

CHAPTER

# 7

## *Call Centers*

### Emotional Labor Over the Phone

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Emotional labor is “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” occurring in face-to-face or voice-to-voice interactions with customers (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Service workers who interact with customers over the phone, namely the call center workforce, do not need to directly manage the visual cues they communicate to customers. Rather, their focus is primarily on communicating appropriate emotions via vocal cues, which presents some unique challenges for performing emotional labor. In this chapter, we focus on the call center context to underscore the unique aspects of emotional labor in voice interactions. First, we present an overview of working conditions in call centers, and the role of emotional labor in call center work. Second, we examine how organizational factors, extra-organizational factors (i.e., customers), and individual factors such as personality, gender, and race influence emotional labor. Finally, we consider the consequences of emotional labor for the call center workforce and suggest future research directions.

## WORKING CONDITIONS IN CALL CENTERS

Customers view call centers as a way for them to communicate with company representatives over the phone or via other communication channels such as instant messaging. Qualitative studies of call center work reveal a high pressure environment where customer service representatives cope with demands to deliver high quality customer service efficiently (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002; Taylor & Bain, 1998). On one hand, call centers are efficient alternatives to face-to-face customer service interactions. Management uses routinization through script use, and technological tools such as automatic call distribution systems and predictive dialers to control the work pace and to closely track the efficiency and accuracy of customer service interactions (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). On the other hand, some researchers suggest that the climate of control these mechanisms create contributes to an unfavorable image that some describe as "electronic panopticons" (Ferne & Metcalf, 1998, p. 9) and "dark satanic mills" (p. 2).

These characterizations, however, overlook the extensive variation in job characteristics (e.g., length of calls, types of customers), organizational characteristics, and working conditions that exists across call centers (Bain & Taylor, 2000; Callaghan & Thompson, 2002; Frenkel, Korczynski, Shire, & Tam, 1999). Calls vary in length and complexity ranging from a directory assistance call to a pension plan inquiry. Some call centers handle inbound calls that customers initiate (e.g., billing, product or service information), while others handle outbound calls that the call center workforce initiates (e.g., telemarketing, surveys). Call centers can be in-house, serving the customers of their own firms (e.g. banking) or outsourced, serving customers of other companies. These outsourced call centers can be found in the same country as the customers they serve, or located offshore separating customers and the call center workforce geographically.

## DEFINING FEATURES OF EMOTIONAL LABOR IN CALL CENTERS

Call center work meets three criteria Hochschild (1983) describes as being characteristic of emotional labor jobs: (1) face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public; (2) employees altering the customer's emotional state as part of their job; and (3) employers exerting control over employees through training and supervision. Some characteristics distinguish call center work from other frontline service occupations involving emotional labor such as the greater reliance on the voice and the

absence of face-to-face contact with customers. In call centers, customers have no idea whether or not call center employees are smiling when they interact, and so, call center employees learn to "smile down the phone" or convey positive emotions through the tone or inflection of their voice (Marshall & Richardson, 1996, p. 1855).

Information and communication technologies figure prominently in these workplaces facilitating workflow and workforce management. The use of electronic performance monitoring metrics such as call handling time, after call time, compliance with schedule and script content, and customer satisfaction ratings is more intensive than in other frontline service workplaces (Bain & Taylor, 2000). Throughout the workday, managers also listen in on calls with customers, and review them with call center employees. In combination with the high level of control exercised in these workplaces, this boundary-spanning workforce interacts with the public more frequently than other service work occupations involving emotional labor (Frenkel, May, Korczynski, & Shire, 1998; Holman, 2003). Moreover, compared with other service occupations, the call center workforce is under more pressure to express fewer negative emotions (Zapf, Isic, Bechtoldt, & Blau, 2003). At a general level, the distinguishing characteristics of call center work, specifically, the use of voice in performing emotional labor, the extensive role of technology, and frequent interactions with customers, create a unique environment for studying emotional labor.

## ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS: PERFORMANCE MONITORING AND DISPLAY RULES

Quantitative studies of call centers view emotional labor as an intrapsychic process focusing on how individuals manage their emotions (Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013). Constructs commonly examined in more general emotional labor research also appear in call center research on emotional labor, including: (1) display rules, (2) emotional dissonance, (3) surface acting and deep acting, and (4) the frequency, intensity, duration, and variety of interactions in the job (Morris & Feldman, 1996). In this section, we examine the influence of some organizational factors on emotional labor, specifically, performance monitoring and display rules in call center settings. Beyond these factors, we discuss how other choices regarding technology and how the workforce perceives them could influence emotional labor.

In call centers, performance monitoring offers a way for managers to track and document employee work behaviors (Stanton & Weiss, 2000). The performance of the call center workforce can be monitored

electronically or in person by a supervisor who, for example, listens to call recordings. This data varies in its content (e.g. criteria for evaluation) and purpose (e.g. how the information is used). By reinforcing the emotions employees are required to display, performance monitoring can heighten emotional dissonance and employees' regulatory responses.

Holman, Chissick, and Totterdell (2002) evaluated the role of performance monitoring in the emotional labor process in call centers. How employees viewed the purpose of performance monitoring (i.e., perceived benefits) was related to surface acting via emotional dissonance. That is, if employees viewed performance monitoring as having a beneficial purpose, it reduced emotional dissonance and the perceived need to surface act. Moreover, emotional dissonance also mediated the relationship between employees' perceptions of the intensity of the monitoring and surface acting, such that if employees perceived the monitoring as especially intense they were more likely to be aware of emotional dissonance, and to regulate their emotions by surface acting.

Display rules, or the emotions management expects employees to express (Ekman & Friesen, 1975), are another relevant organizational factor crucial to understanding emotional labor in the call center context. Display rules vary across call centers. Those handling inbound inquiries (e.g. airline reservations) are expected to be friendly and courteous, whereas those who are convincing customers to pay bills may exhibit neutral or negative emotions (Sutton, 1991). To comply with display rules, employees may have to resort to self-regulatory behaviors (Diefendorff & Gosserand, 2003). When employees surface act, they can deplete their resources thereby affecting their ability to comply with the display rules. Alternatively, when employees deep act, they modify their feelings, removing the need to constantly monitor their feelings in response to display rules (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). Deep actors are also able to narrow the difference between the display rules and their felt emotions enabling employees to replenish their resources.

The content of display rules can also influence the consequences of emotional labor. In an experimental study simulating a call center, Goldberg and Grandey (2007) compared the reactions of individuals who could freely express their emotions to customers with individuals who were required to display a specific type of emotion. Employees required to exhibit positive emotions to customers found display rule compliance more effortful and more emotionally exhausting compared to employees who were free to display their naturally-occurring emotions to customers. Moreover, surface acting explained the relationship between display rules and emotional exhaustion such that employees who were required to express positive emotions were more emotionally exhausted because they surface acted.

These findings indicate that display rule expectations can influence how employees regulate their emotions, as well as the consequences of their regulatory choices. While display rules can be presented through scripts and training, it is the responsibility of call center supervisors to enforce display rules on a daily basis. Yet, the emphasis call center supervisors place on display rules can vary. In a field study of call center employees, Wilk and Moynihan (2005) found that employees experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion when they worked for a supervisor who placed more importance on display rules, and as a consequence, placed more pressure on employees to regulate their emotions. As such, supervisors in the call center context are "display-rule regulators" – a source of differentiation in how customer service representatives experience display rules.

## ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS: INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

Research in call centers connecting technology and emotional labor primarily focuses on performance monitoring. However, call centers rely on other technologies that could also influence how employees manage their emotions. How employees view these various technological choices and whether these choices influence emotional labor warrants further research attention.

