The Relationship Between Emotional Labor Strategies, Service Provider Hostility, and Service Quality

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This article suggests that emotional labor strategies relate differently to negative emotions displayed by service providers during service interactions. The display of hostile emotions by service providers is expected to influence customer perception of service quality. Findings tested in a sample of 107 service provider–customer dyads show that only surface acting related positively to service provider displays of hostility. Surface acting was also related positively to customers’ evaluation of service quality. The same relationships with deep acting failed to reach significance. Furthermore, the display of service provider hostility was negatively related with customer evaluations of service quality.

KEYWORDS negative emotions, emotional labor, service quality

INTRODUCTION

The “process of regulating both feelings and expressions for the organizational goals” (Grandey, 2000, p. 97) is defined as emotional work or emotional labor. The concept of emotional labor has received ample attention in existing research in an effort to understand how service organizations can better deliver “service with a smile” to their customers by effectively managing their employees’ emotional display (Groth, Hennig-Thurau, & Walsh, 2009). Yet, little research is devoted to how emotional labor strategies relate to service providers’ negative emotional displays.
Various studies have found that employees’ positive affective displays in service encounters have a positive effect on customers’ emotions and behaviors (Goodwin & Smith, 1990; Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, 2001). Yet, only a few studies have focused on the outcomes of negative affective displays in the service encounter. Most of these have explored the consequences of customer aggression on service employees’ well-being (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Dorman & Zapf, 2004; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004; Grandey, Tam, & Brauburger, 2002). Little cumulative knowledge is currently available on the effects of service provider hostility on the customer, or on service outcomes (for an exception, see Doucet, 2004).

The aims of the current study are two fold: (a) to extend theory and research about emotional labor by examining the effect of emotional labor strategies on service provider’s negative emotional display; and (b) to decipher the consequences of employees’ negative emotional display on customer-related outcomes (i.e., service quality). More specifically, the research model suggests that emotional labor strategies (i.e., deep acting and surface acting) relate negatively to negative emotions displayed by service providers during service interactions (i.e., hostility). The service provider’s display of hostile emotions is expected to influence customer perception of service quality.

**THEORY AND HYPOTHESES**

**Emotional Labor**

Emotional labor is generally defined as the act of expressing organizationally desired emotions during service transactions (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Hochschild (1983), who introduced the term, distinguished between two processes that underlie emotional labor: deep acting and surface acting. In surface acting, employees modify behaviors by suppressing or faking expressions and displaying emotions not actually felt (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2000). In deep acting, employees modify behaviors through internal change so that a genuine emotional display can follow. Thus, individuals try to influence what they feel in order to “become” the role they are asked to display. This involves changing cognition through perspective taking, or positive refocus (Grandey et al., 2004).

As research on emotional labor has accumulated, researchers have begun to explore the differences between surface and deep acting, and have concluded that they yield different outcomes. For example, surface acting was positively associated with personal costs such as physical complaints, an absence of job satisfaction (Bono & Vey, 2005), different components of burnout (i.e., depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment; Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008), poor or inappropriate affective delivery (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003) and decreased
customer orientation, when a customer accurately detects an employee engaging in a surface acting strategy (Groth et al., 2009). Conversely, deep acting is associated with more desirable states, including an enhanced sense of professional efficacy, affective well-being (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008), job satisfaction (Lam & Chen, 2012), facilitate customer positive affect (Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, & Gremler, 2006), perceived customer orientation (Groth et al., 2009) and fulfillment of customer expectations (Chi, Grandey, Diamond, & Krimmel, 2011).

The Relationship Between Emotional Labor Strategies and Service Provider Hostility

Hostile behaviors are defined as overt actions by one party toward another that are perceived by the target as malevolent, unfavorable, or even warlike (Buss & Perry, 1992; Doucet & Jehn, 1997).

