Original Article

Korean Emotional Laborers' Job Stressors and Relievers: Focus on Work Conditions and Emotional Labor Properties

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A B S T R A C T

Background: The present study aims to investigate job stressors and stress relievers for Korean emotional laborers, specifically focusing on the effects of work conditions and emotional labor properties. Emotional laborers are asked to hide or distort their real emotions in their interaction with clients. They are exposed to high levels of stress in the emotional labor process, which leads to serious mental health risks including burnout, depression, and even suicide impulse. Exploring job stressors and relieving factors would be the first step in seeking alternatives to protect emotional laborers from those mental health risks.
Methods: Using the third wave data of Korean Working Conditions Survey, logistic regression analysis was conducted for two purposes: to examine the relations of emotional labor and stress, and to find out job stressors and relievers for emotional laborers.
Results: The chances of stress arousal are 3.5 times higher for emotional laborers; emotional laborers experience double risk-burden for stress arousal. In addition to general job stressors, emotional laborers need to bear burdens related to emotional labor properties. The effect of social support at the workplace is not significant for stress relief, unlike common assumptions, whereas subjective satisfaction (wage satisfaction and work-life balance) is proven to have relieving effects on emotional laborers' job stress.
Conclusion: From the results, the importance of a balanced understanding of emotional labor for establishing effective policies for emotional laborer protection is stressed.

1. Introduction

"Emotional labor (EL)" has become an important concept in discussing work conditions in Korean society as the service industry expands and workers involved in EL increase accordingly. Emotional laborers deal with customers as a "face" of their organizations, and they make efforts to regulate their emotions following "feeling rules"—which defines the type and intensity of emotions the emotional laborers express.

As EL is reported to become more prevalent in Korean society, issues surrounding emotional laborers including their working conditions, human rights, and mental and physical health-related issues have drawn much social attention. Job stress of emotional laborers is especially worthy to study for two reasons: (1) on an organizational level, job stress reduces productivity, causing burnout and job dissatisfaction of workers; and (2) on an individual level, and more importantly regarding health, chronic job stress may lead to critical hazards for workers' mental health including depression, anxiety disorder, and suicidal impulse. An emotional laborer's process of emotion regulation can cause long-term negative effects [1]. A high rate of depression among emotional laborer groups [2], recent media reports on suicides of sales clerks, hardships of call center workers, and court judgments on compensation for mental diseases related to EL have proven the negative effects.

Diverse social discourses have been formed in Korean society to address these related issues from an individual business level to a legislation dimension: e.g., revision of the Occupational Safety and Health Acts and Act on Equal Employment and Support for Work-Family Reconciliation, also known as "emotional laborer

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protection bill", is proposed in the National Assembly. However, these efforts to socially regulate the negative effects of EL are still focused on certain industries with visible problems. This approach has a risk of confining EL-related job stress as "someone else's problem", and thus not understanding it as a new burden at the workplace related to societal work environment change.

In line with the question of the possibility of a more general understanding of EL and its effect on job stress, this paper explores job stressors and relievers of emotional laborers in contrast to general workers using third wave Korean Working Conditions Survey (KWCS) data. This approach questions general views to interpret EL only within certain industries, and attempts to link understandings on EL-related job stress to general job stress discourse. More specifically, analysis of the study encompasses: (1) comparison of stress arousal levels (presented through odds ratio) between emotional laborer groups and general worker groups; (2) examination of the "double risk-burden" effect of general work conditions and EL properties to emotional laborers' job stress; and (3) tests on the stress relieving effect of social support and subjective satisfaction of emotional laborers.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

The KWCS has been carried out by the Occupational Safety and Health Research Institute since 2006, stemming from the European Working Conditions Survey, and has been continued with survey item correction: the second wave data was collected in 2010, and the third wave data in 2011. The KWCS asks questions of workers >15 years of age nationwide. The data has two strengths for EL studies: (1) it contains questions on both the general work environment and EL properties; and (2) the data is standardized with the European Working Conditions Survey so that researchers can broaden the analysis scope to Korea–EU country comparative studies for socio-cultural understanding. The sample size of the third wave KWCS data was 50,032: the number of male respondents was 29,138 (58.2%) and female respondents numbered 20,894 (41.8%).