### *Workflow and Interaction Automation Technologies*

Workflow automation, and interaction automation are specific technologies that support the work process in call centers (Sieben, de Grip, Longen, & Sørensen, 2009). *Workflow automation* systems route specific types of calls to employees with specialized skills. For example, call centers may distribute calls to customer service representatives who specialize in handling business as opposed to mass market customers (Batt, 2002). From self-regulation theories, we know that employees have a certain amount of resources at their disposal. Demands such as display rules can deplete the resources individuals have to regulate their emotions. Centers with workflow automation could signal employees that the calls they receive will require their specialized skills and therefore have higher cognitive demands (Sieben et al., 2009). If employees perceive these technologies as increasing their specific workloads or the complexity of the calls they handle, this could increase the effort they have to exert to regulate their emotions.

*Interaction automation technologies* such as interactive voice response (IVR) automate simpler aspects of the customer interaction (Sieben et al.,

2009). IVR enables customers to input information using the telephone keypads or using speech recognition technology (Cena & Torre, 2006). Similar to workflow automation, reserving complex parts of calls for the call center workforce to handle could exacerbate discrepancies between their felt emotions and the emotions they are expected to display, thus requiring more regulatory effort. Alternatively, customers could become frustrated with the truncated nature of the interaction with the call center workforce, which in turn will require more emotional regulation from call center workers.

### *Emotion Detection Systems*

An emerging trend in call centers is the use of *emotion detection systems* to analyze the wave frequencies of a person's voice to detect a wide range of human emotions – irritation, duplicity, delight, or sexual arousal (Gurstelle, 2005). These systems can evaluate both word choice and emotions, using indicators such as pitch, tone, cadence, and pace for their emotional content. They can signal a supervisor to intervene when the emotional content of a call exceeds appropriate levels or if specific words are used in the interaction.

Emotion detection systems could influence how employees manage their emotions (Poster, 2011). On the one hand, employees' awareness that such systems are monitoring their emotions and word choice could heighten the pressure felt regarding compliance with display rules. Employees might compensate for this by engaging in higher levels of surface acting. On the other hand, emotion detection systems can alert supervisors to intervene when employees are experiencing an especially emotional customer, which could protect call center employees from draining their emotional regulation reservoir.

Supervisor intervention during especially stressful calls may also allow call center workers an opportunity for the regulatory recovery that breaks have been shown to provide (Troughakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008; Troughakos & Hideg, 2009). However, such recovery opportunities would be reduced if other technologies are simultaneously speeding up the work pace and thus decreasing the opportunities for such breaks. Research is needed that considers the cross-purposes of call center technologies in influencing emotion regulation processes.

### *Enhanced Interaction Technologies*

The call center context is also useful for examining how employees regulate their emotions using *enhanced interaction technologies*, which add to or replace telephone communication with email, electronic chat, or

videoconferencing (van Jaarsveld, Frost, & Walker, 2007). Combining telephone contact with other communication channels expands the range of cues that the call center workforce can use to communicate with customers. At the same time, regulating emotions through multiple communication channels simultaneously could be more demanding for employees. Better understanding how employees regulate their emotions using various types of communication channels could offer important insights into the nature and consequences of emotional labor.

A few studies are beginning to examine whether the communication medium influences how employees regulate their emotions when interacting with customers. In an experimental study comparing employees who interacted with customers over the phone with those who interacted with them via video conference, Wegge, Vogt, and Wecking (2007) found that both groups experienced similar levels of emotional dissonance. Consistent with this pattern, in a field study comparing call center workers (e.g. voice interactions with customers) with cabin crew (e.g. face-to-face interactions), Kinman (2009) found that both groups experienced emotional labor, and that for both groups, emotional labor was associated with negative consequences (e.g., decreased job satisfaction, increased psychological distress, and increased work-life conflict). However, the specific components of emotional labor (e.g. emotional faking, emotional suppression, and perceptions of display rules) were shown to be differentially related to strain outcomes. For example, display rules were positively related to work-life conflict and negatively related to intrinsic job satisfaction for the cabin crew, but were only related to lower extrinsic job satisfaction for the call center workforce. Moreover, emotional suppression and display rules were positively related to work-life conflict for the cabin crew while emotional faking and emotional suppression were positively related to work-life conflict for the call center employees.

