

# **Emotional requirements and emotional regulation strategies within private and public services**

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**Abstract:** The issue of regulating emotions in organizational contexts was mainly studied within the paradigm of emotional work (Hochschild, 1983; Fishbach 2003), by the psychologists and sociologists interested in the dynamics of organizational processes. They have ignored the models proposed by the cognitive and social psychologists on the dynamics and consequences of emotional regulation strategies almost entirely (Gross, 1998). In this present study, we are trying to integrate these two perspectives and to analyze the differences between public and private services sectors when it comes to performing emotion work. Participants completed a set of questionnaires measuring emotional requirements and emotion regulation strategies. The results support the idea that the organizational variables are important for the dynamics of emotional regulation.

**Key words:** emotional requirements, emotion regulation strategies, private and public services

## **I. Introduction**

### *Emotional labor framework*

Employees' attitudes toward their clients have been mostly studied within the emotional labor framework (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Along with most researchers in the area (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Morris & Feldman, 1996, 1997; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini & Isic, 1999), we will use the term emotional labor and emotional work as synonyms, although some researchers argue for a conceptual differentiation based on whether the emotional work is paid or not (Duguid, 2002).

Emotional labor was defined as the act of expressing socially and organizationally desired emotions during service transactions (Hochschild, 1983). The most frequently investigated organizational antecedents of emotional labor are frequency, duration, variety of emotional labor (Morris & Feldman, 1996, 1997), presence of display rules (Morris & Feldman, 1996), client events (Fishbach, 2003), or other job variables, such as emotional labor training, quality orientation (Kruml & Geddes, 2000) and job autonomy (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Kruml & Geddes, 2000).

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The importance of studying emotional labor is sustained by its consequences, both at an individual level (stress, burnout, depression, identity diffusion and even professional satisfaction) and at an organizational level (client retention, high rates of personnel turnover, absence from work, personnel health costs) (for a review, see Zaharia, 2011). The dominance of positive versus negative consequences of emotional work depends not only on the person-organization fit (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Chu, 2002), but also on the strategies used to perform this kind of labor. Hochschild (1983) differentiated between surface acting (efforts to change only the emotional expression) and deep acting (efforts to change the internal feelings of emotions). Later on, emotional effort and emotional dissonance have begun to be analyzed as dimensions of emotional work (Kruml & Geddes, 2000; Zapf et al. 1999).

#### *Integration of two perspectives on emotion work*

In 2000, Grandey argued for the necessity to integrate the perspective of daily emotion regulation (Gross, 1998) within the emotional labor framework. Gross (1998) had argued that emotions may be regulated by using either antecedent-focused strategies or response-focused strategies. Antecedent-focused emotional regulation includes *situation selection* (one avoids or approaches certain situations depending on their likely emotional impact); *situation modification* (one changes certain aspects of his/her environment in order to alter its emotional impact); *attention deployment* (one turns his/her attention toward or away from something in order to alter his/her emotions); *cognitive change* (one reevaluates either the situation, either his/her own capacity to manage the situation in order to alter his/her emotions). Response-focused emotion regulation may include *intensifying*, *diminishing* or *maintaining* ongoing emotional experience, expression or physiological responding (Gross, 1998).

From Grandey's perspective (2000), attention deployment and cognitive change are specific to deep acting because they involve the alteration of inner feelings. Emotion regulation by response modulation implies only changing the response tendencies (behavioral and physiological). This emotional regulation strategy is specific to deep acting (Hochschild, 1983).

Grandey (2000) argues that employees that need to perform emotional work have limited job autonomy. As a consequence, they will rarely use situation selection or situation modification. Such employees are more prone to using the other three emotional regulation strategies identified by Gross (1998): attention deployment, cognitive change and response modulation. Grandey's supposition that situation selection and situation

modification are rarely used in service jobs, was supported by a study conducted on Romanian service employees (Zaharia & Chirilă, 2009).

Although Grandey's proposal (2000) is interesting, only a small number of studies on emotional work have tested it (Zaharia & Apostol, 2008).

#### *Emotional work in private and public service*

The difference between quality of public and private services has been a frequently analyzed topic, not only in the Romanian media but also in daily discussions among Romanians. One of the aspects being analyzed in relation to the quality of these services is the attitude of the employees toward their clients.