2.2. Research design

The study set up four hypotheses:

H1. Emotional laborers will experience more stress than general workers.
H2. Emotional laborers will feel double stress burden due to general job stressors and EL properties.
H3. Social support will relieve stress of emotional laborers.
H4. Emotional laborers with high satisfaction will experience less stress.

H1 compares the stress arousal odds ratio of emotional laborers with general workers for examining the premise of the study. H2 examines "double risk burden" in emotional laborers' job stress. Generally, EL studies on job stress follow two directions: part of the studies focuses on distinctive properties of EL, and the others analyze the mediating effect of general job stressors such as work autonomy and employment types on emotional laborers' stress levels. This paper aims to show that the two groups of stressors (general work environment and EL property) both have effects on emotional laborer's stress logic. H3 and H4 test the effects of well-known stress relievers for emotional laborers. Social support can be categorized into an individual level (support by peer and/or friend) and organizational level (labor representative organization at work

including labor union). In this paper, the effects of three social support variables (perceived peer support, perceived friend support, and existence of labor representative organization at work) on individual emotional laborers' job stress are analyzed H4 examines whether emotional laborers would feel less stress if they think their emotional burden is 'rewarded' adequately at work, and/or if their family and social life functions adequately as "back stage." The analytic frame for this study around the four hypotheses is shown in Fig. 1.

The study opted for logistic regression with stress arousal as a dependent variable. Firstly, logistic regression was conducted for the general sample population (general worker group) to test H1. In this first step, EL is considered as an independent variable along with other stress-related work environment variables, namely employment status, industry sector, scale of workplace, tenure, weekly work hours, work autonomy, social supports, wage satisfaction, and work-life balance. Individual socio-demographic variables such as gender, age (measured by generation), educational level, and subjective health satisfaction are controlled. Secondly, the sample was divided into two subsets, emotional laborers and nonemotional laborers following the study's operational definition, and logistic regression analysis was carried out for each subset. This was to examine the effect of job stressors and relievers for emotional laborers in a comparative and exploratory way. Independent variables were the same in the second analysis, except the EL variable was used for dividing the subsets. SPSS 18.0 (SPSS Inc. Released 2009. PASW Statistics for Windows, Version 18.0. Chicago) was used for the analysis.

2.3. Operational definitions

2.3.1. Emotional laborers

The term "emotional labor" was coined by a US sociologist, Arlie Russell Hochschild, in *The Managed Heart* [3]. EL refers to processes of "managing emotional expressions and gestures in public" to compromise customers' emotions and/or to convey values requested by the company. Theoretically, direct interaction with clients and subjective emotional burden in the interactive labor process are considered two major components in defining EL. According to the Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency's definition in *Guideline for Emotional Labor Related Job Stress Prevention* [4], EL is defined as "labor which includes emotional display and expressions under company's request regardless of the worker's own emotional state." However, former empirical studies often tended to choose only the "contact with clients" aspect in detecting EL. This narrower variable operation seems to be related to the limit of precedent data: the KWCS is the first survey which contains questionnaire items on emotional aspects among
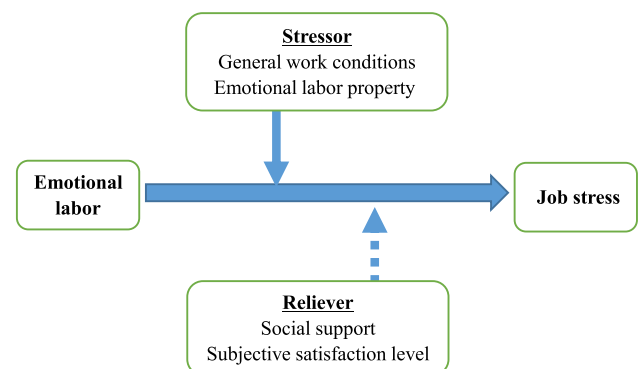

Fig. 1. Analytic frame for the study.