

*An Exploratory Study on Workers' Characteristics Affecting the Use of Different Acting Strategies in Emotional Labor*

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The Asian Conference on Psychology & the Behavioral Science 2021  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

There are two acting strategies in emotional labor: surface acting and deep acting. Previous studies have shown that surface acting has negative effects, such as depression, burnout, and increased turnover of workers. For deep acting, the findings are inconsistent with both positive and negative effects being reported. In addition, these acting strategies are thought to be used according to the environment the worker is in, the situation at that time, and the personality characteristics of the worker himself/herself. However, there are still many unclear aspects about what specifically affects the use of the worker's acting strategy. The purpose of this study was to quantitatively as well as qualitatively examine the recognition and use of acting strategies by emotional labor workers. Semi-structured interviews and web questionnaires were carried out for 13 counselors and 4 telephone operators related to insurance claims at an employee assistance program company. In the semi-structured interview, the sense and use of the acting strategy were asked. In the web questionnaire, the Emotional Labor Scale-Japanese version (Sekiya & Yukawa, 2014) was administered in which demographic details, such as educational history, work history, and years of experience, were also asked. As a result, it was found that the tendency to use either of the acting strategies differed depending on the type of work. Furthermore, it was suggested that attitudes toward emotional labor may differ depending on an individual's educational background and the presence of the supervisor, even in the same job category.

Keywords: Emotional Labor, Acting Strategies, Deep Acting

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## Introduction

Emotional labor is a concept proposed by Hochschild (1983), an American sociologist, and is a term referring to work or occupations that require workers to control their emotional state to a certain degree, with the aim of bringing about some kind of change in others involved during their work. For example, just as physical labor requires control of the physical aspects of the body, and mental labor requires the use and application of knowledge and information, emotional labor requires the worker to use his or her emotions appropriately for the work. The management of workers' emotions in emotional labor can be likened to "acting". In other words, just as professional actors, create emotions on the stage and bring about changes in the audience's feelings by skillfully changing their facial expressions and verbal expressions, emotional workers are also considered to perform a kind of act for their clients on the "stage" of the workplace.

It is said that these acting styles can be categorized into two major types. One is surface acting and the other is deep acting. Surface acting is a form of acting in which the parts that are directly visible to the other person, such as facial expressions, tone of voice, and posture, are changed as necessary, and the inner feelings (true feelings) and emotional expressions do not have to be the same. Previous studies have shown that surface acting has negative effects, such as depression, burnout, and increased turnover of workers (e.g. Bono & Vey, 2005; Brotheridge & Lee, 2003).

Deep acting, on the other hand, is a method of attempting to change one's true emotions according to the needs of the job. If deep acting is successful, there will be no discrepancy between the true emotions and the expressed emotions, which is said to have the effect of reducing stress. On the other hand, it has been pointed out that the concept of deep acting, in particular, has not been sufficiently elaborated conceptually (Sakakibara, 2011). While it is said that deep acting is an adaptive strategy for workers, there are findings that it can also be a stressor, and the ambiguity of the deep acting concept may exist behind the unstable results.

By the way, these acting strategies are thought to be used according to the environment the worker is in, the situation at that time, and the personality characteristics of the worker himself/herself. However, there are still many unclear aspects about what specifically affects the use of the worker's acting strategy. In addition, although most of the previous studies separated the two acting strategies and examined each effect independently, however, it is possible that the two are used in combination. For example, some of the previous studies actually classified the patterns of the use of surface and deep acting into five types and examined the effects of each pattern (Gabriel et al., 2015). However, these studies are also based on quantitative categorization, and it remains unclear how the two acting strategies are related or used differently depending on the job and other factors.

The purpose of this study was to obtain more detailed and specific information on the acting strategies of emotional labor by investigating the use of different acting strategies, and subjective feelings when using them through both qualitative and quantitative approaches among the employees of Employee Assistance Program (EAP) companies.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

In this study, counselors and telephone operators related to insurance claims were selected as the survey targets, as they are assumed to be engaged in emotional labor, and the survey cooperators were recruited. As a result, 14 counselors and 5 telephone operators for insurance claims who work for an EAP company in Japan participated in the interviews. The survey was conducted in February and March 2020.

### **Interview**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the form of individual interviews, which took about 50 minutes per interviewee. A conference room in the EAP company was used as the interview site. The purpose of the interview was mainly to examine the subjective feelings and perceptions of the participants when they were switching or acting out their roles.

The interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants.

