

**GENDER DIFFERENCES IN
EMOTIONAL LABOR PROCESSES**

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Abstract

Recent emotional labor scholarship in public administration conceptualizes emotional labor primarily as a psychological good benefiting the entire organization but disproportionately supplied by and expected of women. While the *provision* of sanctioned emotion is a fundamental and gendered dimension of emotional labor, our research emphasizes another component of emotional labor that is equally gendered and merits attention: the *psychological process* that public employees undergo to deliver emotional labor. While significant evidence suggests that women public servants are the primary providers of emotional labor in public organizations, we argue that male public servants will experience more intense emotional labor processes because they have less capacity to regulate those emotions than public servants who are women. Our hypothesis, based on a range of psychology, sociology, and organizational management scholarship, is tested using cross-sectional mail survey data collected from employees of four cities in a Midwestern state. The results of ordered probit modeling generally support the contention that male public employees experience higher emotional labor than women public employees in citizen encounters. The result suggests that significant acculturation and training to the organization-wide importance of emotional labor may be needed to solicit emotional labor from men.

Emotional labor has surfaced as an important public administration topic within the last few years. Broadly defined as relational work that requires the manipulation of emotions, there is significant evidence that emotional labor is a gendered facet of public sector work. Guy and Newman, who brought emotional labor to the attention of the broader public administration audience, demonstrate through an analysis of occupational titles, job descriptions, and wages, that emotional labor is an unrecognized and undercompensated skill inherent in positions held primarily by women (2004). Meier, Mastracci and Wilson provide indirect evidence that emotional labor increases organizational effectiveness via the presence of higher proportions of women employees (2006). Mastracci, Newman and Guy review state performance appraisal documents and find that emotional labor is recognized only at the most perfunctory level in performance expectations, a finding that reinforces its unrecognized and unrewarded nature (2006).

Each of these studies emphasizes the part of emotional labor that involves delivering organizationally sanctioned emotional responses, e.g., “service with a smile.” This emphasis pertains to emotional labor as a psychological good benefiting the entire organization but disproportionately supplied by and expected of women. While the provision of sanctioned emotion is a fundamental and gendered dimension of emotional labor, this article emphasizes another component of emotional labor that is equally gendered and merits attention: the psychological process that public employees undergo to deliver emotional labor.

Emotional labor as a psychological process involves regulating emotions to project organizationally expected demeanors (Hochschild 1983, Steinberg and Figart 1999). The extent of labor required depends on the level of emotional dissonance (Morris

and Feldman 1996) – the psychological disconnect between internal emotions and expected demeanors – as well as the level of emotional effort to reconcile that disconnect (Schaubroeck and Jones 2000, Wharton 1999). We argue that there will be gender differences in emotional labor because societal norms and acculturation processes result in unequal capacities of males and females to handle these processes. Specifically, cultural masculinity emphasizes control and emotional suppression and cultural femininity emphasizes responsiveness and submission. These social notions of masculinity and femininity lead to the expectation that public servants who are men will experience higher emotional labor because their emotions – particularly negative ones – are triggered more easily and they have less capacity to regulate those emotions than public servants who are women.

This thesis has practical as well as theoretical implications. Emotional labor processes have been shown to evoke a range of psychological and physiological impacts on public employees, including work stress (Erickson and Ritter 2001), lower job satisfaction (Wharton 1999) and well-being (Pugliesi 1999), alienation (Rafaeli and Worline 2001), sleeplessness (Schaubroeck and Jones 2000), and ill health (Schaubroeck and Jones 2000). Further, the effectiveness on an employee's emotional labor efforts has been linked with more positive customer service evaluations (Grandey 2003). Thus, emotional labor has significant implications for both protecting human capital as well as advancing organizational effectiveness.

