), customer–employee rapport (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2006), Customers demand (Pugh 2001; Tan et al. 2003) customers’ revisit (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987; Tsai 2001), and increased sales (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987). As each act of service is an advertisement (Hochschild 2003: 137), organizations focus has expanded beyond the traditional economic rationales associated with the product (service) to more intangible part of customer interaction. Also with enhanced dependence on customers, organizations are increasingly structured around the image of the customers (du Gay 2000). As a result, service providers are expected not only to behave in a pleasant and affective manner to the customers but also react to their aggressive behaviors with non-aggressive and even courteous behavior as desired by the organizations (Ben-Zur & Yagil 2005).

Service providers experience stress and even burnout by the aggressive behavior of customers (Dormann & Zapf 2004; Evers, Tomic & Brouwers 2002; van Dierendonck & Mevissen 2002; Walsh & Clarke 2003; Winstanley & Whittington 2002). For example, Evers et al. (2002) argued that physical and psychological aggression had a significant relationship with emotional exhaustion for individual’s working in homes for the elderly. Similarly in different contexts, researchers (Grandey, Dickter & Sin 2004; Winstanley & Whittington 2002) noticed that customer aggression is related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization of service providers. In summary, aggressive behavior by customers is a social stressor that can lead to burnout among service providers. It has been assumed that customer aggressive behavior is independent of the service providers’ behavior and thus, the role of the service provider is to cope with the aggression. To address this problem, researchers focused their attention on various coping strategies employed by service providers (Hogh & Dofradottir 2001; Winstanley & Whittington 2002), including emotional labor (Ben-Zur & Yagil 2005; Grandey et al. 2004). For example, Mears & Finley (2005) treated emotional labor as a self-protection mechanism and Grandey (2000) treated different forms of emotional labor as different coping strategies to deal with stress. It was
implicitly assumed that the service provider has no control over the aggressive behavior of the customer and therefore emotional labor as a coping strategy was taken for granted. This paper challenges this assumption and argues that emotional labor of the service provider can influence customer’s aggressive behavior. Arguing further, the paper claims that the customer aggression will be less in organizations employing women service providers. Based on review of literature, propositions are derived.

WORKPLACE AGGRESSION & CUSTOMER AGGRESSION

Aggression takes a wide variety of forms in workplace, and in literature numerous similar terms used to describe them, like workplace violence (Schat & Kelloy 2000), workplace abuse (Richman et al. 1999), mobbing (Leymann 1996), bullying (Einarsen 1999), victimization (Aquino 2000), and workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson 1999). Workplace violence consists of behaviors that are physical in nature. By definition all violent behaviors are aggressive whereas not all aggressive behaviors are violent. Workplace abuse is captured as verbal aggression, disrespectful behavior, isolation, threats/bribe, and physical aggression (Richman et al. 1999). Mobbing means harassing, ganging up on someone, or psychologically terrorizing others at work (Leymann 1996). Workplace bullying occurs when someone at work is systematically subjected to aggressive behavior from one or more colleagues or superiors over a long period of time, in a situation where the target finds it difficult to defend him or herself or to escape the situation. Such treatments tend to stigmatize the target and may even cause severe psychological trauma (Einarsen 1999). Workplace incivility (Andersson & Pearson 1999) is a low-intensity deviant behavior with ambiguous intent and is characterized by rudeness, discourtesy, and display of lack of regard for others. Workplace bullying, workplace abuse, victimization, mobbing, and workplace incivility are often defined to include intra-organizational behaviors perpetrated by organizational insiders. Similarly workplace aggression is broadly defined as the behavior by an individual or individuals intended to psychologically harm a worker or workers and it occurs in a work-related context. Some researchers consider it as a term related to employees of the organization (Neuman & Baron 1998) or as a broad term including customers (see Kennedy, Homant & Homant 2004). Thus, customer aggression is a form of aggression where the sources of aggression are the customers who are outside people. With increasing dependence on customers, customer aggression constitutes a major form of aggression (Ben-Zur & Yagil 2005). In the present paper customer aggression is viewed as a type of workplace aggression occurring in a particular environment (workplace) and perpetrated by the customers.

