

Do you expect service with a smile? There's a dark side to putting on a happy face

July 26 2017, by Milda Perminiene



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As I was walking through the [V&A museum](#) in London a few days ago, two statues immediately grabbed my attention. It was Heraclitus and Democritus, a couple of Greek thinkers known as the "weeping and

laughing philosophers". Heraclitus got his name from being melancholic and sad, whereas Democritus always wore a mask of cheerfulness.

Humans are, and always have been, highly sensitive to the [emotional expressions](#) of others. Unsurprisingly, studies have shown that [we much prefer people who appear happy](#) to those who seem sad or neutral. But what is the emotional cost of being like Democritus, always putting on a smile? Is it fair to ask people to do it on the job? We have just reviewed the evidence on the topic – and the findings are concerning.

The reason we like a happy face so much is because positive emotions in others immediately boost our own mental state. For example, [a recent study](#) showed that in speed dating, people who appeared positive elicited more uplifting emotions in others and were more desirable for a second date.

But what are the [emotional consequences](#) of trying to seem happy in order to please others? Pioneering work by Arlie Hochschild divided such "emotional [labour](#)" [into two varieties](#): deep acting and surface acting. We use surface acting when we adjust facial expressions and body gestures without actually changing our [emotional state](#) – for example putting on a smile without being happy.

Deep acting, on the other hand, is when we try to change how we feel by thinking of something that stirs up desirable feelings or reduces the significance of a negative experience. You may, for example, think about an upcoming holiday when dealing with a difficult client or identify something about them that you like.

Both techniques can help us develop better relationships at home and at work to some extent, but, overall, deep acting helps to exert a more genuine feeling. Indeed, [a recent study](#) found that waiters engaged in deep acting tended to get more tips than others.

Heavy price for workers

Service sector employees clearly experience pressure to perform emotional work – suppressing or amplifying particular emotions to make clients happy and encourage them to come back. Most empirical studies on emotional labour have discovered negative effects. People performing surface acting "put on a mask", which creates an unhealthy inner conflict between expressed and felt emotions. A review of 95 studies in 2011 demonstrated that using surface acting [is linked to emotional exhaustion](#), strain, reduced job satisfaction and poorer attachment to the employer organisation. It also creates psychosomatic problems such as trouble sleeping, headaches and chest pain.

Deep acting, on the other hand, was linked to some positive outcomes – such as greater personal accomplishment, customer satisfaction and attachment to the employer. This is probably because it helps to exert more authentic emotions, which is appreciated by costumers and coworkers. It can also help to [enable more rewarding social interactions](#). However, it's not all good. Deep acting was also linked to greater emotional exhaustion and more psychosomatic complaints. Despite conflicting arguments among researchers, it seems that both surface and deep acting can be harmful for an employee.

Consider the bigger picture. If emotional labour exhausts us and leads to a pile up of stress and strain, it could have a negative impact on our relationships. Some theories propose that willpower and self-regulation depend on a limited pool of mental resources that can be depleted. And it could be argued that repeated emotional labour uses up these resources. As a consequence, instead of acting nice with others, the slightest trigger can explode into aggressive reactions.

For the last decade I have done research in the field of workplace bullying. I am aware that workplace aggression [may be triggered by](#)

[stress](#). In stressful circumstances we become more defensive, sensitive and, hence, more likely to act hostile. And given that emotional labour creates stress and strain, it would make sense that it could also trigger aggression.

My colleague [Asta Medisauskaite](#) and I decided to find out. As a starting point, we performed a systematic review of existing research papers linking emotional labour and aggression towards others at work. We reviewed 12 recent studies (most were published in 2015 and 2016) which looked specifically at emotional labour and dysfunctional workplace relationships.

Our review, not yet published but [presented at the recent congress](#) of the European Association of Work and Organisational Psychology, demonstrates that in most cases surface acting was linked to aggressive behaviour towards customers and colleagues at work. Deep acting was linked to aggression toward coworkers in one study. The acts of aggression were reported by the participants themselves in some cases and by colleagues or supervisors in others.

In the future we wish to see whether gender, cultural background, training and socialisation in organisations affect emotional labour and relationships at work. As a second step we are planning to implement a qualitative study, interviewing service sector employees. In addition, we are looking for ways to develop a joint intervention project with theatre actors and directors, transferring stage-acting techniques to service sector organisations.

For the time being, while we are aware that emotional labour can give a leg up for an organisation, in reality it may actually impede performance. If we accept that we all have an inner Heraclitus that needs to shine through on occasion, we may be able to reduce stress and aggression in the workplace – ultimately making it a happier and more productive

place.

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