Emotional Display Rules: Friend or Foe?

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined individual outcomes associated with emotional labour as a response to emotional display rules in a customer-service environment. Researchers propose that display rules may give rise to the negative affective state of emotional dissonance due to a conflict between felt and displayed emotions. An alternative view derived from cognitive dissonance theory indicates, however, that 'rules' provide a mechanism by which dissonance maybe averted or reduced. Data from 37 semi-structured interviews indicated that display rules equally elicited positive and negative affective employee outcomes, and that workers used display rules to manage negative outcomes associated with emotional labour. The challenge of future research is to examine individual differences that impact upon the nature of outcomes linked to emotional labour.

Emotional labour is performed by employees engaging with customers when they display emotions that are organisationally appropriate (Hochschild 1983). When workers manage emotional display to meet organisational expectations they are responding to implicit or explicit expectations for emotional display (such as a service with a 'smile' ethos) called emotional display rules (Hochschild 1983; Brotheridge & Grandey 2002). Display rules have traditionally been viewed as precursors to the negative affective state of emotional dissonance as they, at times, establish situations that expected emotional display is contrary to the felt emotions of employees (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Grandey 2003; Härtel, Hsu & Boyle 2002). Emotional dissonance is a stressful psychologically uncomfortable state that results from the conflict between felt and displayed emotion, and has been linked to negative affective outcomes for employees such as emotional exhaustion and burnout (Brotheridge & Grandey 2002; Hochschild 1983; Van Dijk & Kirk 2007). An alternative view derived from cognitive dissonance theory, however, indicates that 'rules' can provide employees with adequate justification to behave in a manner contrary to feelings, beliefs, values, and attitudes (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999). When a worker is experiencing a conflict between felt and displayed emotion, display rules may provide a mechanism by which emotional dissonance may be averted, or reduced, for emotional labourers when engaging with others for organisational purposes.

This paper will begin with a review of the emotional labour construct followed by a discussion of the nature and function of emotional display rules in establishing expectations to display appropriate emotions during interpersonal interactions for organisational purposes. Next, an explanation of the role of emotional display rules in eliciting the negative affective state of emotional dissonance will be presented, followed by an examination of how cognitive dissonance theory can illustrate the possible role of display rules in preventing, or reducing, emotional dissonance. Using cognitive dissonance theory, it will be argued in this paper that though display rules create situations that may elicit emotional dissonance, they equally provide the emotional labourer with a mechanism by which dissonance can be avoided or managed. Data from 37 semi-structured interviews with tourism-based service workers will be discussed in relation to the performance of emotional labour, and the experience and management of emotional dissonance using emotional display rules.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Emotional labour

Emotional labour is different from other forms of labour as it involves the imposed and managed emotional display of workers in order to achieve organisational goals and objectives (Hochschild, 1983; Leidner 1999; Kruml & Geddes 2000). Emotional labour is primarily an interpersonal communication tool that workers can use to fulfil organisational aims (Grandey 2000; Fiebig & Kramer 1998). Employees perform emotional labour when they manage individual emotion in order to present 'a publicly observable facial and bodily display' (Hochschild 1983: 7) during the provision of employee-mediated services or experiences. The purpose of the emotional labour-based interaction is to influence affective outcomes for the customer/visitor such as service satisfaction or leisure-based enjoyment (Fiebig & Kramer 1998; Hochschild 1983). In situations that the worker finds that felt emotion is different to that required, the worker can comply with organisational expectations and 'act out' the required emotional display.

Traditionally, emotional labour has been defined by two types of acting (Hochschild 1983; Brotheridge & Grandey 2002, Mann, 2004). The first, *surface acting* is altering outward behaviour

such as facial expression, tone of voice, and other forms of non-verbal cues in order to display unfelt emotion, or to suppress situationally inappropriate felt emotion such as anger (Ashforth & Humphrey 1993; Grandey 2000, 2003; Hochschild 1983; Kruml & Geddes 2000). The second, *deep acting* is when workers regulate, or manage, experienced emotion to be the same as those required for the purpose of providing an 'authentic' emotional display (Brotheridge & Grandey 2002; Hochschild 1983). Surface acting is the emotional labour-based behaviour of interest for the present study as it has been more closely associated with negative employee outcomes for workers responding to organisational demands and expectations in the form of emotional display rules (Hochschild 1983; Van Dijk & Kirk 2007).