Understanding Aggression

Though researchers are divided on whether aggression is an inevitable part of person’s biology, or a learned behavior, more recently the latter view has gained prominence (Cox & Leather 1994). Similarly, Burkitt (1997) argued that aggression is not an emotion that initially arises inside the people from some
deep inner well and in accordance with its own mechanics, but is produced in the relations of which aggressive person is a part. Relations of conflict may stir in people feelings of aggressiveness towards certain others with whom they are interdependent – those who may not have fulfilled their responsibilities in the relationship, or who may have betrayed or undermined it – but the aggressiveness comes from the interrelations not, originally, from inside the person. Similarly, Cox and Leather (1994) argued that aggressive behavior is frequently considered part of an escalating interaction rather than merely an isolated response. Elias ((1988: 178) in Burkitt (1997: 40-41)) commented that “it is not aggressiveness that triggers conflicts but conflicts that trigger aggressiveness”. Thus any aggressive action, gesture or talk is not the result of aggressive feelings, but the feelings are the result of relationships. Further these relationships are always social and cultural, specific to a particular place and time, and within them only certain actions or utterances will be labeled as aggressive. Thus, customer’s aggressive behavior can be a part of the service encounter. In the context of violent patients’ care wards, Whittington, Shuttleworth & Hill (1996) found that aggressive incidents were often preceded by aversive interpersonal stimulation of the patient by the nurse-victim. Similarly, the context of Psychiatric hospital, Nijman et al. (1999) suggested that the dynamics of an aggressive encounter is the improper communication between the staff and patients. Additionally, results from a longitudinal study provide support for a model where cognitions precede aggressive behavior, i.e. response selection processing predicts subsequent aggressive behavior (Keltikangas-Jarvinen & Pakaslahti 1999). Neuman & Baron (2003) commented that because many of the antecedents of aggression are social in nature, they are amenable to change.

EMOTIONAL LABOR AND CUSTOMER AGGRESSION

Emotional labor refers to “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild 2003: 7). The term emotional labor is appropriate only when emotion work is exchanged for something such as a wage or some other type of valued compensation. According to Ashforth and Humphrey (1993: 90), it is the act of displaying appropriate emotions, with the goal to engage in a form of impression management to foster social perceptions of her-/him-self as well as to foster an interpersonal climate. Wharton (2005) interpreted emotional labor as a type of labor that does not involve primarily the body or mind, but rather the workers subjectivity – that is, jobs that require emotional labor ask a worker to be a certain kind of person on the job and to display certain qualities when interacting with others. According to Hochschild (2003: 146), jobs that call for emotional labor has three characteristics in common. Fast, they require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public. They require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person and they allow the employer to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of the employees. In American context, in service industries women are overrepresented and men are underrepresented (Hochschild 2003: 244-245).
However, in Indian context, though independent researched data is scarce, in some of the growing service sectors like BPO, the estimated number of women employees are about 30-40 per cent of the workforce (Seshu 2003), compared to about 15 percent women in the manufacturing sectors (Labor Bureau, Govt. of India 2004). Employees perform their emotional labor either by surface acting or deep acting in order to modify their display of emotions (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Hochschild 2003). In surface acting employees try to manage the visible aspects of emotions to bring them in line with the organizational display rules, while the inner feelings remain unchanged. Surface acting often is interpreted by the customer as superficial and insincere (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Zapf 2002). In deep acting individuals try to regulate their inner feelings and their expressive behavior changes as a result of that regulation. Both deep acting and surface acting represent different intentions. Deep acting is called ‘faking in good faith’ as the intention is to help the customers. Surface acting is called ‘faking in bad faith’ because the employee conforms to the display rules to keep the job, not to help the customer or the organization (Rafaeli & Sutton 1987).

