Task Performance Repair by Emotions of Human Service Employees

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Abstract

Emotional labor aspects of flight attendants were hypothesized to be significantly and moderate the relationship between role ambiguity and task performance in the changed organizational climate. A questionnaire survey was administered to 413 flight attendants working for an Asian airline. A 5-point Likert-type scale was employed to assess the aspects of the role ambiguity (RA) and emotional labor aspects. The results show that “surface acting” moderates the negative effect on task performance, when RA is lowly perceived. On the other hand, when the level of the RA is highly perceived by employees, “surface acting” might not able to moderate the negative effect on task performance of employer. Since the high perception of RA might lead the employees to feel the dilemma about how much of themselves to give to their roles and how much to protect themselves from the RA, suggesting their emotional exhaustion, moreover, to burnout propensity.

The contemporary human service employees perceive certain kind of role ambiguity or dilemma in the changing industrial climate, even though they clearly understand their roles. Using emotional labor as a psychological tool in a human service interaction, particularly in the speed-up situations that the employees perceived role ambiguity, can help moderate or repair the downward propensity to task performance. Thus, by using the right tool (or remedy) at the right place, the employees can have an effect. The way to offer hospitality make differentiates a company from others, particularly in the recent trend that IT and automate machine substitute jobs that used to be done by employees. Emotional competence makes the employees possible to execute the quality of service with hospitality. Emotionally competent employees provide an organization with harmony and integrity and can increase the competitiveness of the company because the employees effectively adapt the company’s strategy and work efficiently.

Keywords: Human service employees; Flight attendants; Hospitality; Emotion labor; Role ambiguity

Introduction

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of emotions in the context of role prescribed and prosocial organizational behavior in everyday work life [1-5]. Some prosocial behaviors are actually a part of one's role prescriptions [6], and an aspect of the role-prescribed and prosocial behavior may bet ask performance. For example, a component of task performance in the hospitality service sector is customer-service behavior with hospitality, or helpful behavior directed at customers [1].

The purpose of this study is to examine that emotional labor aspects (affective delivery, surface acting, deep acting) providing by human contact service employees repair the decreasing propensity of task performance of which hospitality offering is a commercial part of their roles in the changed organizational climate, where role ambiguity likely perceived by the customer service employees.

Literature Review

Emotion research

The management of emotions as part of the work role refers to emotional labor. "Emotional labor" refers to how human service employees, including flight attendants, control their feelings and expressions based on the emotional display rules of a job. Since Hochschild [7] first published The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling in 1983, there has been literature exploring the relationship between the emotional controls of human service employees, particularly flight attendants, and work-related attitudes and behavior. Hochschild [7] described her observation of how management practice is used to encourage flight attendants maintain their task performance, and she provided an appendix with a proposed list of high emotional labor job, including service workers, sales workers, nurses, teachers, bank tellers, cashiers, bill collectors, receptionists and etc. According to Hochschild [7], organizations are increasingly willing to direct and control how employees present themselves to others. Management of emotions practiced by flight attendants is emotional labor and is commercialized for the purpose of airlines [7]. In other words, the images that employees create for customers and the quality of interactions between employees and customers have become increasingly under the control of management [8]. As a consequence, a key component of the work performed by many human service employees has become the presentation of emotions that are specified and desired by their organizations [8].

Emotional exhaustion

Emotional labor is potentially good; no customer wants to deal with a surly waitress, a crabby bank clerk, or flight attendant who avoids eye contact in order to avoid getting a request [7]. Conversely, the literature indicates that emotional labor is stressful and may lead to emotional exhaustion, moreover burnout. Burnout is identified as a form of job stress and a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and
Reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individual who do “people-work” of some kind [9].

**Emotional strategies**

Surface acting and deep acting are emotional strategies. The employees engaging surface acting (which is modifying their emotional displays without shaping inner feeling is reported more strong relation to emotional exhaustion than the employees engaging deep acting (which is modifying feelings to match the required emotional displays [10-12].

**Affective delivery**

Affective delivery, or expressing positive emotions in service interactions, promotes customer satisfaction [10]. “Employee affective delivery” refers to an employee’s “act of expressing socially desired emotions during service transaction” [13]; affective service delivery is perceived as friendly and warm, which is related to desirable outcomes [14]). The affective tone of service encounters is an important aspect of service quality [15]. Rafaeli and Sutton [16] proposed that appropriate employee displayed emotions would result in some positive consequences for an organization, including immediate (e.g., passengers’ contentment on board), and contagion gains (e.g., passengers would tell this content experience to friends). A key factor of good affective delivery is the perceived authenticity of affective display [13].

