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Do Job Positions Matter in Emotional Labor and in its Relationship With Job Performance?

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Abstract: A central focus of emotional labor research is on the frontline service workers and empirical research on managers has so far been rare (Humphrey 2012). Moreover, only limited research has examined the impact of emotional labor on job performance (Duke et al. 2009) and such paucity is aggravated if we consider samples from China. Considering these gaps in the literature, this study has three research questions. First, do employees at different hierarchical positions report different levels of emotional intelligence or does emotional intelligence increase as the job position increases? Second, do employees at different hierarchical positions report different levels of emotional labour or does emotional labour increase as the job position increases? Third, do levels of emotional labour predict levels of job performance across different positions in organizations? We address the research questions with a sample of 245 managerial professionals from business organizations in mainland China. Significant differences were found on emotional intelligence between those in senior positions (i.e., director or above) and ordinary employees. In addition, the results show that among ordinary employees, emotional intelligence and emotional labor are important predictors of job performance. Moreover, emotional labor has a moderating effect in the association between emotional intelligence and job performance, such that high levels of emotional intelligence were more likely to be associated with high levels of job performance when the demand of emotional labor increased. The relationship does not hold true for the managerial positions in our sample. This study suggests that the interaction effect between emotional intelligence and emotional labor does not hold equally true for employees in different positions.

Keywords: emotional labor, emotional intelligence, job performance, leadership

1. Introduction

Most organizations have implicit or explicit requirements concerning the way employees express their emotions (Totterdell and Holman 2003). When individuals follow organization's display rules to manage their feelings and emotional expressions for a wage, they are considered to perform emotional labor (EL) (Hochschild 1983). A central focus of EL research is on the frontline service workers and empirical research on managers has so far been rare (Humphrey 2012). Moreover only limited research has examined the impact of EL on job performance (Duke et al. 2009) and such paucity is aggravated if we consider samples from Chinese mainland.

This study seeks to add to existing research by focusing on a selection of business organizations in China and pursuing the following queries. First, do employees at different hierarchical positions report different levels of emotional intelligence (EI) or does EI increase as the job position increases? Second, do employees at different hierarchical positions report different levels of EL or does EL increase as the job position increases? Third, do levels of EL predict levels of job performance across different positions in organizations?

The following sections describe the literature and propose a more holistic definition by drawing from social exchange theory. Then we discuss EL's association with job position and job performance, and propose EL's hypothesized relationships with position and job performance. Following a review of the literature, we propose the hypotheses, describe the data collection procedures and analyses, we conclude with a discussion of the findings and their implications for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Emotional intelligence

Researchers propose that EI contributes to effective leadership (e.g., George 2000; Goleman et al. 2002). EI was perceived as an underlying competency for effective leadership (Tang et al. 2010). In turn, Yu and Yuan's (2010)

study in China indicates that EI is a leader's important ability as it facilitates social exchanges and catalyzes emotional exchange to build up trust in the leader-member exchange (LMX) relationship. Gardner et al. (2009, p.476) assert that EI enables leaders to: "(1) understand the emotional requirements of situations; (2), empathize with followers and other participants in the affective event; and (3) successfully manage their emotional displays to conform to situational requirements and follower expectations.

Johnson and Spector (2007, p. 322) propose that "emotional intelligence is the underlying ability that allows an employee to successfully perform emotional labor". Schneider et al. (2013) suggest that EI facilitates stress resilience as a higher EI would facilitate stress responses in the direction of challenges, rather than threats. Leaders who are high on EI may be in a better position to perform EI in order to influence the moods and motivations of their teams (e.g., Humphrey et al. 2008). As we expect, based on the Conservation of Resources Theory (Hobfoll 1989), a higher position demands a higher level of EI. To qualify and succeed in a higher leadership job, one needs to have higher level of EI to accommodate, withstand, or overcome the EI. Therefore we propose:

H1: Emotional intelligence is positively related with job position. Specifically, the higher the position, the higher the emotional intelligence.

2.2 Emotional labor

EL occurs when individuals regulate their emotional expressions for organizational goals in exchange for a wage. The discussion on EL mostly stems from the perspective of interaction with external customers, particularly in a service context, and the internal organizational context has been largely overlooked, particularly regarding the interaction between "organizational insiders" such as supervisor and co-workers (Grandey et al. 2007). Existing research explicitly and implicitly suggests that EI is not only relevant to external customers, but to internal customers as well (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Morris and Feldman 1996; Grandey 2000; Totterdell and Holman 2003). Workers expend emotional resources to meet the emotional demands of their roles in anticipation of generating rewarding relationships with their constituents such as customers and coworkers (Brotheridge and Lee 2002; Ozelik 2013). Moreover, the primary focus of EI has been mainly on front-line service employees, and EI's relevance with organizational members in other roles has been downplayed and there are obvious demands for EI research to focus on the performance of the leadership role in the organization (e.g. Brotheridge and Grandey 2002; Gardner et al. 2009). There is a need to extend the concept of EI beyond service roles to other organizational roles.