According to Grandey (2000), in surface acting, individuals may attempt to suppress unwanted feelings by simply faking appropriate displays, which may lead to a breakdown of character (Grandey, 2003), ending with a “leaking out” of the service provider’s true feelings (Ekman, 2001; Grove & Fisk, 1989). Moreover, research has shown that attempting to suppress negative emotions may result in the ironic effect of thinking about the situation even more, which ultimately intensifies those negative feelings (Wegner, 1994). Lastly, research (Butler et al., 2003) reveals that surface acting depletes cognitive resources, thus reducing performance in social contexts. Moreover, it may also engender a sense of discrepancy between experience and expression which, in turn, may lead to negative feelings about the self and contribute to distracted, strained, and avoidant interpersonal behavior. Therefore, it is reasonable to hypothesize that employees who engage in surface acting are more likely to display negative emotions towards customers although it conflicts with the organization rule displays.

In contrast, service providers who act deeply may deploy their attention elsewhere by conjuring thoughts that elicit desired affective states, or they may change their cognitive perspective by reappraising the situation (Grandey, 2000). Since these strategies produce a change in felt affect that fits the display rules, such employees would be expected to have a firmer sense of their role definition and would thus be less likely to break character in the face of problems (Grandey, 2003).

Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

\[ H1a: \] Surface acting will be related positively to service provider display of hostility during interactions with customers.

\[ H1b: \] Deep acting will be related negatively to service provider display of hostility during interactions with customers.
The Relationship Between Emotional Labor Strategies and Service Quality

Service quality is defined as “the consumer’s judgment about [a service interaction’s] overall excellence or superiority” (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988, p. 15).

Only few studies have investigated how emotional labor strategies relate to service quality. Grandey’s research finds that employees’ use of deep acting leads to higher ratings of service delivery than does the use of surface acting (Grandey, 2003), and that customer satisfaction is higher when customers perceive employee behavior as authentic (Grandey, Fisk, Mattila, Jansen, & Sideman, 2005). Hennig-Thurau and colleagues (2006), however, could not replicate Grandey and colleagues’ (2005) results. Similarly, Groth et al. (2009) found the direct effect of employee deep acting on service quality to be significant only at the .10 level whereas it failed to reach significance for employee surface acting.

Despite these inconclusive research results, the present authors concur with the theoretical assumptions (Groth et al., 2009; Hennig-Thurau et al., 2006) that a high level of authenticity of the employees’ emotional labor display (i.e., deep acting) evokes positive emotions in customers and leads to a positive influence on customers’ service quality perceptions due to their preference for being treated in an honest way. Moreover, deep acting behavior relates to key dimensions of service quality such as reliability, assurance and customers’ beliefs that the employees serving them are truly willing to help (responsiveness). In contrast, a lack of authenticity (i.e., surface acting) may lead customers to question, either consciously or unconsciously, the employees’ reliability and responsiveness and could reduce customers’ confidence in the service firm, which in turn decreases service quality. According to Côté’s (2005) social interaction model, surface acting is likely to elicit more negative reactions from customers because it is inauthentic.

Therefore, the following hypotheses were posited:

\begin{equation}
H2a: \text{Surface acting will be related negatively to service quality perception.}
\end{equation}

\begin{equation}
H2b: \text{Deep acting will be related positively to service quality perception.}
\end{equation}

The Relationship Between Service Provider Hostility and Service Quality

Since the display of positive emotion can be viewed as an expected predictor of service quality (Hochschild, 1983), along with empathy and assurance (Parasuraman et al., 1988), a display of negative emotion toward a customer during an interaction may be considered a violation of customer expectations and can negatively affect the customer’s perception of service quality.
Furthermore, customer emotions can be affected by service provider hostility as a result of emotional contagion processes, which subsequently will effect customers’ evaluation of service quality (Dallimore, Sparks, & Butcher, 2007; Doucet, 2004). Employees’ hostile interactions can be emotionally draining and costly in terms of the need to invest more energy and emotional regulation in order to stay focused on the service task. In the context of service quality coping with negative feelings is also depleting (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998). Recently, research has found that service provider hostility was negatively related to their ability to provide a solution to customers’ problems, which was further related to customers’ hostility towards the service provider (Medler-Liraz & Kark, 2012). This implies that service providers’ ability to perform their job well and give customers a high level of service by providing professional and creative solutions to their problems will be hindered when service providers display hostility. Therefore, the following hypothesis was posited:

\[ H3: \] The display of service provider hostility will be negatively related to customers’ evaluations of service quality.