The theoretical case for expecting gender differences in the psychological processes of emotional labor is built upon scholarship on gendered cultural expectations for emotional responses, as well as social psychological evidence that men and women

respond to emotion under different circumstances and in different ways. The data for testing for these differences comes from a mail survey of the employees of four cities in a Midwestern state. Response rates for the survey averaged 49 percent (n=645). Survey data are statistically analyzed using ordered probit to test hypotheses pertaining to the influences of gender and other demographic variables on a city employee's levels of emotional labor.

We seek to contribute to the broad dialogue on emotional labor developing within the public administration community, and in the process bring more specific attention to the gendered dimensions of how emotional labor is experienced. In pursuit of this goal, the paper proceeds as follows: we first focus on theoretical arguments supporting gender differences in individuals' psychological experience of emotional labor and arrive at our formal hypothesis on gender and emotional labor. Next, we describe our research design and elaborate on the measures chosen to represent our theoretical propositions. Finally, after providing some descriptive detail on our data and explaining our analytical approach, we present the results and discuss implications for the general study of emotional labor in public organizations.

Theory and Hypothesis:

Individuals undergo emotional labor when their internal emotions do not match the emotional displays expected by society or their employing organizations. In the context of public service, these demeanors include courtesy, patience, and responsiveness to citizens, sometimes in response to hostility and other negative emotions (Morris and Feldman 1996; Schaubroeck and Jones 2000). When public servants have internal

feelings that do not match these demeanors, they experience a dissonance that must be regulated in order to achieve the emotional displays required and expected of them. We argue that men will experience higher dissonance and work harder at regulation because they are less “equipped” than women to take on these demeanors. In addition to sociology, the theoretical arguments for expecting these differences are based in theory and evidence from various subfields of psychology including general social psychology, evolutionary social psychology, clinical psychology, personality psychology, and occupational health psychology. Studies from research in human resources, communications, organizational behavior, management, and even evolutionary biology complement and flesh out these arguments.

Explanations for gender differences in general emotional capacity are derived either from basic biologically hardwired processes and attendant genetic distinctiveness or sociological role development and acculturation (Brody 1985). The former emphasizes such things as the influence of neurochemical, hormonal, and neuroelectric processes associated with processing and interpreting emotional experiences. In support of this position, Pennebaker and Roberts (1992) summarize a number of findings suggesting that fundamental differentiation across the sexes in brain structure enables women to integrate internal and external sources of information between the right and left hemispheres much more effectively than men. Subsequent experiments, designed and conducted by Pennebaker and Roberts to test these implications, have shown that women use environmental context in terms of both relationships and physical location to cue emotion while men rely heavily on their own internal physiological changes to assess how they feel and to determine what emotion is appropriate (Pennebaker and Roberts 1992).

Sociological accounts for gender differences in emotional capacity challenge whether a purely biological explanation is sufficient arguing that gender differences in cognitive functioning are augmented by the social process of establishing gender roles (Haviland and Malatesta 1981; Brody 1985). In particular, there are two separate socially-based mechanisms that highlight the role of social organizations and relationships in emotional development (Wharton and Erickson 1993). First, at the level of individual experience of emotion, gender differences in emotion and behavior are believed to have evolved over time in response to specialization of roles in interpersonally based survival-related functions (Brody 1985). The enactment of caretaking roles by women requires them to exhibit greater sensitivity to the needs of others with an accompanying expression of emotion (Grossman and Wood 1993). More specifically, greater awareness and ability to interpret non-verbal signals and the natural suppression of anger are particularly likely among women since those activities would have evolved for the purpose of raising children (Brody 1985; Grossman and Wood 1993). Women are more likely to display warmth and liking because those emotions constitute a successful evolution for maintaining relationships (Brody 1985; Rafaeli and Sutton 1989). In contrast, to the extent that emotional displays are used by men, they evolved as a way of maintaining norms and rules in support of maintaining control and gaining status (Brody 1985; Grossman and Wood 1993). Gender role specialization leads to development and reliance upon differentiated skills and abilities for managing emotions and navigating interpersonal relationships which parents then pass to their offspring (Grossman and Wood 1993).

