

Emotional Labor in Interactive Service Roles in Indian Restaurants

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Emotional labour is more pronounced in interactive service roles where significant communication is necessarily exchanged as a part of the service delivery. Customer interaction, performed by stewards is an intrinsic component of service delivery in restaurants. The nature of interactions between guests and staff is as critical a determinant in the customer service experience as the food itself. To explore the nature of such interactions, twelve frontline employees (stewards) were interviewed across two restaurants in Ahmedabad (India). Restaurants in India lack formalized training programs on emotional labor. The study propounds a structured and need based training for employees on emotional labor and managing stress to control high attrition and enhance job satisfaction.

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Introduction

The liberalization of the Indian economy has contributed to the expansion of its service sector (Kotwal, Ramaswami & Wadhwa, 2011) and thereby to an increase in work options for restaurant staff (Yadav, 2015). Apart from food, quality of service helps restaurants differentiate themselves from competition. In restaurants, customer service is usually provided by stewards¹ whose work requires them to display courtesy irrespective of customers' behavior. Stewards have to display a limited set of facial expressions at work, irrespective of actual feelings. Therefore, they need to be adept at emotional labor, which refers to the individual's efforts to display only the appropriate emotions through one's behavior (Chu, 2002).

The term "emotional labor" was introduced by Arlie Hochschild

¹In this paper, the words "stewards" and "waiters" are used interchangeably to represent frontline restaurant employees.

(Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor, as classified by Hochschild (1983), is of two types: surface acting and deep acting. When one expresses an emotion that he/she is not feeling, it is called surface acting. On the other hand, simulating real feelings by using previous emotional experiences is called deep acting. This concept applies both at the workplace as well as in the personal lives of individuals. Emotional labor has a substantial impact on the dimensions of organizational well-being such as attractiveness of the organization and quality of service (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The attraction and retention of motivated employees has been identified as one of the key concerns of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Nair & Sodhi, 2012), which includes restaurants.

Emotional labor is a comparatively unexplored topic of research in the Indian context (Harini, 2013). Only 1% of studies in this area in India are empirical in nature, as reported by Modekurti-Mahto, Kumar and Raju (2014). Extant studies have focused on academicians (Gaan, 2012); medical representatives (Mishra & Bhatnagar, 2010); call centre employees (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008) and aircraft employees (Waddar & Aminabhavi, 2012). Other Indian studies have also referred to the role of emotional labor among other frontline employees such as call centre employees (Kumar & Prakash, 2008), teachers in technical institutes (Nayeem & Tripathy, 2012) and air hostesses (Tomar & Dhiman, 2012). The present study extends the research on emotional labor to encompass the Indian hospitality industry. It studies the role

emotions play in the performance of interactive work roles in restaurants.

Twelve in-depth interviews of stewards, captains and senior captains working in two different restaurants were conducted. The interview time ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. The staff affirmed the necessity of emotional labor in their work. Interviews suggested that most respondents viewed deep acting to be more useful in their line of work while surface acting was associated with higher stress and lower work satisfaction. The discourse suggested the importance of on-job training in interpreting emotional cues and overall experience in building steward's capacity for deep acting.

The study asserts the need for structured training on emotional labor to stewards, especially on deep acting. Training on emotional labor can help stewards in handling stress situations and reducing burnout. It will also help the stewards in dealing with the customers in amore effectual way. This is expected to lead to higher customer satisfaction and repeated visits. We also expect stewards to develop a greater sense of job satisfaction and reduced turnover intent.

Literature Review

According to Ashforth & Humphrey (1993: 88), "the role of emotion in the workplace has been a constant though often implicit theme in the organizational behavior literature". Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) identified various spheres in which an individual's emotions interact with their work roles, such as decision making (Isen

& Baron, 1991), job design (Hackman & Oldham, 1980), physical environment (Sundstrom & Sundstrom, 1986), and service culture (Schneider, 1990). Current research is increasingly emphasizing the importance of emotional labor in interactive service industries (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Leidner, 1999).

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In service transactions, general expectations regarding the appropriate emotional display of individuals tend to get formulated (Hochschild, 1979; 1983 cited in Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). These expectations, in turn, lead to development of context-specific 'display rules' (Ekman, 1973; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) that limit expression of emotions irrespective of the individual's internal state (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989).