It seems that the attitudes and affective states that employees enact in front of their clients or beneficiaries depend on the type of sector they pertain to (public versus private) (Heintz, 2006). Public institutions evolve in an almost non-competitive environment. As a consequence, managers and employees are less attentive to the attitudes and emotional states that characterize interactions with clients (Heintz, 2006). Even studies conducted in USA show that, in public agencies, performance criteria related to emotional labor were scarce and considered of little importance (Mastracci, Newman & Guy, 2006). Within the private sector, the competition is fierce, and managers are directly interested in maintaining customer satisfaction (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). In traditional service jobs, such as airline industry, restaurants, tourism, sales, in the last 30 years, managerial programs have been aiming at maximizing customer satisfaction (Hochschild, 1983; Guerrier & Adib, 2003; Taylor & Tyler, 2000). These programs have involved intense training, attention to selection criteria and performance evaluation based greatly on employee emotional work.

The studies that investigate work ethics among Romanians discuss the employee - client relations. Heintz (2006) showed that, when organizations evolve in a very competitive environment, management pays more attention to the attitude that their employees have toward their clients. Employees are required to be patient, attentive, polite and cheerful. Meanwhile, in public institutions, employees see themselves as being in an empowered position in relation to their clients – and are less polite, and more irritable, less attentive and less polite. Consistent with Heintz's observations, Zaharia and Apostol (2008) found that private service employees use response modulation as an emotion regulation strategy more frequently than public employees.

### *Emotional display rules*

It has been shown that display rules are important in the dynamics of emotional work (Morris & Feldman, 1996). Emotional display rules (emotional requirements) specify what attitudes and affective states should be expressed in each type of customer interaction (Hochschild, 1983). An important aspect is related to the strength of these display rules – the degree in which these norms are widely shared and deeply internalized within a certain group of people (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). The content and strength of the emotional display rules depend on: i) the particular industry, organization and occupation; ii) the specifics of the service being provided; iii) customer characteristics (background and needs) (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993).

### *Research goal, objectives and hypotheses*

Within this study, we intend to deepen the analysis of emotional work in private and public Romanian services as well as within four particular service industries: education, health care services, financial services and traditional services. To that purpose, we will analyze not only the organizational emotional requirements but also the emotional regulation strategies used by employees in client interactions. We intend to investigate the efforts to regulate a specific emotional state: irritation, because it one of the most frequently encountered affective states in professional contexts (Zaharia & Chirilă, 2009).

The first objective of this study was to explore the differences that exist: between private and public organizations and in the emotional displays required in client transactions. Based on Heintz (2006), we anticipated that employees from private organizations report a higher necessity to display desirable affective states during client encounters, as compared to employees from public institutions (hypothesis 1.1.), and that employees from public institutions report a higher need to display undesirable affective states, as compared to employees from private organizations (hypothesis 1.2.). Taking into consideration the observations of Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), we also anticipated that there are significant differences in emotional requirements among employees from different domains of activity (hypothesis 1.3.).

The second objective of this study consisted in analyzing the differences in the emotional regulation strategies that are being used by employees (from private and public organizations) when trying to regulate irritation felt toward clients. Based on previous results (Zaharia & Apostol, 2008), we anticipated that private service employees use, more frequently than public service employees, response modulation in order to regulate the irritation felt during interactions with their clients (hypothesis 2.1

Recently, in the banking and financial sectors, management has begun to implement procedures that allow for the monitoring of the employee - client interaction. This is why we anticipate that within the banking and finance sector employees will report the highest levels of response modulation, as compared to the employees from other professional domains (Hypothesis 2.2).

## **II. Method**

### ***Participants***

Questionnaires from 338 people employed in service jobs were collected. Participation was voluntary. As a part of a course requirement, 25 students (operators) were asked to find 16 employees to complete a set of questionnaires. Each operator was required to identify four employees in each field of activity interested in completing the set of questionnaires. From each of the four employees, two people had to be younger than 35 and two – older than 35 years old. 400 questionnaires were distributed; only 338 were returned. Respondents gave their telephone number, and 20% of the respondents (randomly chosen) were contacted to verify their participation.