Employees and customers are now communicating through text-based communication (e.g. email, text messaging). Regulating emotions over email could be less effortful and could have less negative consequences for employees than phone interactions because employees have more time to respond to emails giving them the opportunity to recover regulatory resources before responding. Research suggests that customers appear to prefer authentic emotional expressions in text responses as much as they do in other types of communication (Turel, Connelly, & Fisk, 2011).

Initial investigations into the influence of communication mode on emotional labor reveal similar levels of emotional labor regardless of the service delivery mode. Yet the differential relationships between dimensions of emotional labor and its consequences reveal complexity in how employees experience emotional labor. Based on these findings, how front-line service workers engage in emotional labor and its

effect on employees when different communication modes are in use requires further investigation. As the communication channels for customer service expand (e.g. co-browsing, Twitter, Facebook, instant chat, video conference), new avenues arise for emotional labor research in technology-mediated interactions.

### THE INFLUENCE OF CUSTOMERS ON EMOTIONAL LABOR

We now turn our focus to extra-organizational factors that can influence the emotional labor of call center employees. Recognizing that the call center workforce frequently interacts with difficult customers during the workday (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004), researchers are beginning to examine the influence of customers on emotional regulation processes at work. In relation to emotional labor, negative interactions with customers can undermine employee compliance with display rules, and increase efforts to regulate emotions. Consistent with this reasoning, employees who feel mistreated by customers have been shown, in both laboratory and field research, to exert more effort in managing their emotions (Grandey et al., 2004; Rupp & Spencer, 2006).

How employees regulate their responses to customer mistreatment depends on the degree to which they view it as stressful or unfair. Grandey et al. (2004) showed that employees who were more threatened by customer verbal aggression surface acted or vented their emotions to customers whereas those who viewed it as less threatening were more likely to deep act. In a lab study, Goldberg and Grandey (2007) showed that negative encounters with customers were positively associated with emotional exhaustion, and surface acting partially mediated this effect.

Rupp and Spencer (2006) examined customer interactional injustice in a lab study simulating a call center and found that employees were angered by unfair treatment from customers and expended more effort regulating their emotions. In a follow-up study involving face-to-face interactions among service workers, perspective-taking, which is a person's cognitive skill to comprehend another person's position, buffered the negative effect of customer injustice on surface acting (Rupp, McCance, Spencer, & Sonntag, 2008). Perspective-taking could be useful to examine in call centers as well because call center employees are customers in other contexts and therefore can appreciate and sympathize with frustrations and customer complaints.

Most emotional labor studies investigate employee experienced emotional dissonance more generally, while overlooking the specific

emotions that employees suppress or fake when interacting with customers. Investigating how call center employees react to customer mistreatment, Wegge, van Dick, and von Bernstorff (2010) depart from this approach by incorporating an emotion-specific dissonance measure derived from the EMO-16 (Schmidt-Atzert & Hüppe, 1996). They find that when interacting with customers, employees mask anger, boredom and affection. With this approach, they suggest that the consequences of emotional dissonance depend on whether the emotions that employees are suppressing or faking are positive or negative (Wegge et al., 2010). This approach is useful because it has the potential to resolve mixed findings regarding the consequences of emotional dissonance.

We know customer mistreatment influences emotional labor, yet we know less about the consequences of emotional labor when it is provoked by customer mistreatment. Customers, relative to the call center workforce, enjoy a fair amount of freedom in how they behave in the customer service interaction (Harris & Reynolds, 2003). Despite the extensive monitoring of the call center workforce, however, employees have some power in the face of customer mistreatment. Two studies of call center employees in Canada and China revealed that they react to customer mistreatment and in some cases, these reactions involve them sabotaging customers (Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008; Wang, Liao, Zhan, & Shi, 2011). The call center workforce has also been shown to respond to customer mistreatment by being uncivil to customers (van Jaarsveld, Skarlicki, & Walker, 2010). These examples reveal that employees who view themselves as being unfairly treated can retaliate in response to injustice. Call center employees could engage in other types of dysfunctional workplace behaviors in retaliation for what they perceive as unfair emotional labor demands. Qualitative studies of the call center workforce provide some examples of undesirable retaliation behaviors, including the manipulation of performance monitoring systems by faking sales, failure to fulfill customer requests, and call avoidance (Mulholland, 2004).