2.3 Emotional labor across hierarchical positions

Humphrey et al. (2008) suggest that leaders have to express a wide range of emotions required by different types of service workers that are not necessarily felt, but they want their subordinates to feel, and thus engage in EI. Leaders perform their emotional displays with both outsiders (e.g. customers, the press, competitors) and insiders (e.g., supervisors, co-workers) to pursue desired goals (Gardner et al. 2009; Humphrey 2012). Moreover, managers were found to perform EI as often as human service professionals and sales/service workers (Brotheridge and Grandey 2002).

Gardner et al. (2009) propose that contextual variables such as leader's position and audience attributes (e.g. number of people) are relevant to a leader's EI. Hence, as the level of the job position increases, we expect leaders will experience more EI due to a wider range of emotions (variety) to be displayed, higher frequency of appropriate emotional display, more attentiveness to required display rules, and higher emotional dissonance (Morris and Feldman 1996).

H2: Emotional labor is positively related with job position. Specifically, the higher the position, the higher the emotional labor.

2.4 Emotional intelligence, emotional labor and job performance

Though the results gained in previous studies regarding the impact of EI on job performance have been mixed, increasing evidence supports the positive effect of EI on work performance (Wong and Law 2002; Van Rooy and Viswesvaran 2004; Cote and Miners 2006; Sy et al. 2006; O'Boyle et al. 2011). Some researchers assert that the emotional intelligence-job performance relationship is moderated by the extent of EI required by the job (Wong

and Law 2002). In Joseph and Newman's meta-analysis (2010), EI predicted job performance in a high EL context, but showed a weak relationship with job performance in the case of low emotional jobs.

Limited research has examined the impact of EL on job performance (Duke et al., 2009), though EL is considered beneficial for organizational performance because employees meet their job requirements (Hochschild 1983; Grandey 2000). Literature tends to support that EL is positively related with work performance (Goodwin et al. 2011; Grandey 2003; Totterdell and Holman 2003). However, EL may negatively impact employee job performance (Duke et al. 2009), and "mere emotional labor does not necessarily result in higher performance" (Chen et al. 2012, p. 841). The reason for this mixed finding may be due to the influence of mediating and moderating variables in the relationship between EL and work performance (Chen et al. 2012; Goodwin et al. 2011). Therefore we hypothesize:

H3a: Emotional intelligence has a positive effect on job performance;

H3b: Emotional labor has a positive effect on job performance;

H3c: The emotional intelligence-job performance relationship is moderated by emotional labor;

3. Research methods

3.1 Sample and procedure

This study is part of a large research project and focuses on 245 questionnaires from business organizations in China. The average respondent's age was 31 years old; 60% were male and 69% were married. The majority of respondents (73%) held managerial positions, including ordinary employees 27%, supervisor and manager 62% and director or above 11%.

3.2 Measures

Consistent with Wong and Law's (2002) reasoning, we treat EI as a latent multidimensional construct and EI is conceptualized as a set of abilities pertaining to emotions. We focus on the broad construct of EI rather than on each of its dimensions. The EI was measured by a 20-item forced choice EI scale developed by Wong et al. (2004) for Chinese respondents.

The emotional labor was measured by 5-item scale taken from Wong and Law (2002). We used these items because this scale reflected the emotional interaction with both internal constituents as how we define the definition. The job performance was measured by a four-item scale taken from Farh and Cheng (1997) for Chinese respondents. The response format for EL and job performance was a 7-point Likert-type scale.

4. Analytical strategy

First, means, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alpha internal consistency reliabilities were computed. Following this preliminary analysis, ANOVA analysis was conducted to investigate differences between the different position groups (ordinary employees, supervisor/manager, and directors). Next, hierarchical regression analyses were conducted on the two position groups to investigate and compare the relationships between employee EI, EL and job performance. We regressed job performance on age, gender, marital status, education and tenure as the control variables, EI, EL, and the two-way interactions of EI and EL. The control variables were entered in the first step, the EI variable was entered in the second step, the EL variable in the third step and the interaction between EI and EL was entered in the last step. Because none of the above control variables were found to influence the dependent variables in our regression analyses, we ran another hierarchical regression analyses without the control variables and similar results were obtained. Hence, following Sluss et al. (2012), we present our results below without the control variables.

5. Results

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviations, correlations, and coefficient alphas for the key variables. Significant positive correlations emerged among the measures of EL and job performance. The ANOVA analyses on differences of the hierarchical positions are reported in Table 2. In general, higher positions scored higher on EI, which is in the direction of the hypothesis propose. However, only directors or above scored, on average, significantly higher on EI than ordinary employees. Moreover, higher positions scored higher on EL. However,

the differences are not significant. Therefore, hypothesis 1 was partially supported and hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, correlations and scale reliabilities

Variable	M	SD			
			1	2	3
1. WEIS	14.10	3.57	.73		
2. Emotional labour	4.94	.92	.10	.64	
3. Job performance	5.62	.93	.12	.15*	.82

Note: N = 245. Cronbach α reliability coefficients are in boldface along the diagonal.