Emotional Display Rules

Emotional display rules refer to standards for organisationally appropriate emotional expression in work-related contexts, and are imposed through such activities as induction, recruitment, training, policy, performance appraisals, culture and supervision (Copranzano, Weiss & Elias 2004; Diefendorff & Richard 2003; Grandey 2000; Hochschild 1983; Kruml & Geddes 2000; Rafaeli & Sutton 1989; Sutton & Rafaeli 1988). These rules are important in promoting emotional labour-based activities when the emotion required to be displayed by the employee is not the same as the emotions experienced (Hochschild 1983; Bono & Vey, 2005). The psychological and physical well-being of the worker is put at risk when there is extended conflict between displayed and felt emotion due to the burdensome negative affective state of emotional dissonance (Hochschild 1983; Morris & Feldman 1996a; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006).

Emotional Dissonance

Emotional dissonance is a stressor that can be experienced by the worker as discomfort, unease or unpleasant tension with the distinct possibility that it may lead to negative work outcomes for the worker such as emotional exhaustion and burnout (Jansz & Timmers 2002; Morris & Feldman 1996b, 1997; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006). The concept of emotional dissonance has its foundation in cognitive dissonance theory (Härtel et al. 2002; Lewig & Dollard 2003). Consistent with some

researchers' evaluation of emotional dissonance (Hochschild 1983; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006: Van Dijk & Kirk 2007), Festinger (1957: 266) asserted that dissonance for some is an "extremely painful and intolerable thing". Hochschild (1983) linked emotional dissonance with depression, substance abuse and even suicide. A definition of emotional dissonance by Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown (2006) is consistent with Elliot and Devine's (1994) description of cognitive dissonance as a psychologically uncomfortable state that occurs when the individual has conflicting cognitions (pieces of knowledge) or incongruence between thought (cognition) and behaviour (Elliot & Devine 1994; Festinger 1957; Goldsmith, Sedo, Darity & Hamilton 2004; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999). To better understand the cause and management of emotional dissonance as a response to emotional display rules it is prudent to review the concept's theoretical underpinnings. Cognitive dissonance theory presents a well established theoretical framework that can contribute to a more complete understanding of the emotional labour phenomenon and associated outcomes.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance has been applied to a broad range of psychologically oriented topics involving the interaction of cognition, emotion and motivation (Aronson 1992; Elliot & Devine 1994; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999). Cognitive dissonance theory has established a 'theoretical oxymoron' in that a construct that is labelled cognitive in reality carries an emotional theme and is, therefore, relevant to the study of emotions at work (Sweeney, Hausknecht, & Souter 2000; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006). The induced-compliance paradigm associated with cognitive dissonance research suggests that dissonance is evoked when someone is required to behave or say things that are incongruent with pre-established beliefs, existing attitudes, values or feelings (Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006). The induced-compliance paradigm is important as it illustrates the possible effect of display rules in the elicitation of emotional dissonance. When an emotional labourer is surface acting in response to display rules, he or she is behaving (displaying emotions) inconsistently with how he or she knows (cognition) they are feeling, and fulfils the prerequisites for dissonance elicitation according to the induced-compliance paradigm (Harmon-Jones & Mills 1990; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006). Generally, behaviour that is contrary to

attitudes, beliefs feeling and values would not be engaged in but behaviour can be induced when promise of reward, or threats of punishment, exist. These promises or threats are linked to display rules and may provide individuals with pieces of knowledge (cognitions) that are consistent (consonant) with the behaviour and may provide adequate justification for continuing a behaviour that is inconsistent (dissonant) with beliefs, attitudes, values or feelings (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999).

Display rules prescribe behaviours in the form of emotional display in the provision of a service (Copranzano et al. 2004; Diefendorff & Richard 2003) that is linked to threats of punishment (demotion, dismissal) and rewards (wages, bonuses, promotion). The implied threat of punishment and promise of reward may provide the worker with a consonant piece of knowledge, that justifies behaving in a manner contrary to previously held beliefs, attitudes, values and feelings. If the individual perceives that there is no other choice (induced compliance) but to behave in the undesirable manner (according to display rules), the dissonance experienced is said to be negligible as the lack of choice provides the individual with sufficient justification (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999). Display rules, therefore, may not only evoke dissonance (Hochschild 1983; Schaubroek & Jones 2000), but can also provide justification for displaying unfelt emotion, resulting in a reduction or avoidance of experienced dissonance, assisting the employee in the process of engaging in unfelt emotional display for organisational purposes (Festinger 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills 1999).