A second sociological process, grounded upon Hochschild's normative theory, focuses on the role of the wider cultural context in shaping gender norms for appropriate emotional and behavioral responses (Simon and Nath 2004). Men and women confront different societal expectations regarding the emotion they are expected to perform. Cultural values also impose constraints on types of emotion they display and how they may be expressed (Brody 1985; Wharton and Erickson 1993; and Nath 2004). These differences in experiencing emotion and its relative importance for gender roles creates cultural emotion norms that discourage men from feeling and expressing emotions – sadness in particular – and women from feeling and expressing anger (Simon and Nath 2004). The cultural norms, in turn, instill beliefs and skills that lead women to be more responsive to their own and others' emotions than men (Grossman and Wood 1993). For example, the expression of kindness, understanding, and compassion may be expected more from a female front-line worker compared to her male counterpart. Furthermore, the expression of nurturing emotion may actually be perceived by citizens as more of a weakness that is to be taken advantage of if given by a man.

These literatures taken together support the expectation for gender differences in the experience of emotional labor due to innate differences in emotional functioning, learned differences, or an interaction between the two (Brody 1985). The assertion of some clinical and social psychologists that men may be less adept at synthesizing internal and external cues supports the notion that men will experience more emotional labor because they are less capable of anticipating impending conflicts with citizens and solving conflict when they experience dissonance. By contrast, the greater sensitivity that women exhibit toward non-verbal signals may make them better able to predict and

diffuse impending conflicting with citizens before it can begin to escalate. Since emotional labor in the context of public service requires acting upon non-verbal and contextual emotion cues, employing caretaking emotions, and subservience to citizen concerns, the main hypothesis is:

H: Public employees who are men will experience more intense emotional labor processes than public employees who are women.

Research Design

Gender differences in emotional labor are tested using mail survey data gathered from a study of employees of four cities in a Midwestern U.S. state: a small city with an agricultural economy (City A); a slightly larger, but still small city with a light industrial economic base (City B); a mid-size city located near a military base (City C); and an affluent metropolitan city (City D). Survey data are statistically analyzed using ordered probit to test hypotheses pertaining to the influences of gender and other demographic variables on a city employee's level of emotional labor.

Mail Survey Process. The mail survey was distributed to city employees and asked questions related to various aspects of their workplace experiences. The survey process began with an alert letter from the city manager's office to employees expressing support for the study and encouraging participation. Within two weeks, an envelope was attached to employee paychecks that contained a cover letter from the researcher inviting survey participation and stressing the confidentiality of results; the mail survey; a stamped return envelope addressed to the researcher's university; and a postcard with a survey

identification number that employees were asked to return separately from the mail survey. The postcard's purpose was to track responses to the survey without linking survey results to employee identities. This process produced response rates of 61 percent in City A, 83 percent in City B, 43 percent in City C, and 45 percent in City D. The overall response rate was 49 percent (n=645). The study was conducted between June 2005 and December 2006.

Measures. The ordinal dependent variable in this study measures emotional labor in three separate models by a city employee's level of agreement or disagreement from (0=strongly disagree to 3=strongly agree) with the following statements:

- It is a struggle for me to hold my tongue when a citizen is rude to me or yells at me.
- In dealing with citizens, I "put on" a different personality.
- Dealing with citizens drains my energy.

The first statement, a variant on that used by Schaubroeck and Jones (2000), taps the extent of emotional dissonance incurred by negative interactions with citizens. The second item reflects one strategy for regulating emotion known as "surface acting," in which an individual projects an external countenance that matches organizational expectation for demeanor, but mismatches internal feelings at the moment (Grandey 2003). The third statement, adapted from Maslach and Jackson (1981), measures emotional dissonance indirectly through emotional exhaustion, an observed effect of dissonance (Morris and Feldman 1997; Abraham 1998; and Grandey 2000). These measures tap interrelated but distinct aspects of emotional labor for which we

hypothesize gender differences to exist. In selecting the extent to which they agree with the statement, they provide a relative ranking of their perception of the dependent variable as it applies to and is interpreted by them. While not an absolute and continuous measure of experience, relative ordinal measures provide a subjectively derived ranking of experience which can be analyzed using predicted probabilities (Wooldridge 2006).

