

# The dimensionality and antecedents of emotional labor strategies

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## Abstract

This investigation had two purposes. The first was to determine whether the display of naturally felt emotions is distinct from surface acting and deep acting as a method of displaying organizationally desired emotions. The second purpose was to examine dispositional and situational antecedents of surface acting, deep acting, and the expression of naturally felt emotions. Results supported a three-dimensional structure separating deep acting, surface acting, and the expression of naturally felt emotions. In addition, the dispositional and situational variables exhibited theoretically consistent and distinct patterns of relationships with the three emotional labor strategies. Overall, the results of this study expand the nomological network of surface acting and deep acting and suggest that the expression of naturally felt emotions is a distinct strategy for displaying emotions at work and should be included in research on emotional labor. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labor as “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” for a wage (p. 7). In most theories of emotional labor, organizations specify display rules that serve as standards for the appropriate expression of emotions. Emotional labor entails following these display

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rules regardless of how one actually feels. A central focus of emotional labor research is on how individuals achieve the desired emotional displays. Previous theory (e.g., Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003) suggests that individuals may simply express what they feel, or when this will not produce the desired display, they may surface act (fake unfelt emotions and/or suppress felt emotions) or deep act (modify felt emotions so that genuine displays follow). Thus, surface acting (SA) and deep acting (DA) may be considered compensatory strategies that individuals use when they cannot spontaneously display the appropriate emotions. Interestingly, research has focused primarily on SA and DA (e.g., Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003), while giving little attention to the expression of naturally felt emotions. This focus is surprising given that the display of naturally felt emotions at work may be fairly common and should not be associated with the negative effects often attributed to emotional labor, such as emotional dissonance and burnout. Further, individuals who display their felt emotions likely will appear sincere, a quality associated with good customer service (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

The first purpose of this investigation was to determine whether the display of naturally felt emotions can be empirically distinguished from SA and DA as a method of displaying organizationally desired emotions. The second purpose of this paper was to examine dispositional and situational antecedents of SA, DA, and the expression of naturally felt emotions. The following sections describe emotional labor strategies and then discuss the antecedent variables and their hypothesized relationships with emotional labor strategies.

## **2. Emotional labor strategies**

Most emotional labor conceptualizations suggest that to display appropriate emotions at work, individuals sometimes must hide or fake felt emotions (SA) or try to experience the desired emotion (DA). Because many occupations have the general expectation that positive emotions should be displayed, DA typically involves trying to experience positive emotions so that positive displays naturally follow. In contrast, SA usually involves faking positive emotions and sometimes suppressing negative felt emotions, so that positive displays will follow. SA has been described as “acting in bad faith” and DA has been described as “acting in good faith” as the former involves going through the motions and the latter involves trying to experience the emotions (Grandey, 2003).

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argued that focusing on only SA and DA ignores the possibility that employees can spontaneously experience and display appropriate emotions. Indeed SA and DA may be considered compensatory strategies that help individuals express emotions that do not come naturally. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) considered the expression of naturally felt emotions to constitute emotional labor in that individuals still may have to put forth conscious effort to ensure that their displays coincide with the organization’s expectations. However, no published research has examined the display of naturally felt emotions as an emotional labor strategy. Therefore, the first purpose of this study was to measure the strategy of

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