



**BRITISH ACADEMY  
OF MANAGEMENT**

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**BAM**  
CONFERENCE

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**3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER**

**ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM**

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

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## **The Positive Side of Emotional Labor: A Qualitative Study**

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## **The Positive Side of Emotional Labor: A Qualitative Study**

### **Abstract**

Emotional labor is an important area of research in organizational psychology especially in the context of service industry. Past research in this area has primarily focused on the negative consequences of emotional labor. The present study was carried out with two primary objectives. First, whether professors working in higher educational institutes, experienced emotional labor. Second, whether it had a positive or negative impact on them. The study adopted a qualitative approach. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted. Three broad themes emerged from the study: (a) work environment leading to emotional labor (b) factors facilitating emotional regulation, and (c) consequences of emotional labor. The findings revealed that the consequences of emotional labor are context specific and in the context of educational setting, it has interesting positive outcomes.

**Keyword:** emotional labor, emotional dissonance, role internalisation, qualitative, educational setting

**Track:** Organizational psychology

**Word count:** 5316

## **The Positive Side of Emotional Labor: A Qualitative Study**

### **Introduction**

Emotions play a significant role in teacher's development, teacher's satisfaction, and the formation and transformation of teachers' identity or self-understanding (Yin & Lee, 2011; Yin, Lee, Zhang & Jin, 2013). Hochschild (1983) stated that there are three criteria for work that requires emotional labor strategies in teaching profession, (1) teaching requires face-to-face contact between teachers and others, especially students; (2) teaching requires teachers to produce some emotional state (e.g. joy, fear, excitement or anxiety) to students or other people around them; and (3) there is a degree of external control over teachers' emotional Labor, which usually comes in the form of cultural expectations or professional norms (Paris & Winograd, 2003). Emotional labor as an important element of teachers' work in a school or classroom isn't easily identified because emotional rules in many cases are disguised as ethical codes or professional norms (Fried, 2011). They have to keep the class dynamics healthy, play different roles like mentor, counsellor, and facilitator. Their work context is challenging as they deal with different batches of students and tackle with different mental attitudes. With every batch that comes in, the expectation varies. While they are doing this, the professor has to regulate the emotions and demonstrate a detached attitude. They have been observed every time in the class. The job of teaching requires emotional regulation as the professor might be going through a lot of emotions but he has to come to a class and approach it neutrally and energetically. Emotional performance is an important aspect of their job.

This study is aimed at contributing to the literature in multiple ways. First, by adopting an inductive approach to unravel the underpinnings of emotional Labor amongst professors, it would contribute to theory development by exploring a context which has not been studied earlier. Second, the current literature in the emotional labor focuses on negative consequences of emotional labor, however, in our study the data revealed that emotional labor led to positive consequences. Thus, it contributes to the literature of emotional asymmetry by providing a context where it is applicable.

### **Literature Review**

Organisations are demanding and have high expectations on the way people present themselves at work. As a consequence, employees engage in displaying emotions which are desired by their organization (Hochschild, 1983). This phenomenon was termed "emotional labor" and was first used by sociologist Hochschild (1983) in the seminal work 'The managed heart' which was carried out in the context of cabin crews. Subsequent researches have elaborated the concept of emotional labor.

Morris and Feldman (1996) explained emotional labor in terms of "the effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotion during interpersonal transactions". They proposed four dimensions of emotional labor: (a) frequency of interaction; (b) intensity of interaction and duration of emotions; (c) variety of emotions required and (d) emotional dissonance. Gross's (1998) model described two points where the

emotion regulation might occur. The first one is antecedent-focused, where individuals can regulate the emotions. The second is response- focused, where individual tries to manipulate how he should express or give a specific response. In this technique, employees work to display emotions which are different from what they truly feel, or and suppress their true feelings, in favour of acceptable expressions.

Employees experience emotional labor when they have to display emotions which are aligned to organizational rules, but do not represent their actual feelings (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). It often has negative consequences for employees' personal well-being (Bono & Vey, 2005; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Wang, Seibert, & Boles, 2011). Abraham (1998a) defined emotional dissonance as the conflict between expressed and experienced emotions. There are two emotional dissonance conceptualizations in the literature as follows: (1) when feelings do not match displays, called emotion-display dissonance or fake emotional display (i.e., surface acting); and (2) when feelings do not match display requirements, called emotion-rule dissonance (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Holman, Martinez-Inigo, & Totterdell, 2008; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011; Rubin, Staebler Tardino, Daus, & Munz, 2005). Brotheridge & Lee (2003) developed the six faceted Emotional Labor Scale (ELS) based on the theories of Hochschild (1983) and Morris & Feldman (1996). This scale measures the "intensity, frequency, variety of emotional display, surface acting, deep acting and the duration of interaction".