Existing studies emphasize the interpersonal nature of the service interaction overlooking the call center worker as a representative of a company. Similar to counterproductive work behaviors, motivations for customer mistreatment could differ. Customers are sophisticated and can distinguish between the fault of the company and that of the employee. Motivations for customer mistreatment may be personal in nature because the call center representative was rude or could be incited by corporate policies.

Connecting this to emotional labor, employees could experience greater need to regulate their emotions when the customer mistreatment is perceived as a personal attack. When customer mistreatment is motivated by corporate policies and the target is the company as opposed to

the employee, employees could exert less effort to manage their emotions in this context. Personal attacks could be viewed as being more unfair than attacking the company. Do customer service representatives surface act when they encounter customer mistreatment that is a personal attack and deep act when the content of the mistreatment is focused on the company? Research is needed to clarify these various motivations for customer mistreatment and their influence on emotional labor.

Negative interactions with customers clearly influence how employees choose to regulate their emotions, and in turn, the consequences associated with these choices. To date, customer mistreatment measures rely on self-report data from employees. Collecting data on actual customer behavior typified by Rafaeli and Sutton (1989) is a feasible research design in the call center setting because recordings of customer service interactions are available. This type of research could benefit our understanding of how customers react to employees when they surface or deep act. Moreover, this data could yield valuable insights about whether customers can detect when employees surface act and deep act over the phone (e.g., Rupp & Spencer, 2006).

#### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS: PERSONALITY, GENDER AND RACE

Beyond organizational factors and discrete customer encounters, individual differences may influence the emotional labor process in call center settings. That is, certain individual characteristics might aid employees in coping with high levels of emotional dissonance, frequent interactions with customers, and aggressive customer behavior, all of which are common for call center employees.

##### *Personality*

Several studies have examined whether personality characteristics are related to emotional labor, some of which have been undertaken in call centers (see Dahling & Johnson, 2013). Emotional intelligence, positive expressivity, negative affectivity, and positive affectivity have been examined as potentially influencing the emotional labor process (Grandey, 2000). Empirical research shows that call center workers are more likely to surface act if they score high on emotional intelligence, a set of abilities involving emotion in the self and others (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Call center employees who score high on emotional intelligence have been shown to be more likely to deep act (Totterdell & Holman, 2003). Meanwhile, positive emotional expressivity, the degree to which

employees find it difficult to hide their true emotions from customers, has been shown to be unrelated to the emotional labor of call center workers.

Negative affectivity (NA) is an especially relevant personality characteristic in the call center context. Trait negative affectivity has been shown to relate to emotional dissonance among call center employees (Wegge et al., 2010). Low NA individuals have been shown to be more likely to experience a dramatic increase in emotional dissonance when they encountered customer aggression than their high NA counterparts. Wegge et al. (2010) explain this finding as high NA individuals being more understanding of disgruntled customers than low NA individuals.

Beyond the personality characteristics Grandey (2000) identifies, self-efficacy, an evaluation of one's capability to successfully complete a task (Bandura, 1986, 2012) is another personality characteristic that has been studied in relation to emotional labor in the call center context. Highlighting the importance of specifying what type of self-efficacy is relevant to the context being studied (Dahling & Johnson, 2013), Wilk and Moynihan (2005) found in a sample of call center employees that general job self-efficacy did not moderate the relationship between interpersonal job demands (display rules) and emotional exhaustion whereas Wang et al. (2011) found in a sample of call center employees in China that self-efficacy for regulating emotions moderated the relationship between daily customer mistreatment and employee sabotage such that higher scoring employees (versus lower) engaged in less sabotage.

