

The Emerging Role of Emotions in Work Life: An Introduction

Cynthia D. Fisher
School of Business
Bond University
Gold Coast
Queensland 4229
Australia

e-mail: Cynthia_Fisher@Bond.edu.au
Phone: +61-7-5595-2215
Fax: +61-7-5595-1160

and

Neal M. Ashkanasy
Graduate School of Management
The University of Queensland
Brisbane
Queensland 4072
Australia

e-mail: n.ashkanasy@gsm.uq.edu.au
Phone: +61-7-3365-7499
Fax: +61-7-3365-6988

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Abstract

Research into the role that emotions play in organizational settings has only recently been revived, following publication in 1983 of Hochschild's The Managed Heart. Since then, and especially over the last five years, the tempo of research in this field has stepped up, with various initiatives such as conferences and e-mail discussion lists playing significant roles. This Special Issue is another initiative in this genre. The six papers in the Special Issue were selected from forty submissions, and cover a wide range of contemporary research issues. The papers deal with the relationship of mood to job characteristics and to job satisfaction, manifestation of anger in dyadic relationships, perceptions and effects of emotional labor, emotional intelligence in selection interviews, and the effects of displays of sadness and anger by leaders. In this introduction, we broadly introduce the topic of emotions in workplace settings, summarize the six papers, and present some directions for future research.

Interest in emotions in the workplace has accelerated rapidly over the past decade. The impetus has come from several sources and has led to bodies of research on a variety of topics. Although these bodies of work are not yet fully developed, they all show promise, and portend that the study of emotions in the workplace has the potential to add to our understanding of behavior in organizations.

Although the study of emotions in work settings has a long history (see Mastenbroek, in press; Brief & Weiss, in press), the starting point for modern research on emotion in organizations seems to have been sociologist Hochschild's (1983) seminal book on emotional labor: The Managed Heart. This work inspired Rafaeli and Sutton's work (1987; 1989; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988) which focussed the attention of management scholars on emotional expression as part of the work role. Concurrently, Staw's frame-shattering work (Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986) on dispositional affect as a predictor of job satisfaction stimulated the rapid adoption of trait affectivity as a useful variable in organizational research. Trait affectivity subsequently fueled interest in state affect (mood), which was studied at both the group and individual level by scholars such as George and Brief (Brief, Butcher, & Roberson, 1995; George 1989, 1990, 1991). Isen and Baron's (1991) review of mood effects on behavior was also highly influential in turning scholars' attention to the hotter, more transient side of affective experiences at work. Another influential article was Ashforth and Humphrey's (1995) analysis of the reasons underlying the failure of scholars in the organization sciences to tackle the emotional dimensions of behavior in the workplace. Finally, the popularization of the concept of emotional intelligence acted as a further stimulus to scholars in this area. Based on work by Salovey and Mayer (1990) and Gardner (1983), emotional intelligence became a "buzzword" following the success of Daniel Goleman (1995) best selling book of the

same name. Goleman (1998) subsequently extended his theories of emotional intelligence into the workplace context (see also Cooper & Sawaf, 1996), although much of his thinking remains speculative and is based on inadequate conceptualization and measures of emotional intelligence (see Davies, Stankov, & Roberts, 1998). Nevertheless, if this individual difference variable exists, can be measured reliably, and can be shown to predict job and life success as well as Goleman and others claim, it will have substantial implications for organizational behavior.

These threads are beginning to be drawn together. A model which has been especially influential in our own work (Ashkanasy, Fisher, Härtel, & Ashforth, 1998; Fisher 1998a; Fisher 1998b, Fisher 1999) and which shows great promise for inspiring additional future research is Weiss and Cropanzano's (1996) Affective Events Theory (AET). AET proposes both causes and consequences of momentary mood and emotions at work. Moods and emotions are considered to be a mediating mechanism by which stable features of the work environment, such as job design, impact job attitudes and behavior. AET theory suggests that mood and emotions flow from discrete affective events or occurrences. Stable work environment features predispose the more or less frequent occurrence of discrete events that give rise to specific emotions. For instance, jobs that are high in scope should more frequently produce events (instances of positive feedback, important goals successfully met, etc.) which lead to momentary positive emotions (joy, happiness, pride). Weiss and Cropanzano propose that affective experiences may lead to spontaneous affectively-driven behavior such as acts of good or bad citizenship. In the aggregate, affective experiences contribute to the affective component of attitudes such as job satisfaction, and eventually to judgment-driven behaviors such as a decision to quit a job. Affective Events Theory seems to present a very useful framework for understanding the role of affect in the workplace.