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) suggested there are three ways in which employees respond to emotional Labor. First among them is surface acting. Surface acting is displaying emotions one does not actually feel. Research suggests surface acting can cause emotional dissonance and a loss of one's sense of authentic self. Second strategy is deep acting. Deep acting is when an individual is truly feeling the emotion that he is displaying (Hochschild, 1983). When people use deep acting, they try to summon the emotions they want to portray when interacting with others. Thus, they try to feel and experience the actual emotions, and they purposely engage in thoughts and activities that help foster those emotions (Hochschild, 1983). Studies indicate that emotional labor in the form of deep acting improves performance without causing a reduction in well-being (Hülshager and Schewe ,2011), Wang et al. 2011, Kammeyer-Mueller et al. 2013).

Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argued that, in addition to surface acting and deep acting, there is a third form of emotional labor: spontaneous and genuine emotional labor. They argued that in many cases, service workers' natural and spontaneous emotions comply with social expectations and organizational display rules such that they do not have to deliberately summon the correct emotions. Authenticity, "the subjective experience of alignment between one's internal experiences and external expressions" (Roberts, Cha, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009, p. 151) is highly prized. Authenticity is a matter of being true to the identities one values in a given context.

### **Emotional Labor and Positive Outcomes**

Though emotional labor is associated with negative outcomes (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015), some positive outcomes have also been observed (e.g., Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Gabriel, Daniels, Diefendorff, & Greguras, 2015). Grandey (1998) proposed the concept of emotional regulation and extended the research of Gross (1998) and explained how the emotional labor may benefit the organization. She defined emotion regulation as "the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they

have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions" (Gross, 1998, pp. 275). Emotion work can be defined as the process of regulating feelings and expressions as part of the work role (Grandey, 2000). She studied various aspects of emotion regulation which leads to stress and burnout. Grandey's (2000) model of Emotional labor elaborated on antecedents of emotional labor (interaction expectations, emotional events, individual factors, organizational factors) and outcomes of emotional labor (individual and organizational wellbeing).

In contrast to other researchers, Zapf (2002) related emotional work to psychology. He defined it as "the psychological processes necessary to regulate organizationally desired emotions" (pp. 239). He stated that emotional work has three aspects. The person has to meet the emotional regulation requirement which includes positive emotions, express and handle negative emotions and sensitivity. The second aspect is emotion regulation possibilities that include interaction control and third one focuses on emotional regulation problems those are external demands which causes emotional dissonance and ultimately results in stress.

### **Social identity and emotional Labor**

The proponents of social identity theory suggest that individuals who strongly identify with their organizational roles as central and salient are apt to feel authentic when they are conforming to role expectations. Similarly those who do not identify themselves with the organizational rules will experience emotive dissonance or self-alienation. Here, acting per se is not the issue. For example an introverted individual who identifies with the role of a sales person may be motivated to act in an extroverted manner. Here, acting may protect the valued identity of a salesperson. On similar lines, researches on effect of potential stressors depend on how the stressors are perceived (Lazarus and Folkman 1984). Burke (1991) and Thoits (1991) extended this argument by proposing that the effects of a stimulus depend upon the perceived relevance of the stimulus to one's identity. Therefore, greater the relevance greater the potential threat to psychological wellbeing. Similarly, greater the relevance of an event or action to an important identity, greater would be the enhancement of the psychological wellbeing. Therefore, with reference to emotional labor and the role of teaching, the more strongly one identifies with the role, the greater the positive impact on psychological wellbeing. According to Cheney, (1983) emotional labor gives an opportunity to act out one's identification and gives an identity enhancing experience (Thoits, 1991).

### **Research Method**

#### **Sample**

The study was carried out in Mumbai, the financial, commercial and entertainment capital of India. We contacted a private business school based in Mumbai to study the professors associated with them. The inclusion criteria for the study were the professors should have minimum 5 years of teaching experience. Thirty-five faculty members were approached for this study and twenty agreed to be part of this study. The sample included professors from varied areas such as organizational behaviour, human resources, marketing, finance, operations. The sample included both male and female professors with teaching experience ranging from minimum 5 to maximum 20 years.