Psychological hardiness and emotion recognition (a component of emotional intelligence involving the ability to interpret verbal cues) are other personality characteristics that could influence call center workers' ability to regulate their emotions (Elfenbein & Ambady, 2002; Kobasa, 1979). Important for call center contexts in particular, the Diagnostic Analysis of Nonverbal Accuracy Test (DANVA) measures emotion recognition with photographs and audio recordings (Nowicki Jr, 2000). In a study of police and nurses, Bechtoldt, Rohrman, De Pater, and Beersma (2011) used this assessment to show that emotion recognition moderated the relationship between emotional labor and work engagement such that employees with high emotion recognition who engaged in emotional labor did not report lower work engagement whereas employees with low emotion recognition did. Call center workers who have better emotion recognition skills could more accurately assess customer emotions, and, based on this information, could exert less effort to respond with the appropriate emotions.

### Gender and race

Call center workers' demographic characteristics are generally treated as control variables in studies undertaken from the intrapsychic perspective. However, theory suggests these variables be considered as moderating the effects of emotional labor processes in call center settings, especially considering the prominent role of personal characteristics in shaping customer expectations in these contexts (Grandey et al., 2004; Totterdell & Holman, 2003).

Similar to other frontline service jobs involving emotional labor, the call center workforce is overwhelmingly female (with some exceptions, such as IT helpdesk employees; Belt, Richardson, & Webster, 1999; Lively, 2013). Despite this, sex differences have been found with regard to emotional labor processes. For example, Totterdell and Holman (2003) found that female call center employees engaged in higher levels of negative affect regulation and faking emotions compared with their male counterparts (in a call center where 72% of the workforce was female). This finding supports Hochschild (1983)'s assertion that women have lower status shields, meaning that they are more susceptible to anger, and lack necessary coping skills for dealing with negative emotion.

Gender differences in emotional labor could also be the result of different motivations for regulating emotions, with women striving for positive interpersonal relations and men striving for control (Grandey, 2000). An alternative to studying sex differences among this predominantly female workforce might be to consider gender (i.e., the possession of masculine and feminine characteristics across the sexes; Bem, 1974; Kent & Moss, 1994). For example, a woman with masculine characteristics may exert less regulatory effort and be less affected by surface acting than a woman with feminine characteristics.

As is the case with gender, few quantitative call center studies focus explicitly on the relationship between race and emotional labor. The racial identity of a call center worker is only detectable on the phone via accents when speaking. Individuals with certain accents can be viewed as less competent (Atkins, 1993; Cargile, 2000), and those individuals with accents from countries viewed as having lower socio-economic status (e.g. Mexico, India; Lippi-Green, 1997) can experience discrimination. Grandey et al. (2004) showed that Hispanic call center employees reported more hostile callers in comparison to non-Hispanic employees, and explained this finding as a manifestation of aversive racism where people who have the opportunity to punish someone do so to a greater extent if the person is a minority member (Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Gender and race characteristics can also interact and, accordingly, we would expect minority women to engage in higher levels of surface acting.

### Nationality

Increasingly, the call center workforce is geographically separated from the customers they serve. For example, as a strategy to reduce labor costs, we see call center work moving, from the UK and the US to India, and from Canada to the Philippines (Dossani & Kenney, 2007). Performance monitoring is used more, and display rules are more intensely enforced in offshore call centers because they want to offer clients a competitive alternative to retaining work in-house (Mirchandani, 2008). Offshore call center employees are also put under great pressure to emulate the culture they are serving, for example, by adopting new names, altering their accents, and reciting scripts to reflect national identities that are reinforced through training (Noronha & D'Cruz, 2006; Poster, 2007). Poster refers to this practice as "national identity management."