Researchers suggest that customers can discriminate between authentic and inauthentic facial expressions through subtle facial cues (Ekman et al. 1988). Grandey et al. (2005) argued that the extent that the display of emotions seems authentic is at the discretion of the employee. An actor who makes authentic display of emotions evokes an impression of someone who e is honest, friendly, and likeable (Harker & Keltner 2001; Levine & Feldman 1997). Grandey et al. (2005) in their study found that ceteris paribus, service providers’ authentic display of emotions leads to customers’ experience of satisfaction with service encounter compared to inauthentic display of emotions. On the interpersonal level, emotional expression is one of the most powerful forms of social influence (Keltner & Haidt 1999), both inside and outside of the workplace. Burkitt (1997) contend that relationships and the practices rather than the processes internal to the individual (which are later expressed at some appropriate moment) are involved in the production of emotions. In other words, how the service provider expresses her/his emotion has a potential effect on the customers’ aggressive behavior. Also, research in emotional contagion has shown that exposure to an individual expressing positive or negative emotions can produce a corresponding change in the emotional state of the observer (McHugo et al. 1985). Zazonc ((1984) in Pugh (2001)) remarked that emotions displayed by a service provider causes emotional mimicry in a customer, ultimately resulting in a change in the customer’s experienced affect. Building on these arguments, this paper argues that the perception of authentic emotions affect the cognition and feeling of the customers and in a way on the aggressive behavior of the customers. Since deep acting is more authentic compared to other display of emotions, deep acting may lead to lowered customer aggression.

*Proposition – 1: Deep acting is negatively related to customer aggression.*
Negative forms of reciprocity are recognized as ‘sentiments of retaliation where the emphasis is placed not in the return of benefits but on return of injuries’ (Gouldner 1960: 172). Similarly, direct provocation from another has been found to be a much stronger and consistent determinant of human aggression (Anderson & Bushman 2002; Chermark, Berman & Tyler 1997). Indeed there is strong tendency to retaliate at a higher level than that received – one reason that aggressive encounters often show an alarming tendency to spiral upward (Ohbuchi & Kambara 1985). When asked to describe situations that made them angry, most individuals refer to something another person said or did – something that caused them to become upset and view aggression against this person as justified (Harris 1993). In short, the things that make people most angry are the words and deeds of other people. As the objective of the service providers are to enhance the customers’ status, to heighten their importance, conversations or expressions that are not proper and inauthentic, leads to status deflation, which often provoke hostility (Hochschild 2003: 139).

As discussed earlier, while performing emotional labor by surface acting the intention of service providers is not to help the customers, or treat the customers in courteous way, rather to save the situation. Thus, surface acting is associated with lack of concern for the customers. According to Ekman, Friesen, & O’Sullivan (1988) customers often catch the inauthenticity of the service providers, due to different neurological bases. During customer interaction, when the service providers display emotions by surface acting, customers feel the insincerity associated with the service providers’ behavior which may provoke aggression.

*Proposition – 2: Surface acting is positively related to customer aggression.*

**GENDER**

Broadly speaking sex is a biological classification of humans into women and men, whereas gender is a cultured knowledge that differentiates them (Aaltio & Mills 2002). However researchers do differ as to whether or not biology plays some part in defining gender. For example, Hallberg ((1992) in Alvesson & Due Billing (2002)) criticized the distinction between (biological) sex and (social) gender because the meaning or implication of biological sex is also socially defined (i.e. a cultural phenomena). Acker (1990) remarked that gender ‘refers to patterned, socially produced, distinctions between female and male, feminine and masculine’. Similarly Padavic & Reskin (2002: 5) remarked that biological sex is the foundation on which societies construct gender. Wicks & Bradshaw (2002) argued that en-gendering the organization contributes to the construction of the ideas of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Aaltio & Mills (2002) commented that men and women in organizations can be seen not only as carriers of bodies and
voices, but also of femininity and masculinity, which are both institutional and organizational categories. Though masculinity and femininity issue can be approached in great variety of ways, many researchers link the concepts very closely to biological origin. For example, Alvesson & Due Billing (2002) argued that men are generally regarded as primarily representing masculine ways of thinking and behaving, and women as representing feminine ways of thinking and behaving. Thus, gender and sex are related phenomena. Alvesson & Due Billing (2002) remarked that in certain respects the body is obviously an important fixed point in our understanding of gender and gender constructions in society. Gender thus designates social relations between the sexes, or a set of social constructions that create ideas about appropriate roles for women and men (Scott (1988) in Wicks & Bradshaw (2002)). Thus gender is the meanings attached to being male or female, as reflected in social status, roles and attitudes regarding the sexes (Segall et al. (1990) in Mamman (1996)). Consistent with the views given by Padavic & Reskin (2002), I have assumed that the foundation of gender lies in the biological sex.