The Mediating Role of Service Provider Hostility

Although mood can be an antecedent of emotional labor, and the type of emotion regulation strategies chosen can be guided by the mood that is already present (Totterdell & Holman, 2003), emotions can also be a consequence of emotional labor. Hochschild (1983) asserted that surface and deep acting can result in emotional outcomes. For example, engaging in “phony” behavior can lead to feelings of resentment. Research by Judge, Woolf, and Hurst (2009) supporting this assumption, shows that surface acting positively predict negative affect.

Experiencing negative emotions such as hostility creates demands on the service provider’s resources that are likely to interfere with their performance and impact the customer’s mood. This, in turn, can negatively affect customer perception of service quality.

Therefore, the following hypothesis was posited:

\[ H4: \] The display of service provider hostility will partially mediate the relationship between emotional labor strategies (i.e., surface and deep acting) and customers’ evaluations of service quality.

METHOD

Sample and Data Collection

The study was carried out in a large communications company in Israel. The sample consisted of 107 service provider employees who worked as
call service attendants and whose work description was to provide customer finance information and technical help. A total of 142 service providers (out of 400 who were invited to participate in the study [36%]) had agreed to participate, but only 107 service providers were included in the final sample owing to an inability to collect relevant data from customers or to locate employee-customer interactions that were not audio taped due to technical problems. Sixty-six percent of the respondents were female; average age was 24 (range 19–45 years); mean for job tenure was 14 months (range 6–60 months).

In the first stage, the service providers completed self-administered questionnaires assessing their emotional labor strategies. The authors distributed the questionnaires in envelopes to the service providers individually at their work site. Each envelope also contained a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study (“to learn about employees’ attitudes toward their workplace”) and provided instructions regarding the questionnaire and the data collection procedure. In the second stage, the authors received “customer service-quality data” from the organization for each employee who agreed to participate in the first stage. Generally, customers were chosen randomly, two customers per month for each employee, and were contacted by telephone within 48 hours after the interaction. Since the survey was managed by an outsource company hired by the organization, questions could not be changed or influenced by the authors. Therefore, familiar measurements of service quality could not be used. In the last stage, two research assistants who were blind to the research hypotheses located employee-customer interactions that were audio taped routinely from a remote location for internal performance evaluation and feedback purposes. Their task was to locate the interaction that matched the “customer service quality data” with the particular service employee by date and time. After an initial stage of training and practice in which the students learned the coding process and mastered the related nuances, they listened to the audiotape and independently coded the service providers’ tone of voice.

Measures

Emotion Labor Strategies

Emotion labor strategies were assessed by eight items from Grandey’s Emotional Labor Questionnaire (2003) originally developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2002). Surface acting items constituted five items (e.g., “Put on an act in order to deal with customers in an appropriate way”), and deep acting items constituted three items (e.g., “Try to actually experience the emotions that I must show”), on a 7-point scale (1 = never to 7 = always). Reliabilities were .51 and .77 for deep and surface acting, respectively. In order to improve reliability for deep acting, one item was deleted from the scale (“I’m really
trying to feel the emotions that I need to express”) increasing the reliability to .79.

SERVICE PROVIDER HOSTILITY

Service provider hostility was coded by two research assistants following Doucet’s (2004) procedure. They listened to the audiotape and independently coded the service providers’ tone of voice used in each speaking turn (an uninterrupted string of words spoken by one person) in each interaction. A speaking turn was coded as 1 if the tone of voice displayed any hostility, or 0 if the tone of voice displayed no hostility. In total, 4,891 speaking turns were coded. 96% agreement was reached, with a Cohen’s kappa of .795 (Cohen, 1960). Remaining coding disagreements were resolved by consulting one of the authors. To create an overall hostility score that represented the hostility displayed by the service provider for an entire interaction, an average hostility rating was calculated across all the speaking turns of the service provider in a given interaction. Since the mean for hostility was extremely low (M = 0.01, SD = 0.03), we decided to treat this variable as dichotomous (0 = none of the service provider’s speaking turns were rated as hostile, 1 = service provider’s speaking turns were rated as hostile).

SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality was assessed using the organization’s standard scale. Each customer was asked to rate five items evaluating the quality of their service interaction: “Thinking about the service representative you spoke with, how would you rate the overall quality of the service provided by this individual?” and “Based on your experience during this call, please rate the representative’s knowledge/willingness to help you/ability to make you feel like a valued customer/your overall satisfaction from the organization following the interaction.” Responses were ranked on a 4-point scale (1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, and 4 = very good). The mean of the five items was used to calculate the customer’s evaluation of service quality (Cronbach’s α = .85).