Gender, the explanatory independent variable of interest for our hypothesis, is coded 1 for men and 0 for women. Additionally, however, we include control variables which fall into two categories: individual characteristics and job position characteristics. Individual characteristic control values frequently cited by previous researchers (e.g. Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Morris and Feldman 1996; Schaubroeck and Jones 2000; and Erickson and Ritter 2001) include age, race, education (1=college or graduate degree, 0=none), salary (0=less than \$20,000, 1=\$20,000-\$29,999, 2=\$30,000-\$39,999, 3=\$40,000-\$49,999, 4=\$50,000-\$59,999, 5=\$60,000-\$64,999, 6=\$65,000-\$79,999, 7=\$80,000 and above), length of years employed by the city, and membership in a professional organization. The intrinsic attributes of the individual have the potential to affect the experience of emotional labor by changing fundamental characteristics of the interaction (Shelton and Richeson 2006). Expectations related to age, race, and education structure status and stereotype expectations shared between the public servant and citizens (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Steinberg and Figart 1999). Salary, tenure, and professional membership all contribute to a city official's personal valuation of self and their competency (Shaubroeck and Jones 2000). In addition, longer tenure and professional memberships provide opportunity for developing shared organizational and

professional norms of belief and conduct which should result in less experience of dissonance (Morris and Feldman 1996).

Position characteristics kept as control variables consist of three job related items: whether a city employee enforces rules among citizens (1=yes, 0=no), the frequency of interactions with citizens (0=never, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often), and status as a front-line worker (1=yes, 0=no). These controls are important because they pertain to the frequency of interaction, intensity of the interaction, and physical closeness that a public servant has to citizens (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Morris and Feldman 1996; Wharton 1999; Shaubroeck and Jones 2000). The first two controls are expected to have cumulative effects on both the total experience of emotional labor and the rate of increase in labor over time. The inability to withdraw from public interaction prevents recovery after a particularly stressful emotional experience.

Descriptive statistics are provided for the dependent and independent variables in Table 1. For the emotional labor measures, the mean and median response for employees

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

surveyed indicate low levels of experience of emotional labor, but the responses show a fairly normal distribution. Overall, the city workforce is quite homogeneous and dominated by Caucasian employees (88%) and most of those surveyed were men (72%). 53% of the employees worked on the front line, and 50% of all employees surveyed had some element of an enforcement role in their work suggesting a good horizontal cross-section of city departments. The relatively low education, salary, and professional association scores indicate the database consists of a good vertical cross-sectional sample of employees through various levels of management. Tenure within city government

shows a little skew in tenure, but organizations still demonstrate high degrees of stability with a median score of 8 years.

Analytical Approach. The scale used to measure perceptions of emotional labor relied on an ordinal likert scale and as a result, we cannot assume a continuous distribution along the measurement of the dependent variable (Wooldridge 2006). For example, individual respondents to the survey may feel that a greater change in their perception is warranted before moving from agree to strongly agree than from agree to disagree. Additionally, these scale interpretations may vary from one respondent to the next.

Due to these effects and the violation of basic assumptions of OLS regression, gender differences in the experience of emotional labor are tested by applying ordered probit to the quantitative survey data. Ordered probit is appropriate for modeling dependent variables with two or more ordinal variables where the exact distances between levels of measurement are unknown (Long 1997). Ordered probit is a nonlinear regression model that is an extension of logistic regression (Long 1997). In addition, we have used robust standard errors in running the model to minimize the heteroskedasticity of data (particularly associated with age and tenure) as indicated by Wooldridge (2006). The resulting model outputs provide the statistical probabilities the various variables having some non-random effect.

