

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN RELATIONAL ENERGY, EMOTIONAL LABOR, AND COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY AMONG FLIGHT ATTENDANTS

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The primary aim of the civil aviation industry is to work for the safety and comfort of their clients and customers. This study concentrated on the frontline employees of the aviation industry, the flight attendants who are paid to smile. Energy at workplace is a fairly new concept and is an organisational resource which help employee attain their goals. The aim of the study was to establish the relationship between relational energy and the major issue of emotional labor (deep acting and surface acting) and cognitive flexibility among flight attendants. A correlational research design was used to study the relationship among 39 flight attendants in India. The study revealed that relational energy was positively related to deep acting. Also, relational energy proved to be a significant predictor of deep acting. However, no statistically significant relationships were found between relational energy and surface acting and also between relational energy and cognitive flexibility.

The work culture in general has seen a shift from working in industries to the ones that include working for people. The civil aviation industry is one such sectors whose primary aim is to work for the safety and comfort of their clients and customers. The crew members in the civil aviation industry include pilots, flight attendants, air traffic controllers, and baggage and maintenance personnel. In any airline industry the frontline workers are the flight attendants also called the cabin crew members. Although the job of the flight attendants seems to be glamorous and appealing, it is very strenuous and taxing. As the cabin attendants are the first source for the clients and customers to form an impression about the airline company, it becomes imperative for the cabin attendants to deliver the best possible services. In this bargain, the well-being of the cabin crew members are often neglected.

Issues Experienced by Flight Crew

Some of the leading issues in the aviation industry are interpersonal and communication errors (Avis, 2012). Emotional dynamics also lead to malfunction in communications (Brown & Moren, 2003). As reported by Avis in 2012, 37% of the aviation employees primarily the pilots, cabin crew, and ground employees do not communicate the relevant information to other crew members thereby resulting in major mishaps. Brown and Moren (2003) reported that the sterile cock-pit rule also leads to major frustrations between the pilot and the flight attendants. Some of the emotions that the crew members face are that of shame, excitement, awkwardness and inhibitions that seem to adversely affect their performance (Avis, 2012). Inconsistent work schedules, different time zones at work, food habits, variable altitudes, attitudes of the aviation employees, differences in culture and continuous interactions with clients and customers lead to mental and physical exhaustion.

Emotional Labor

Flight attendants belong to the niche group of population who are paid to smile (Hochschild, 2003). No matter what the flight attendant is going through on actuality their work situation demands them to smile and maintain a positive demeanour. Hochschild (1983) called this as Emotional Labor (EL) in 1983. She defined Emotional Labour as managing one's feelings to produce a publicly acknowledged facial and bodily demonstration of emotions. When there is an incongruence in the emotions felt and emotions exhibited, there is emotion dissonance (1983).

Forms of emotional labor. According to Hochschild (1983), there are two forms of emotional labor. They are surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves acting or expressing an emotion on the surface without actually feeling them (Hochschild, 1983). Deep acting involves modifying feeling to match the organizationally demanded emotion (Hochschild, 1983). Though both the types of emotional labour signify dissimilar intensions they are internally false. That is, surface acting involves managing the overt expressions to abide by the organizational display rules, while deep acting consists of managing the underlying emotions to genuinely feel the emotion demanded by the display rules (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983).

Relational Energy

Energy at workplace is a fairly new concept. As cited by Owen, Baker, Sumpter and Cameron in 2015, the capacity of the employee's motivation and action is influenced by the energy at work. They cited that energy is an organisational resource which help employee attain their goals. Absence of energy results in stress, burnout, and disengagement (Sonnetag, Kuttler, & Fritz, 2010; Schaufeli, Bakker, & Van Rhenen, 2009;

Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner, & Schaufeli, 2001). Research reveals that work performance levels are improved if individuals are surrounded by energised people (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004). Owens et al. (2015) defined relational energy (RE) as a “heightened level of psychological resourcefulness generated from interpersonal interactions that enhances one’s capacity to do work” (p 37).

Cognitive Flexibility

According to Martin and Rubin (1995, p 623), “Cognitive flexibility refers to a person’s (a) awareness that in any given situation there are options and alternatives available, (b) willingness to be flexible and adapt to the situation, and (c) self-efficacy in being flexible”. Individuals who acknowledge more possible adjustments are more cognitively flexible than the counterparts.

In 2005, Canas defined cognitive flexibility as the individual’s ability to change and adapt the strategies of cognitive processing to face unpredictable and new situations in the environment. When faced with any new problem, individuals with higher cognitive flexibility will be able to consider various alternatives and will outperform the others with lower cognitive flexibility (Stewin & Anderson, 1974). It has been reported that more an individual is cognitively flexible, better will be his/her ability to optimise his/her potential (Bergland, 2015). According to Bergland (2015), previous studies showed that higher levels of cognitive flexibility are directly related to resilience in adulthood, better reading capabilities of children, and higher quality of life in older age. The neurological mechanics of cognitive flexibility are directly linked to multitasking executive functions.

Rationale of the Study

Relational energy being a relatively new concept of energy at work, the empirical studies are scanty. Therefore, the researcher tried to fill in the gap by carrying out further exploration of relational energy and contribute to the theory. According to conservation of energy theory, lack of resources at work lead to burnout (Owen et al., 2015). And enhanced psychological resources which result from relational energy at work would enhance coping with stressors at work, burnout and lead to well-being at work. Therefore, the researcher aimed to study and verify if better relational energy at work result in lower emotional labor which causes burnout, thereby, filling the research gap.

