Antecedents and Consequences of Emotional Labor in Coaching Sports

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Organizations across the world have realized that providing excellent service experience to their customers is vital to achieving organizational goals. The interactive experiences between the service provider and the customer/client have become the forum where service quality is determined. Further, such service encounters involve emotional displays from either of the parties or both. Therefore, organizations specify organizational emotional display rules defining which emotions employees should display for a particular encounter. As such, those purposeful efforts to express certain emotions at work regardless of real feelings are called emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). Past literature has identified four emotional labor strategies that may be used by employees. They are (a) surface acting—managing observable expressions to obey display rules (Hochschild, 1983), (b) deep acting—actually feeling the emotion required by the display rules (Hochschild, 1983), (c) automatic regulation—expressing true feelings that are appropriate for the situation spontaneously (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993), and (d) emotional deviance—expressing true feelings that are not appropriate for the situation, thus not following display rules spontaneously (Zapf, 2002).

The significance of emotional labor is even greater in the case of those service providers who are also in leadership positions as in the case of coaches and teachers. In fact, coaches in sports have continuously expressed the difficulty in regulating and expressing emotions in appropriate ways in their interactions with athletes, the opponents, the referees, the media, and such other stakeholders. For instance, the coach need to control the frustration aroused by team’s losing streaks or athlete mistakes and be calm in expressing enthusiasm to keep the athletes motivated. Thus, since coaches suppress their real feelings and express the emotion that is appropriate for the situation for organizational goals, it is rightfully suggested that they are laboring emotionally.

This study will examine a working model of emotional labor in coach-athlete relationship. Our model will identify emotional intelligence (Mayer & Salovey, 1997) and past experience as potential antecedents of a coaches’ choice of emotional labor strategy. Grandey (2000) states that emotional intelligence is a key individual difference variable which influences the levels and types of emotional labor display employees perform. Additionally, based on Conservation of Resource Theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the current study will also investigate the differential impact of the emotional labor strategies on the individual outcomes of emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. Specifically, our model proposes that experienced coaches with high level of emotional intelligence will be more likely to engage in deep acting and automatic regulation, which in turn result in less emotional exhaustion and more job satisfaction. In contrast, inexperienced coaches with low level of emotional intelligence are expected to display surface acting, which in turn result in more emotional exhaustion and less job satisfaction. While emotional intelligence and past experience will have negative relationship with coaches’ emotional deviance display, it will have negative impact on emotional exhaustion. We also posit that gender of the team will influence the emotional labor strategy coaches use as well as their well-being.

Questionnaires will be distributed to coaches at NCAA Division I universities in the United State via online. Structural Equation Modeling will be employed to test the proposed hypotheses. The research will analyze the overall fit of the proposed structural model by using maximum likelihood estimation such as chi-square value, root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR), and the goodness of fit index (GFI). Specifically, the researcher will use maximum likelihood estimation to evaluate the fit of the model.

The current study will have a significant implication for practitioners by showing the different impact of each emotional labor strategies on coaches’ emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. It is expected that coaches’ surface acting will be a health-detrimental strategy, whereas deep acting and automatic regulation will be health-beneficial strategies. By identifying the beneficial role of deep acting and automatic regulation, practitioners can develop an intervention program which trains coaches to engage in those strategies in their interaction with athletes. From a scholarly perspective, the current study will extend and contribute to the emotional labor literature by providing a
working model of emotional labor in the sport setting. In addition, this will greatly contribute to the literature in sport management field where the topic has not been addressed adequately. Further implication of the results and future research will be discussed in the presentation.