Coping with Self-Conscious Emotions in Toxic Service Encounters: A Service Frontline-Employee Perspective

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Abstract:

This study delves into the mechanism through which negative emotions, incited during toxic service encounters, such as shame, embarrassment and anger induce service agents in maladaptive responses that debilitate their ability to engage in emotional labor (EL). Results show that service agents tend to engage in counterproductive coping efforts when they experience such emotions. On one hand, shame and anger induced emotion-focused coping which in turn impeded EL while embarrassment hindered service agents' ability to cope. As a result, service agents struggled to maintain their role identity. Yet, shame was positively related to problem-focused coping which, in turn, fostered role maintenance even if this may be detrimental to wellbeing and lead to job strain, emotional exhaustion or even to burnout. Our findings challenge the widespread assumption that compelling service agents to maintain their role at any cost, as long as the service encounter lasts, would improve service delivery.

1. Introduction of Paper

As frontline-employees, service agents are prompted to embody the values and norms of the organization (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) and to enact roles shaped by management (Ashforth, 2001; Greil & Rudy, 1984). In fact, they are compelled to engage in emotional labor (EL), a form of impression management requiring to display specific emotions considered crucial to the enactment of the service agent role according to organizational guidelines as an attempt to live up to customer's expectations. These enacted emotions may be contradictory with their inner feelings (Ashforth, Tomiuk, & Kulik, 2008; Hochschild, 1983: Parkinson, 1997; Rafaeli, 1989) which makes emotional regulation more and more difficult as actual feelings are discordant with the organizationally desired emotions that they endeavour to express and/or display. On the other hand, customers are not bound by these rules and the ubiquitous organizational mantras such as "the customer is always right" (Kern & Grandey, 2009) reinforce their free actor status during service encounters which bring about a "power imbalance" that, in turn, may prompt customers to usurp service agents (Rafaeli et al., 2012). As they unfold, such encounters may prove to be extremely stressful for service agents thus detrimental to their psychological and emotional wellbeing because they are likely to give rise to unpleasant emotional states, disrupt self-regulatory processes, afflict self-esteem and perhaps prompt the agent to engage in behaviors which are not prescribed within the confines of their role (see Harris and Reynolds, 2003). We dub such encounters "Toxic Service Encounters" and take the term to refer to service agents' appraisal of a stressful service encounter that is perceived as jeopardizing for their wellbeing. The purpose of this paper is to investigate how stress-induced negative emotions, in the context of toxic service encounters, such as shame, embarrassment and anger may affect service agents' ability to regulate their emotions and, in turn, to maintain EL.

1. Toxic Service Encounters

Toxic service encounters may have multiple detrimental effects on the service agent. Amongst the most obvious are negative affect regulation as well as stress and its detrimental consequences (see Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2004). Such encounters can undermine the service agent's sense of self-worth through various forms of negative feedback of the agent's or the organization's performance as well as its capabilities and competencies and may escalate to aggression and even violence. Individuals cognitively appraise their environment to make sense of it (Lazarus, 1991). Therefore, cognitive appraisals play an important role in their reactions to events within their organization (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Moreover,

emotional reactions and stress are determined by cognitive evaluations of situations with respect to their relevance to well-being or self-esteem (Frijda, 1986, 1988; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Lazarus, 1990, 1993). Ultimately, service agents are asked to deliver a performance which involves, on the one hand, a particular competency and on the other, a more interpersonal aspect which is perhaps best captured by the adage of "service with a smile" (see Grandey, Fisk, & Steiner, 2005). Service encounters are therefore goal-oriented activities which involve economic exchange but are also social encounters (Czepiel, 1990). It is likely that both aspects of service will be evaluated by the customer. Indeed, the interpersonal aspect is deemed of primary importance in service encounters as services are produced and consumed simultaneously (Berry 1980; Lovelock 1981, 1983) and customers often lack the ability to accurately judge the competencies of service providers such as MDs, lawyers, etc. (see Bowen & Schneider, 1985; Bitner, 1990). Accordingly, the customer-employee interaction is crucial in the assessment of service quality (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault, 1990). As a result, service encounters are regarded as "moments of truth" since companies consider them as the most opportune point of contact with a customer for the delivery of satisfying service (Carlzon, 1989). However, service failures are common occurrences which represent incidents that may prompt dissatisfied customers to take their business elsewhere. In sum, much is at stake during service encounters and the onus often rests squarely on the shoulders of service agents.