The widespread and increasing interest in affect at work is documented by symposia and caucuses at the Academy of Management annual meetings since 1996, the formation by Neal Ashkanasy of the *Emonet* discussion group (now comprising more than 200 scholars), and the successful *First Conference on Emotions and Organizational Life* held in San Diego in 1998. This conference has resulted in the forthcoming publication of an edited collection based on the best papers from the conference (Ashkanasy, Härtel, & Zerbe, in press). A second conference is scheduled to be held in August, 2000 in Toronto.

A fuller appreciation of the range of issues to be addressed in emotion research in organizations can be gained from the “idea clusters” assembled by Wilf Zerbe through the *Emonet* e-mail discussion list (Zerbe, 1998). Zerbe developed the list of topics (see Table 1) after polling list members on their interests, current research, and perceptions of future research needs in the field of emotions in the workplace. Twenty-nine scholars provided information for this qualitative analysis of the current and future potential of the field. The ideas for dozens of dissertations may be found in the table.

It is against this background that the present Special Issue on Emotions in Organizations attracted 40 submissions from scholars around the world. These papers and proposals spanned a wide range of issues, but they also served to document how little is actually known about emotions in the workplace. The submissions could be divided into those concerned primarily with felt mood or emotion, versus those addressing publicly displayed emotion and/or the requirement to perform “emotional labor.” The former included studies tying experienced emotion to other organizational variables as either cause or effect. For instance, job and task characteristics, reward systems, performance feedback, and leader/colleague behavior were identified as potential causes of experienced emotions. Receptivity to change, job satisfaction, stress, and health were studied as possible consequences of emotional experiences in the workplace. Four of the forty

submissions reported studies that focused on the specific emotion of anger -- clearly one that scholars feel is relevant in organizations. Three addressed the measurement or effects of emotional intelligence.

Emotional labor was the most popular single topic, with ten of the forty submissions addressing this concept. Nonetheless, there are still a number of unresolved issues surrounding the measurement and definition of emotional labor. For instance, does the simple requirement to display a particular emotion (such as friendliness) really constitute emotional labor? Or is it only emotional labor if the performer feels and displays friendliness but had to work at creating those feelings (deep acting)? Or is it only emotional labor if the performer does not feel friendly but fakes friendliness (surface acting)? Or, finally, is it only true emotional labor if the performer does not feel friendly and experiences genuine dissonance or stress or inauthenticity when complying with the organization's mandate to display friendliness? Issues such as these must be resolved before the effects of emotional labor are addressed. The dominant (but not sole) view of these effects is that emotional labor is hard on people. In the vast majority of cases, however, organizations require the display of positive (cheerful, friendly) emotions. If emotional labor is defined as the gap between what one is required to display and what one really feels, how much of the supposed ill effects of emotional labor is caused by the gap itself, and how much is due to actual feelings? People who feel negative much of the time will indeed have a larger gap when required to act out positive feelings, but are any potential negative effects on physical or mental health due to the need to act, or to the fact that these individuals, for what ever reason, experience negative affect much of the time? Clearly, there is much work that needs to be done before we know the answers to these questions.

Of the forty papers and proposals submitted for this Special Issue, sixteen were selected by the editors for submission as full manuscripts, and subject to blind review by three reviewers. Eight of the sixteen were subsequently selected for revision and resubmission. Finally, six papers were chosen for inclusion in the Special Issue. We acknowledge with grateful thanks the efforts of the thirteen reviewers who assisted in the selection process.

