

**EMOTIONAL LABOR AND ITS CORRELATES IN VOICE-TO-VOICE  
SERVICE INTERACTIONS: THE CONTEXT OF CALL CENTERS**

**By**

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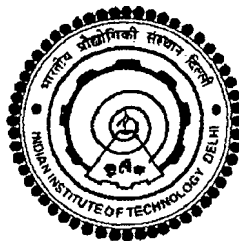
**Department of Management Studies**

**Submitted**

**In fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**To the**



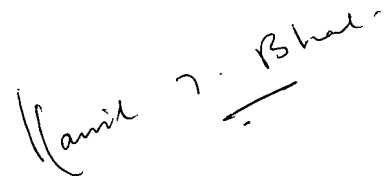
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## CERTIFICATE

The thesis titled “**Emotional Labor and its Correlates in Voice-to-Voice Service Interactions: The Context of Call Centers**”, being submitted by **Tuheena Mukherjee** to the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi, for the award of the degree of **Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)**, is a record of bonafide research work carried out by her. She has worked under my supervision, and has fulfilled the requirements for the submission of this thesis, which has attained the standard required for Ph.D. degree of the Institute. The results presented in this thesis have not been submitted elsewhere for award of any degree or diploma.

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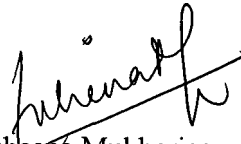
A famous verse, in Hindi, by a noted poet of India, Kabir, goes, *Guru Govind dou khade, Kake Lagoo Pae, Balihari Guru Apne, Govind Diyo Bataye*, meaning, if you meet both God and your mentor at the same time and one is in dilemma about whom to pay respect first (touch their feet), God himself says that it has to be your teacher/mentor. This quote aptly suits my mentor, philosopher and guide, Prof. Kanika T. Bhal. The creation of this research work was undoubtedly an impossible mission, without her guidance. My deepest love and gratitude towards her, is almost indescribable.

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Tuheena Mukherjee

## ABSTRACT

The realization that employee emotions could be productive for an organization gave birth to the concept of emotional labor. The work which revolutionized the use of emotions at the work place was done by Arlie Hochschild (1983), who coined the term emotional labor and explained it as emotional resource that fulfils commercial purposes of organizations. Though the genesis of the concept is in the realm of Sociology (Hochschild, herself being one), emotional labor has been subsequently studied in diverse disciplines like psychology and management science.

Emotional labor is a salient feature of service industry, specifically of employee-customer interactions. These customer-employee (agent) interactions can happen either through face-to-face interactions or through voice-to-voice interactions. With the changes on the technological front (Singhal & Chatterjee, 2006), services have emerged as a key driver and most service interactions thrive on emotional labor. Its presence has been widely studied in the face-to-face interactions (Henning-Thurau, Paul, Groth, & Gremler, 2006; Dallimore, Sparks, & Butcher, 2007), but its presence in the contemporary forms of service industries, which deliver services through call centers via voice-to-voice mode, has been limited (Kinman, 2009; Rupp & Spencer, 2006). Customer encounters in call centers are highly emotionally laden and require manipulation of emotions (emotional labor). The literature on call centers has mainly focused on the dismal propositions and consequences like stress, monotony, boredom (Baumgartner, Good, & Udris, 2002; Holdsworth & Cartwright, 2003) which significantly harm the psychological well being of the employees (Grebner, Semmer, Faso, Gut, Kalin, & Elfering, 2003; Holman, 2002). However, literature and research on emotional labor in the context of call centers is limited (Kinman, 2009). Hence, looking at the relevance of the context and the presence of emotional labor, this research is an attempt to explore the correlates and develop a psycho-social understanding of emotional labor.

In order to understand the concept of emotional labor in totality, focus is on antecedents and consequences. The antecedents in emotional labor literature have primarily focused at two levels i.e. individual level dispositional factors (Diefendorff, Gosserand, & Croyle, 2005; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000) and organizational level factors (Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand 2005) i.e. organizational demands from emotion related jobs. However, a third level of antecedent, relevant to in the service industries, is the customer level variables which have been relatively less explored. Literature on emotional labor also states various consequences for the employees like burnout, emotional dissonance and self esteem (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2003). Emotional labor is primarily done for the customers and it is equally important to assess its impact on customer reactions. However, research focusing on customer reactions is also limited.