RESULTS

Analysis Strategy

The research model was analyzed utilizing the two-step approach to SEM (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988; Bollen, 1989). First, the fit of a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model to the observed data was tested separately for service providers using SEM methods (implemented by AMOS 6.0; Arbuckle, 1997). Next, the fit of a structural model with the data was tested.
Preliminary Analyses

SERVICE PROVIDER MEASURE

A two-factor model with deep acting and surface acting indicated an acceptable fit to the data, \( \chi^2 \) of 19.86 on 12 degrees of freedom; CFI = 0.97; IFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.93; NFI = 0.93; RMSEA = 0.07. An alternative measurement model with a single factor model, with all items loaded on one factor, was also examined. The results show that the two-factor model is significantly better than a single factor structure, \( \Delta \chi^2 (2) = 71.43, p < .001 \).

Test of the Hypothesized Model

The means, standard deviations, and correlations for the research variables are presented in Table 1. To reduce the possibility of other factors affecting the results, respondents’ gender, age, job tenure, and positive and negative affectivity were controlled in light of various research findings (Medler-Liraz & Kark, 2012; Seger-Guttmann & Medler-Liraz, 2013). Although there were significant relationships between the control variables and surface acting: gender and surface acting \( (r = −.23, p < .05) \) and negative affectivity and surface acting \( (r = .39, p < .001) \), the control variables were not included in the final analyses because they did not affect the final results.

Fit indices of the hypothesized model showed a good fit to the data-model, \( \chi^2 \) of 1.18 on 1 degree of freedom; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; TLI = 0.94; NFI = 0.97; RMSEA = 0.04. Path estimates are presented in Figure 1.

Supporting H1a, surface acting was positively related to service provider display of hostility during interactions with customers \( (.21, p < .05) \). However, H1b was unsupported, as there was no significant relationship between deep acting and service provider display of hostility \( (−.05, p > .05) \). H2a and H2b were not supported. The relationship between surface acting and customers’ evaluation of service quality was only marginally significant in the

### Table 1: Individual-Level Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations (N = 107)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender (1 = female)</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Age</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>4.15</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Job tenure</td>
<td>14.29</td>
<td>10.06</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Negative affectivity</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>−.19*</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>−.16</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Positive affectivity</td>
<td>3.12</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>−.20*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>−.44***</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Surface acting</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.84</td>
<td>−.23*</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>−.14</td>
<td>.39***</td>
<td>−.11</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Deep acting</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.04</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Service provider hostility</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>−.15</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.20*</td>
<td>−.01</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Service quality</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>−.08</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.13</td>
<td>−.49***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.
opposite direction (.16, \( p = .07 \)), while the relationship between deep acting and customers’ evaluation of service quality was not significant (.09, \( p > .05 \)). Supporting H3, the display of service provider hostility was negatively related to customers’ evaluations of service quality (−.52, \( p < .001 \)).

H4, which predicted that the relationship of emotional labor strategies (i.e., surface and deep acting) and customers’ evaluations of service quality will be partially mediated by the display of service provider hostility, was partially supported. Following the procedure outlined by Baron and Kenny (1986), as well as revisions in mediation procedures as discussed in Kenny, Kashy and Bolger’s (1998) work for testing mediation, SEM was used to test H4. Since the relationship between deep acting and service provider display of hostility, and deep acting and customers’ evaluation of service quality, were not significant, the display of service provider hostility cannot mediate the relationship between deep acting and customers’ evaluations of service quality.

Next, the mediating effect regarding surface acting was examined. As noted when testing H1a, surface acting (independent variable) and service provider display of hostility (mediating variable) were significantly and positively related. In addition, surface acting was only marginally significant and positively related to customers’ evaluations of service quality (dependent variable). However, Kenny et al. (1998) argued that this relationship could be weak or even nonsignificant in cases where the independent variable has a more distal (or indirect) influence on the dependent variable, as was the case in the present research (two different sources). Surprisingly, the relationship between surface acting (independent variable) and customers’ evaluations of service quality (dependent variable) increased when service quality.