First, we eliminated the questionnaires that had more than 10% of the items uncompleted. Before analyzing the data, we checked for the normality of the distributions (Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test). The variable response modulation was not normally distributed ( $z=1.57$ ,  $p=.01$ ). After eliminating the deviant values, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated acceptable values ( $p>.05$ ).

After eliminating the participants with deviant responses and those with incomplete answers, the number of the participants was reduced to 315. The remaining participants were 83 males (26.3%) and 232 females (73.7%); 140 of the respondents (44.4%) were employed in public institutions, while 175 (55.6%) worked in private organizations. 74 participants (23.5%) worked in education services, 77 (24.4%) in health care services, 73 (23.2%) in finance and 77 (24.4%) in sales.

### ***Variables and instruments***

The main independent variables were the type of working sector (public or private) and the domain of activity (education, health care services, banking-finances and traditional services). The dependent variables were emotional requirements as well as emotion regulation strategies.

An *emotional requirements* scale was developed for this study, and it was pre-tested on Romanian employees. It consisted of five organizationally desirable affective states (good mood, politeness, calmness, patience and understanding) and of five undesirable affective states (irritation, superiority, discontent, severity and detachment). Within the

present study, the participants were asked to rate, on a six point scale, how frequently they were required to display each emotion at work, in relation with their clients (1 – never; 6 - always). The means for both the desirable and undesirable emotional displays were computed.

In order to investigate emotion regulation strategies, we used the Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire (Zaharia, 2011). The questionnaire has three scales: attention deployment, cognitive change and response modulation. The participants were asked to appreciate, on a five point scale (1 - not at all; 5 - a lot), the extent to which they used certain strategies to regulate the irritation felt toward one of their customers within in a specific situation. The respondents were asked to think of a situation when they felt irritation toward a client and tried to regulate what they felt and/or expressed. After describing a specific situation, the participants were asked to complete the Emotion Regulation Strategies Questionnaire.

### **III. Results**

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics relevant for the main variables investigated within this study. The internal consistencies of the scales are good (all Cronbach's Alpha indices are above .70).

	Number of Items	Mean (s.d.)	Alpha Cronbach
1. Desirable affective states	5	5.53 (.57)	.70
2. Undesirable affective states	5	2.34 (.85)	.51
3. Attentional deployment	11	3.38 (1.02)	.83
4. Cognitive change	11	3.90 (.86)	.76
5. Response modulation	8	4.35 (.94)	.80

*Table 1:* Means, standard deviations and Alpha Cronbach values

*Note:* Cronbach's alpha internal consistency values are presented on the main diagonal; \* p < .05. \*\* p < .001

The unequal representation of the participants across the independent variable categories represents the main reason for not conducting an ANOVA analyses in order to investigate the interactions between the two work sectors (public and private) and the four domains of activity (education, health, finance and sales).

In order to test hypothesis 1.1, we conducted an Independent Sample t Test, having as the dependent variable the mean score of the desirable affective states and the type of working sector as the independent factor. The results show no significant differences between the private and the public sector ( $t (312) = 1.24$ ,  $p=.21$ ). It may be argued that employees from public

and private service sectors have similar perceptions related to the necessity of displaying the desired emotional states.

A further analysis (an Independent Sample t Test was conducted for each desirable affective state) shows that employees from private organizations claim that they are required to display politeness and good mood more often than employees from public organizations do (Table 2). There are no differences in the perceived necessity to display neutral or slightly positive states: calm, patience and understanding.

	Public service employees	Private service employees	t	df
Desirable affective states (overall score)	5.49	5.57	1.24	312
Good mood	5.26	5.49	2.20*	313
Politeness	5.46	5.66	2.00*	313
Calm	5.51	5.53	.17	313
Patience	5.72	5.60	1.53	313
Understanding	5.52	5.52	.05	312

Table 2: Differences between public and private sectors in the necessity to display desirable affective states

Note. \* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .001$ .

In order to test hypothesis 1.2, we conducted Independent Sample t Tests, having as the dependent variables each undesirable emotional state and the type of working sector as the independent factor (we did not use the overall score because the internal consistency of the undesirable emotions scale is quite low – an Alpha Cronbach Index of 0.51). The results (Table 3) show that the employees from public institutions consider that they need to display irritation, superiority, discontent and severity, more frequently than employees from private institutions. If irritability is the most undesirable emotional requirement, severity has an intermediary position between the most desirable affective states and the most undesirable ones.