**Gender and Emotional Labor**

Psychoanalytic theorists assert that both men and women are at some level, motivated to behave in ways consistent with their gender identity (See Wharton 2005). According to, Stivers (1995), the capacity for employing emotions as a skill to achieve organizational mission, willingness to listen, ability to see the issue from others perspective, concern for others, the nurturing others – emphasizes the importance of feminine roles in organizational settings. Consistent to this idea, researchers argue that in jobs requiring getting along well with others, women are viewed as better qualified than men (Wharton 2005) and organizations tend to employ more women as associates than men (Padavic & Reskin 2002). Researchers found that men and women differ in the extent to which they outwardly display their emotions (Kring, Smith, and Neale 1994), demonstrate different patterns of emotional expression even within the same jobs (Rafaeli 1989), differ in their ability to monitor and control their own verbal and nonverbal behavior with respect to social cues (Snyder 1974), have different emotional reactions and style of interaction (Putnam & Mumby 2002) and are expected to behave differently and display different values in their behaviors (Wicks & Bradshaw 2002).

For example, compared to men, women are expected to take on more roles requiring emotional nurturance and support (See Lively 2000), are more emotionally expressive than men (Briton & Hall (1995) in Brody & Hall (2004)), are more likely to express warmth & liking during interactions with others (LaFrance & Banaji (1992) in Pugh (2002)), report more empathy and sympathy (Eisenberg 2004), more commonly use deep acting by invoking their sentiments (Ogbonna & Harris 2004), produce more authentic smiles (Metron 1997), are better at suppressing negative feelings and displaying positive feelings (Simpson & Stroh 2004), and display more positive socioemotional behavior (Anderson & Blanchard 1982; Carli 1989). Studies (Bellas 1999; Webb 2001) show that female public servants are
required to engage in emotion work to a greater degree than men, and typically they aspire to meet explicit requirements articulated in their job description. However, compared to women, men are superior at expressing anger and harshness through their voice (see Brody & Hall, 2004), suitable for jobs involving aggressiveness (Gorman (2001) in Padavic & Reskin (2002)), experience more agitation at work (Erickson & Ritter 2001). In contrast, feminized roles require the skillful suppression of anger and the invocation and display of more positive, deferential emotions (Hochschild 2003). As discussed earlier, the present paper has assumed that aggression is the outcome of employee behavior. Since women employees behave in more authentic and positive manner, and as authentic display of emotions is negatively related to aggression, customer aggression will be less in case of women service providers compared to the situations where service providers are men.

Proposition – 3: Customer aggression will be lower in case of women service providers compared to men service providers.

IMPLICATIONS OF PRESENT STUDY

Worldwide women’s work is less valued than men’s work (see Cleveland, Vescio, & Barnes-Farrell 2005), women get lower pay (see Padavic & Reskin 2002: 29), and face glass ceiling. Thus, organizations are not only gendered (Acker 1990) but also play a fundamental role in establishing a gender hierarchy that tends to favor men over women (Cleveland et al. 2005). Studies have shown that, when men enter traditionally female occupations the female co-workers generally welcome them and in contrast, the response of men to women intruders varies widely from helping to hostile (Padavic & Reskin 2002: 91). Thus increased participation of women employees may likely to both reinforce and undermine gender division (Perrons 2004: 111). Though entry into paid work alone does not automatically bring about change, in long run, it may lead to decreased importance of these categories and the division of labor would no longer revolve round gender relations. As Wharton (2005: 228) argued to achieve gender equality, gender itself must matter less. With increased women workers, organizations need to be sensitive to women’s needs and requirements and become the starting points for gender equality by changing their policies favoring equality. Perrons (2004: 117-118) argued that increased participation in paid work provides a sense of freedom, a space and time where they can be themselves and some enjoyment from socializing with other women. Paid employment is also found to raise self-confidence, self-esteem and respect from other people in their household, so overall women are to some degree empowered by independent incomes.

DISCUSSION
The present paper argues that study of emotional labor should not be restricted only as a coping strategy but should be broadened as a strategic means for controlling customer aggression. The paper concludes that organizations should give importance not only to the display of appropriate emotions but also the way in which these emotions are managed by the service employee. This study has strong implications for organizations in service sector, as the manner in which the emotions are expressed influences customer behavior, including their aggressive behavior. This paper makes a contribution to the literature by highlighting the importance of women employees in the organization.
REFERENCE