Also, previous research have shown the influence of emotions over cognitive flexibility but no published research has tried to find if emotional labor (surface and deep acting) has any relation with the flexibility of cognition. Cognitive flexibility has also shown to be effective in interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. This study tried to fill the gap by investigating if interaction with the human resources at work and their psychological exchange have any relation with cognitive flexibility. Positive affect has proved to be better predictor of cognitive flexibility. Therefore, the researcher aimed to study if emotional labor (surface and deep acting), which is related to positive and negative affect is also related to cognitive flexibility.

Objectives of the Study

To study the relationship between relational energy, emotional labor (surface acting and deep acting) and cognitive flexibility.

Hypotheses of the Study

- H(1). There is no relationship between relational energy and surface acting.
- H(2). There is no relationship between relational energy and deep acting.
- H(3). There is no relationship between relational energy and cognitive flexibility.
- H(4). There is no relationship between cognitive flexibility and surface acting.
- H(5). There is no relationship between cognitive flexibility and deep acting.

Tools Used in the Study

Relational energy Scale. This scale was developed by Owens et al. 2015. There are five items which are measured on a 7-point Likert scale (1-strongly disagree to 7-strongly agree). The reliability of this scale is 0.96.

Emotional labor Scale. This scale was developed by Brotheridge and Lee in 2003. It is a 5 point Likert scale with 14 items. The reliability of this scale is 0.89.

Cognitive flexibility Scale. This scale was developed by Martin and Rubin in 1995. It is a 6-point rating scale with 12 items. The reliability of the ale is 0.83.

Procedure. An online survey was carried out. Individuals who gave their consent to participate in the study were included. The online questionnaire comprised of the consent form, demographic checklist, Relational Energy Scale, the Emotional Labor Scale, and the Cognitive Flexibility Scale. 39 participants responded to the online survey. The data gathered was subjected to appropriate statistical analysis using SPSS 21. Subject matter experts, academic experts and cabin crew members were asked to give their feedback on the same.

Results and Discussion

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Under Study.

Variable	Total	Mean	Std. Deviation
Relational Energy	39	23.90	8.178
Cognitive Flexibility	39	51.56	6.648
Deep Acting	39	9.44	3.119
Surface Acting	39	44.46	10.918

Table 3.

Table 2.

Findings Based on Correlation Analysis.

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Relational Energy				
2. Deep Acting	0.632**			
3. Surface Acting	0.221			
4. Cognitive Flexibility	0.027	0.038	0.230	

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Findings Based on Regression Analysis.

Variable	R	R2	F	Sig.
Relational Energy				
Deep Acting	0.585	0.343	19.294	0.000

The data gathered was subjected to Shapiro-Wilk normality test and it was found that the data for emotional labor (deep acting and surface acting) was normally distributed. However, the data for relational energy and cognitive flexibility was not normally distributed. The descriptive analysis of the data is displayed in Table 1.

To check hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, Spearman's correlation was used respectively. From Table 2 it is seen that a significant positive relationship was found between relational energy and deep acting. However no statistical significant relationship was found in testing hypotheses 1, 3, 4, and 5. Table 3 displays the Regression analysis between relational energy and deep acting. The table reveals that relational energy is a significant predictor of deep acting.

From the analysis we can conclude that the exchange of psychological resources (relational energy) that take place at work increases the flight attendants to deep act. Previous research has shown a positive relationship between deep acting and variables like job performance (Bursali, Bagci, & Kok, 2013), employee creativity and role prescribed customer service performance (C. Liu, X. Liu, & Geng, 2013). The result also supports the precious findings that work performance are improved when surrounded by energised people (Baker, Cross, & Wooten, 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004). Therefore, relational energy at work should be encouraged during Crew Resource Management in the Aviation industry and practised among colleagues so that a healthy environment at work is maintained and thereby help the flight attendants to ward off the negative consequences related to emotional labor at work.

Scope of the Study

The insignificant relationships with regard to the other hypotheses could be because of the fact that the data was gathered from only 39 flight attendants in India, which may not be adequate to represent the population. Also, all the tools used in the study were self-report measures and hence there is a probability of personal bias in their responses and also the accuracy of retrospective accounts are questionable in self reports. Hence, to gain more interesting insights, a qualitative analysis would be adopted by the researcher in the future.

From the feedback gathered by the subject matter experts it was observed that, the relational energy scale which had five items measured the psychological exchange that take place between two specific individuals at work. As the job of the flight attendants require them to go on rotation with no specific group of batch mates or colleagues on a regular basis, this may cause a discrepancy in the way they responded to the items. Therefore, there is a scope for adaptation of the relational energy scale to suit the specific sample of this study and come out with interesting findings that can contribute to the literature of Aviation Psychology and also help the Aviation industry at large.

Ethical Consideration

1. Participants were included in the study only after their consent was taken.
2. Participants had the liberty to withdraw from the study at any point they want.
3. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained.
4. Participants were given the option to ask for their results if they were willing to know.
5. No injury or harm of any nature was meted out to the participants during the research.

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