Results

Even after controlling for city specific differences, gender is a statistically significant influence in two of the three emotional labor models. In the first model (Table

2), city workers who are men indicate higher emotional dissonance than city workers who are women ($p < 0.10$). Similarly, the results of the second model (Table 3) indicate that city workers who are men are more likely to regulate their emotions through surface acting than city workers who are women ($p < 0.10$). However, as seen by the model in Table 4, gender is not a significant influence on emotional exhaustion.

[TABLES 2-4 ABOUT HERE]

Of the control variables, employee age is associated with lower levels of all three emotional labor variants ($p < .05$) consistent with expectations derived from previous research. The model related to verbal restraint in Table 2 indicates salary is associated with experiencing lower levels of dissonance when trying to keep anger in check, while length of city employment is associated with higher levels of dissonance in exhibiting verbal restraint (both $p < 0.05$). These results agree with evidence and expectations for emotional labor precursors found in the social psychology literature (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993; Morris and Feldman 1996; Schaubroeck and Jones 2000; and Erickson and Ritter 2001).

One way to substantively interpret ordered probit results is to examine the probability changes in the values of the dependent variable given changes in the values of the explanatory variables, holding other model influences constant (Long 1997). Figure 1 depicts gender differences in the predicted probability of indicating a given level of agreement or disagreement. Predicted probability differences that are positive indicate

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

that male city workers are more likely than female city workers to indicate that particular level of agreement or disagreement. Conversely, negative predicted probabilities occur

when women city employees have a higher likelihood of indicating that particular agree-disagree response. Generally speaking, male city employees are more likely than female city employees to agree with statements pertaining to dissonance and regulation, whereas women city employees are more likely than their male counterparts to disagree with these statements. While gender was not a significant influence on the dissonance measure pertaining to emotional exhaustion, gender differences in predicted probabilities follow a pattern opposite to that of dissonance and regulation, with women experiencing more emotional drain than men.

Summary and Conclusion

The results of ordered probit modeling generally support the contention that public employees who are men experience higher emotional labor than public employees who are women. Specifically, male city employees appear to experience higher emotional labor on two of three dimensions examined. When interacting with citizens, male city employees appear to experience a greater disconnect between internal emotions and organizationally expected demeanors than city employees who are women. Male city employees also appear to regulate emotions through surface acting more so than their female counterparts. These results account for the influence of the frequency of citizen interactions and whether the employee enforces city regulations among citizens (a role that would inevitably encounter conflict with citizens).

Three caveats qualify the study results. First, the low explanatory power of the ordered probit models indicates there is much work to be done to understand this complicated behavioral phenomenon. Second, research on gender and emotional labor

needs to be undertaken with an expanded array of emotional labor measures, so the full gendered nature of emotional labor can be better understood. Third, the study does not control for the nature of the work, thus the complexities inherent to a full understanding of emotional labor and the multidimensionality of emotions has been simplified significantly. The number of emotions, their intensity, type, frequency, and duration all may combine in different ways to place different demands for emotional labor. There may also be important contextual influences on emotional labor. For instance, some tasks routinely place employees in contexts where they must face emotional labor demands without a surrounding group of co-workers. How might this change the way emotional labor is experienced?

Given significant evidence that women are the disproportionate deliverers of emotional labor as an organizational good, does it matter that public servants who are men will experience higher emotional labor for any given citizen encounter than public servants who are women? We answer yes, because emotional labor is a skill that should be cultivated equally regardless of gender. True gender equity, in our view, is not possible as long as skill sets remain the dominant purview of a single gender. Thus, where women deliver more emotional labor than men, and in this context seem more adept in its delivery, a gender equitable public organization will solicit emotional labor from both women and men. The results reported here suggest that significant acculturation and training to the organization-wide importance of emotional labor may be needed to meet that goal.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics					
Emotional Labor Variables	Mean	Median	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
It is a struggle for me to hold my tongue when a citizen is rude to me or yells at me.	0.98	1	0.94	0	3
In dealing with citizens, I “put on” a different personality.	1.32	1	0.97	0	3
Dealing with citizens drains my energy.	1.05	1	0.85	0	3
Gender					
Male Employee	0.72	1	0.45	0	1
Control Variables					
Individual Characteristics					
Age	42.52	43	10.11	20	68
Race	0.06	0	0.23	0	1
Education	0.53	0	0.50	0	1
Salary	2.76	2	1.57	0	6
Tenure	10.30	8	8.32	1	38
Professional Assoc. Member	0.58	1	0.49	0	1
Position Characteristics					
Enforcer	0.5	1	0.5	0	1
Citizen Interaction Frequency	2.58	3	0.73	0	3
Front-Line Worker	0.53	1	0.5	0	1
Overall: n = 645 observations					

