Volume 48, issue 5, April 2010 ISSN 0191-8869

ELSEVIER

PERSONALITY AND INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH INTO THE STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF PERSONALITY, AND THE CAUSATION OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Contents:

[Continued on outside back cover]

Person. individ. Diff. is indexed/abstracted in:
ASSIA, Curr. Cont. Soc. & Behav. Sci., PASCAL-CNRS Data, Psychol. Abstr, PsycINFO, PsycLIT., Res. Alert, Soc. Sci. Cit. Indx. Also covered in the abstract and citation database SCOPUS®. Full text available on ScienceDirect®.

ISSN 0191-8869
48(5) 507–692 (2010)

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES (ISSID)

Personality and Individual Differences 48 (2010) 574–578

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Personality and Individual Differences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/paid

Older worker, different actor? Linking age and emotional labor strategies

Jason J. Dahling *, Luis A. Perez

Department of Psychology, The College of New Jersey, 2000 Pennington Road, Ewing, NJ 08628, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 1 July 2009
Received in revised form 7 December 2009
Accepted 10 December 2009
Available online 20 January 2010

Keywords:
Emotional labor
Emotion regulation
Industrial gerontology
Customer service
Trait affect

ABSTRACT

In this study, we examine how the age of service employees influences the emotional labor process. We integrate research on socioemotional selectivity theory and emotional labor to develop hypotheses concerning the relationships between age and specific emotional labor strategies (deep acting, surface acting, and expressing naturally-felt emotions). Consistent with our expectations, we found that age was positively related to the use of deep acting and the expression of naturally-felt emotions, and negatively related to surface acting. Further, we found that trait positive affect partially-mediated some of the age-strategy relationships.

1. Introduction

Emotional labor is the compensated management of emotional displays in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). For example, an important part of the job that a customer service representative is paid to perform is showing the customer that he or she is caring, enthusiastic, and interested in helping. Emotional labor is a common part of many service occupations with important implications for effective customer service, job performance, and the continued well-being of the employee (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Consequently, a great deal of research has focused on the individual differences that predict emotional labor choices among service employees (e.g., Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey, 2000; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000).

Despite considerable interest in the role of demographic characteristics in the emotional labor process, particularly gender (e.g., Wharton & Erickson, 1993), no research to date has examined how age is related to the performance of emotional labor. This omission is noteworthy considering the growing numbers of older adults remaining in the workforce (American Association of Retired People, 2005; He, Sengupta, Velkoff, & DeBarros, 2005) or seeking bridge employment (Adams & Rau, 2004) at retirement age into entry-level jobs that frequently involve service components. Given that a large body of research indicates that affective experiences, emotion regulation motives, and emotion regulation ability change over the lifespan (Carstensen, 2006; Gross et al., 1997; Mroczek, 2001), we expect that age should be predictive of the emotional labor strategies that service employees utilize when interacting with customers or clients.

To test this idea, we apply aging research on socioemotional selectivity theory (SST; Carstensen, 2006) and trait positive affectivity over the lifespan to develop hypotheses linking age to different emotional labor strategies. Using the dramaturgical perspective of emotional labor described by Hochschild (1983), we submit that older adults' choices among different strategies to regulate emotional expressions at work are shaped by (a) their motivational desires to downplay negative emotional experiences and enhance positive emotional experiences, and (b) changes in the experience of trait positive affect that accompany aging through the late 60s as predicted by SST. In the sections that follow, we begin by reviewing research on the dramaturgical perspective of emotional labor to clarify the strategies that we are focusing on in this study. We then turn to a review of SST to explain why we expect age-related changes in emotional regulation motives to be related to emotional labor. Lastly, we discuss research demonstrating trends in the experience of trait affect that suggest positive affectivity should be a mediating mechanism between age and emotional labor.

1.1. Emotional labor strategies: deep acting, surface acting, and expressing naturally-felt emotions

Most previous research has described two general acting strategies that employees utilize to bring about the emotional displays that are required by their employers (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Because this approach to understanding emotional labor positions the employee as an actor responding to organizational demands, Hochschild (1983) described it as the

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 609 771 2582; fax: +1 609 637 5178.
E-mail address: dahling@tcnj.edu (J.J. Dahling).

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doi:10.1016/j.paid.2009.12.009

dramaturgical perspective. The first dramaturgical strategy, surface acting, involves managing only the observable emotional expression; the employee suppresses internal feelings and generates inauthentic displays consistent with the organizational demands. For example, a waiter faced with a table of indecisive diners might surface act by generating a fake smile despite his unchanged internal feelings of irritation over the delay. In past research, surface acting has been described as "acting in bad faith" (Grandey, 2000).