We now turn our attention to discussion of the six papers that survived the review process to be included in this volume. These papers might be loosely categorized as to whether they concentrate on the hypothesized causes of emotional experiences, the consequences of emotional experience or display, or both cause and consequence. The first paper, “Affective States in Job Characteristics Theory” by Saavedra and Kwun, demonstrates that job characteristics are reliably related to recent mood while working. Their study showed that attributes of enriched work such as task significance and autonomy were positively related to activated pleasant affect, while task identity was negatively related to activated unpleasant affect. Skill variety was positively related to activated unpleasant affect, suggesting that it may function as a stressor at times. Further, they found that the effect of job characteristics on affect was moderated by Growth Need Strength (GNS), such that high GNS employees are particularly affectively reactive to the motivating potential of their jobs. In addition to providing support for Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) Job Characteristics Theory, these results are also consistent with the prediction of AET that stable job features such as job design are causes of affect at work (via affective events which were unmeasured in this case).

Two papers explored the causes and consequences of emotion at work simultaneously. Fitness, in “Anger in the Workplace: An Emotional Script Approach to Anger Between Superiors, Coworkers, and Subordinates,” presents a richly evocative

analysis of major anger events as later recalled by participants. Different types of events seemed to trigger anger for individuals of different power positions. Superiors were most often angered by rule violations and incompetence on the part of subordinates. Peers, in contrast, were angered by rule violations (failing to act as one “should,” or failing to carry one’s share of the load). Finally, subordinates were angered by what they saw as unjust treatment by more powerful others. Responses to anger also varied by organizational position. Superiors were more likely to confront the target of their anger, while subordinates were more likely to withdraw and avoid confrontation. The consequences of this behavior were that superiors were more likely to feel that the anger incident had been successfully resolved, while subordinates were likely to harbor continuing resentment or even hatred toward the powerful target of their anger. Fitness concludes that relative power plays an important role in the anger scripts played out in dyads within organizations.

Schaubroeck and Jones explore “Antecedents of Workplace Emotional Labor Dimensions and Moderators of Their Effects on Physical Symptoms.” This thoughtful paper makes a substantial contribution by treating emotional labor as a perceptual variable and exploring some of the individual differences and objective role characteristics that influence perceptions of emotional labor. Further, the authors distinguish between role requirements to display positive emotion, and role requirements to suppress the display of negative emotions. These two dimensions have somewhat different causes and effects, though both are positively correlated with physical symptoms. Further analyses revealed that demands to display positive emotion are harmless among individuals who identify strongly with the job or organization, but are associated with increased physical symptoms for those low on job involvement or organizational identification. Demands to suppress negative emotions are particularly harmful to the health of individuals who are high on

negative affectivity, and thus presumably have to work harder to hide their more frequent and intense negative feelings.

The remaining three papers all focus on outcomes of emotional experience or display on the self or others. Fisher explores the relationship between real time mood and emotion while working, measured up to fifty times per respondent, and overall job satisfaction. Affective Events Theory suggests that affective experiences should accumulate to contribute to the affective component of job attitudes, such that measures of real time emotion should predict scores on standard measures of job satisfaction. This was, in fact, found to be the case, though the correlations were not especially strong when verbal/cognitive measures of satisfaction were used. Fisher suggests that most measures of satisfaction are weighted toward cognitive appraisals of the job rather than the affective experience of working on a job. She suggests a need to study further the causes and consequences of emotional experiences while working, and to develop measures which capture affect while working as distinct from cognitive evaluation of job features.

Fox and Spector put the concept of emotional intelligence to work in the interview context. They ask about the extent to which emotional dispositions and competencies influence interviewer judgments of candidate likability, similarity, and hireability. The answer, they found, is that positive affectivity is a substantial contributor to interviewer judgments, as are test scores on general intelligence and practical intelligence. Some of the other emotional intelligence measures were weakly related to judgments. While the results for emotional variables were not as pervasive as one might like, there are still substantial unresolved issues in the conceptualisation and measurement of emotional intelligence. These researchers have posed an interesting question that warrants further investigation using other indicators of emotional intelligence. If their results are confirmed and extended, we will then need to ask whether the effect of emotional

intelligence and affective disposition on interviewer judgments constitutes bias, or whether this effect contributes valid variance in predicting interpersonal aspects of job performance.