RESEARCH AIMS

This paper seeks to use concepts associated with cognitive dissonance theory to determine if workers use emotional display rules as a mechanism to manage the experience of emotional dissonance as a consequence of displaying unfelt emotion. Traditionally, display rules have been viewed as precursors to the negative affective state of emotional dissonance, however, cognitive dissonance theory suggests that these 'rules' can also be used as a justification to display emotions contrary to those experienced

when linked to reward or punishment. No previous emotional labour research has considered emotional display rules as beneficial to customer service workers.

METHODS

The intention of this study is to apply grounded interpretive qualitative research techniques in order to examine emotional display rules as a tool to manage emotional dissonance. The participants in the present study consisted of 37 tourism-based customer/visitor service employees. Organisation A had 25 employees and organisation B had 12 members participate. Overall, 23 (62%) females and 14 (38%) males participated in the study which is reflective of the gender mix of the organisations. Ages of the participants varied from 18 to 66. Potential volunteers were informed that in order to participate they needed to be actively involved in providing organisationally determined customer/visitor service roles on a voice-to-voice or face-to-face basis. This was a prerequisite for contributing to the study in order to ensure that employees met the criteria for being considered 'emotional labourers'. Respondents' roles included counter and telephone customer service as well as face to face interaction on an individual and group basis (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 here

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted exploring the emotional experience of employees engaged in the provision of a customer/visitor service experience. Though the present study was conducted as a part of a larger study examining the constructs of emotional labour, emotional dissonance, emotional intelligence and burnout at work, notable themes in relation to individual responses to emotional display rules emerged from the data. Employee responses to three questions included in the semi-structured interviews were examined in relation to responses to, and uses of, emotional display rules when surface acting (A list of the questions is provided in table 2). The duration of the semi-structured interviews was approximately 20-30 minutes. The interviews were conducted on a face-to-face basis and tape recorded, and were later transcribed and analysed for emergent and predicted themes in exploring the nature, consequences, and management of performing

emotional labour (Huberman & Miles 1998; Mishler 1990) using the qualitative data analysis package, NVivo.

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Insert Table 2 here

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Findings

Three steps were taken in analysing the data generated from the semi-structured interviews. The first step was to examine the data in order to identify instances of employees engaging in surface acting in specific response to emotional display rules. The second step was to identify employee evaluations of surface acting when responding to display rules. Finally, cognitive techniques adopted by individuals to manage emotional dissonance/negative outcomes of surface acting are examined in relation to the use of display rules according to concepts embedded in cognitive dissonance theory.

Step One: From the data it was evident that employees are aware of an obligation to display appropriate emotion during interpersonal interactions for organisational purposes. The first two examples of interviewee statements illustrate the display of unfelt emotion (surface acting) in response to display rules. In the first example the tourist worker was en route to perform some organisational duties. Visitors to the park stopped the employee on their way to perform that given role to ask questions. In the account the worker reluctantly displays an appropriate form of emotional expression consistent with the requirements of her role whilst being anxious about getting to her next job.

> "And you just think 'come on I've got to get out of here you know' and <u>you've got to just keep trying to be, have that smile on your face</u>."

The second example of surface acting illustrates the conscious effort of an employee to respond to display rules. The employee is trying to feign an organisationally appropriate disposition ('I have to...) whilst acknowledging divergent feelings at the time.

> "People say to me, 'oh here comes happy' 'you're always got a smile on your face … so I often I feel., 'oh well I mightn't be feeling like that inside ….People don't really know how I am feeling because <u>I have to put on this different expression when I am out there."</u>

The second aspect to surface acting is the suppression of inappropriate emotion (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002). The following example illustrates the conscious effort of the worker to suppress a

negative emotional display. In the example, the worker suppressed their feelings in response to emotional display rules.

> "The last tour I just did, I had an annoying man right behind me sucking loudly on lollies, right in my ear, which was (annoying). He was American and he was telling me how good San Diego Zoo (was) and how much bigger it was than this one, and all that sort of stuff. I wasn't about to show that I was actually a bit fed up with him saying that. Also, the other woman she was an older woman but she had a walking stick and, to get my attention she continued to tap me with her walking stick, which also was a little bit annoying. <u>You just can't show that those things annoy you.</u>"

Step Two: After reviewing employee comments relating to surface acting in response to display rules, the data were examined for specific instances where employee' perceptions of outcomes associated with surface acting were positive. It is important to determine if positive work outcomes can be linked to display rules and surface acting. When employees are surface acting, experienced emotions are incongruent with expected emotional display. A conflict between felt and displayed emotion is generally regarded as the mechanism that elicits emotional dissonance for emotional labourers (Mann 2004; Morris & Feldman 1996b, 1997; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000). If workers associate faking emotional display with positive work outcomes it suggests that individuals may differ in responses to faking emotions, and in ability to manage the affective outcomes of performing emotional labour.