In contrast, the second dramaturgical strategy, deep acting, involves managing actual feelings. When deep acting, employees proactively change their feelings to elicit an authentic emotional display that is consistent with organizational requirements. For example, a tour guide who expects to interact with visitors soon might choose to deliberately reflect on positive thoughts to elicit a positive mood, which subsequently generates natural displays of happiness and enthusiasm. Deep acting has consequently been described as "acting in good faith" because the display is genuinely linked to underlying emotional experiences (Grandey, 2000).

Although both surface and deep acting can be functional responses to workplace demands (Côté, 2005), past research indicates that, in aggregate, these strategies yield different outcomes. Specifically, surface acting is generally related to undesirable outcomes for the employee and the organization; for example, several studies have found that surface acting is positively related to the different components of burnout (i.e., depersonalization, emotional exhaustion, and reduced personal accomplishment; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008; Zammuner & Galli, 2005) and providing poor or inappropriate affective delivery (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003). These outcomes are generally attributed to the continued effort that must be put into faking an emotion when surface acting. Conversely, deep acting is unrelated to many of these negative outcomes and is associated with more desirable states, including an enhanced sense of professional efficacy and affective well-being (Johnson & Spector, 2007; Kim, 2008). The pattern of findings reported in past research suggests that organizations stand to benefit by encouraging employees to deep act instead of surface act when customer interactions are necessary (Bono & Vey, 2005).

Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand (2005) expanded on the dramaturgical perspective by presenting a third "strategy", which they called expressing naturally-felt emotions (NFE). They observed that employees sometimes naturally feel emotions consistent with organizational display demands and, in those circumstances, no additional "acting" would be required. Accordingly, natural emotions can sometimes be shown without any regulatory modification. Although research to date on expressing NFEs is extremely limited, Diefendorff et al.'s (2005) findings clearly indicate that it is a means of providing emotional labor that is conceptually and statistically distinct from surface or deep acting.

1.2. Socioemotional selectivity theory and emotional labor

SST is one of the most influential theories of lifespan development in recent aging research (Ready & Robinson, 2008). The central reasoning behind SST is that emotions, and especially positive emotional experiences, become more salient to people as they become older because they realize that their lifespan is finite. In an interest to derive the most pleasure from their remaining time, people become increasingly motivated to maximize the experience of positive emotions and minimize the experience of negative emotions as they age (Charles & Carstensen, 2007; Consedine & Magai, 2006; Ready & Robinson, 2008). Much research is supportive of this proposition, suggesting that the desire to regulate emotions to feel more positive grows over the lifespan (e.g., Blanchard-Fields, Stein, & Watson, 2004; Consedine & Magai, 2006). Additionally research indicates that adults develop both greater emotion regulation skill as they age (Gross et al., 1997) and a biased tendency to filter out negative situational information (Mather & Carstensen, 2005), suggesting that older adults have both the motive and the ability to down-regulate negative emotional experiences in the interest of feeling more consistently positive (Carstensen & Turk-Charles, 1994).

Interestingly, some research on SST indicates that these changes in emotion regulation help older adults manage interpersonal situations more effectively. For example, Birditt and Fingerman (2005) found that older adults utilized more effective conflict management strategies than younger adults in tense interactions with both unfamiliar and well-known interaction targets. These gains in interpersonal effectiveness again suggest that older adults may approach customer service interactions and emotional labor differently relative to younger adults.

Despite the relevance of these changes in emotion regulation motives and ability for service employees, emotional labor theorists have not considered how the age-related changes described by SST align with the emotional labor strategies noted previously. We suggest that the emotion regulation motivations of older adults align with the emotional labor strategy of deep acting. In service settings, organizations typically call for integrative displays of positive emotions like happiness and enthusiasm (Wharton & Erickson, 1993). Deep acting involves evoking these appropriate emotional displays by changing the emotions one is feeling to those that are consistent with the desired emotional display. Consequently, deep acting is a strategy that fits well with the natural motivational tendencies of older adults; they want to genuinely down-regulate negative emotions to feel more positive, and deep acting involves a genuine change from feeling negative or neutral to feeling positive to elicit a genuine, positive emotional display. We therefore expect that age and deep acting should be positively related; as people grow older, deep acting becomes a strategic orientation that is increasingly consistent with their natural emotion regulation motives.