**Display rules**

The display of positive emotion (e.g., friendliness and warmth) are required in many human contact service employees. The display rules states that the positive reaction to customers is appropriate in the service interactions. The past empirical evidence has indicated that employee affective delivery can influence customer reactions (e.g., customer satisfaction and service quality evaluation) [17]. For most types of service organizations, a market orientation is implemented largely through individual workers [18]. The benefits of the companies include a higher level of customer satisfaction [19], better service quality evaluation [20], and the improvement in customer willingness to return and recommend [21].

**Emotional regulation**

Emotional regulation is defined as “the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” [22]. The emotional regulation requires the employees to display the organizationally desired emotion [23] and induce or suppress feelings to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others [7]. For example, flight attendants are expected to act cheerful and friendly [13] and must put on a smile when addressing customers because doing so is part of the job [24].

**Organizational climate**

Organizational climate is composed of many routines and rewards. Therefore, there are many dimensions of climate (e.g., safety, service, or innovation) [21]. In the recent airline industry, there is an ongoing trend (or climate) to employ as few people as possible to do as much possible [28]. Another trend is increasing demands of employee flexibility to meet variations in the employee’s needs and growing job insecurity [28]. Moreover, as information technology has advanced, IT and the automated machines have begun substituting the employees’ work. Under such an environment and strong pressure of competitive, many companies have been obliged to alter their organizational structure and human resource relationships. The traditional contract of long-term job security in return for hard work and loyalty may no longer be valid [29], the expected roles of flight attendants are gradually changing [30], and organisations and employees are now reconsidering the mutual obligations in employment contracts.

**Psychological climate**

Psychological climate has been defined as an employee’s perception of an organization’s events, practices, and procedures (routine) and the kinds of behaviors that get rewarded, supported, and expected [31]. It is more than mere descriptions of work environment conditions [21]. Specifically, it reflects “the individual characteristics involved in the process of perception and concept formation as well as the characteristics of the situation being perceived” [32]. The psychological climate for flight attendants has been gradually changed following the industrial climate changes. Therefore, it is possible that flight attendants’ workplace today is more complicated and stressful than it was before. Consequently, flight attendants may feel role conflict and role ambiguity.

**The role theory**

Since the theory of organizational role dynamics was first introduced, extensive research has examined the relationships, for example, between role ambiguity [33]. Role ambiguity (RA) occurs when the set of behaviors expected a role is unclear and job performance, and role conflict (RC) occurs when there is incompatibility between the expected set of behaviors perceived by the focal person and those perceived by role senders [34]. Since organizations are role-systems [34] that depend on the interaction of system members, role ambiguity could be expected to have negative consequences on organizational outcomes [33].

**Moderating effects**

A moderator variable specifies when and under what conditions a predictor variable influences a dependent variable [35]. A moderator variable may reduce or enhance the direction of the relationship between a predictor variable and a dependent variable, or it may even change the direction of the relationship between the two variables from positive to negative or vice versa [36].

**Problem statement**

As the role expected of modern flight attendants are gradually changing from what they were in past decades [30], the potential for RC and RA of flight attendants has increased. On the other hand, many airlines have created, since foundation, a company culture with specific characteristics regarding customer service with hospitality. The images of airlines, including hospitality offering and tacit knowledge in the form of human service employees have been accumulated over their entire histories, and should be considered as intangible assets of the airlines. It would be regrettable if the intangible assets were lost because of managerial changes; furthermore, even the most loyal customers...
may be moving away from companies [30]. "Tacitness of a skill or the knowledge" is a core factor that underlies skills, in combination with degree [37].

Understanding the consequences of emotional labor is important because both theory and empirical evidence suggest that emotional labor is integral to the daily work experience of many frontline service employees, and is closely linked with indicators of employee well-being [7,38], customer outcomes such as satisfaction and loyalty [39,40], and, ultimately, organizational performance [38].

Finally, though the organizational climate changed, and IT system are performing work previously done by human contact employees in many industries, the importance of human service employees is unchanged for many organizations because they act as interfaces between organizations and customers.

This study tests that emotional labor aspects of human contact service employees repair the decreasing propensity of task performance including hospitality offering in the changed organizational climate, where role ambiguity likely perceived by the customer service employees.

Research Hypotheses

Role theory

Role theory states that when the behaviors expected of an individual and an organization are inconsistent, the employees will experience stress, become dissatisfied, and perform less effectively than if the expectations imposed on the employees did not conflict [41–43]. Therefore, I propose the following direct effect hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Role Ambiguity (RA) perceived by hospitality service providers are negatively relates to task performance.

The previous research findings show that the role conflict is likely to have negative effects, and the best known of such position is that of the foreman, who is often caught in the middle [42,43]. I suggest that though RC has a negative influence on organizational outcomes such as trust toward employer and job satisfaction, such a negative influence may be moderated by working practices with emotional labor. Therefore, I propose the following moderating hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2: Affective delivery of hospitality service provider moderates the negative relationship between role ambiguity and task performance.