	Public service employees	Private service employees	t	df
Detachment	2.50	2.50	1.41	313
Irritation	1.62	1.36	2.54*	313
Superiority	2.91	2.22	4.22**	313
Discontent	2.47	1.92	4.41**	313
Severity	3.71	2.41	7.91**	313

Table 3: Differences between public and private sectors in the necessity to display undesirable affective states

Note. \* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .001$ .

Further on, we wanted to explore if the previously found differences were generated by the specifics of the working sector (public or private) or by the specifics of different domains of activity. From the four domains of activity taken into consideration, only in health care services, the public and private domains were both reasonably represented (52 respondents from public institutions and 25 from private organizations). We conducted Independent Sample t Tests only for the health care professionals, with the type of institution (public versus private) as an independent variable and the emotional requirements as the dependent variables. Not a single difference was found to be statistically significant.

Hypothesis 1.3 was tested by conducting One Way Anova tests, having the emotional requirements as the dependent variables and the domain of activity as the independent factor.

The results (Table 4) indicate that among the four domains of activity there is a similarity in the requirements to express good mood, calm and understanding. There are significant differences in the necessity to display patience ( $p=.006$ ) and politeness ( $p=.001$ ). When it comes to expressing politeness, differences appear between education and health care services ( $p=.04$ ) and between education and finances ( $p<.001$ ). In comparison to employees from health services and finances, teachers consider that expressing politeness is significantly less required. In expressing patience, significant differences appear between health care services and traditional services ( $p=.001$ ).

Detachment is the neutral state that is most undesirable in education services, significantly less desirable than in health care services ( $p=.03$ ) and financial services ( $p=.006$ ).

With respect to the four negative-valence emotional states, there are significant differences among the four domains included in our study. Irritability is significantly less accepted in financial services than in education ( $p=.004$ ). Superiority, discontent and severity are more frequently required in education, as compared to each of the other domains.

	ES	HCS	FS	TS	F
Good mood	5.31	5.36	5.54	5.38	$F(3,300)=0.88$
Politeness	5.27	5.67	5.84	5.53	$F(3,300)=5.91^{**}$
Calm	5.58	5.57	5.54	5.44	$F(3,300)=0.43$
Patience	5.72	5.83	5.65	5.44	$F(3,300)=4.23^*$
Understanding	5.41	5.70	5.56	5.38	$F(3,299)=2.10$
Detachment	1.93	2.70	2.86	2.54	$F(3,300)=4.22^*$
Irritation	1.70	1.40	1.26	1.45	$F(3,300)=3.46^*$
Superiority	3.36	2.46	2.00	2.27	$F(3,300)=13.32^{**}$
Discontent	2.97	1.93	1.57	2.06	$F(3,300)=14.48^{**}$
Severity	4.35	2.83	2.46	2.32	$F(3,300)=33.63^{**}$

*Table 4:* Differences in emotional requirements as a function of activity domain

Note: ES - Education services; HCS - Health care services; FS - Financial services; TS - Traditional services; \* =  $p < .05$ . \*\* =  $p < .001$ .

In order to test hypothesis 2.1, we conducted an Independent Sample t Test, having response modulation as the dependent variable and the working sector as the independent factor. The results show that differences exist between employees from private and public organizations when using response modulation as a strategy to regulate irritation felt during interactions with clients ( $t(313)=3.00$ ,  $p=.003$ ). Employees from the private sector report using this strategy more often ( $m=4.50$ ), when compared to employees from private institutions ( $m=4.18$ ). There are no differences between employees from public and private sectors when using attention deployment ( $t(313)=1.61$ ,  $p=.10$ ) or cognitive change ( $t(313)=.38$ ,  $p=.69$ ).

Further analyses were conducted so as to explore the previous results. From the four domains of activity, only within health care services, we found enough respondents employed in both private and public sectors. The Independent Sample t Test showed that, within this domain of activity, the differences between employees from public and private organizations are not statistically significant ( $t(75)=.30$ ,  $p=.76$ ).