On the one hand, from a conservation of resources (COR) perspective, intensive enforcement of display rules and performance monitoring in addition to organizational requirements to present an alternative national identity to customers could compound the depletion of resources that the offshore workforce has available to regulate their emotions (Hobfoll, 1989). The offshore call center workforce deceives customers regarding their location, nationality, and name as part of their job. Greater awareness about the organizational expectations for emotional expression and national identity management as a result of intensive monitoring could increase the efforts necessary to regulate emotions.

On the other hand, offshore call center work can (for example, in India) attract university educated job applicants who view such jobs as positive career opportunities – an attitude that may not be held by a similar onshore workforce (for example, in the US). These offshore call center employees may consequently have relatively more regulatory resources with which to cope with emotional challenges. Because the deceit inherent to offshore call center work (i.e., "national identity management," Poster, 2007) is organizationally sanctioned, employees might also feel more powerful and less vulnerable when interacting with hostile customers. Tenure might also moderate these processes, with lying replenishing resources in the short term, and depleting them over the long term.

Another useful perspective for considering how requiring offshore employees to present an alternative national identity could influence the emotional labor process is *national identity centrality*, or "the extent to which individuals define themselves by their citizenship or the subjective importance of one's national identity in the hierarchy of different social identities" (Das, Dharwadkar, & Brandes, 2008, p. 1507). Using data from a call center in India, Das et al. (2008) found that offshore call center

workers with strong national identity centrality experienced more burnout, higher turnover intentions, and lower performance compared with those with weaker identity centrality. Applying this concept to emotional labor, national identity centrality could moderate the relationship between surface acting and outcomes such as emotional exhaustion. The dissonance offshore call center employees experience from managing their emotions could be compounded by the efforts they exert to present customers with an alternative national identity. A research design comparing two call centers, one located in the same country as its customers, and one offshore, would be useful for exploring such issues.

### THE CONSEQUENCES OF EMOTIONAL LABOR IN CALL CENTERS

Throughout this chapter, we identified several future research ideas to expand our understanding of how characteristics internal and external to call centers and their employees influence emotional labor processes. In this section, we turn to the consequences of emotional labor.

In general, the consequences of emotional labor in call centers are similar to those in other service occupations. Surface acting is generally associated with negative consequences for both individuals and organizations (e.g. employee well-being, performance, turnover intentions). Evidence from field research reveals that the relationship between surface acting, deep acting and performance is complicated by the use of different performance measures. In call center studies, Totterdell and Holman (2003) found no relationship between surface acting and self-reported performance whereas Goodwin, Groth, and Frenkel (2011) found that surface acting is indirectly related to supervisor ratings of performance. Although some have found that deep acting is positively related to self-reported job performance and laboratory-based measures of performance, others have found that deep acting is not related to supervisor-reported job performance (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Goodwin et al., 2011; Totterdell & Holman, 2003).

With respect to individual outcomes, the disconnect between employees' true feelings and the organizationally-sanctioned emotion display rules can be costly for employees. Surface acting is positively associated with stress, emotional exhaustion, psychological distress, psychosomatic complaints, and lower job satisfaction (Kinman, 2009; Totterdell & Holman, 2003; Zapf, Schmitte, Mertini, & Holz, 2001; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini, & Isic, 1999). Emotional dissonance, sometimes used as a proxy for surface acting, is related to lower well-being, lower work motivation, and an increase in emotional exhaustion, health disorders, and work-

family conflict (Kinman, 2009). Deep acting is negatively related to job satisfaction and positively related to a personal sense of accomplishment and displayed enthusiasm (Totterdell & Holman, 2003).

The majority of emotional labor studies examining the consequences of emotional labor involve call center samples from developed economies as opposed to offshore operations. Given the global nature of call center work, emotional labor researchers can use this context to examine whether the emotional labor process operates in the same way for the offshore workforce in, for example, India or the Philippines, as it does for call center samples in advanced economies. Call center work lends itself to addressing these questions because it is expanding in several countries, facilitating comparative studies using call centers in different countries to evaluate the influence of cultural and institutional differences on the experience of emotional labor (Batt, Holman, & Holtgrewe, 2009).