Based on SST, a second strategy that should also be frequently employed with increasing age is the expression of naturally-felt emotions (NFE). Expressing NFEs occurs when the service employee happens to be feeling positive emotions consistent with the desired display, like happiness, so no additional regulation is required. Because older adults are more motivated to feel positive all of the time, including during their time at work, we again expect that age will be positively related to expressing NFE.

In contrast, we submit that surface acting should be negatively related to age. Surface acting involves merely faking the appearance of a positive emotion without changing the original, incompatible internal feeling. Given that SST research has demonstrated that older adults are motivated to down-regulate negative feelings (e.g., Carstensen, 2006), we find it unlikely that they would choose to simply fake positive emotions and continue feeling negative emotions inside, such as irritation or anxiety. This strategic orientation contrasts strongly with the motives described by SST, and we consequently expect that surface acting will be utilized less often by older adults.

To summarize, we expect main effects of age on emotional labor strategies due to changes in emotion regulation motives over the lifespan described by SST. However, SST also offers more specific indirect mechanisms through which age may influence emotional labor, such as increased positive affect. Because these changes in affect may complement the regulatory motives described by SST, we next present a rationale for how trait affectivity partially mediates the age-emotional labor relationships.

1.3. Trait positive affectivity as a mediator between age and emotional labor

In addition to the changes in self-regulatory motivations discussed previously, SST also posits that well-being may improve

with age (Carstensen & Turk-Charles, 1994). A central component of well-being is the experience of positive affect, the relatively stable, dispositional tendency for a person to experience positive emotions. Consistent with SST, past research indicates that adults experience a curvilinear increase in positive affect over the lifespan through their mid-70s, at which point positive affect begins to slightly decline (Mroczek, 2001; Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

Importantly, trait positive affect has previously been established as an antecedent of emotional labor in several studies. These relationships are rooted in early theory on emotional labor; Hochschild (1983) noted that emotional labor is required when employees feel emotions that are inconsistent with organizational requirements. However, when feelings are congruent with organizational requirements, less or no regulation is required. Consistent with this idea, research indicates that positive affect is negatively related to surface acting (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002) and positively related to deep acting (Zammuner & Galli, 2005). Further, Diefendorff et al. (2005) measured extraversion as a proxy for positive affect and found that it was positively related to expressing NFE. In short, employees who tend to experience more positive emotions find it more natural to engage in emotional labor by deep acting or expressing NFE. They less frequently find themselves needing to surface act to hide undesirable expressions.

Consequently, integrating research on SST and emotional labor research yields several expected mediated relationships. According to SST, age should directly influence emotional labor strategies based on the regulatory motives of older adults, which encourage them to down-regulate negative emotions. However, SST also suggests that some of the effects of age on emotional labor strategies may be indirectly transmitted through age-related changes in trait positive affect. SST research shows that age is linearly and positively related to positive affect through the mid-70s of one's lifespan (Mroczek, 2001), and positive affect is a known predictor of all emotional labor strategies (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Diefendorff et al., 2005; Zammuner & Galli, 2005). We therefore expect that positive affect will partially mediate the relationships between age and all three emotional labor strategies, and we accordingly submit the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1. Positive affect will partially mediate the relationship between age and deep acting, yielding a positive indirect effect.

Hypothesis 2. Positive affect will partially mediate the relationship between age and the expression of naturally-felt emotions, yielding a positive indirect effect.

Hypothesis 3. Positive affect will partially mediate the relationship between age and surface acting, yielding a negative indirect effect.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

To acquire a sample with a wide variety of ages, we recruited participants with a networking approach, which is also known as "snowball sampling" (Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004). Participant networking is a well-established technique for collecting data from uncommon or inaccessible respondents, including in the emotional labor literature (e.g., Gosserand & Diefendorff, 2005). We initially recruited employed students from a small institution in the Northeastern US to complete our survey for course credit. Eligible participants had to be currently employed in a job that required face-to-face customer service; sample job titles reported by respondents included receptionist, cashier, sales associate, and field representative. All student participants were presented with the opportunity to earn additional credit by optionally recruiting an older participant (over 25 years old) who was also working in a face-to-face service job to complete the survey. Student participants were instructed to consider sources such as siblings, co-workers, parents, and grandparents as suitable respondents to elicit a wide variety of ages in the sample. Older participants reported similar entry-level job titles, such as tour guide, bartender, and sales representative.