Mann (2004) identified three components of emotional labor: feigning, hiding and managing emotions at the workplace. The two types of emotional labor, described earlier, influence job satisfaction and task effectiveness in different ways. Deep and surface acting have been found to be positively and negatively associated, respectively, with teaching effectiveness (Gaan, 2012). The formulation of standardized display rules that govern the expression of emotions helps employees behave in socially desirable fashion. This standardization helps in improving job performance (Ashforth &

Humphrey, 1993). Conversely, suppressing and mismanaging the emotions, which is associated with surface acting, can lead to work stress and hypertension (Mann, 2004) and burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Persuad, 2004). Burnout has been associated with low service quality, poor morale and increased turnover (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Interactive work can also cause emotional exhaustion—“a state of depleted energy caused by excessive emotional demands” (Saxton, Phillips & Blakeney, 1991; Morris & Feldman, 1996). In turn, emotional exhaustion leads to increased withdrawal behavior and reduced productivity (Jackson, Schwab & Schuler, 1986; Cordes & Dougherty, 1993 cited in Morris & Feldman, 1996).

Emotional labor is especially important in interactive service jobs (Leidner, 1999) because of the mismatch between customer expectations and behavior. Customers always expect high-quality service from the staff irrespective of their behavior towards them. The non-physical nature of services provided by the service staff makes it difficult for customers to judge service quality (Augustine & Joseph, 2008). Hence, any deviation of stewards' behavior from expected standards is likely to have ramifications such as increased customer turnover and bad word-of-mouth.

Although emotional labor has positive organizational outcomes in the service

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industry, sustained differences in displayed and perceived emotions (emotive dissonance) may lead to emotional exhaustion in employees (Hochschild, 1983; Middleton, 1989). Higher the emotive dissonance, higher is the effort expended in displaying emotional labor (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Emotional labor performance has been found to be positively related to work stress (Rutter & Fielding, 1988; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989). Emotive dissonance can have negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, depression, work alienation and burnout (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). Due to the negative impact of emotional labor, it has been compared to surrendering of heart (Stenross & Kleinman, 1989) and 'hypocrisy pay' for employees performing emotional labor has been advocated (Foegen, 1988).

Emotional labor is a learned behavior, and a person may develop skills that enable the enactment of surface and deep acting (Ashforth & Fried, 1988). Compared to surface acting, deep acting leads to a reduction in stress as the degree of emotive dissonance is lower (Humphrey, Ashforth & Diefendorff, 2015). Hence, it is possible that training on developing deep acting ability can diminish the negative consequences of emotional labor on employee's psychological health.

Hospitality Industry in India

The hospitality industry is one of the crucial segments of the fast growing services sector in India (Indian hospitality industry, n.d). Employment in the hotel and restaurant industry in India has seen

a year on year increase of 6.13 % from 1977-78 to 2009-10 (Yadav, 2015). Increased foreign tourists and movement of tourists from within the country have given a boost to the hospitality industry in almost all parts of the country (Indian hospitality industry, n.d.).

The growth in any sector is challenged by increased demand and sensitivity towards its stakeholders. In the same vein, the hospitality sector is also witnessing high expectations and timely delivery of the services. At this juncture while handling the customer's sensitivity requires the skill of emotional labor because employees have to be nice, courteous and polite irrespective of the customer's behavior.

The hospitality industry in India is labor intensive and highly fragmented in nature. The dominant share of this industry includes small and unorganized players. (Indian hospitality industry, n.d.). The hospitality industry in general and its unorganized sector in particular face several human resource management issues such as high turnover, lack of training and skill development programs (Jauhari & Manaktola, 2009).

Research Methodology

Emotional labor is a complex, interactive phenomenon that has not been extensively explored in the existing literature. According to Fredrickson (1986) interviews are amongst the best instruments to develop rich understanding of complex and rarely explored phenomena. Quantitative research is unable to account for

the richness of the social settings, which includes multifaceted interactions and effects (Cronbach, 1975; Hoepfl, 1997). According to Cronbach (1975: 124), “the time has come to exorcise the null hypothesis” because it leads to wastage of data. Hoepfl (1997) argues that qualitative studies can help further research in situations where quantitative techniques are inadequate because qualitative inquiry acknowledges the complexity and dynamism of society. Therefore, in this study, we use the ‘active interview’ method. The ‘active interview’ method envisages the role of the informant as something beyond a passive individual (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Interviewing thus has to be an interpretative and evolving process. In an active interview, participants help to create meaning to the process, and they give a whole new way of looking at the situation. Holstein & Gubrium (1995: 8) state that “construed as active, the subject behind the respondent not only holds facts and details of experience but, in the very process of offering them up for response, constructively adds to, takes away from, and transforms them”.

Sample Design

In this study, we have used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling can help researchers in choosing content-rich cases (Patton, 2005). In this study, we have used homogeneous purposive sampling as we seek to understand in detail restaurants catering to customers from the upper and upper-middle income groups.

Participants were selected on the basis of the degree of direct (face to

face) exposure to customers. All respondents were males with ages ranging from 20 to 42 years. The respondents belonged to 5 different states of India, viz. Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal. The two selected restaurants were similar in size and cuisine with a seating capacity of around 100 persons.