#### **Data collection**

We visited the professors in the institute during their work hours. This time frame allowed us to observe them in their natural work settings. The interviews with the professors were semi-structured and lasted for approximately 30 to 45 minutes each. All interviews were conducted one-on-one and in private space. This ensured confidentiality and helped in getting in-depth data. We informed the participants about the objective of the study. Consent forms were filled and signed by all the participants. The interviews were recorded (with the participant's permission). We informed the participants that they could end the interview or turn off the recording at any point in time. The interview questions were developed based on the earlier responses in an iterative manner.

## **Data analysis**

The interview protocol based on the objective of the research was prepared. The respondents were also asked to cite instances from their professional life. Interview started with questions to obtain personal profile of the participant in teaching profession such as: 'Can you tell me about your work profile like since how long you have been in teaching profession?, what are your areas of expertise?' and then moved to questions which captured various elements about work context, work environment, roles played, management of emotions at workplace, effect of emotional dissonance and the techniques to overcome that. Each interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions were between five and ten single-spaced typed pages per person (overall 150 single-spaced typed pages). We paid close attention to the body language of the professors to validate the information provided by them. The transcripts were coded using the Nvivo 11 software tool through a reflexive and inductive approach, to allow codes and categories to emerge from the data. We used the iterative process of simultaneously collecting data and analysing it, which helped in seeking new data in the subsequent interviews. We achieved theoretical saturation through this process when no additional themes could be derived with additional information (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

We used the constant comparison method for data analysis. We first analysed every sentence of the transcription to look for major ideas within each sentence (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This enabled us to identify major concepts. We then used open coding to group all the similar concepts into categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Table 1 describes the first-order categories with exemplary quotes. Two of the authors did open coding individually, and at times when there were differences in open coding, we discussed the differences; the final coding was based on mutual consensus. This mitigated the single-researcher bias.

Later, we did axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to develop second order codes by finding the relationship between sub-categories at a conceptual level. They were categorized as higher order themes (second order codes, Table 1).

After identifying the dominant themes, we looked for the relationship between the themes. At this stage, we iterated between the data and the existing literature for possible explanation for those relationships. This helped us understand the dynamics of emotional Labor

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## **Findings**

The data and analyses helped in understanding the experiences of emotional Labor of teacher and how and what helps them to cope with the same. We discuss these findings in this section.

## Work Environment leading to Emotional Labor

The data revealed that various elements of the work environment of the professors leads to experience of emotional labor. The factors which emerged from the study are as follows-

- i. **Job demands.** Respondents shared that teaching job is highly demanding. The students because of their knowledge and exposure expect high levels of performance from the faculty. Therefore, it gets challenging for the professors to be emotionally at their best in all their interactions with the students.
- ii. **Multiple roles.** Data revealed that another factor which adds on pressure to the role of professors is the multiple roles that they have to play. Respondents shared that in one class itself different students may have different expectations from the professors. Satisfying these expectations becomes critical to do their job and sometimes these expectations are conflicting in nature. In this regard, one of the respondents mentioned, *“You have to kind of guide them, you have to parent them, nurture them and at the same time push them that can be a bit messy sometimes”*.
- iii. **Organizational roles.** Apart from playing multiple roles in the classroom, respondents shared that apart from teaching, professors need to perform on multiple criteria’s such as research publications, and administrative responsibilities. Performing on all the criteria creates stress for professors. Respondents shared that sometimes satisfactory performance in one area may negatively affect another as the time and attention gets divided.
- iv. **Role model.** Respondents shared that professors felt the pressure to behave in a certain way because teachers are generally considered as role models. Therefore, how they behave in a class has a lot of bearing on what kind of impression that they create on students. Data also revealed that the respondents also feel the pressure because they have to maintain a certain code of conduct not only during their class or also how they behave outside and also in their social media presence. A participant shared, *“The students look up to you, so, it’s a big responsibility and If I am able to do that, if I am able to give them and able to stand in front them, it goes a long way”*
- v. **Need for acceptance.** Participants shared their need to be liked by the students. Respondents shared that they evaluate their performance not based on how students perform in the exam but by the kind of perception and impression they create in the mind of their students.
- vi. **Social perception.** Another factor which created pressure on professors was their need for impression management before their other colleagues in the institute. Respondents shared that students discuss about professors to other professors and that create their impression. Thus, the pressure to be likeable by students increased. One respondent shared, *“You have to constantly manage your impression pertaining what class really thinks of you”*.