A total of 191 responses were collected. We dropped five responses from substantially-older participants in their late 70s and early 80s, leaving 186 responses for hypothesis testing. The final sample ranged in age from 18 to 69 years old; the mean age was 31.2 with a standard deviation of 14.6 years. Respondents were 69.6% female and 79.6% Caucasian, 4.3% African American, 7.5% Asian American, 5.4% Hispanic/Latino, and 4.2% identified as "other".

2.2. Measures

Responses to all measures were on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Reported reliabilities are from the current study.

2.2.1. Trait positive affect

Trait positive affect was measured using the 10-item subscale ($\alpha = .85$) from the PANAS, short form (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988). We presented participants with instructions to indicate the extent to which they agreed that each of a series of trait adjectives generally described them; sample trait adjectives from this scale include "interested" and "excited".

2.2.2. Emotional labor strategies

We used Diefendorff et al.'s (2005) seven-item measure of surface acting ($\alpha = .89$), four-item measure of deep acting ($\alpha = .70$), and three-item measure of expressing NFE ($\alpha = .58$). Sample items include "I fake a good mood when interacting with customers" from the surface acting scale, "I try to actually experience the emotions that I must show to customers" from the deep acting scale, and "The emotions I show customers come naturally" from the expressing NFE scale.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and correlations between study variables. Prior to testing our hypotheses with structural equation modeling (SEM), we examined correlations to determine if the conditions for mediation as described in Hypotheses 1–3 were met. As shown in Table 1, deep acting was positively related to age as expected, but not to the mediator, positive affect. Thus, Hypothesis 1 could not be supported, and we consequently dropped deep acting from the structural equation model before testing Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Fig. 1 shows the final model, which fit the data reasonably well ($\chi^2_{(184)} = 342.84$, $p < .01$; CFI = .89; RMSEA = .07; SRMR = .07). The individual items from the positive affect, surface acting, and expressing NFE scales served as the indicators for their respective latent variables. Age was treated as a manifest variable. Consistent with our expectations, age was negatively related to the use of surface acting ($\beta = -.32$, $p < .01$) and positively related to expressing NFEs ($\beta = .23$, $p < .05$). Our results are therefore consistent with previous research on SST; as age increases, employees use emotional labor strategies that are compatible with their age-related motives to down-regulate negative emotional experiences and express genuine positive emotions. Hypothesis 2 stated that positive

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Age	31.20	14.61	–						
2. Gender	–	–	−.12	–					
3. Race	–	–	.03	.23**	–				
4. Positive affect	3.54	0.62	.18*	−.13	−.16*	.85			
5. Surface acting	2.99	0.83	−.35**	−.04	.10	−.27**	.89		
6. Deep acting	3.08	0.71	.16*	.06	.03	.03	−.05	.70	
7. Express NFE	3.40	0.72	.27**	−.02	−.13	.39**	−.56**	.08	.58

* $p < .05$.
** $p < .01$.

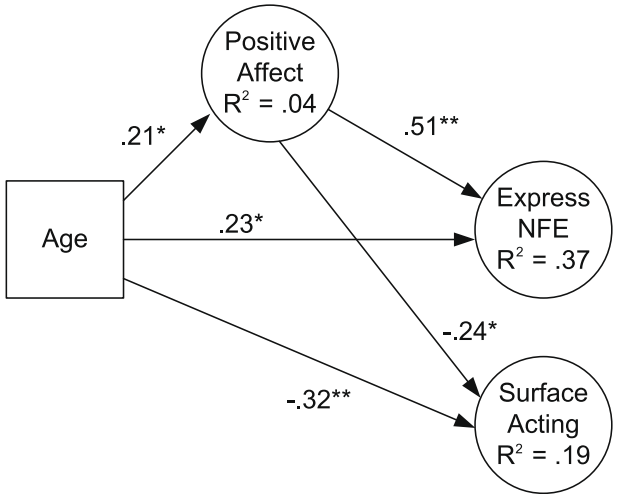

Fig. 1. Test of final model. NFE = naturally-felt emotions.

affect would mediate the relationship between age and expressing NFEs, and Hypothesis 3 stated that positive affect would mediate the relationship between age and surface acting. We tested the significance of the indirect effects using bootstrapping ($N = 5000$; Shrout & Bolger, 2002). Hypothesis 2 was supported; the indirect effect from age to expressing NFE via positive affect was small ($\alpha\beta = .11$), but a 95% confidence interval around the unstandardized, bootstrapped estimate of the indirect effect confirmed that it was statistically significant ($M = .003$, 95% CI = .001–.007). Hypothesis 3 was also supported. The indirect effect from age to surface acting via positive affect was again small ($\alpha\beta = -.05$), but statistically significant based on a 95% bootstrapped confidence interval ($M = -.002$, 95% CI = −.001 to −.005).

