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BEYOND DEEP AND SURFACE ACTING: PERCEIVED EMOTIONAL EFFORT IN CUSTOMER SERVICE ROLES

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ABSTRACT

Emotional Labour (EL) is a central feature of customer service roles, which refers to the effort employees exert in order to manage the emotions required by their role. Despite the emphasis placed upon “effort”, the instruments developed to measure EL have been focused on the strategies “deep acting” (i.e. changing your own feelings to achieve the required display) and “surface acting” (i.e. changing only the outward display). The lack of consistent findings, however, reveals the limited explanatory power of deep and surface acting as predictors of employees’ well being. Initial evidence from qualitative studies has started to emerge and suggests that the effort employees perceive to perform EL could be a better predictor of employees’ well being. Based on these findings and building on relevant stress theory, we present the development and initial validation of the perceived emotional effort construct.

1 INTRODUCTION

In order to ensure a pleasant customer experience, front-line workers must display a range of positive emotions when dealing with customers (Grandey, 2003). Within this context, Emotional Labour (EL) becomes a fundamental component of customer service work as it refers to the “effort, planning and control required to display organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions” (Morris and Feldmann 1996, p.987). According to Hochschild’s pioneer work (1983), employees perform EL by either surface acting (SA) or by deep acting (DA). DA describes the process whereby employees try to change their own feelings so that they match the emotions they have to display (Grandey, 2003). For instance, individuals perform DA when they try to recall a pleasant situation in order to smile to customers more genuinely. SA, on the contrary, refers to the process whereby employees fake the emotional displays keeping their own feelings untouched; for example “painting on a smile” (Grandey, 2003:86).

A crucial aspect of Hochschild’s ethnographic work was highlighting the costs associated to EL. Thus, she found that the maintained effort involved in managing emotions to meet role requirements, could lead to a form of chronic stress called “emotional exhaustion”; but also to other negative indicators of well being such as inauthenticity and depression (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2003). These findings raised the awareness of the potential risks of EL and encouraged the development of tools to examine the EL phenomenon in a quantitative way (Grandey, 2000). The mainstream tool used in the literature developed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003) however, ignores the central element of the definition of EL as the “effort” employees make to meet the emotional requirements of the job (Hochschild, 1983). Instead, they measure SA and DA strategies and its associations with well being, assuming that EL is an “effortful activity” per sé (Brotheridge and Lee, 2003). This assumption will be challenged and the development of a measure of perceived effort will be justified.

2 GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

The lack of consistent findings from self-administered surveys in cross-sectional studies has evidenced the limited explanatory power of DA and SA as predictors of employees’ well being. Whereas SA seems to be associated with emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction in many studies (Grandey, 2003; Brotheridge and Lee, 2003), mixed evidence has been found for DA. Thus, DA usually has weak or non relationships with emotional exhaustion however some studies reported associations with job dissatisfaction (Grandey, 2003). Contrarily, DA has also been found associated with positive outcomes such as professional accomplishment (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). In view of this mixed results we cannot conclude whether the strategies are beneficial or detrimental for individuals’ well being.

Initial support for the “perceived emotional effort” as an alternative and more accurate construct whereby analyzing the different impact of EL has started to emerge in qualitative studies. Thus, an exploratory study conducted by the authors of this paper with Human Resources Practitioners found that emotional exhaustion was associated with the effort employees perceived in meeting emotional display rules, regardless of the strategy they used. Similarly, in-depth interviews conducted by Wong and Wang (2009) with tour representatives suggest that the emotional burden reported by employees was the result of the emotional effort they had to exert when dealing with customers. The latter increased with the size of the group they

were working with but was independent of the EL strategies. On the other hand, Guerrier and Adib (2003) found that when meeting emotional requirements was perceived as a “low-effort activity”, tour-operators reported high levels of job satisfaction and authenticity. In short, these results suggest that when perceived effort is high, negative consequences are expected but when perceived effort is low, EL can have positive impact on individuals’ well being (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Based on this evidence and the limitations shown by DA and SA, we argue that perceived effort is a more accurate construct by which to examine the impact of EL on employee’s well being. In the next section, theoretical support for the construct will be presented.

3 PERCEIVED EMOTIONAL EFFORT: A TWO DIMENSIONAL CONSTRUCT

Lazarus’ stress theory (1993) states that individual’s experience of stress is largely determined by how threatening they perceive the external demands of their environment. It is argued that when demands are related to meeting emotional requirements of the role, the extent to which individuals perceive the latter as an effortful activity will ultimately determine the stress they experience. Although many studies imply and support that EL is effortful, no study so far has analyzed the role of individual’s perception of effort on handling the required emotions. Marginally, support for the role of perceptions in the experience of stress within the EL field was found by Grandey et al. (2004). In their study, the authors demonstrate that when employees perceived customer aggression as less stressful, they also experienced less emotional exhaustion and had fewer absences from the job.