Customers are very aware that companies seek to retain them and that service agents are usually asked to bend over backwards to ensure satisfaction and retention. The imposition of such a climate by organizations can lead to an imbalance of power during service encounters which, in turn, may impel some customers to take advantage of service agents (Fine, Shepherd, & Josephs, 1999; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli et al., 2012). In fact, service employees report that over 40% of the abuse they experience in the workplace comes from customers (Grandey et al., 2004). As a result, service encounters can easily become dysfunctional and involve various forms of negative feedback, abuse, and incivility on the part of customers. Thus, service work can be demeaning, threatening, and stressful (see Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Gettman & Gelfand, 2007; Grandey, Dikter, & Sin, 2004; Grandey et al., 2005; Hochschild, 1983; Rafaeli et al. 2012). Service encounters can become toxic to the point where service agents may no longer be able to enact their prescribed role. Conservation of resources theory suggests that individuals hold a limited array of psychological and emotional resources dedicated to their job (Hobfoll, 1989, 2002). When treated poorly by customers, these resources may be depleted which causes the service agent

to become psychologically strained and emotionally exhausted. Consequently, they will tend to refrain from EL as an attempt to protect or preserve their resources.

2. Role identities and Role Transitions

Service encounters are primarily social interactions where the service agent and the customer are both actors engaged in role performances (see Bitner, Booms & Tetreault, 1990; Deighton, 1992, 1994; Grove & Fisk, 1992). In other words, the service agent and the customer interact rather as role occupants than as individuals and each protagonist assimilates a set of behaviors that may enhance the likelihood of goal achievement (Ashforth, 2001). The former tries to fulfil their obligations as a service representative while the latter claims the service quality they expect as a customer. "Mutual understanding" between both parties contributes to a successful and uneventful service encounter (Mohr & Bitner, 1991).

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) posits that individuals tend to define themselves in terms of social categories such as father, doctor, or service agent and tend to adopt the norms, values, and beliefs inherent to these categories depending on which role or social identity they are embodying at the time. In other words, employees adopt the role identity of service agents and are required to fulfil its related goals. Likewise, employees may abandon a role identity in favor for another for various reasons such as retirement, a job promotion, or job burnout (Ebaugh, 1988). Ashforth (2001) holds that a person can shift from one role identity to another over the course of the day by engaging in "micro-role transitions" which represent momentary identity changes in daily activities. For instance, one leaves work, arrives home, and takes an alternate role identity of a partner or a parent. Furthermore, self-regulation theories suggest that individuals are likely to promote a particular identity in social interactions by attempting to promote positive aspects of the self. Conversely, they may reject any identity which may be perceived as negative or contradictory with the one they are promoting (Higgins, 2002). According to Ashforth (2001, p. 147) "role exit" (i.e., disengagement from a role identity) will "disrupt the pattern of inter-role relationship". In service encounters, the interaction between the service agent and the customer as individuals is essentially founded on the inter-role relationship (i.e., service agent and customer as role occupants). Hence, role exit is likely to be detrimental to service delivery. In addition, exiting role identity in an organizational context can be costly for the employee as it is likely to result in poor performance and exposure to punishment, reprimand or even dismissal. Therefore, service agents may attempt to maintain their role identity to the detriment of their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