Some evidence suggests that the dynamics of emotional labor play out differently in offshore versus domestic call centers. One of the few studies examining the relationships between display rules and emotional exhaustion in an offshore call center found that call center employees in India reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion when their supervisors emphasized display rules (Little, Nelson, Quade, & Ward, 2011). This finding contrasts with Wilk and Moynihan (2005) who found that US call center employees experienced higher levels of emotional exhaustion when their supervisor emphasized display rules. Little et al. (2011) explain this difference as call center employees in India viewing display rules as helpful because they clarify job requirements as opposed to their US counterparts who view them as stressful and controlling.

Although India receives significant attention as an offshore destination for call center work, the Philippines, Canada, and Ireland are also offshoring destinations for English speaking work. Non-English speaking countries also offshore work to the following partnerships: Germany to Poland, France to Morocco, and Spain to Latin America (Batt et al., 2009). In circumstances where the offshoring dynamic involves two countries with considerable distance between their cultures such as the US and India (Hofstede, 1980), there may exist greater demands on the call center workforce and larger differences in the consequences associated with emotional labor. In contrast, when the offshore partnership involves countries with narrower cultural differences, such as the US and Canada, less effort is required to manage national identity and therefore we would expect smaller differences in the consequences of emotional labor.

This distinction in how call center workers in the US and India view display rules highlights the importance of taking cultural context into consideration when we evaluate theories about emotion work. Countries also differ on an institutional level (e.g. employment regulations and



collective bargaining systems) with coordinated economies having stronger employment regulations than liberal market economies (Hall & Soskice, 2001). These institutional differences have been shown to influence working conditions (e.g. compensation, employment contracts) in call centers (Batt, Holman, & Holtgrewe, 2009; Batt & Nohara, 2009; van Jaarsveld, Kwon, & Frost, 2009). Institutional factors such as union density and whether collective agreements are sectoral could influence the degree of emotional labor that employees engage in. For example, Grandey, Rafaeli, Ravid, Wirtz, and Steiner (2010) found that unionization and policies that protect employees in France resulted in lower perceived status of customers and thus employees encountered fewer constraints and consequences for expressing negative emotions.

While the emotional labor process may vary depending on where the work is located, it could also vary across call centers within the same country depending on the human resource systems call centers choose to adopt (Batt, 2002; Frenkel et al., 1999; Houlihan, 2002). Some centers empower their employees by increasing job discretion, organizing them into teams, and paying them generously while others resemble Taylorized operations exercising control over employees through low levels of discretion, intense routinization, and low pay (Batt, 2002). Considering the connection between human resources practices and emotional labor, and whether the negative effects of emotional labor are buffered by the choices organizations make regarding their human resource practices warrants research attention. Matching data from a large sample of call centers measuring their human resource practices with individual level data from their call center employees about how they manage their emotions, and other relevant employee attitudinal, and behavioral data would help connect the macro and micro levels of analysis.

The general patterns in the consequences of emotional labor for the call center workforce are similar to what is found in other contexts. We have outlined some factors that warrant attention for emotional labor researchers who are studying the phenomenon in call centers. Given the context, acknowledging the global nature of call center work and evaluating whether variation in cultural and institutional characteristics should influence emotional labor theories is particularly important.

### Conclusion

Examining emotional labor in the call center context yields important insights about the unique challenges of voice interactions in an environment featuring intensive monitoring and routinization. Technology in call centers has a primary role in service delivery and as companies expand the means of delivering customer service beyond the phone to include other

communication channels, this evolution could affect how employees perform emotional labor, as well as its consequences for employees. The geographic movement of call center work is also altering the locations of customers and customer service representatives in profound ways. This shift is exposing both parties to variations in cultural norms regarding emotional expression. Considering these dynamics, call centers will continue to be a fertile environment for the study of emotional labor.

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# Emotional Labor in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Diverse Perspectives on  
the Psychology of Emotion  
Regulation at Work

Edited by

Alicia A. Grandey,  
James M. Diefendorff, and  
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