

Why don't some employees mind faking their emotions?

Employees often have to show emotions they really do not feel in order to offer quality service to clients. For example, a flight attendant has to appear calm and transmit serenity to passengers, even when he/she is experiencing great anxiety about strong turbulence during a flight. This faking of emotions is increasingly required of employees in the services sector, and the experts call it “surface acting”. Services are characterized by frequent interactions between employees and customers. These service encounters are part of the daily work, requiring these employees to make considerable emotional effort. In order to provide high quality service, it is common for employees to display emotions they do not really feel (“faking emotions” or “surface acting”). This is an effortful process that, over time, leads people to feel tired, depleted, and exhausted.

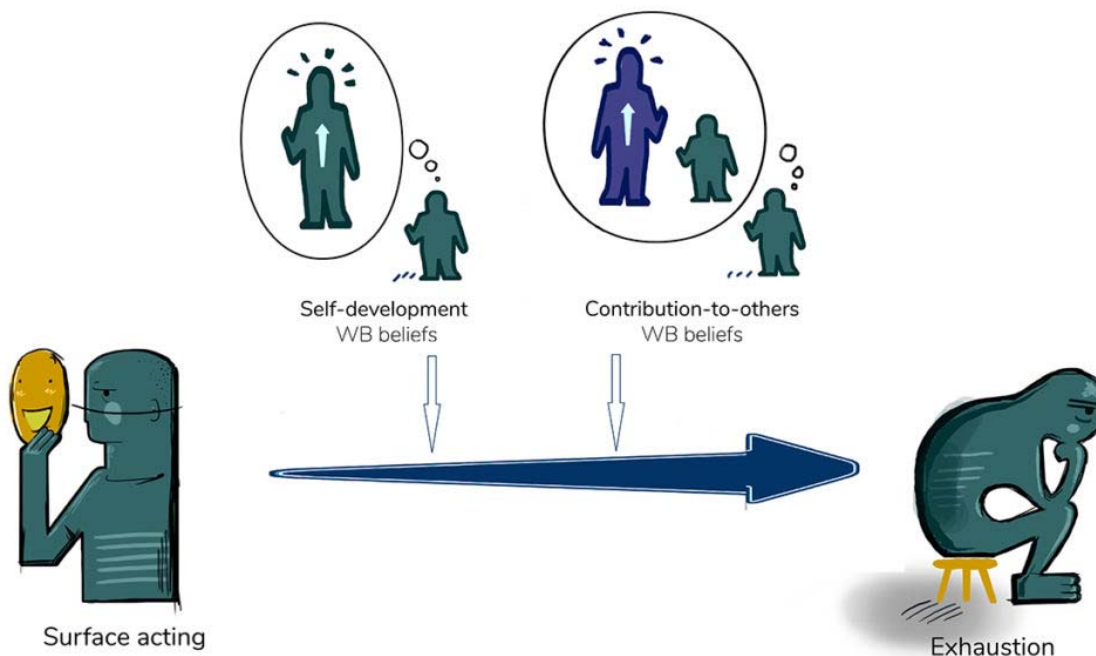


Fig. 1.

One of the challenges for researchers is to find the factors that mitigate the harmful effects of “surface acting” on the wellbeing of services employees. In our study, we propose that eudaimonic beliefs at work play a critical role. Eudaimonia is a widely studied Aristotelian concept that has to do with people’s happiness and wellbeing. Here, we consider eudaimonia to be a system of beliefs about how employees define their own wellbeing at work, that is, what well-being at work means to the employee. In this research study, we differentiate between two types of eudaimonic beliefs: a) “contribution-to-others” beliefs (degree to which the employee defines his/her own wellbeing at workplace based on helping others); and b) “self-development” beliefs (degree to which the employee

defines her/his own wellbeing as personal and professional grow). We propose that the impact of “surface acting” on exhaustion is especially pernicious in employees who base their own wellbeing on helping others because they experience dissonance between their beliefs (“contribution-to-others”) and their behaviors (“surface acting”). By contrast, the harmful effect of “surface acting” is expected to be attenuated in employees who define their own wellbeing in terms of personal and professional grow. “Self-development” beliefs help to mitigate the negative effects of “surface acting” because employees interpret this emotional effort as a necessary requirement to perform a job well and, consequently, to progress professionally.

To test our assumptions, we asked 817 employees from 104 organizations for people with intellectual disabilities to fill in a questionnaire assessing their perceptions of how often they show emotions they do not actually feel (e.g. display joy when they do not feel it) in their interactions with customers. We also asked them how they define wellbeing in the workplace (contribution to others and self-development), and how often they feel the symptoms of being emotionally exhausted (e.g. tiredness) at the end of the workday.

We analyzed the gathered data using statistical software, and our results confirmed that people who “fake” emotions more often will also feel exhaustion more frequently. We also corroborated that eudaimonic wellbeing beliefs have a significant impact on this relationship. Specifically, on the one hand, employees who believe that their own well-being in the workplace is based on “self-development” are less likely to be exhausted when they have to act superficially and display emotions other than the ones they actually feel. Surface acting is seen as a necessary regulation effort that has to be performed in order to achieve personal growth in the workplace. On the other hand, employees who define their own wellbeing in the workplace in terms of “contribution-to-others” are especially sensitive to the negative effects of surface acting. Their exhaustion increases when they are forced to simulate their emotions.

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Publication

[Surface acting and exhaustion: The moderating role of eudaimonia.](#)

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Stress Health. 2016 Sep 28