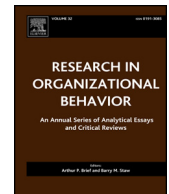




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Emotional division-of-labor: A theoretical account

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ABSTRACT

Division-of-labor is an account of how individuals vary in the types of contributions they make towards collective work efforts. This paper extends the longstanding concept into the realm of emotion in organizations, by developing a theoretical account of emotional division-of-labor (EDOL). Activities that require emotional abilities permeate the roles necessary for interdependent tasks in modern organizations. As with any other form of human capital, it is not necessary to draw equally from each person. Work is structured, instead, to distribute emotion-laden roles across members of workgroups. The model emphasizes that EDOL is both engineered deliberately and also emerges organically during interdependent work. Those who tend to take on roles requiring emotional competencies are those who are capable, believe themselves to be capable, and/or are believed to be capable. Highly committed group members of any capability level can also fill gaps as problems or opportunities arise. Case studies are presented for two settings in modern organizations—police crisis management and automobile dealerships—and reveal that group members use different combinations of emotional abilities to varying degrees, use specific abilities in complementary ways, and use the same abilities to enhance each other's efforts. EDOL can leverage diversity in skill sets, as colleagues take on roles that compensate for each other's weaknesses. Implications for leadership and group emotional intelligence are discussed.

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In essentially every organized human activity, people take on specialized roles. For millennia, the concept of division-of-labor has been both a descriptive and prescriptive account of the notion that individuals differ from each other in the type of contributions they make towards collective work efforts (Durkheim, 1893; Bloom, 1991; Smith, 1776). This paper proposes that there is a division-of-labor within organizations in terms of the tasks that draw from emotional abilities.

Emotion is infused within the workplace (Barsade, Brief, & Spataro, 2003; Elfenbein, 2007; Fineman, 1996). Social functional theories argue that emotions evolved to help solve the problems that humans confront for survival and living socially with others, notably the dual social needs to cooperate and compete (Frijda, 2007; Niedenthal & Brauer, 2012). As such, emotions are particularly relevant to interdependent tasks, for which people need to coordinate, communicate, and influence. These tasks have become the norm in the modern organization. In examining a broad range of professions and job roles, Glomb, Kammeyer-Mueller, and Rotundo (2004) found that many common work activities were socially interdependent and also closely related to emotional functioning. These included establishing and maintaining relationships, assisting and caring for others, selling or influencing other people, resolving conflicts, working with the public, and communicating with people outside the organization. Given that division-of-labor exists for just about every activity related to collective work efforts, this paper argues that one also exists for emotion-laden activities like these. Indeed, it would be surprising if it did not. Theory is introduced below that outlines how emotion-laden activities are likely to be distributed across individuals.

1. Defining emotional division-of-labor

This paper defines *emotional division-of-labor* (EDOL) as any explicit or implicit division of roles in which individuals vary in their requirement to use emotional

abilities. To the extent that organizations see emotional abilities as a source of human capital—just like any other type of human capital—each person is not necessarily expected to provide that capital to the same degree. Individuals vary in the suite of emotional abilities they bring to the table, and effective group work depends on the aggregate availability and use of these emotional abilities, rather than the notion that each person should have the same level. Distributing emotion-related human capital effectively takes place hand-in-hand with distributing other types of human capital, such as cognitive abilities, technical skills, and job experience. EDOL attempts to be a *meso* or cross-level theory (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995), by connecting the study of emotion at the individual and group levels.

The term EDOL was first used by Van Maanen and Kunda (1989), who argued that “[a]n emotional division of labor attaches itself to organizations wherein the management of emotions for some categories of employees is of more concern than it is for others” (p. 55). Their coinage emphasizes how emotion-laden activities can be assigned to individuals, just as any other work role can be assigned. Beyond the formal documentation of job roles, EDOL can emerge organically, as members of work groups attempt to negotiate their interdependent tasks and relationships. This paper attempts to develop a theory of emotional division-of-labor, which is grounded in the social functionalist perspective on emotion while extending it. The paper proposes a theoretical model of EDOL based on analysis of two cases in modern organizations, and includes antecedents and processes, maps out activities involved, connects EDOL to group emotional intelligence and leadership, and discusses implications.

Emotional division-of-labor is ultimately about developing collective human capital from individual human capital (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). EDOL sees diversity as a potential asset. Empirically, there appears to be only a modest to moderate association between emotional intelligence and other forms of human capital such as

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