## Emotional Regulation

The data also revealed various factors which helped in regulating their emotions in the classroom. Following are the factors-

- i. Internalization of roles.** Data revealed that professors internalized their role to the extent that they believed it is expected from them as a professor to exhibit morally and ethically correct behavior because their impact is going to be on the larger part of the society. This is linked to the social identity theory of (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). The proponents of social identity theory suggest that individuals who strongly identify with their organization roles or relatedly their occupations, departments, organization that is individuals who regard their roles as a central, salient and valued component of who they are, they feel more authentic when they are conforming to the role expectations, including display rules.
- ii. Expression of genuine feelings.** Data showed that that since the role is internalized by the professors they experienced less of emotional dissonance as they considered it as a part of their role. Though they have to manage their impressions towards their customers (students) they still accepted the fact that they need to do the same as a part of their job. Expression carried out in the class are not fake, they express genuine feelings. One participant shared, *“I don’t try to make any general effort because I feel that it is better to be a genuine. So, if anything is artificial, I people can see through and also then it is difficult to take it forward”*.
- iii. Beliefs about their profession.** Professors exhibited strong beliefs about their profession where they considered teaching as their calling and therefore a higher commitment to do all things to do it in the best possible way. Data showed that professors believed that teaching profession expects teachers to behave in a certain way and therefore they have to comply with that. A respondent remarked, *“I think because sometimes it comes naturally it just happens because as you keep teaching you realize that you have a responsibility not just of teaching in the sense just of giving the information, you have to be there for students and you have to, you can’t just say ok if you are not interested in class is not my fault, it’s not my problem you have to get into that. So I always had that mindset, my responsibility is to make students interested”*.
- iv. Power over students.** Respondents shared that they enjoyed a certain kind of power over students because of which they could sometimes express the real emotions to the class. This is a unique point that is different from the other service agents. Here the professor is considered as the ‘king’ and hence can set their own rules and can vent out the emotions that they feel appropriate without thinking about its appropriateness.

### **Consequences of emotional regulation**

- i. Stress management.** The literature of emotional Labor and regulation has largely focused on its negative consequences. However, our data revealed that for professor’s emotional regulation leads to positive consequences such as ‘Eustress management’. The acting in the classroom helped them to actually experience the demonstrated emotions and thus helped in effective lecture delivery and performance.

- ii. **Positive energy.** In our sample, we found that emotional Labor had positive impact on the professors. Respondents also shared that emotional regulation in the class room energized them. One of the respondents shared,

*“Even if you enter a class in a different frame of mind you come out in a better way because the process of teaching occupies all your senses and you don’t dwell on negative emotion... you come out much better off so that’s why you may call it therapeutic ..It’s a therapy. Teaching is a therapy ...if you really do it with passion, it is therapeutic. So, that is not a problem it’s actually beneficial to help you to overcome your other emotional setbacks.”*

## **Discussion**

Emotional labor has generally been discussed as a negative phenomenon in the literature as the research suggests that it leads to negative consequences such as stress, burnout etc. Some researches on deep acting aspect of emotional labor showed that the impact is not negative. Our research questions focused on first, whether the instructors working as Professors experienced emotional labor and second, was it was helpful or detrimental?

The present study helped our understanding of how the phenomenon of emotional labor operates amongst professors. The study provided important insights regarding how the phenomenon can be context specific.

The factors in the work context which lead to emotional labor amongst professors included job demand, multiple roles played by professors, organizational roles, the pressure to be a role model for students, need for acceptance and social perception. This showed that professors did experience emotional labor. The analyses of the findings showed that most professors did deep acting which helped them in their teaching and managing students. The factors which facilitated emotional regulations amongst professors were internationalisation of roles, expression of genuine feelings, beliefs about their profession, and positional power over students. These factors were context specific and explained the underlying phenomenon of how professors dealt with emotional labor.

Another major contribution of the study is that it reports that amongst professors, emotional labor leads to positive outcomes such as emotional labor helps in managing eustress and in turn created positive energy. This insight is an important contribution to the literature as it suggests that emotional labor is not necessarily negative but its consequences whether positive or negative would depend upon the work context of the employees.

## **Theoretical Implication**

The study has supported the earlier findings that emotional labor may not always have a negative outcome (Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015). It is the result of identity-alignment processes of employees leading to organization benefit (Gross, 1998; Zapf (2002). The study also supports the positive link between social identity and emotional labor. The proponents of social identity theory suggest that individuals who strongly identify with their organizational roles as central and salient are apt to feel authentic when they are conforming to role expectations. This results in positive relationship between faculty and student and effective teaching. It also leads to positive psychological wellbeing (Thoits, 1991).