We conducted 12 in-depth interviews across the two restaurants. Stewards and their supervisors were interviewed to understand and explore the aspects of emotional labor during their interactions with customers. The interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes. As we progressed, we started observing a repetitive pattern in the responses of the informants after ten interviews. Therefore, we stopped after completing 12 interviews.

Analysis

Every interview was audio recorded, simultaneously personal notes, and comments were maintained to get a complete picture of the conversation as recommended by Strauss (1987). The recording of each interview was then coded and transcribed in a word document (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Some relevant secondary sources were also referred to triangulate the findings obtained from the interviews (Yin, 2003).

The analysis began with the marking of keywords. These keywords facilitated the exploratory analyses leading to the emergence of specific pre-existing themes and some new sub-themes. The

true emotions. Therefore, surface acting emerged to be a prevalent and widespread practice in the restaurant sector.

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“...We have to appear happy while interacting with guests...Our duty is such that if we let our emotions show on our faces, the guest will get angry. This should not happen. They should leave happy and satisfied...”

The restaurant industry works on the principle that the customer is king and is always right. It so happens that even if the customer is wrong, stewards cannot argue or complain about it.

Preparing for emotional labor display: The development of deep level acting skills usually comes with experience. The other way is imparting these skills through well-structured training. The lack of training may lead to poor performance of the employees. Poor performance and stress generated due to emotional dissonance lead to high attrition of the new employees. A quote from one of the stewards indicates the same:

“We can gauge nature (i.e. personality) of a person as they walk into the restaurant. Long experience has taught us to guess it right. But this requires a lot of time and majority of the newly recruited staff leave their job because they fail to read the mood of the customer”.

The role of experience: Respondents stated that stewards who were working in this line for a long time were better able to deal with stubborn and angry customers. It is easier for such stewards to hide their real emotions and put up appropriate emotions. Experienced employees are thought to surface act in a better way than the new and inexperienced employees. Mostly young and new stewards have displayed anger through their facial expression causing tension and stress. In addition to this, experienced stewards can read indicators and signals from guests faster than newcomers. Hence, their response time is quicker. This coupled with courtesy gives a positive feeling to the guests who feel more confident that they are well looked after. This fact was also brought out by one of the senior participants when he stated:

“...it may happen that a steward has not given quick attention to the guest's signals. We change the steward for that table so that the customer feels more comfortable. We also try to send a steward who is a bit more experienced or more knowledgeable about the dishes when such a situation arises, or we sense that customer irritation is likely to arise”.

Finally, experienced stewards were possibly more in line with the service nature of their work. This again reiterates the need for training new comers in customer handling leading to their skill development. Currently, employee training and skill development are informal in nature in the Indian restaurant industry. Therefore, in order to pre-empt high

attrition² across the Indian hospitality industry, the lack of formal training and skill development needs redressal.

Training and active management: The respondents further revealed that there is a rule for briefing the staff's daily routine, but the briefing is rarely related to feedback and how to improve their shortcomings. Some training is organized but on an ad-hoc basis. Since this job requires a match between the employees' natural personality and the expected state of mind to be displayed, the lack of dispositional fit was a major problem for new recruits. This dispositional mismatch needs to be mitigated by proper training and keen surveillance by the management.

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Apart from managing routine customers one major problem faced by workers in the restaurant industry was dealing with inebriated customers. There was a consensus among almost all of the stewards whom we interviewed that guests under the alcoholic influence were more prone to abuse employees. Respondents believed that such inebriated guests usually caused problems to other people as well, and they always had to take extra care and precautions in serving such customers. These customers sometimes display abusive behavior towards the stewards which often results in frustra-

tion and irritation among them. To avoid customer attrition restaurants do not have a strict policy against these drunken customers. This acts adversely as it creates a loss of dignity and frustration among the waiters and stewards which ultimately fuels employee attrition.

"Because I look so weak and small in physical appearance the drunk people get on top of me easily. We can't do anything in such a case."

Performance appraisal: Informants unanimously asserted the absence of proper training programs focused on developing deep acting skills. They further emphasized that the performance appraisal and promotions are heavily based on their ability to perform emotional labor, for which they are not formally trained. One of the informants mentioned the following.

"Our behavior is closely monitored by our captains and managers, especially in the case of such stubborn and angry customers through surveillance".

The performance evaluation of the employees in the restaurant sector is largely based on customer satisfaction and effectiveness of the employees in customer handling. However, there is a misalignment between performance evaluation and employee training. Therefore, there is a need for training programs aligned to the performance parameters in this sector.

Dealing with the fallout of emotional labour: Emotional labor display

²A study on Indian hospitality industry has found this rate to be around 60% (Indian hospitality industry, n.d.)

has been related to higher stress. Most of the participants believed that handling tough customers led to tension and stress. However, the proportion of such customers is not high in Ahmedabad. Participants attribute this low proportion to the alcohol prohibition law in Gujarat and claim that inebriated customers are the toughest to handle.