Hypothesis 3: Surface acting of hospitality service provider moderates the negative relationship between role ambiguity and task performance.

Hypothesis 4: Deep acting of hospitality service provider moderates the negative relationship between role ambiguity and task performance.

Methods

Participants and procedures

A questionnaire survey was administered to 413 flight attendants working for an Asian airline. I randomly distributed approximately 500 questionnaires to flight attendants. A total of 413 valid questionnaires was received, resulting in a valid response rate of approximately 82.6%.78% of the respondents are female, mean age is 31 years (s.d. 1.91), and mean work experience is 10 years (s.d. 1.91).

Measures

The questionnaire survey including 48 questions was administered to test the hypotheses. A 5-point Likert response scale were employed for all questions (from 1=strongly disagree, to 5=strongly agree). The items on each scale were presented in random order.

Role conflict (RC) was measured by using five items (α=0.93) derived from the scale developed by Rizzo et al. [43]. Role ambiguity (RA) was measured by using five items (α=0.82) derived also from the scale developed by Rizzo et al. [43]:

Affective delivery (emotional labor aspect) was measured by using three items (α=0.82) derived from the bases of McLellin et al. [44] and those items were slightly modified to adapt for the flight attendants' work.

Deep acting (emotional labor aspect) was measured by using three items (α=0.91) derived from the bases of deep acting also identified by Brotheridge and Lee [45] and those items were slightly modified to adapt for the flight attendants' work.

Surface Acting (emotional labor aspect) was measured by using assessed four items (α=0.93) derived from the bases of emotional exhaustion identified by Pines and Aronson [47].

Data Analysis

Cronbach’s α is the most widely used index of the reliability of a scale [48]. The descriptive statistics, Cronbach Alpha and inter correlations were calculated (Table 1). Then, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the study hypotheses; the direct effects of the antecedents (RA) on the consequence (task performance) and the moderating effects of RA and emotional labor aspects (surface acting) on the relations between the antecedents and the consequence.

Results

The Table 1 shows that the level of role ambiguity(predictor variable) perceived by the respondents ranged from weak with a mean of 1.78 (s.d. 0.51) on the 5-point Likert response scale, level of self-evaluate task performance(outcome variable) ranged a high with a mean of 4.26 (s.d. 0.55), the level of affective delivery(emotional labor variable) ranged a high with a mean of 4.53 (s.d. 0.17), the level of surface acting(dependent variable) ranged from moderate to high with a mean of 4.17 (s.d. 0.63)and level of deep acting (emotional labor variable) ranged a moderate to high with a mean of 3.83 (s.d. 0.78).

Table 1 also presents correlations and Cronbach reliability coefficients of the measures. All the scales demonstrated good internal consistency reliability, where an alpha ranging from 0.79 to 0.83 is considered acceptable [49].

Hypothesis 1 proposed that role ambiguity (RA) perceived by hospitality service providers is negatively relates to task performance. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, Table 1 shows that RA was significantly
and negatively associated with task performance ($r=-0.39, p<0.01$).

Table 2 presents the summary of hierarchical regression analysis. Table 2 also shows that RA is negatively related to task performance ($\beta=-0.37$, $p=0.01$, step 1; $\beta=-0.34$, $p=0.01$, step 2), supporting Hypothesis 1.

### Direct effects

Table 2 shows the summary of the hierarchical regression analyses. In the step 1, the control variables, including gender, tenure, age, and the additional independent variables, including role ambiguity, role conflict and emotional exhaustion, were inserted into the regression equation to eliminate alternative explanations. In the step 2, the independent variables of emotional labor aspects (affective delivery, surface acting, and deep acting) were inserted into the regression equation.

### Interaction effects

Hypotheses 3 proposed that Surface Acting of hospitality service provider moderates the negative relationship between role ambiguity and task performance. The moderator hypothesis is supported if the interaction is significant [35]. Table 2 shows that, when the interaction term (Role Ambiguity x surface acting) was inserted into the equation in the step 3, the interaction was significant ($F (10, 402) = 12.50, p<.001$, $\Delta R^2=.006$), supporting Hypothesis 3.

On the other hand, Figure 1 shows the plotting graphs of interaction effects of Role Ambiguity (RA) and surface acting on task performance: when low level of RA was perceived by employees, high surface acting group significantly reported higher level of task performance (4.43, $p<.01$) than low surface acting group (4.28, $p<.01$), however, when high level of RA was perceived by employees, though both groups have