Finally, Lewis investigates the influence of a leader's display of either sadness or anger on follower emotional responses. This study raises very interesting questions that clearly need a great deal more research. Might it be best, for instance, for leaders to display anger rather than neutrality if they wish to galvanise organization members to action? Is the display of sadness dysfunctional in that it leads to low arousal and perhaps helplessness on the part of subordinates? Additional research on the mechanisms by which leaders' emotional displays impact followers is also needed. The impact may lie in the direct contagion of emotion, or via a more cognitive route wherein the leader's displayed emotion is taken as information to assist in interpreting what may be an otherwise ambiguous situation for the organization. This paper also explores the impact of leader displayed emotion on follower judgments of leader effectiveness. There are interesting gender differences, such that the display of any negative emotion (anger or sadness) is seen as less acceptable than neutral affect for female leaders, while the display of passive negative emotion (sadness) undermines effectiveness ratings of male leaders compared to either neutrality or anger.

In summary, the articles in the Special Issue constitute a highly varied selection of studies of the role of emotion in organizational settings. These studies showcase an equally wide variety of methodologies. As can be seen from Table 1, however, the range of issues that can be researched in this exciting new field is much wider than can be represented in a single journal issue. Thus, while the studies reported here provide interesting and important findings, and significantly progress our understanding of the role of emotions in organizations, there is clearly scope for a great deal of further research.

Finally, we wish that we could have included more of the research that we read in the initial forty proposals submitted for this issue of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. Fortunately, there are sure to be numerous other outlets for this research as it becomes ever more clear that the study of emotions in organizational settings constitutes a valid and important area; one that has been neglected for far too long. At the time we are writing this, for example, we are aware of five books in various stages of preparation, and two other journal special issues (*Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* and *Human Resource Management Review*). The portents are good for researchers who wish to push the boundaries further in the study of emotions in organizational settings. We hope that the papers in this Special Issue serve to encourage further research into this exciting field.

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Table 1: Idea Clusters for Research on Emotions at Work*

Determinants of Emotions**Individual Differences (in the experience and display of emotions, dispositional affect)****Self-Processes in the Experience of Emotion (self-discrepancy, self-evaluation, use of scripts in emotion processing)**

- Situational Determinants of Emotion (work environment and interpersonal triggers of emotion, affective events, hassles and uplifts)

Nature and Description of Emotions**Definition (moods versus emotions, affect versus cognition, taxonomy of emotions)**

- Measurement (measuring emotional labor, measuring emotional intelligence, measuring displayed emotions, measuring affect in real time versus retrospectively, dimensionality of affective experience)
- Accuracy of Perception of Emotion (in self and others)
- Interplay of Emotion and Cognition
- Normative Approaches (why do we deny the existence of emotion at work, how can we harness the power of emotion, etc.)

Organizational Level Processes and Effects of Emotion**Organizational Requirements for Emotions or Emotional Display**

- Role of Emotion in Culture, Climate, Socialisation, Organizational Identity/Cohesion, and Organizational Communication

Group and Team Level Processes and Effects of Emotion**Collective Emotion, Emotional Contagion****Group Affective Tone, Impact of Individual Emotional Dispositions on Team Outcomes****Individual Level Processes and Effects of Emotion**

- Cross-cultural and Gender Effects in Felt/Displayed/Expected emotion
 - Emotion and the Sensemaking Process
 - Impression Management and the Display of Emotions not Felt
 - Decision Making (role of affect in judgment, framing, ethical decision making, etc.)
 - Power (as an influence on emotions felt and displayed)
 - Feedback (role of emotion in the giving and receiving of feedback, affect or emotional awareness as mediators of responses to feedback)
 - Effects of Emotion on Performance (and of performance on emotion)
 - Effects of Emotions on Attitudes (satisfaction, organizational commitment, etc.)
 - Effects of Emotions on Well-being, Stress, and Health
 - Effects of Displayed Emotion on Customers/Clients
 - Effects of Emotional Labor on Service Providers
 - Effects of Emotion in Interpersonal Judgment Situations (e.g., interviews)
 - Causes and Consequences of Specific Emotions (anger, shame, envy, jealousy, etc.)
 - Emotion in Non-traditional Work (teleworking, virtual organizations, etc.)
 - Role of Arousal and Pleasantness in the Effects of Mood.
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*from Zerbe (1997)