The complaints of the customers are about waiting time. People love to eat out in Ahmedabad and the waiting time is often around 30 minutes which makes some customers angry. One captain has this to say:

“Our communication of waiting time for customers waiting outside is backed by our assessment of the time needed for running tables. However, some customers are slow which lead to an error in our estimation. This gives a chance to customers to complain.”

This kind of problem happens in the case of new customers as we do not know much about their eating speed, and sometimes there is no consistency in that. Customers’ complaints regarding slow service sometimes create a stress situation for the attendants when mentioned during the briefing session. As elaborated by an attendant, any customer complaint creates performance pressure.

Discussion

Leidner (1999) observed that workers in interactive service roles have to simultaneously manage their own emotions and influence the emotional re-

sponses of their customers. The present study supports the above observation. In interactive job roles “it is impossible to draw clear distinctions between the worker, the work process, and the product or outcome, because the quality of the interaction is frequently part of the service being delivered” (Leidner, 1999: 83). This stresses the criticality of understanding and managing emotional labor in interactive service delivery. That interaction is an amalgam of facial expressions, body language, the tone of voice, personal bearing and other soft aspects of communication. It makes the observation and control of public emotional behavior difficult for the management.

Emotional labor can result in stress. The possibility of stress is more if emotional labor is coupled with the workload.

Emotional labor can result in stress. The possibility of stress is more if emotional labor is coupled with the workload. In the restaurant business, the establishment has no control over the demand, and there is likely to be wide fluctuation in the number of patrons on different days. This fluctuation can lead to a seasonal overload of work resulting in stress. Lee and Ashforth (1996) found that job stressors, like work overload and role conflicts, usually have a stronger link with emotional exhaustion as compared to customer related stressors. Although organizations have little control over customer related stressors, management can restrict the negative effect these stressors

have on employees by introducing better, more employee friendly practices at the workplace.

Another way to reduce the effect of stressors is to provide structured and planned training on the display of deep acting. Positive linkages have been found between deep acting and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, customer satisfaction, and job performance (Humphrey, Ashforth & Diefendorff, 2015). However, in this study we found no incidence where the management formally trained the staff in techniques of deep acting. The training was mostly confined to informal instructions from senior staff. Owing to the high attrition rate in the hospitality industry, the management should deploy structured training and induction programs for new employees. This training is likely to enable new employees to develop adequate customer handling skills including deep acting.

Management should deploy structured training and induction programs for new employees.

Despite the absence of formal training that helps stewards improve their emotional regulation, the management seemed to be aware of the need for and effects of emotional labor. Hence, the stewards were tutored about the need for customer satisfaction; experienced stewards were assigned to difficult customers, and continuous feedback about customer service was provided. However, there seemed to be only informal mechanisms, like support from co-workers, for dealing with the ef-

fects of emotional labor. Restaurant workers need to implement more proactive measures for reducing negative effects of emotional labor among workers for their long-term establishment sustainability.

A proper induction and training program leads to skills acquisition and development of competencies that help improve job performance and give rise to other positive behavioral changes (Satterfield & Hughes, 2007; Hill & Lent, 2006). This improved job performance is positively related to higher job satisfaction (Judge & Larsen, 2001), lower stress and increased employee well-being. The increased satisfaction with the job aggregates lower down the feeling of turnover intention among employees (Mobley, 1977). Thus, we can propose that the implementation of structured training and induction program for the new employees can help the hospitality industry in addressing the attrition problem. The training program should contain a detailed module on emotional labor and its usage in the hospitality industry. This will help the employees in proactively displaying surface and deep level acting during the customer handling process. It will not only increase customer satisfaction but will also reduce employee attrition, and, therefore, increase overall effectiveness of the organization.

Limitations & Future Research

This study is qualitative in nature and dealt with the hospitality sector (restaurants) in India. The selection of industry and individuals (subjects) was purpose-

ful and not probabilistic in nature. Thus, we may fail to make an explicit claim about the generalizability of results across the service industry. The findings may be applicable only for hospitality sector (restaurants) in India having similar settings and backgrounds. These limitations give scope for some future research.

Future research can explore the importance of emotional labor across the service sector in India. It may be interesting and insightful to study and compare the importance of emotional labor for frontline employees and back office employees of the service industry. Researchers can also explore various practices implemented across the service sector to tackle problems related to handling stress and emotional labor. Studying the options available to employees about techniques for controlling interactions between workers and service recipients may be beneficial for emotional literature as well. Moreover, while one appreciates the benefits of such control to both service providers and recipients, this approach to human behavior in social interactions raises ethical questions related to customer deception and employee dignity. Also, various manifestations of emotional labor, which depend on the degree of emotional labor exercised, need to be studied in greater detail.

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