The role of effort in the experience of stress is also supported by the Ego Depletion Theory (Baumister et al., 1998). According to this theory, there is a limited source of energy for self-control activities. Thus, if one activity involves self control then the energy remaining for subsequent self control activities will be reduced. Based on this, Martínez-Iñigo et al. (2007) developed a two item instrument to assess the effort indirectly, by interference with other tasks. Although the instrument had low reliability and validity, their findings revealed that indirect effort predicted emotional exhaustion beyond SA and DA. Thus, these results provide initial evidence for the role of indirect effort as a fundamental component of EL and better predictor of well being than the EL strategies.

In view of this, we believe that the Perceived Emotional Effort is a two-dimensional construct that distinguishes between direct perceived emotional effort (based on Lazarus classic stress theory) and indirect perceived emotional effort or by interference with other tasks (based on the Ego-depletion theory and the existing items). In this study we present preliminary findings for the development and initial validation of the Perceived Emotional Effort scale.

4 METHOD

4.1 Procedure, item development and sample

We followed the standard procedure recommended in the literature for the development and initial validation of a scale (Worthington and Whittaker, 2006). The first stage consists of developing the initial pool of items. The item development process in our study was inspired on the theoretical models outlined earlier. Thus, items for the direct dimension were developed based on Lazarus Stress Theory (e.g. “How often have you felt that this activity involves a great amount of effort”) and items for the indirect dimension were based on Ego Depletion Theory (e.g. “How often have you felt that you make more mistakes in other areas due to this activity”). We also included the two items developed by Martínez-Iñigo et al (2007). Secondly, there is an exploratory stage where researchers must administer the initial questionnaire to a given sample in order to find out the psychometric adjustment of the initial pool of items. Statistics analysis will show the internal consistency of the items (i.e. reliability) and whether or not the two theoretical dimensions (direct and indirect perceived effort) are confirmed with the initial sample (i.e. factorial validity). Finally, the questionnaire is administered to an independent sample to test the reliability and validity of the final scale.

A total of 253 employees from the South-East of England dealing with customers on a regular basis participated in the exploratory and item purification stage. Recruitment consultants and letting agencies made 45% of the sample; 26% retail, 16% bars, and restaurants; 7% travel agents, and 6% bank clerks and insurers. Ages ranging from 17 years old to 61, with an average of 30.5; 60% were female, and 40% were male. As a pilot study, a convenience sampling was used (Field, 2005). The final scale was made of 13 items and participants were asked to rate on a 5 point Likert scale (from never to very often) the frequency with which they felt each of the 13 statements. A further 204 employees participated in the second stage. Participants were customer service workers from a Theme Park and a large chain of Pubs and Restaurants. Their ages ranged from 18 to 70, an average of 30 years old; 65% were female, and 35% male.

4.2 Data analysis and results

Answers were entered into a Social Statistics Computer Package (SPSS) and analysis were performed. We performed factorial analysis (to assess the extent to which the two theoretical dimensions can be maintained) and reliability analysis (to assess the internal consistency of the scale). Factorial analysis was conducted as recommended in the literature (e.g. Field, 2005; Hayton et al., 2004). First, positive results on the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity allowed us to conduct exploratory factor analysis. Second, Principal Component Analysis with Oblimin rotation was performed. Finally, decisions to retain factors were informed by three tests: Kaiser's criterion to retain factors (those with eigenvalues >1); Cattel's Screeplot (where only components above the point where the shape of the plot changes should be retained) and Parallel Test. Then, items that reduced the internal consistency of the scale were eliminated.

The best solution with regards to both validity and reliability was found for 2 dimensions which corresponded to the theoretical ones, direct and indirect effort. The final scale was made up of 7 items. The "Indirect Factor" was made up of 4 items and "Direct Effort" factor of 3 items. Factor analysis were replicated with the second sample confirming the two factor structure of the scale. High internal consistency of the items was achieved in both samples. Indirect Factor achieved .72 in the first sample and .85 in the second one and Direct Effort achieved .64 in the first sample and .70 in the second sample.

5 DISCUSSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The need for a measure of perceived emotional effort has been justified. Also, the development and initial validation of the "perceived emotional effort scale" has been presented. The final 7 item-scale showed good reliabilities in both samples. As highlighted in this paper the EL literature assumes and even defines EL as "effort to manage emotions". However, the empirical measure of EL has been focused just on the EL strategies. We believe that by measuring the effort with this new and reliable instrument we will be able to explain the mixed evidence found for DA, SA and its impact. Authors may incorporate the perceived emotional effort in future studies along with measures of DA and SA. In line with Martínez-Iñigo et al. (2007) we expect to demonstrate that the actual predictor of emotional exhaustion would be perceived effort, regardless of the strategy.

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