To provide additional support for our hypotheses, we also compared the hypothesized, partially-mediated model to an alternative model in which the direct paths from age to the emotional labor strategies were removed. Consequently, this alternative model tested a fully-mediated model in which all effects of age on emotional labor occurred through positive affect. Results indicate that this alternative model had significantly worse fit to the data ($\Delta\chi^2_{(2)} = 17.80$, $p < .01$) compared to the hypothesized model. In sum, support for the hypothesized, partially-mediated model and the small magnitude of the indirect effects that we found is consistent with our expectations, but also suggests that there are other mechanisms aside from affect through which age impacts emotional labor.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine how age was related to the use of different emotional labor strategies. We demonstrated that age has both direct and indirect effects on the emotional labor strategies that employees can use in service situations. Our results indicate that age is positively related to deep acting and to expressing NFE, and negatively related to surface acting. These findings are highly consistent with SST, which posits that older adults seek to maximize positive and minimize negative emotional experiences. Further, we found that some of the effects of age on surface acting and expressing NFE were mediated by trait positive affectivity. Support for these mediation hypotheses indicates that part of the reason that older adults are more likely to express NFEs and less likely to surface act is that they are dispositionally more prone to be experiencing positive emotions when conducting service interactions, a finding that dovetails with SST research concerning the growth of well-being over the lifespan (e.g., Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

These findings are important in several respects for both researchers and practitioners. First, many adults are remaining in the workforce well into their 60s and 70s (AARP, 2005: Adams & Rau, 2004). Our findings suggest that these older adults may fit well in jobs that require emotional labor and interpersonal interactions. Although we cannot say whether or not older adults will provide better service based on our results, their emotion regulation motives and abilities do predispose them to regulate their emotional displays in effective ways (i.e., deep acting and expressing NFE vs. surface acting). These findings are also important for the well-being of older employees in service positions; we know from past research that employees who engage in more deep acting and less surface acting tend to experience better personal outcomes, including less burnout, less work-family interference, and greater affective well-being (e.g., Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Johnson & Spector, 2007; Montgomery, Panagopolou, de Wildt, & Meenks, 2006). Organizations may benefit from the emotional labor tendencies of older service employees as well; for example, recent research has demonstrated that deep acting indirectly reduces turnover among service employees, whereas surface acting indirectly increases it (Chau, Dahling, Levy, & Diefendorff, 2009).

From a research perspective, our findings are also noteworthy because they represent the first integration of aging research with emotional labor theory. Future research should expand on these findings to more specifically identify other mediating mechanisms drawn from aging research that more precisely explain how age influences emotional labor. Although SST would suggest that age-related changes in affect are a primary mechanism through which age should impact emotional labor, the weak indirect effects that we found suggest that future research should focus on testing alternative mediating mechanisms. For example, older adults develop greater emotion regulation skill and confidence with age (Gross et al., 1997; Mather & Carstensen, 2005). Therefore, we suggest that perceptions of cognitive control over emotion regulation would likely be another mediator of the age-emotional labor relationship. Further, our findings interestingly mirror those of Austin, Dore, and O'Donovan (2008), who examined emotional intelligence (EI) as a predictor of emotional labor. They found that EI was unre-

lated to deep acting, but negatively related to surface acting. Given that some researchers believe that EI develops with age and experience (e.g., Salovey & Mayer, 1990), we submit that emotional intelligence might be a more viable mediator variable to study in future research. Indeed, the small effect sizes that we observed in this study may have occurred because age is distally related to emotional labor through a longer chain of mediating variables. For example, age may give rise to greater interpersonal experience and regulatory skill, which contributes to greater emotional intelligence, which shapes one's approach to emotional labor.

4.1. Limitations

Despite these contributions, there are several limitations of our study to note. First, the reliability of our expressing NFEs scale was lower than is desirable. This poor reliability may have distorted our results for this particular criterion, which should be replicated with better measurement. Second, we tested our hypotheses with cross-sectional survey data. Employees may ultimately regulate their emotional displays differently from the way that they report doing so on a survey, suggesting the importance of experimental or observational techniques to complement our survey findings. Lastly, our sample was somewhat homogenous with respect to gender and race/ethnicity, consisting primarily of Caucasian females. Future research should seek to replicate and expand on our findings with a more diverse sample.

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