2. Hypotheses Development

In the following section, we explicate our theoretical framework and present our hypotheses in accordance with the theoretical model depicted in Figure 1.
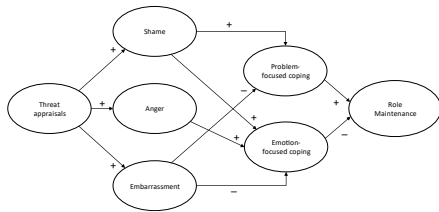

Figure 1. Theoretical model

2.1 Threat Appraisals and Self-Conscious emotions

Cognitive theories of emotion assume that emotions are initiated by exposure to stimuli which are appraised through cognitive processes. A category of appraisals which are likely to induce negative emotions in toxic service encounters is called threat appraisals. Threat appraisals may be defined as anticipated harms and losses to one's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being (see Lazarus 1991; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Carver and Scheier (1998) assert that affective states are provoked by self-regulation processes in that discrepancies between actual and desired self-states produce a negative affective response. According to Tracy and Robins (2004), current, ideal, and ought self-representations constitute an individual's identity. If an event is relevant to a self-representation, this event is likely to be appraised as significant to an identity goal as well (Tracy and Robins, 2007b). A subsequent step involves an appraisal of whether this event is congruent with that identity goal. If it is not, negative emotions are likely to occur.

Furthermore, social self-preservation theory (Kemeny, Gruenewald, & Dickerson, 2004; Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004; Gruenewald, Dickerson, & Kemeny, 2007) asserts that when the elemental goal of maintaining a positive social self is threatened, self-conscious (SC) emotions such as Shame, embarrassment, and pride are elicited, and a harmonized psychological response is prompted in order address the threat. Unlike basic emotions such as fear, sadness, and happiness, SC emotions involve perceptions and evaluations of the self (Brown & Marshall, 2001). They also serve specifically social goals and needs and foster behaviors that improve the stability of social hierarchies and that maintain status roles (Tracy & Robins, 2007a). SC emotions are particularly relevant to service encounters especially in the case of toxic service encounters where service agents are likely to be exposed to open criticism and negative feedback which, in turn, may disrupt cognitive and affective regulatory

mechanisms such as EL. In addition, social actions are often affected primarily by considerations of "loss of face" in public (see Tangney & Fischer, 1995; Tracy & Robins, 2007b; see also Goffman, 1955). Accordingly, SC emotions, such as shame and embarrassment play a central role in motivating and regulating feelings, behaviors and beliefs in toxic service encounters. Shame is induced by negative assessment of the global-self while embarrassment is triggered when the public-self is exposed (see Tracy and Robins, 2007b).

In addition, even though anger is categorized as a basic emotion (Ekman, 1992), it has often been associated with shame and embarrassment (see Keltner, & Haidt, 1999; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992, Miller & Tangney, 1994). Negative SC emotions motivate self-regulatory processes, such as the regulation of hostility and aggression. For instance, Tangney et al. (1992) established shame-proneness to be consistently correlated with anger. In addition, anger is likely to occur when embarrassment is caused by other's intentional misbehaviour (Miller, 1996). Moreover, anger is likely to occur when access to motivational goals is obstructed (Scherer, 1993; Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009) and ego-involvement (i.e. self-esteem enhancement or preservation against assault) is activated (Lazarus, 1991). Specifically, anger will occur if the threat to role identity is attributed to others rather than to oneself (Lazarus, 1991). To sum up, we expect that negative SC emotions as well as anger will occur when the service agent's role identity is threatened.

Hypothesis 1: Threat appraisals will be positively related to SC emotions and anger such that (a) threat appraisals involving global-self representations will be positively related to shame (b) threat appraisals involving public-self representations will be positively related to embarrassment and (c) anger.

