Emotional labor's impact in a retail environment

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ABSTRACT

It is essential for organizations to understand and manage salespeople's emotions. By monitoring the effects of emotions on the job, management can promote and enhance its sales force. However, the literature on salespersons' emotions has been largely overlooked. This paper establishes an integrative emotional labor process model to better understand the emotional component of the sales force in a retail context. Specifically, the paper examines the impact of emotional labor and emotional exhaustion in relation to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Findings suggest that emotional labor predicts both job satisfaction and organizational commitment, while emotional exhaustion only predicts job satisfaction.

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1. Introduction

Keeping employees satisfied and committed to the organization is a major challenge for retailers. Literature shows that both employee satisfaction and commitment increase performance (e.g., Dabholkar & Abston, 2008; Paulin, Ferguson, & Bergeron, 2006) and decrease employee turnover intentions (e.g., Pettijohn, Pettijohn, & Taylor, 2007). However, the retail industry is faced with above average turnover rates (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010) and increasing training and administrative costs, which hinder firms from achieving optimal employee performance (Trevor & Nyberg, 2008). While research examines methods to increase employee satisfaction and commitment (Vandenberghe et al., 2007), a stream of research examining the impact of emotion is developing (Ashkanasy, Hartel, & Daus, 2002). The role of emotions in service encounters, however, is still underdeveloped despite the emerging literature (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006). Given the limited research in the area, organizational behavior scholars call for a broader integrative view of emotions in the workplace (Bono, Foldes, Vinson, & Muros, 2007).

The research stream that addresses the role of emotions in service encounters involves emotional labor (e.g., Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006) and emotional exhaustion (e.g., Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Hamwi, Rutherford, & Boles, 2011; Jaramillo, Mulki, & Solomon, 2006). Emotional labor is the act of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions (Morris & Feldman, 1996) and appears in studies of salespeople in a range of different workplace settings (e.g., Varca, 2009). Emotional labor is important in services because front-line employees engage in emotional work as part of their jobs, including greeting customers with a positive attitude. If employees express positive emotions when interacting with customers, the customers are likely to perceive these emotions. Hence, for the benefits of both employees and customers, employees should be able to successfully manage emotions, not inhibiting their emotions nor expressing insincere emotions. However, prior research does not indicate a consensus among researchers on either the theoretical or methodological grounds of emotional labor in regard to its construct definition (Glomb & Tews, 2004). To further compound the issue, the amount of empirical research on emotional labor in the workplace remains limited (Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000).

As a state of depletion and fatigue, emotional exhaustion is the primary component of burnout (e.g., Halbesleben & Bowler, 2007). The outcomes of emotional exhaustion can be particularly detrimental in the service industry because employees engage in a high level of interaction with customers, making them more prone to emotional exhaustion (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Presently, little consensus on the findings related to job satisfaction and organizational commitment exists (Babakus, Cravens, & Johnston, 1999; Rutherford, Boles, Hamwi, Madupalli, & Rutherford, 2009).

The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of the impact of emotions (emotional labor and emotional exhaustion) on employee job satisfaction and organizational commitment within an Eastern culture. To accomplish the purpose of this study, affective events theory and emotion regulation theory are used as the theoretical foundation. This study also takes place in South Korea, using a

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sample of retail sales employees to further develop the understanding of the emotional labor process model within the Eastern culture. Fig. 1 provides a graphical view of the examined model.

2. Model overview

The model examines how the emotional process influences employees' job related outcomes (job satisfaction and organizational commitment). The bulk of research on emotional labor examines its negative outcomes in relation to employee well-being (e.g. Morris & Feldman, 1996). This paper, however, argues that processing and regulating of emotions may produce psychological empowerment and improve morale among employees from which the additional job related outcomes stem. Unlike previous studies that examine emotional labor and emotional exhaustion in a separate, independent model, this paper examines the constructs within the same model.

3. Theoretical overview

3.1. Affective events theory

From a macro-level perspective that incorporates an emotional labor process of both individuals and firms, affective events theory captures the overall flow of the proposed model. Affective events theory is relevant in studies which examine emotions in organizations (e.g., Cole, Walter, & Bruch, 2008; Walter & Bruch, 2009). According to the theory, the nature of the job and the requirements for emotional labor affect behavior and work attitudes (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). As a combination of daily hassles and uplifts that employees experience on the job, work events lead to positive and negative emotions that may lead to work attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Ashkanasy et al., 2002).

