



Emotional Labor and its Importance in Various Jobs

Sharon Mastracci, Virginia Tech University

Occupational “display rules” are the unwritten rules governing a worker’s outward expressions. Different jobs and professions use different strategies of emotional management to navigate display rules. For example, emergency responders must tune out the chaos, engage fully with the patient, and attend to the crisis at hand. Similarly, police officers cannot betray anxiety or fear to suspects. A social worker cannot cry in front of her clients. Dictated by demands specific to various jobs, emotional labor is the effort required to suppress inappropriate feelings and elicit appropriate emotions within one’s self and in others encountered at work.

People frequently engage in emotion work in their private lives – aiming to appear happy at a party or sad at a funeral. But these efforts benefit interpersonal relationships. Emotional labor in the workplace is, by contrast, part of the employer-employee exchange of pay for work. In public service jobs, such as those done by emergency first responders, emotional labor represents such a substantial and fundamental part of the employer-employee bargain that failing to engage in mandated emotional labor can amount to failing to do the job. Yet despite its importance, emotional labor may go unrecognized – and may not be adequately compensated.

Emotional Labor across Professions and Genders

To follow display rules, workers can take one of two approaches. Through deep acting, they can convince themselves that these emotional rules are objectively right and true. Or they can “fake it” by enacting the rules on the surface. In comparison to deep acting, surface acting is more stressful and produces more negative outcomes like burnout and emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, display rules that prohibit negative emotional expressions like anger, boredom, and disgust rather than promoting positive expressions are especially taxing. Whether performed through surface or deep acting, workers following negative rules are especially prone to burnout and emotional exhaustion. In addition, all emotional labor is effortful, and faking emotions through surface acting especially increases the likelihood of burnout. What is more, researchers know that emotion regulation compromises working memory.

It is important to recognize that emotional labor is a job trait, an aspect of a role, rather than a trait of the individual who fills the role. Fully three of every four public service jobs demand substantial emotional labor. Both new and long-tenured employees engage in emotional labor with equal exertion – the length of job tenure does improve capacities to perform emotional work. The frequency and intensity of emotional labor vary by job, and both men and women engage in it even though its nature differs with gendered expectations. Emotional control is more challenging when job expectations cut against ingrained gender roles. But for all workers, on-the-job emotion regulation takes skill and significant effort. It is crucial to getting jobs done – and lies at the very heart of professionalism.

Lessons from Research on Emotional Labor

Research on emotional labor has recently expanded to examine the nonprofit sector and workplaces outside the United States, with important theoretical and practical consequences.

In new studies, my collaborators and I find that emotional labor is less stressful and costly to public servants in collectivist cultures than in individualist cultures. This finding, in turn, suggests practical strategies for public-sector managers everywhere:

- Leaders should shape the culture of their agencies, emphasizing the shared ideals of public service. Our results suggest this can ease the burden of emotional labor requirements for government jobs.
- Public agency leaders should instill a strong sense of organizational commitment to encourage deep acting as opposed to surface acting in public servants' encounters with citizens and clients.
- Consistent with findings from the public sector, we find voluntary as well as paid emotional labor in nonprofits can be rewarding and fulfilling. To this end, the better leaders of nonprofit organizations understand display rules, the better they can match volunteers to necessary tasks through well-structured interviews with potential volunteers.

Remaining areas for further scholarly investigation include the differences in emotional display and labor across different societal cultures, probing whether harmony and emotional regulation work the same way in collective versus individualistic cultures. Additional work on emotions in volunteer work would also be fruitful.

Occupational display rules demand effort and energy, and the emotional labor needed to comply with them is taxing to those doing jobs, just as physical labor and cognitive efforts are taxing. Gauging the value of emotional labor in performance evaluations and compensation reviews requires more careful attention to the intense interpersonal aspects of many occupations. Estimates vary but anywhere from one-fourth of all private-sector jobs to three-fourths of public-sector jobs require emotional labor.

Organizations – particularly public-sector employers – owe it to their public servant employees to recognize, compensate, and facilitate their substantial efforts at emotional control, rather than leaving it to workers to cope on their own with tactics ranging from self-medication to burnout and early exit from emotionally-laborious jobs. Emotional displays appropriate to work settings are vital, and much can be done by organizational leaders as well as front-line workers to ease such efforts and compensate them properly. Researchers, meanwhile, can learn more about the dynamics of emotional work in different workplaces and cultures, and draw lessons from rigorous studies to help employers and employees alike.

Read more in Sharon Mastracci and Ian Adams, "Is Emotional Labor Easier in Collectivist or Individualist Cultures? An East-West Comparison" *Public Personnel Management* (forthcoming).