![FIGURE 1 Summary of study results. Note. Hypothesis 4 is a mediation hypothesis and therefore not shown in the figure. \(^{†} p < .10. \,* p < .05. \,*∗ p < .01. \,*∗∗ p < .001.\,](image-url)
provider display of hostility (mediating variable) was included in the model (from .05, \( p > .05 \) to .16, \( p = .07 \)).

Following Baron and Kenny’s recommendation, Sobel’s (1982) statistical procedure was used to test the significance of the mediation effect. The result of a two-tailed Sobel test, as to test whether the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable would become significantly larger when taking the mediator into account, proved significant (Sobel = 2.05, \( p < .05 \)). Notably, MacKinnon, Krull and Lockwood (2000) described a situation in which the magnitude of the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable becomes greater when a third variable is included as a suppressor. In a mediation model, a suppression effect would be present when the direct and mediated effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable are opposite (Tzelgov & Henik, 1991). Such models are known as inconsistent mediation models (Davis, 1985), in contrast to consistent mediation models in which the direct and mediated effects are similar.

The results of this research support such a model. Surface acting relates positively to customers’ evaluations of service quality. However, a service provider who uses a surface acting strategy will display higher levels of hostility, which will be negatively associated with customers’ evaluations of service quality. Thus, the direct effect of surface acting on customers’ evaluations of service quality would be positive, and the indirect effect of surface acting on customers’ evaluations of service quality mediated by hostility would be negative. These results partially support H4, suggesting that service providers’ display of hostility partially mediates the relationship between surface acting and customers’ evaluations of service quality.

**DISCUSSION**

The study constitutes an attempt to narrow an existing research gap by exploring the link between service providers’ emotional labor strategies, their emotional display, and customers’ perceptions of the service experience.

The present findings suggest that surface acting has a positive and significant relationship with service provider display of hostility. Contrary to expectation, surface acting related positively to customers’ evaluation of service quality, rather than negatively, although it was significant only at the .10 level. Furthermore, the display of service provider hostility was negatively related to customers’ evaluations of service quality. Lastly, the results support an inconsistent mediation model, with service provider hostility functioning as a suppressor variable. Thus, surface acting relates positively to customers’ evaluations of service quality. However, a service provider who uses a surface acting strategy will display higher levels of hostility, which will result in lower levels of customer evaluations of service quality.

Our findings extend the previous research and indicate that engaging in surface acting is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it may be detrimental
because it heightens service providers’ negative emotional display and their tendency to be hostile in service interactions; giving credence to findings by Judge et al. (2009) that surface acting positively predicts negative affect. Apparently, engaging in “phony” behavior and simply suppressing negative emotions can end with a “leaking out” of service providers’ true feelings of resentment, leading to a display of hostility towards customers. On the other hand, surface acting relates positively and marginally significantly to service quality. The same phony behavior that contributes to the service provider’s hostility can yield a high evaluation of service from the customer.

Taken together, both results can be explained by relying on Groth and his colleagues’ (2009) notion of customer accuracy in detecting different emotional labor strategies. Their research found that surface acting is not a problem as long as customers do not recognize it. Surface acting exerts negative effects only when customers perceive it as such. Hence, we assume that customers’ accuracy in detecting surface acting behavior may affect service quality evaluation. Customers who don’t detect surface acting behaviors (e.g., phony smiles) will evaluate the service quality as pleasant, since it is the appropriate behavior expected by the customer. By contrast, if engaging in surface acting leads to a display of hostility, it is easy for the customer to recognize service provider behavior as unauthentic, resulting in a low evaluation of service quality. While signs of hostility during an interaction can help customers detect deceptive behavior, if the interaction is smooth, with no clues of deceit, decoding such behavior is more difficult. Notably, while customers can indeed detect deceptive emotions, their accuracy is far from perfect (Ekman, 2001; Ekman, O’Sullivan, & Frank, 1999; Groth et al., 2009). It may be assumed, therefore, that at least some of the customers cannot detect surface acting behavior without any “leaking” clues. Further research on this issue is needed.