The concept of emotional labor has had ethical/ moral undertones (Hochschild, 1983) too. Though some research has hinted at the ethicality of emotional labor (Steinberg & Figart, 1999), empirical studies in the area have been lacking. The normative value attached to the term calls for investigating it from an ethical viewpoint too. Hence there were certain research gaps that were identified before taking up the present research work. Firstly, our review reveals that most of the studies on emotional labor have been done from functional and descriptive approaches. Despite a felt need to study emotional labor from an ethical/moral (Normative) perspective, the area is singularly lacking in systematic studies. Secondly, most of the studies have looked at the impact of emotional labor on service providers (employees). Empirical studies on its impact on service recipient (customer) have been scant. Thirdly, call centers in particular are characterized by high turnover rates; little effort has been made to relate it to issues of emotional labor. Fourthly, several call centers in India provide off-shore services, which require cross-cultural interactions which are a challenge for the organizations (Tavakoli, Keenan, & Karanovic, 2003). Service providers' social intelligence (Cultural Quotient) may be an important factor in service delivery, which

has been a neglected area. Fifthly, factors impacting emotional labor in call centers can be seen occurring at 3 levels - individual, organizational and customer. With few exceptions, (Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Henning-Thurau. et. al, 2006), literature is sparse on customer level variables.

### **Research Objectives**

The present research studies the phenomenon of emotional labor both from functional and normative perspectives. The present research had the following three broad objectives.

1. To study the individual, organizational and agent-customer interactional level determinants of emotional labor.
2. To study the agent and customer related outcomes of emotional labor.
3. To study the perceived ethicality and cognitive moral logics of emotional labor.

These objectives were achieved through four studies. The first two studies were experimental and the third one was survey based. The last study, exploring ethicality and cognitive logics was qualitative in nature.

The first study was 2X2 within group repeated measures experimental study, which was designed to study the impact of customer moods on the strategies of emotional labor; surface acting and deep acting. The study also attempted to assess the psychological well-being, (through stress and self esteem) of the service agent as a consequence of customer moods. The results indicate that agents indulge in surface acting for angry customers. The male angry customers created most threatening effect on the well-being of male service agents creating highest level of stress and lowest level of self esteem. In deep acting, neither mood nor gender of agent were significant factor. This implies that external factors may not be relevant for those who indulge in deep acting.

The second study assessed the impact of authentic service delivery (assessed in part, in terms of surface and deep acting) on customer reactions, in terms of, customer-agent rapport, customer affect, customer satisfaction and future buying intentions. This study was

done using between group experimental design. Results indicate that high authentic service delivery leads to customer-employee rapport, which leads to positive customer affect and customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is also an outcome of positive customer affect, which predicts future buying intentions of the customers. The study showed that authentic service delivery (deep acting) leads to positive outcomes of customer response (Tan, Foo, & Kwek, 2004), a useful result for design of HR policies and practices in an organization.

The third study was an industry based survey aimed to assess the antecedents and consequences of emotional labor in a real life setting. Gender, emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence were taken as individual level determinants, whereas organizational display rules and interaction characteristics were taken as organizational determinants of emotional labor (assessed as surface acting and deep acting). Consequences of emotional labor were assessed as emotional dissonance, burnout, self esteem, stress and turnover intentions of the employees (service agents). The study was carried out on the frontline agents engaged in promotional services in call centers of India. The results indicate that emotional intelligence emerged the most significant dispositional predictor of emotional labor which was negatively related to surface and positively related to deep acting. From the organizational perspective, highly routine tasks led to surface acting. The outcomes of emotional labor emerged at two levels. Surface-acting as a strategy of emotional labor led to emotional dissonance, depersonalization and emotional exhaustion for the service agent as first level immediate outcomes. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most significant predictor for the second level outcomes, like stress and intentions to quit. Deep acting though lead to emotional dissonance but the magnitude was lower compared to surface acting. Deep acting also led to personal accomplishment (experienced by the service agents) which further reduced stress levels and positively impacted self esteem. In summary, surface acting may be responsible for the negative consequences for the employees, deep acting, as a mechanism of emotional labor, actually leads to positive ones.

The last study aimed at studying objective 3 i.e. exploring the ethical aspects of emotional labor. This was a vignette based study where the participants were given an introduction to the nature of job that call center agents indulge in and they were asked to evaluate the situation. The results revealed that respondents did not perceive unethical as the opposite of ethical, but preferred to use 'not unethical' as the opposite of unethical. It seems like two sets of factors are operational for considering emotional labor as ethical or unethical. Respondents provided cognitive moral logics and judged the situation as unethical because it threatened the employee dignity and was unjust to the employee. Those who did not consider it unethical were of the view that emotional labor was a part of job description. Normative logics were used both for considering emotional labor as ethical or not ethical.

Future studies need to explore the issues in detail real life settings. Call center agents deal with the customers in different situations, typically, they could be promotional or recovery. Our study focuses on promotional interactions, future studies might focus on recovery interactions too.