* p < .05 (two-tailed)

Table 2 ANOVA results of EI and EL across positions

	EI	EL
Ordinary employee	13.56 ^a (3.52)	4.78 (.99)
Supervisor/Manager	14.08 (3.66)	4.99 (.90)
Director	15.58 ^a (2.80)	5.07 (.83)
F	2.82 ⁺	1.44

Mean values are reported with standard deviations in parentheses.
Means with a superscript letter is significantly different at the 0.05 level by post hoc Hochberg's GT2 test

⁺p < .1

Table 3 presents the regression analyses on job performance for three position groups. Results revealed that in the ordinary employee group: 1) EI and EL significantly predict job performance; 2) the two way interaction of EI and EL is also significant to predict job performance, revealing evidence that EI predicts job performance in jobs when the relationship is moderated by EL. However, the above results do not hold true for the other two groups. Therefore, hypothesis 3a “emotional intelligence has a positive effect on job performance” is partially supported; hypothesis 3b “emotional labor has a positive effect on job performance” is partially supported; and, hypothesis 3c “the emotional intelligence-job performance relationship is moderated by emotional labor” is partially supported.

Table 3: Hierarchical linear modeling results

Indep. variable	Ordinary employee			Supervisor/Manager			Director or above		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
WEIS	.64	.64	7.38 ⁺	.39	.22	-1.11	1.56	1.83	9.01
Moderator									
EL_2items	.04	.04	1.20*	.21*	.03	.03	.17	.17	1.27
Interaction									
WEIS * EL			1.74*			.27			-1.40
R-square	.01	.02	.09*	.01	.05*	.05	.05	.07	.09
Adjusted R ²	.00	-.02	.04	.01	.03	.03	.01	-.01	-.03
F-value	.89	.12	4.51	.90	6.45	.37	1.27	.55	.49
Change in R ²		.01	.07		.01			.02	.02

Note: N = 245.

+ p < .1 * p < .05

6. Discussion

The current study examined three questions regarding EL and job performance. First, we compared the emotional intelligence of the respondents in hierarchical positions. Second, we compared the emotional demands of the respondents in hierarchical positions. Third, we tested the impact of EI, EL on job performance.

Do individuals in distinct hierarchical positions differ in reported emotional intelligence?

The results suggest that, in general, those in higher positions report higher EI. But, statistically, only significant differences were found between those in senior positions (i.e., director or above) and ordinary employees. This result may imply that the gap of EI grows bigger as the position increases along the hierarchical ladder, and significant differences may exist only between levels of the hierarchy which have some intermediary positions in between. This finding may imply that those high in EI are more likely to succeed in career advancement and to take a managerial (leadership) role.

Do individuals in hierarchical positions differ in reported emotional labour?

The results seem to indicate a general trend that the higher the position, the higher the EL as we proposed in the hypothesis, but it was found that the differences are not statistically significant. More research will be needed to examine this finding.

Do emotional intelligence and/or emotional labour predict job performance?

Our results show that among ordinary employees, EI and EL are important predictors of job performance. It is also described that EL has a moderating effect in the association between EI and job performance. The results may suggest that, among ordinary employees, the individuals who are skilled at managing and displaying emotions are likely to have better performance. The relationship does not hold true for the managerial positions in our sample, including supervisor/manager and director or above. This may suggest that, compared with ordinary employees, those in managerial positions depend less on emotional interaction in achieving performance. A plausible reason would be, as the structural-relational approach (see Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Lawler and Thye 1999) suggests, that low status employees are more likely to experience negative emotions while high status managers enjoy more "autonomy" in displaying emotions. If it is so, ordinary employees would need to get the best of their EI and EL to properly perform their roles. Of course, being emotionally intelligent is an advantage in low level positions, but those people who follow the organization's display rules to manage their feelings and emotional expressions seem to improve their task-performance behaviors.

The current study may enrich literature in the following ways. First, the study shifted from the conventional research of EL on service workers to managerial professionals, and used a sample from the under-researched China. Second, this study suggests that the interaction effect between EL and EI does not hold equally true for employees in different positions, implying the contention that the EI-Job Performance relationship is stronger for jobs that require high EL (Wong and Law 2002; Joseph and Newman 2010) might not be true. Last, though the results of the managerial position of EL fail to provide support for the notion of "leading with emotional labor", this study provides further evidence for EI as an important element of leadership.

7. Limitations and future research

The different sample size for position groups presents a limitation. In particular, the number of participants in the position of "director or above" was much lower than the other groups and the sample size of this group may have kept us from finding more meaningful results although this sample reflects the actual work population. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design and the direction of causality that cannot be tested. As a result, the direction of the relationships is theory-based and longitudinal studies are needed to test the causal directions. Lastly, the current study employed a self-reported job performance measure, which may have inflated the result. Future research may try to collect objective job performance indicators.

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