The following set of employee statements illustrate that not only do positive affective outcomes emerge from surface acting, but that employees sometimes use surface acting as a mechanism by which they focus their attention and manage their affective states at work when responding to display rules.

> "… beforehand it <u>seems like a real chore</u> and you really don't want to do it and you don't want to go out there and face people. Ninety percent of the time, though, by the end of it you have actually forgotten what you were upset about and it has taken your mind away from it and it actually <u>makes my mood a little bit better</u>".

> "Good, <u>I really enjoy it</u>, because you can see that the audience responds to it. <u>If you're displaying the right emotions</u> then ... I don't feel like I'm being a wooden actor.

> "<u>Oh, just satisfied</u> that you've done the right thing…Yes. ….. Yes, It is a discipline because I feel I'm representing (the organisation) and that is <u>how they would expect me to behave.</u>"

In the first example the employee uses their perception of organisationally correct emotional display as a mechanism to shift attention from issues that are upsetting and, therefore, improving his/her affective state ('it actually makes my mood a little bit better'). In the final statement, the employee explicitly refers to employer expectations which educe a sense of satisfaction when met. These examples demonstrate that feigning emotional display does not automatically produce negative affective outcomes for workers as some research literature may suggest (Hochschild 1983; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000).

Though some employees linked surface acting with positive outcomes, and consistent with the literature, employees did at times associate surface acting with negative job outcomes. The following examples illustrate workers' accounts of surface acting when asked how they felt when concealing emotion. The employee accounts indicate that displaying a fake positive emotions can be taxing, often resulting in a negative reaction/outcome.

> "You're trying to keep that happy persona but someone is really pushing against that. You just want to turn around and snap their head off or throw them to the hippos, or something like that, and you can't. You've got to try to put on a happy face and try to deal with it and try to smooth things over. It can take a toll because if you've already had a crap day, you are just ready to kill anyone at the end of the day. You're just looking forward to the end of the day".

> "(Do you put on a front?) Oh yeah (How does that make you feel when you're putting on a front?) Tired and bored and it's just very taxing you know".

> "You're putting on a smile but you know that underneath the surface that you'd rather wring their neck".

> "I'm in front of the class you have to just switch that off and you've got to come out with this different persona, you've got to be this happy bright person and your feeling inside 'oh dear'. I've got to resolve this when this is over and that can be quite draining."

The previous and following tourist workers' statements provide an illustration of the difficulty some employees experience when surface acting. In the following examples of employee statements, some employees indicated that surface acting could be draining, taxing, and tiring whereas some described a sense of frustration, guilt, and psychological discomfort. Elliot and Devine (1994) suggest that psychological discomfort and tension is the essence of experienced dissonance when beliefs, values and attitudes are incongruent with behaviour and is unhealthy for the employee (Festinger 1957;

Harmon-Jones 1999). The experience of discomfort linked to surface acting is consistent with that proposed by cognitive dissonance theory.

"…you just feel like you haven't done, ... <u>what you're paid to do</u> that's not what its all about, you just haven't enthused them which is <u>what you're supposed to do</u>".

"It makes me feel a bit <u>guilty</u> because I don't want to be there and <u>I'm just pretending</u> I do. <u>It's tiring</u>".

"No, <u>not really comfortable</u>…"

"It <u>makes me feel uncomfortable</u> because I'm putting it on".

Step Four: After instances were identified where employees experienced negative outcomes associated with surface acting, the data were examined for cognitive techniques used by workers to manage outcomes associated with surface acting. Concepts established in cognitive dissonance theory suggest that the impact of dissonance can be averted or reduced by adding consonant (consistent with behaviour) cognitions, removing dissonant (inconsistent with behaviour) cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the relevance of consonant cognitions (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Consistent with these suggestions were examples of workers explicitly, or implicitly, referring to display rules when using cognitive techniques to manage the conflict due to the difference between felt and displayed emotion.

Adding consonant cognitions:
"You just tell yourself <u>you can't have a bad day</u>. I think that's where it is. You can't have a bad day" or "You're constantly <u>reminding yourself</u> (what you're here for) if you are having an off day"

Removing a dissonant cognition:
"Basically, I just try and forget about what's worrying me or what's wrong with me, or whatever, and <u>just get on with my job</u>. <u>That's what I'm here for</u>" or "I think, when you've got problems at home, you should leave them at home...When you're in here, you treat it like you've stepped into an environment where <u>you're required to be different, pleasant and ready to react positively</u>… You've got to wipe that slate clean"

Reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions:
"…sometimes with the hostile ones,…your immediate reaction is to be hostile back…that's a common, basic emotion. No, you just have to <u>remember that you are at work, that you are being paid to do this job</u>" or "I'm here to help them have a great time and whatever happens to me before or after the tour <u>is nothing to do with them and so it shouldn't affect them</u> in any way".

