

Surface Acting and Deep Acting: Emotional Labor and Burnout in Firefighters

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Objective: To investigate possible differential effects of two types of emotional labor such as surface acting and deep acting on burnout among firefighters.

Background: As first responders, firefighters must manage traumatic scenarios which require *emotional labor*, a psychosocial stressor known to be related to burnout in human service work. Emotional labor, a concept developed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild, refers to the regulation of emotions working people perform as part of their job or to promote organizational goals. There are several types of emotional labor potentially applicable to firefighters as human service workers. The literature suggests that professional human service workers, such as nurses, social workers, or firefighters/paramedics, are more likely to “deep act” when performing emotional labor since they internalize the appropriate display of emotion as part of their professional role. Those firefighters more likely to “surface act” are more likely to experience burnout, while “deep acting” may be associated with lower burnout. We will also investigate whether reporting specialized training as helpful to the management of emotions while in the field could modify the association between emotional labor and burnout.

Methods: A cross-sectional, pilot web survey of approximately 200 firefighters (FF's) in a Southern California regional organization was conducted in October 2009 (96% male, 42.5 + 9.8 years). Emotional labor was measured using two well-validated sub-scales from the literature (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002); “surface acting” (2 items) measuring how individuals “put on an appearance” or “hide genuine emotions” during service encounters, and “deep acting” (2 items) measuring how individuals “easily express the right emotions” and “actually feel emotions necessary for the job.” We also measured the extent to which training offered by the organization helps cope with the demands of emotional labor with 1 item; “My training helps me show the appropriate emotions in emergency situations.” Burnout was measured using the three components of the Maslach Burnout Inventory, emotional exhaustion, depersonalization/cynicism, and professional accomplishment. Bivariate and multivariate regression analyses were conducted.

Results: Among these firefighters, 32% reported medium-high levels of emotional exhaustion and 25% reported medium-high levels of depersonalization/cynicism. Eighty-three percent reported high professional accomplishment on the job. Surface acting was correlated negatively with “deep acting” ($r = -.24$, $p.001$) as expected, and was not significantly associated with training. However, “deep acting” was strongly negatively correlated with training ($r = -.25$, $p.000$), 83% of those who reported training to be least helpful, performed high on “deep acting.”

Bivariate correlations showed that “surface acting” was positively associated with emotional exhaustion ($r = .24$, $p.001$) and depersonalization ($r = .19$, $p.009$). “Deep acting” was negatively associated with all three components, but not significantly. The item measuring “training” was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -.15$, $p.039$) and depersonalization ($r = -.22$, $p.030$), and positively associated with professional accomplishment ($r = .15$, $p.038$).

In multivariate logistic regression analyses, controlling for age, rank, education, and marital status, we found that only “surface acting” (above median = 1) was significantly associated with emotional exhaustion (OR 2.29, p.026, CI 1.10-4.78). Deep-acting was not significantly associated with any of the burnout domains. When the item on “training” was entered into this model, the effect of “surface acting” on emotional exhaustion was reduced slightly (OR 2.22, p.035, CI 1.06-4.67), and rank (being a Captain or higher) became significantly associated with emotional exhaustion (OR 2.22, p.035, CI 1.05-4.70)

Conclusions: The “surface acting” component of emotional labor is associated with emotional exhaustion in these firefighters. “Deep acting” was associated with lower emotional exhaustion but was not significant in this study population. The reported helpfulness of training in managing emotions during emergency situations appears to be health protective or associated with lower burnout, particularly emotional exhaustion. Further study of emotional labor and the possibility of enhancing the training of firefighters, particularly those who report high “surface acting” will be studied in a larger funded project underway.

Key words: emotional labor, burnout, firefighters.