The questions were as follows;

1. Whether or not they switch between their private and professional selves at work, and they have a sense or awareness of this and how they do so.
2. Whether or not they have a sense or awareness of "acting" while on the job.
3. The subjective feeling when switching or acting well, or the parts of the self that differ from the normal self.

### **Questionnaire**

In this study, a questionnaire survey was also conducted after the interviews through a web-based questionnaire tool. The Emotional Labor Scale Japanese version (ELS-J; Sekiya & Yukawa, 2014) consists of six factors: (a) surface acting, (b) deep acting, (c) intensity, (d) frequency, (e) type, and (f) duration. (c) intensity, (d) frequency, (e) type, and (f) duration. However, for the one item measuring duration, respondents were asked to enter a numerical value directly for the amount of time (in minutes) they spend in interpersonal work, while the other five factors were measured using the Likert method ("never," "almost never", "Sometimes", "Often", and "Always") for the other five factors.

We also asked the respondents about five demographic variables: major field of study at university or vocational school, qualifications held, company history, work history, and previous work experience, and at the same time, we asked them to write freely about their past experiences that they found useful, especially in dealing with customers and clients.

### **Ethical considerations**

As ethical considerations in conducting the survey, we explained the purpose and significance of the research, the method of presenting the research results, the method of protecting personal information (data storage and management method), and safety management considerations in writing and orally to the survey cooperators before conducting the interviews, and asked them to sign a consent form. This study was approved by the ethical review of "Research on Human Subjects" at Tokyo Seitoku University.

## Result

In this study, one counselor and one telephone operator who were not asked to respond to the questionnaire survey were excluded from the analysis, and finally 17 participants (4 males and 13 females) were included in the analysis. Participants' demographics are shown in Table 1. The breakdown of occupations was 13 counselors (4 males, 9 females) and 4 telephone operators (all females), and the age range was 25-54 years. The average number of years of service in their current occupation was 9.06 years, with about half of the respondents being veterans of 10 years or more, while two respondents had been in their current occupation for 5 years or less.

counselors					telephone operators				
	sex	age	Years in current position	duration of service		sex	age	Years in current position	duration of service
A	female	50~54	15	15	N	female	35~39	9	9
B	female	40~44	6	7	O	female	25~29	7	5
C	female	40~44	10	10	P	female	35~39	12	12
D	female	40~44	8	8	Q	female	25~29	7	3
E	female	40~44	10	12	/				
F	male	30~34	10	5					
G	male	25~29	2	5					
H	male	40~44	8	8					
I	female	40~44	13	9					
J	female	45~49	15	5					
K	female	40~44	12	8					
L	female	35~39	4	16					
M	male	30~34	6	3					

Table 1: Participants' Demographics

## Differences in Emotional Labor Scores by Occupation

The mean scores in each subscale of the emotional labor scores and mean durations for each occupation were calculated and are shown in Table 2.

	ELS-J					
	frequency	intensity	variety	surface acting	deep acting	duration
counselor	3.51 (0.95)	2.04 (0.57)	3.21 (0.79)	3.15 (0.52)	2.56 (0.87)	50.83 (16.56)
telephone operator	2.92 (0.55)	2.25 (0.90)	2.42 (0.36)	3.42 (0.49)	3.00 (0.62)	7.00 (2.94)
all	3.37 (0.91)	2.09 (0.67)	3.02 (0.79)	3.22 (0.52)	2.67 (0.84)	42.07 (22.99)

Table 2: The Mean Scores in Each Subscale of the Emotional Labor Scores and Mean Durations for Each Occupation

The results showed that counselors scored higher than counselors on frequency and type, while telephone counselors scored higher than counselors on intensity, surface acting and deep acting. Furthermore, a t-test without correspondence revealed a significant difference in type ( $t(10) = 2.56, p < .05, r = .63$ ).

### **Types of Acting Strategies**

In order to further examine the types of acting strategies of the participants, they were categorized into low group and high group for surface acting and deep acting based on their overall average scores (surface acting:  $M = 3.22, SD = 0.52$ , deep acting:  $M = 2.67, SD = 0.84$ ). We then attempted to classify them into four types: (1) surface acting-low group x deep acting-low group (LL type), (2) surface acting-low group x deep acting-high group (LH type), (3) surface acting-high group x deep acting-low group (HL type), and (4) surface acting-high group x deep acting-high group (HH type). The breakdown of the number of people in each type is as follows: 5 LL-type (all counselors), 2 LH-type (1 counselor and 1 telephone operator), 5 HL-type (3 counselors and 2 telephone operators), and 5 HH-type (4 counselors and 1 telephone operator).