Increasing the relevance of consonant cognitions:
"These people have paid a lot of money to come in. <u>They deserve to be treated friendly</u>…" or "If I'm sad or got problems at home, it will never come across to them; it's not their problem. So, <u>when I come to work, they are the most important people in my day</u>".

Discussion

The employee statements presented in the findings from the 37 employee interviews illustrate the utility of cognitive dissonance theory as a theoretical framework to help interpret the complexities of the range of outcomes linked to performing emotional labour. Not only do the employee statements presented in the findings support the use of cognitive dissonance theory in emotional labour research but they also presented a range of cognitive coping techniques, using emotional display rules, for workers to use to deal with the negative consequences of performing emotional labour (surface acting) in response to organisational demands. Employees not only demonstrated attempts in managing affective outcomes of performing emotional labour prior to emotional labour-based activities occurring ('wipe the slate clean') but, importantly, some employees also indicated an ability to manage negative affective states as a result of customer/visitor interactions referring to organisational expectations in relation to interpersonal interactions (display rules). Employees used these organisational expectations as pieces of knowledge (cognitions) to manage negative affective states consistent with the propositions of cognitive dissonance theorists. In order to manage affective states in relation to surface acting workers added consonant cognitions ("You're constantly reminding yourself..."), removed dissonant cognitions ("Basically, I just try and forget about what's worrying me..."), reduced the importance of dissonant cognitions ("...whatever happens ...is nothing to do with them and so it shouldn't affect them..."), or increased the relevance of consonant cognitions ("...it's not their problem. So, when I come to work, they are the most important people in my day...").

Though employee accounts suggest that cognitive dissonance theory contributes to demonstrating the use of display rules in cognitive techniques to manage outcomes associated with surface acting, it is not clear what other individually-based factors may contribute to reducing negative outcomes when the worker surface acts. Previous research has suggested that individual identity, affectivity, and emotional intelligence are contributing factors in eliciting or reducing negative work outcomes such as emotional exhaustion and burnout in relation to emotional labour (Härtel, Barker & Baker 1999; Hochschild 1983; Van Dijk & Kirk-Brown 2006, Van Dijk & Kirk 2007). Future research needs to consider such individual differences in relationship to emotional labour-based work outcomes. In

particular, differences that contributes to the effective management, or aversion, of negative employee outcomes.

Conclusion

This study has provided accounts of customer/visitor service staff engaging in interpersonal interactions for organisational purposes using emotional labour. Emotional labour research generally suggests that display rules may result in workers displaying an unfelt emotion, eliciting emotional dissonance, which can lead to negative work outcomes such as emotional exhaustion and burnout (Hochschild 1983; Schaubroeck & Jones 2000). Employee accounts indicated, however, that surface acting in response to display rules equally facilitated positive and negative outcomes. Workers used perceived obligation to display unfelt emotion to shift attention to their work which improved individual affective states, whereas others reported that displaying false emotion could be taxing and draining and had negative outcomes such as tiredness, psychological discomfort (emotional dissonance), and guilt. Consistent with propositions of cognitive dissonance theory, further examination of the data also indicated that employees reported the ability to manage or avert negative work outcomes using cognitive techniques. They did this by adding consonant cognitions, removing dissonant cognitions, reducing the importance of dissonant cognitions, or increasing the relevance of consonant cognitions in relation to surface acting. The results of this study suggest that cognitive techniques may have utility when managing employee outcomes of emotional labour. This present study involved a limited number of interviews (37) and was primarily exploratory in nature. The results are not conclusive but suggest that further explanatory research regarding emotional labour-based activities in response to emotional display rules, and individual characteristics that contribute to the successful management or avoidance of dissonance due to surface acting is needed.

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Table 1: Subject's Roles

Table 2 – Interview Questions

Semi-Structured Interview Questions
How does displaying the right (organisationally appropriate) emotions make you feel?
When do you have to hide your true feelings when interacting with the public? How does this make you feel?
Do you find yourself just putting on a front, if you do is this hard to do and why?

Role	Number of Interviewees
Guide/Demonstrations	21
General Customer Service – Reception and Sales	6
Education Officers	3
General Service (Mixed Roles)	7
Total	**37**