In order to test hypothesis 2.2., an Anova One Way Test was conducted. The results show that there are significant differences, among the four professional groups, when regulating irritation by using response modulation ( $F(3, 297) = 6.29$ ,  $p<.001$ ). The Tamhane test shows ( $p<.001$ ) that respondents from the financial sector use this strategy more frequently ( $m=4.67$ ), as compared to teachers ( $m=4.02$ ).

There are no significant differences among the four professional groups with respect to regulating irritation by cognitive change ( $F(3, 297) = 1.55$ ,  $p=.20$ ). But differences do exist with respect to attention deployment ( $F(3, 297) = 3.40$ ,  $p=.01$ ). The Bonferroni test shows that health care employees use this strategy more frequently ( $m=3.66$ ) as compared to those offering banking and financial services ( $m=3.13$ ,  $p=.01$ ). It is interesting that

cognitive change and attention deployment do not follow the same pattern of the results.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Within this study, we intended to analyze the some particularities of emotional work in private and public Romanian services and within several service industries. To that purpose, the organizational emotional requirements were analyzed, along with the emotional regulation strategies used by employees in client interactions.

In order to attain our research objectives, we analyzed the responses of 315 people working in four domains of activity (education, health, finance and traditional services), from public and private organizations.

Our results (hypotheses 1.1. and 1.2) indicate that service employees from private organizations need to display more positive affective states, such as politeness and good mood and less negative affective states, such as irritation, superiority, discontent and severity), when compared to employees from public organizations. Employees from private organizations also use response modulation more frequently as an emotional regulation strategy when interacting with clients. We did not find differences in attention deployment or cognitive change. One of the reasons pertains to the fact that emotional work training is still at its beginnings in Romanian organizations. Another reason relates to the fact that deep acting processes (attention deployment and cognitive change) are far more difficult to be monitored by the management – as compared to response modulation.

Investigating the differences among several domains of activity within the service sector proved to be a very interesting endeavor. The need to display positive emotions was the highest in the banking sector, when compared to all other domains included in this present study. Politeness is the emotional requirement most salient in this domain of activity. Financial service employees also report the highest use of response modulation when regulating irritation within client transactions. These results might be explained by the fact that the financial domain is greatly influenced by the practices of international financial organizations which have entered the Romanian space beginning with the 90s. They brought specific policies regulating client interactions and also a system of monitoring employee behavior. In order to survive in the face of private competition, Romanian financial institutions needed to also implement such behavioral practices and standards.

In traditional services (sales, transportation, tourist services, beauty services) – also a mostly private domain -, the national spirit is much stronger, and payment less satisfactory than in the financial domain (Heintz,

2006). As a consequence, the effort of the employee to engage in emotional labor is less consistent.

Education seems to represent a domain with special emotional requirements. It seems that education represents a domain where the variety of emotional requirements is larger than in other domains of activity. Teachers report a higher necessity to display negative affective states, when compared to employees from all other domains of activity. In comparison to employees from health care services and financial sectors, teachers and educators consider that expressing politeness is significantly less required. The explanation may pertain to the differential status that teachers and students have (Gavriliuc, 2011). It is commonly required for the student to be polite with the teacher, and not vice-versa.

Health care services have a pretty different emotional work profile, when compared to education: negative emotional displays are more undesirable. Patience seems to be the most salient emotional requirement. The necessity to show more patience in health care services might be explained by the difficulties in helping patients understand and respect medical instructions and by the emotional difficulties that patients encounter when facing serious illnesses. Further studies may be conducted in this sector taking into consideration the fundamental assumptions that govern the doctor – patient relationship (Oprea, 2009).

It is important to state the fact that the public and private sectors are not equally represented along all domains of activity: education and health services are mostly public, while financial and traditional services are mostly private. Our results support the idea that, at least in health care services, the specifics of emotional regulation do not pertain to the type of institution (public versus private). One explanation may be that the differences between public and private sectors do not pertain as much to the type of institution (private or public) but to the specifics of the activity domain. Our data supports the statement that a pattern of emotional requests and client behavior has developed within each domain of activity.

One of the main limitations of this research pertains to the fact that we didn't find a fair enough percentage of employees from different domains to work both in public and private sectors. Another limitation pertains to the limited set of variables taken into consideration. Further analyzes should take into consideration individual variables relevant for emotional work, such as professional identity and employee emotional characteristics.

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