We contend that the harmful effects often attributed to emotional labor are due, in part, to the use of maladaptive emotion regulation tactics, poor person job fit, to the role not reflecting a valued identity, or poor working conditions imposed by management (especially a lack of autonomy in how to perform emotional labor). In other words, we suggest that the expectation to show positive emotions and the effort required to do so is not inherently harmful; rather, what makes it harmful are the regulation strategies adopted to pursue them, fit and identity-alignment processes of employees, and the broader conditions under which emotional labor is performed. In short, when properly performed, emotional labor can be beneficial for both workers and organizations.

### **Managerial implication**

The study shows how deep acting is related to positive social identity. Role identification can counter experience of stress and burnout (Diefendorff & Greguras, 2015). The study shows that the harmful effects of emotional labor are due, in part to the role not reflecting a valued identity, or poor working conditions imposed by management (especially a lack of autonomy in how to perform emotional labor). Self and social identity of employees can be leveraged to enhance positive experiences at work and reduce emotional exhaustion and burnout. In short, when properly performed, emotional labor can be beneficial for both workers and organizations.

### **Limitations and future direction**

The study was carried out on Professors of Management stream. To add more reliability on the findings it needs to be carried out on Professors in other streams like Science and Technology, Humanities and Fine Arts. The study opens doors to link the concept of deep acting with outcome variables like thriving (Spreitzer & Sutcliffe, 2007) and empowerment (Spreitzer, 1995) which also lead to psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1995) and happiness (Seligman, 2012). Instead of focusing on stress and emotional exhaustion, researchers could take a positive psychology approach and examine the personality factors, attitudes, and contextual factors that enable employees to stay motivated and provide outstanding service. Given the important role that personal and social identities play in the emotional labor process, research should focus on ways to enhance service-relevant identities and make them more salient in an on-going manner. More research needs to be carried out to study the effect of surface and deep acting on the group and team levels and the interplay across all these levels for overall organizational effectiveness.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides an important contribution by exploring the phenomenon of emotional labor and regulation among professors in a business school. It describes the experiences of emotional labor of professors and how professors cope with its demands. The study also shows that in the context of professor's emotional labor leads to positive consequences.

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Table 1  
Theme Illustrations

Aggregating Theoretical Dimensions	Theoretical Categories	Exemplary quotes
Work Environment leading to emotional Labor	Job demands	Teaching is intellectually stimulating but is also very demanding. There is a lot of pressure. Because the students expect the faculty to know everything, however that's next to impossible.
	Multiple roles	You have to kind of guide them, you have to parent them, nurture them and at the same time push them that can be a bit messy sometimes.
	Organizational expectations	Apart from teaching, we are also expected to do research and publish. We are also involved in administrative work. So, these multiple responsibilities add on to the pressure.
	Role model	I strive to be a role model which creates a lot of pressure.
	Need for acceptance	There is a need to be liked by the students because you are putting in a lot of efforts preparing for just one class and the outcome of that effort is not going to be what the students score in exam but whether they will like you five years down the line and if they will remember you as a teacher.
	Social perception	Students tend to mention about you to another faculty. And what they talk about you tends to create an impression about you whether you are a good teacher or not.
Factors facilitating Emotional Regulation	Internalisation of roles	You have a duty towards your students which is way above your emotion. So you actually try to distract yourself and not think about that particular event. I know about my moral obligation towards students.
	Expression of genuine feelings	I don't try to make any general effort because I feel that it is better to be a normal self. If anything is artificial, people can see through and hence difficult to take it forward. So, it's better to be your normal self.
	Beliefs about profession	Negative emotion is something you need to avoid in any class. When you come to class, it's your 'Karmabhumi', You are not supposed to display those emotions which are negative. Because negative emotions don't help learning.

	Power over students	One of my very close relatives passed away and I had to take a session that day. I was not in a mental frame. But what happened was I actually shared it with the class that possibly today I might not be at my best. So, you might like the session or you might not like the session.
Consequences of Emotional Regulations	Stress management	When I enter the class, I forget everything. Honestly. I always forget about whatever happening on the contrary it works as a therapy for me. I overcome my issues.
	Positive Energy	There is range of emotions that one undergoes, but for me, class energies me.