### Table 1: Descriptive Statistics, Reliability, and Inter correlations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables in the Organizational Dynamics Context</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Tenure</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Role ambiguity</th>
<th>Role conflict</th>
<th>Emotional exhaustion</th>
<th>Task performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean S.D.</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Gender*</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td></td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>.26*** (.79)</td>
<td>-.16*** (.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Tenure²</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.21*** (.57)</td>
<td>.29*** (.81)</td>
<td>-.39*** (.81)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Age³</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td></td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.18*** (.83)</td>
<td>-.11** (.81)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2: Hierarchical regressions analyses of predicting employee task performance with the interactions of role ambiguity and emotional labor.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Control variables</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>.04</th>
<th>.03</th>
<th>.02</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Tenure</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>-.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.12</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Independent variables</th>
<th>Role Ambiguity</th>
<th>-.37***</th>
<th>-.34***</th>
<th>.42</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role Conflict</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional Exhaustion</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.16**</td>
<td>-.17**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step 3</th>
<th>Interactions (1)</th>
<th>Role Ambiguity x Surface acting</th>
<th>15.60***</th>
<th>.87**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>12.82***</td>
<td>12.91***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Adjusted R-square</td>
<td>.205</td>
<td>.224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(\Delta R^2)</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Standardized regression coefficients are reported.

\*p<.01, \*\*p<.05, \*\*\*p<.001.
the decreasing propensity of task performance, high surface acting group significantly reported lower level of task performance (3.80, p< .01) than low surface acting group (4.03, p=.01). Finally, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported. Conversely, both hypotheses 2 and 4 were not supported.

Discussion and Implication

The findings of this study extend the previous research and contribute to the literature. First, contemporary human service employees (flight attendant) may perceive certain kind of role ambiguity in the changing industrial climate, even though they clearly understand their roles; the main tasks for flight attendants are security, safety and customer service with hospitality. An explanation may be that the contemporary aviation is no longer only a luxury experience for the privileged few customers and has become a mass transportation with other characteristics turning to a passenger group that is more heterogeneous, including business people, casual travelers, holiday-makers, and commuters with other requirements [28]. Therefore, the presentation of the customer service of flight attendants has gradually changed, for example, the service should be rapid for more passengers. A flight attendant who used to take a pleasure to offer hospitality (or personal caring) to passengers may be losing her/his pleasure. The fact may lead some employees perceive a certain kind of role ambiguity or dilemma, though researchers mentioned that emotional labor is potentially good, as no customer wants to deal with a flight attendant who avoids eye contact in order to avoid getting a request [7], and being required to be friendly to customers may make a monotonous job more fun, or may allow self-expression that is enjoyable for employees [13,50].

Second, the result of this study suggests that the emotional labor aspects may serve as psychological protection tools for human service employees in a fluctuating industrial situation, where employees perceive certain kind of stress. Since speed-up has sharpened the ambivalence many workers feel about how much of oneself to give over to the role and how much of oneself to protect from it [7], using surface acting as a psychologic tool in a speed-up service interaction, particularly in the situations where the employees perceived lowly RA, the downward propensity to task performance would be repaired, thus the employee may avoid emotional exhaustion, burnout and quitting their jobs. Moreover, the literature indicates that task performance related to satisfaction [51].

As a practical implication, therefore, I suggest that the human service employees can use the right emotional tools at the right workplace climate to obtain the right effect. This process may involve utilizing the employee’s experience and the high emotional competence to decide what tool (affective delivery, surface acting, deep acting) to use and when (high or low PC/PCV) to use it.

Limitation and Future Research Direction

In the cross-sectional design, the use of only the self-evaluated responses of emotional labors may be considered limitations of this study. However, it would be difficult for a supervisor or a colleague to estimate the level of perception occurring inside other employees or to estimate whether other employees are performing surface acting. Therefore, the measurement of the variables used in this research by using self-evaluation would be as accurate as possible.

A future research direction would be analyses the interaction of role ambiguity and emotional labor in the different human service professions and the different area in the world; thus, comparative analysis of emotional labor in the different organization would be interesting.

Conclusion

The contemporary human service employees (flight attendant) perceive certain kind of role ambiguity or dilemma in the changing industrial climate, even though they clearly understand their roles. Using emotional labor as a psychological tool or remedy in a human service interaction, particularly in situations that emotional labor employees perceived role ambiguity, can help moderate or repair the downward propensity to task performance in the organization. Thus, by using the right tool or remedy at the right place, the employee can have an effect. The employee’s experience and the high emotional competence would be utilized to decide what tool (affective delivery, surface acting, or deep acting) to use and when (high or low PC/PCV) to use it.

High successful service company offers high service quality with hospitality by the employees. The way to offer hospitality make differentiates a company from others, particularly in the recent trend that IT and automate machine substitute jobs that used to be done by employees. As service quality is one of many variables including pricing, advertising, efficiency, and image that simultaneously influence profit, spending on service per se does not guarantee results, because strategy and execution must both considered [52]. Emotional labor and emotional competence of employees make it possible to execute the quality of service with hospitality in the human service organization. Finally, emotionally competent employees provide an organization with harmony and integrity and can increase the competitiveness of the company because the employees effectively adapt the company’s strategy and work efficiently.

References