Our findings also indicate that customer evaluation of service quality can be affected by the service provider’s display of emotions. Since courtesy, friendliness, and cheerfulness play an important role in fostering positive customer perceptions of service quality (Schneider & Bowen, 1985), a display of negative emotion toward a customer can be considered as a violation of customer expectations. Such behavior may be explained also as a process of emotional contagion, which describes how the display of negative emotions by employees affects customers’ emotions and behavior (Dallimore et al., 2007; Doucet, 2004). Furthermore, when the organizational setting demanding the display of positive emotions is impaired due to the service provider’s hostile behavior, the service provider is no longer capable of performing their task satisfactorily. Presumably, since the service provider is well aware that hostile behavior is viewed as crossing a boundary and violating organizational norms (i.e., display rules), the stressful service situation takes an emotional toll, draining the service provider’s resources to cope with the customers’ actual demands.
To the best of the authors’ knowledge, research by Hennig-Thurau et al. (2006) and Groth et al. (2009) alone has revealed how emotional labor strategies affect customer experience. Yet, while their research found that deep acting has positive benefits for customers, such as perceived customer orientation and service quality, the present research failed to support any of the hypotheses regarding this strategy, although it did not find a negative main effect on customers, either. A possible explanation is based on the difficulty to detect internal changes in the service provider. Since in deep acting employees modify behaviors through internal and cognitive change (Grandey et al., 2004), the customer cannot always appreciate the service provider’s emotional efforts. According to Rupp and Spencer (2006), an employee’s internal emotional struggle may be noticeable only in extreme situations. Moreover, even if the service provider wishes to regulate their emotions, a change of affect is not always easily accomplished (Hemenover, 2003) or accomplished as intended (Larsen, 2000).

Managerial Implications

Frontline workers in call-center work are expected to interact with a large number of customers per hour and deliver “service with a smile” by displaying certain emotions (e.g., happiness) and suppressing others (e.g., anger). The present findings suggest that displaying a perpetual smile impelled by engaging in surface acting may not be the most effective way of improving customer evaluation of service quality. Such a strategy may lead to a display of hostility, which can eventually end with a poor evaluation of service quality, with major implications for organizational sales and profits (Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998). Empirical evidence of the negative outcomes of emotional labor makes it important for organizations and researchers to consider both the costs of emotional labor and its benefits to organizations and their customers (Bono & Vey, 2005).

Service managers should hire individuals who may naturally feel the emotions they are expected to express without having to regulate their emotions, might also have a strong service orientation, care about customers’ needs, and frequently experience positive emotions during interaction with customers. Managers may also need to provide training which address service providers’ emotional resources by showing them how to perceive customer demands as challenges rather than threats (Schneider, 2004).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our findings, based on three separate data sources, expand the extant knowledge on emotions in service encounters, limitations should be noted. First, inferences from this study are restricted by its cross-sectional...
design, which precludes making the kind of causal statements on the nature of relationships studied that longitudinal or experimental studies would enable. For example, the assumption in the study is that deep acting and surface acting will be related differently to negative emotions displayed by the service provider. It is also possible, however, that hostile service providers may tend to use surface acting rather than a deep acting strategy due to fewer emotional resources available to produce a change in felt affect that fits the display rules.

Second, although the present research did not collect information on customers’ mood at the beginning of the interaction, relevant prior research implies that service providers who were exposed to angry customer complaints reported greater levels of negative affective states and exhibited more negative facial expressions due to emotional contagion processes (Dallimore et al., 2007). If such a customer initiates the interaction by being negative and angry, then the tone of the service encounter is likely to be negative. Capturing such information in future studies would contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of negative emotions during the service encounter.

Lastly, the specific context in which this research took place—a communication company—might limit generalization of the research conclusions. Yet, in this regard, the study of emotional experiences of frontline service employees in call centers is a useful setting for investigating emotions in the sense that in this work context, emotions are controlled and used, and employees are exposed to high levels of job-related strain. The research model should also be further explored in different service work contexts (e.g., face-to-face interactions), as well as in organizations that are not focused on service work.

Overall, the study contributes to the emerging body of literature on the role of emotions in service encounters. The findings enable a better understanding of the differences between emotional labor strategies and the role they play in affecting negative emotions displayed by service providers during service interactions. Clearly, engaging in one strategy or in the other has important implications not only for organizational service but also for the emotional well-being of both employees and customers.

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