All of the participants in the telephone appointee were classified as a type other than LL type, and either one or both of the acting strategies showed higher scores than the average. On the other hand, in the counselor category, there was a LL type who did not use any of the acting strategies very much. In addition, the results of the demographic variables were also examined, and it was found that the LL type was characterized by the fact that they had experienced a different type of job from the current one in their previous job. On the other hand, HH type had the same type of job in their previous job.

### **Analysis of Interview**

The following sections describe the characteristics of the use of the acting strategies that were found as a result of a more detailed examination of the interviews. The group that scored high in surface acting seems to have a tendency to be clearly aware of their work roles and the objectives to be achieved in their duties and work, and to be conscious of carrying them out in a rational manner. In addition, it can be said that workers who use a lot of surface acting are more aware of the risk of presenting their "true reactions" to others.

On the other hand, the group that scored higher in deep acting tended to be more aware of the psychological situation and emotional transition of the other party and tried to utilize it in their work. This may be the reason why more counselors intentionally used deep acting in their narratives than telephone appointments. In other words, workers who use deep acting more often tend to be conscious of how to handle the emotions that actually arise in themselves. In other words, workers who use deep acting frequently tend to be more conscious of how they handle the actual emotions that arise in themselves. They have an eye for the risk of showing false or fake reactions to others.

In addition, even in the group with low scores in surface or deep acting, there were many cases in which we noticed that they intentionally presented themselves differently from their usual selves when we interviewed them in detail. This means that they are acting even if they are not very conscious of it. However, it was not reflected in the scores of the emotional labor scale.

We also examined the differences by occupation. As a result, counselors need to improve their techniques in terms of listening so that they can imagine the emotions experienced by their clients and become aware of their own inner changes. On the other hand, all of the telephone operators did not deeply sympathize with the psychological circumstances and experiences of the customers, but consciously stopped their emotional changes to a level that was not too deep.

Even those who answered that they were not very conscious of their on-off switching were able to switch naturally when they were placed in a work environment, such as picking up the phone or entering a counseling room.

## **Discussion**

In this study, we attempted an exploratory examination of the use of acting strategies in emotional labor from both qualitative and quantitative aspects in counselors and telephone operators. As a result, even when people are engaged in the same kind of work, the acting strategies they use are unique to each person, such as those who mainly use surface acting and those who mainly use deep acting. It is presumed that this is due in part to the influence of personality, such as "what kind of characteristics do I originally have?"

In addition, it is possible that the strategies that are easy to adopt are determined by what people value and what roles they place importance on in their jobs. In other words, the purposeful nature of the job may define the performance strategies that are more likely to be used in that job.

However, it may not be possible to simply determine which performance is more likely to lead to stress. For example, in the case of telephone operators, they are able to perform their duties reasonably well by honing their surface acting skills and consciously using them to make the other person sound as if they are sincerely concerned. In addition, having an environment where they can talk about anything and immediately consult with others may be important in preventing their stress from becoming severe. However, being forced to suppress one's emotions for a long time, as in dealing with claimers, is likely to be stressful for anyone.

In light of these results, if we were to compare and describe the two acting strategies focusing on how to handle one's own emotions, we could say that surface acting is closer to the image of "detaching one's own emotions" and deep acting is closer to the image of "intentionally utilizing one's own emotions."

The majority of respondents were conscious of switching when they were not yet familiar with their work or when they were too busy to spare time. On the other hand, as they become more familiar with their work or gain more experience, they may be able to switch routinely. In this case, switching is actually taking place, but it may be automated to some extent, and the person may not be very aware of it.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study is a preliminary survey of employees belonging to one specific company, and it is undeniable that the results are somewhat biased. Therefore, it is necessary to collect more generalizable data in the future.

Furthermore, there are some cases in which the scale scores do not reflect the use of acting strategies even by people who clearly seem to use them based on their speech results. This is a problem related to the measurement scale, and it is a case that needs to be re-examined especially in terms of validity. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a new scale with higher reliability and validity is expected.

The relationship between surface performance and deep acting is not limited to the relationship between which is better or worse, but may also be influenced to a certain extent by the job, the area of work, and the personality of the individual. Empirical investigation from this perspective is desirable in the future.

Based on the findings of this study, we would like to develop a scale that can measure deep acting more accurately, and in the future, we would like to obtain empirical findings that can be used to improve work engagement, for example, by typifying acting strategies with less psychological load for each emotional laborer.

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