2.2 Coping with shame, embarrassment, and anger

Coping is defined by Lazarus and Folkman (1984, p. 141) as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person." They go on to distinguish between two main functions of coping strategies: (1) problem-focused coping (i.e. concentrating on managing or altering the problem) and (2) emotion-focused coping (i.e. concentrating on regulating the emotional response to the problem). Problem-focused coping is more likely when a threatening event is appraised as alterable whereas emotion-focused coping is more likely when nothing can be done to counteract the threatening event (Folkman & Lazarus, 1985). In stressful encounters, problem-focused coping strategies are directed at the environment and/or at the self while emotion-focused coping strategies are directed at

decreasing emotional distress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). According to Frijda, Kuipers, and ter Schure (1989) SC emotions are mainly characterized by action tendencies which can be categorized as either approach or avoidance. Shame and embarrassment are generally associated with avoidance and withdrawal tendencies as they both increase the likelihood of engaging in protective actions which is detrimental for performance (Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2002). Yet, when shame occurs, one realises that their behavior is incoherent with the promoted social identity which may be damaging for their self-esteem. In which case, avoidance/withdrawal tendencies induced by shame might be directed toward this dysfunctional behavior in an attempt to protect the global-self (see Barrett, 1995; Gilbert, 2000, 2007; Gilbert & Miles, 2000). On the other hand, anger is associates with approach tendencies involving aggressiveness and expression of hostility (Harmon-Jones and Harmon-Jones, 2011). Yet, according to Stuewig and Tangney (2007, p. 373), a perceived threat to the global-self may induce "shame-rage" or "humiliated fury". "The pain felt from evaluating oneself as defective or inferior may lead shamed individuals to lash out and blame others in order to regain a sense of control over their live. This may lead to increasing amounts of shame that subsequently feeds right back into anger and further destructive acts". This phenomenon is described by Scheff (1987) as the "shame-rage spiral". Furthermore, Miller (2007, p. 253) explains that "(e)mbarrassment occurs too readily and too intensely in too many of us. We care too much about what others are thinking of us, and we believe that our actions are more conspicuous and salient to others than they really are. Unnecessary and exaggerated desires to avoid embarrassment lead to timidity and passivity that can put us in harm's way." These misperceptions elicit over-preoccupation with oneself, excessive evaluative concern, and inhibit the ability to cope with the threatening event. It is called the *spotlight effect* (see Gilovich, Medvec, & Savitsky, 2000). Thus, we expect negative emotions to affect coping.

Hypothesis 2: Negative emotions will be related to coping strategies such as (a) shame will be positively related to problem focused coping (b) shame and anger will be positively related to emotion-focused coping (c) embarrassment will be negatively related to problem-focused as well as emotional-focused coping.

In any case, service agents are typically required to maintain their role identity throughout the service encounter. This tends to obstruct access to genuine adaptive resources which may be used by individuals in everyday life when they are faced with stressful events and lead to emotional exhaustion. As long as the role identity of service agent is maintained, employees will tend to restrain themselves from any reaction that might be inconsistent with

this role identity. However, upholding the service agent's role identity is also detrimental for emotional, psychological and physical well-being while role exit may result in poor performance and expose the service agent to reprimand and even dismissal.

Hypothesis 3: Problem-focused coping will be positively related to role maintenance while emotion-focused coping will be negatively related to role maintenance.

2.3 Mediation hypotheses

In addition, we suggest that the relationship between negative emotions and role maintenance will be mediated by problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies.

Hypothesis 4: problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies will mediate the negative relationship between negative emotions and role maintenance such that (a) the relationship between shame and role maintenance through problem focused coping will be significant and positive (b) the relationship between shame and role maintenance through emotion-focused coping will be significant and negative (c) the relationship between anger and role maintenance through emotion-focused coping will be significant and negative (e) the relationship between embarrassment and role maintenance through problem focused coping will be significant and negative (f) the relationship between embarrassment and role maintenance through emotion-focused coping will be significant and positive.