3.2. Emotion regulation theory

Emotion regulation theory (Gross, 1998) is a micro-level theory in that individuals, rather than the firms engage in two different types of strategy to regulate emotions. Antecedent-focused emotion regulation is manipulating the input whereas response-focused emotion regulation manipulates output. For example, antecedent-focused strategies may be avoiding, altering, or reevaluating "certain people or situations on the basis of their likely emotional impact" (Gross, 1998: p. 225). Emotional labor seems to fit this description well. Response-focused strategies also deal with ongoing emotional experience, but emphasize more on the physiological responses. Hence, emotional exhaustion may be an appropriate construct for the response-focused strategy. In the proposed model, emotional labor and emotional exhaustion are antecedents, capturing both types of emotional regulation strategies.

4. Construct overview

4.1. Emotional labor

Emotional labor refers to situations wherein employees, especially those in client contact service occupations, are required to display emotions that may differ from the emotions they actually feel (Hochschild, 1979). Emotional labor is the "effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions" (Morris & Feldman, 1996: p. 987). The concept of emotional labor has particular relevance to service encounters because the behavior of employees strongly affects customers' perceptions of product quality (Bowen, Siehl, & Schneider, 1989).

Emotional labor involves both surface and deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting occurs when employees display an emotion that could involve both "suppression of felt emotions and faking of unfelt emotions" (Morris & Feldman, 1996: p. 987). Employees may pretend to be friendly and helpful to angry or upset customers. In contrast, employees create expected or required emotions within themselves in deep acting (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006). For example, flight attendants may approach and deal with angry passengers in a sympathetic and understanding way (e.g., Hochschild, 1983). While deep acting attempts to modify internal feelings to be consistent with display rules, surface acting modifies outward displays to be consistent with display rules (Glomb & Tews, 2004).

4.2. Emotional exhaustion

Emotional exhaustion is a "state caused by psychological and emotional demands made on people" (Bacharach, Bamberger, & Conley, 1991). Emotional exhaustion is also known as the core component of job burnout (Boles et al., 1997) and is conceptualized as a type of strain that results from workplace stressors (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003). Emotional exhaustion often occurs in the service industries because employees face ongoing hassles and excessive customer demands, leading to both physical and emotional depletion (Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Understanding how emotional exhaustion affects emotional display is important because expression of emotions can influence customers' perceptions of service quality, satisfaction, and loyalty (Tsai & Huang, 2002).

4.3. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is a set of evaluative feelings that employees have toward their work situation (Skinner, Dubinsky, & Donnelly, 1984). Churchill, Ford, and Walker (1974: p. 255) defines job satisfaction as "all characteristics of the job itself and the work environment which salesmen find rewarding, fulfilling, and satisfying, or frustrating and unsatisfying." As the well-established operationalization of workplace happiness (Wright, 2005), job satisfaction can result from meeting employees' needs, such as emotional fulfillment.

4.4. Affective organizational commitment

According to Gruen, Summers, and Acito (2000), affective organizational commitment is the degree to which the membership is psychologically bonded to the organization on the basis of how favorable a person feels about the organization. Porter, Steers, Mowday, and Boulian (1974: p. 604) define organizational commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization." In essence, organizational commitment reflects a sense of shared values, identity, and pride in an organization (Sverke & Sjöberg, 1994).

5. Hypothesis development

5.1. Hypothesized linkages

Although researchers are examining consequences of emotional labor (e.g., Glomb & Tews, 2004; Varca, 2009), findings are inconsistent, particularly between emotional labor and job satisfaction. Adelmann (1989) finds conflicting results in two studies. The results of the first study indicate that employees who engage in high amounts of emotional labor report lower levels of job satisfaction. A similar pattern of results in which emotional labor undermines job satisfaction appears within the literature (e.g., Glomb & Tews, 2004; Zapf & Holz, 2006). In the second study, however, Adelmann (1989) shows that emotional labor is not significantly related to job satisfaction. The mixed findings between the first and second study may be partly due to the nature of jobs. The first study includes a job requiring high amounts of emotional labor, whereas the second study examines a job calling for low amounts of emotional labor.