**Table 2. Ordered Probit Model of Gender Differences in the Item:
“It is a struggle for me to hold my tongue when a citizen is rude to me or yells at me”**

	Std. Beta	Robust Std. Error	t-value	p(t)
Gender				
Male Employees	0.10	0.13	1.77	0.08
Control Variables				
Individual Characteristics				
Age	-0.16	0.01	-2.73	0.01
Race	-0.02	0.25	-0.35	0.73
Education	0.00	0.12	0.09	0.93
Salary	-0.13	0.05	-1.75	0.08
Tenure	0.14	0.01	2.29	0.02
Professional Assoc. Member	-0.02	0.12	-0.42	0.67
Position Characteristics				
Enforcer	0.04	0.11	0.65	0.52
Citizen Interaction Frequency	0.05	0.12	0.90	0.37
Front-Line Worker	-0.01	0.12	-0.24	0.81
Location Controls				
City A	0.02	0.27	0.24	0.81
City B	0.13	0.26	1.23	0.22
City C	0.12	0.24	1.10	0.27
N		448		
McKelvey and Zavoina's R ²		4%		

**Table 3. Ordered Probit Model of Gender Differences in the Item:
“In dealing with citizens I ‘put on’ a different personality”**

	Std. Beta	Robust Std. Error	t-value	p(t)
Gender				
Male Employees	0.10	0.12	1.80	0.07
Control Variables				
Individual Characteristics				
Age	-0.14	0.01	-2.28	0.03
Race	0.05	0.23	1.00	0.32
Education	0.09	0.12	1.53	0.13
Salary	-0.04	0.05	-0.57	0.57
Tenure	0.04	0.01	0.58	0.56
Professional Assoc. Member	0.03	0.12	0.56	0.57
Position Characteristics				
Enforcer	-0.03	0.11	-0.61	0.54
Citizen Interaction Frequency	0.04	0.11	0.77	0.44
Front-Line Worker	0.06	0.12	0.97	0.34
Location Controls				
City A	-0.02	0.29	-0.17	0.87
City B	0.01	0.27	0.06	0.95
City C	0.01	0.26	0.04	0.97
N		446		
McKelvey and Zavoina's R ²		5%		

**Table 4. Ordered Probit Model of Gender Differences in the Item:
“Dealing with citizens drains my energy”**

	Std. Beta	Robust Std. Error	t-value	p(t)
Gender				
Male Employees	-0.07	0.13	-1.30	0.19
Control Variables				
Individual Characteristics				
Age	-0.18	0.01	-2.88	0.01
Race	-0.06	0.22	-1.22	0.22
Education	0.06	0.13	1.02	0.31
Salary	0.08	0.04	1.25	0.21
Tenure	0.02	0.01	0.41	0.68
Professional Assoc. Member	-0.03	0.13	-0.56	0.57
Position Characteristics				
Enforcer	0.05	0.11	0.85	0.40
Citizen Interaction Frequency	0.03	0.12	0.56	0.58
Front-Line Worker	-0.04	0.11	-0.65	0.52
Location Controls				
City A	0.02	0.28	0.22	0.83
City B	0.09	0.25	0.94	0.35
City C	0.17	0.24	1.52	0.13
N		448		
McKelvey and Zavoina's R ²		6%		

**Figure 1. Changes in Oprobit Predicted Probabilities of Emotional Labor
Women's Predicted Probabilities (0) - Men's Predicted Probabilities (1)**