3. Method and Results

The study was conducted among service agents from different occupations in the service industry located in Eastern Canada. Data was collected using survey questionnaires. In total, 298 usable questionnaires were garnished. In the final sample, 56.1% of respondents were male versus 43.9% females, average tenure was 3.10 year ($SD = 5.05$) and experience as a service agent was 5.87 years ($SD = 6.65$). A critical incident approach was used asking respondents to think about and briefly describe a recent toxic service encounter they experienced and remembered well.

Threat appraisals were measured via two separate scales. *Threat to global-self representation* was measured using an adapted version of *the Self-Esteem Appraisal Stakes* subscale (6 items) developed by Folkman et al. (1986) ($\alpha = .92$). *Threat to public-self representation* were measured using 6 items generated by the authors based on the question "What's at stake?" drawing from Folkman et al. (1986). An example was: "I thought there was the possibility my superiors would demote me" ($\alpha = .96$).

Anger ($\alpha = .92$), shame ($\alpha = .73$), and embarrassment ($\alpha = .76$) were measured via relevant items in Izard's Differential Emotions Scale (DES: Izard, 1977). Each subscale relies on a set of single word descriptors of an emotion.

Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping strategies were measured via adapted versions of (1) the Restraint Coping subscale ($\alpha = .86$) and (2) Focus on and Venting of Emotions ($\alpha = .92$) and Behavioral Disengagement ($\alpha = .92$) subscales from the Multidimensional Coping Inventory (Carver et al., 1989), respectively.

Based on the recommendations in Churchill (1979) and in Gerbing and Anderson (1988), Exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted to assess internal consistency and discriminant validity (Bentler & Bonett, 1980) for each measure. Subsequently, a structural equation model capturing out hypotheses was estimated via Mplus 7.4. As depicted in Figure 2, these results support Hypotheses 1 to 3 (see Figure 2).

Chi-Square = 708.26 (df = 385; p = .00) ; RMSEA = .06 [.05 ; .07] ; CFT = .93 ; TLI = .93; SRMR = .05
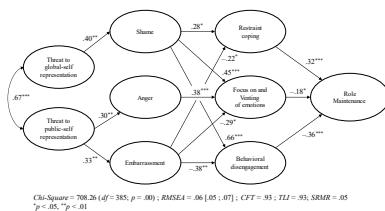$^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$

Figure 2. Structural Equation Model Fit Indexes and Standardized Estimates

Furthermore, we tested mediation hypotheses using 5000 bootstrap estimations. Results partially support Hypothesis 4 as Hypothesis 4(e) was not supported (see Table 1)

Parameter	Estimate	CI (95%)	
		Low	High
Shame → Restraint coping → Role Maintenance	.088*	.010	.228
Shame → Focus on and Venting of Emotions → Role Maintenance	−.082**	−.185	−.025
Shame → Behavioral Disengagement → Role Maintenance	−.234**	−.391	−.130
Anger → Focus on and Venting of Emotions → Role Maintenance	−.0768**	−.134	−.017
Embarrassment → Restraint coping → Role Maintenance	−.068	−.184	.008
Embarrassment → Focus on and Venting of Emotions → Role Maintenance	.053*	.002	.156
Embarrassment → Behavioral Disengagement → Role Maintenance	.134**	.047	.265

$^*p < .05$, $^{**}p < .01$

Table 1. Indirect Effects Standardized Estimates for Hypothesis 5

4. Conclusion and Implications

Our findings provide clear evidence that toxic service encounters prompt negative affective states including shame, embarrassment, and anger which, in turn, trigger maladaptive coping strategies that disrupt service agent ability to engage in emotional labor, jeopardize their wellbeing and debilitate service performance. Indeed, Compelling service agents to maintain role identity during toxic service encounters may be detrimental to their wellbeing. We recommend that service agents should be monitored during toxic service encounters and practical workshops on emotion management under pressure should be put in place within service organizations. Managers should advocate problem-focused coping to deal with negative emotion and coach service agents to deal with negative feedback.

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