

Feeling and smiling



ROB BRINER *gives an overview of what we currently know about emotion in the workplace.*

WORK, like any other domain of human activity, both produces and is influenced by emotion. We may, for example, feel envious of a co-worker's success, proud and delighted when we complete a difficult and important task, embarrassed about a barely-disguised failure, or angry if a colleague lets us down at a particularly crucial moment.

It is, therefore, unfortunate and curious that in conceptualising and researching how people feel at work, psychologists have almost completely ignored emotion. Indeed, it has become something of a ritual for those who do write about the psychology of emotion at work to introduce the topic by expressing regret and surprise at the 'dearth' or 'paucity' of systematic knowledge (e.g. Fineman, 1996; Pekrun & Frese, 1992).

Nothing more than feelings?
So an intriguing question is: Why haven't psychologists paid more attention to the role of emotion at work? There are at least three possible answers.

First, feelings are perhaps seen as unimportant or irrelevant to work activity. This view does appear to have some currency. Workplaces are, or are supposed to be, rational and goal-oriented organisations which exist only to provide products or services. The terms 'business-like' and 'professional', for example, seem to specifically exclude emotion and imply that emotion is something which might get in the way of work activities.

So from this perspective, emotions are viewed as little more than feelings that are not particularly relevant to work and are not therefore a legitimate topic for investigation. This view does not, of course, stand up to even fairly superficial scrutiny, but may partly account for both work organisations' and psychologists' apparent reluctance to think about emotion in work contexts.

A second reason for this lack of focus is the impression held by many that affective experience has already been extensively researched in studies of job stress and satisfaction. It certainly is the case that psychologists have intensively studied the causes and consequences of stress and satisfaction. However, it is not clear that these constructs are valid ways of conceptualising feelings. The problem is that theory and research in these areas often amount to little more than trying to understand why people may — in a very general sense — report 'feeling good' or 'feeling bad' in relation to their work. This is a somewhat limited 'nice or nasty' approach to affect.

While there may be some value in attempting to understand the causes and consequences of general positive or negative feelings, this obviously tells us little

about more specific affective experiences such as moods or emotions.

Last, emotions are simply much more difficult to study than the non-specific and unidimensional notions of stress and satisfaction. Stress and satisfaction are often measured using remarkably simple scales in self-report questionnaires. A single score is obtained, supposedly representing the level of stress or satisfaction. Because emotions tend to be situational, short-lived and quite specific (see below), they cannot so easily be assessed. This appears to have acted as a deterrent to researchers, who often prefer to adopt methodologies on the basis of their usability rather than usefulness.

What are emotions?

There are, then, a number of reasons why psychologists have ignored the role of emotion at work. But what do we mean by emotions? Predictably, and like many other psychological constructs, they elude straightforward definition or description. Four factors, however, seem to play a role (Parkinson, 1995): (1) situational cognitive appraisal (e.g. an evaluation of threat or harm in the situation); (2) change in action tendencies (e.g. approach or avoidance); (3) bodily reactions (e.g. heart rate); and (4) expressive movements (e.g. facial expression, posture).

By no means do all of these factors have to be present in order to identify emotion. Rather, they give a sense of the range of phenomena which could be involved. Another way of describing what emotions are is to contrast them with another affective experience: mood.

Parkinson *et al.* (1996) identify six dimensions on which mood and emotion can be contrasted. Relative to mood, emotion is shorter term (duration), has rapid onset and is episodic (time pattern), is stronger (intensity), caused by a specific event (causation), provides information about the situation (function), and is focused on a specific object (directedness). Most important in this context is that emotions

and to be rather specific reactions to particular events that are relatively intense and short term. This would include, for example, feelings such as guilt, envy, surprise, excitement, rage or resentment.

Emotion at the heart of work

Why should we study emotion at work? One obvious but somewhat less than compelling reason is that we don't already, and therefore there is a gap in our knowledge which should be filled. More convincing reasons can be found when we consider the central role of emotion in almost all the topics of interest to organisational psychologists such as training, careers, motivation, job design and work attitudes.

The importance of emotion is, of course, quite unsurprising given the key role of the closely-related phenomenon of mood — for example, sadness, anxiety and contentment — in many aspects of information processing and social behaviour (see Parkinson *et al.*, 1996), and the cognitive and behavioural factors involved in emotion discussed above.

In the case of work motivation, for example, George and Brief (1996) argue that emotions, both positive and negative, are central in determining how much attention and effort we direct towards each of our numerous work goals. Affective events theory (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996) posits that people's perceptions of and attitudes toward work conditions are formed by their emotional reactions to particular work events, rather than by general and somewhat vague judgements about job characteristics.

Also, if we want to understand the ways in which work can affect people's psychological well-being, this is likely to be better achieved through examining specific emotions such as anger, resentment and pride, rather than general notions of stress and satisfaction (Briner, 1997).

Example 1 provides a simple illustration of the ways in which a sequence of work emotions, thoughts and behaviours unfold over time. It shows how emotion, thought and behaviour are reciprocally related.

Emotion is, then, a fundamental aspect of much of what people do at work. It is interesting to study in its own right, but also helps to elaborate our understanding of many additional areas of psychological research in the workplace.

The incidence of emotion

We know almost nothing about how often and with what intensity different emotions

EXAMPLE 1

A sequence of work emotions, thoughts and behaviours

- Jane is asked to carry out a difficult project, usually given only to more experienced colleagues. She feels valued, flattered and trusted — also a little worried.
- While working hard on the project her emotions range from excitement and elation to fear and frustration.
- She completes the task well and feels proud and relieved.
- Jane tells her boss and shows her completed work.
- Boss gives no thanks or praise and picks out a trivial error.
- She then feels resentful and angry and thinks that she will never again 'put herself out' for her boss. Also feels exploited.
- Thinks about looking for another job.
- Doesn't volunteer to do additional tasks any more.
- Starts to feel sad and disappointed.
- Updates her CV and regularly starts looking at job advertisements.

are experienced at work. While there is a little research, for example, on boredom (Fisher, 1993), aesthetic feelings (Sandelands & Buckner, 1989), and flow experiences in which people become absorbed in highly-demanding tasks requiring high levels of skill (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 1988), this work does not add up to anything approaching a comprehensive picture.

It does seem likely that a number of factors will influence the kinds of emotions people experience at work, such as individual differences, organisation type and work role. I shall now consider some of the ways in which roles and organisations make emotional demands of their employees.

Emotion management

'When you look across the bar, you're looking across the footlights. You've got to put on an act. You may feel like taking an overdose but you mustn't let it show — that's not what the customers are here for ... Just bear in mind what I've told you

and smile! A natural smile at all times. (Alec Gilroy offering advice to a new member of the bar staff at the Rovers Return, Coronation Street, 17 September 1990.)' (Parkinson, 1991, p.420.)

Since the pioneering study by Hochschild (1983) of flight attendants, the ways in which roles demand the expression of emotion has been studied — largely from sociological and anthropological perspectives — in a number of other occupations. These include criminal interrogators and debt collectors (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991; Sutton, 1991), supermarket cashiers (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990; Sutton & Rafaeli, 1988), trainee hairdressers (Parkinson, 1991), ride operators in Disneyland (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989) and McDonald's counter servers (Leidner, 1993).

As Alec Gilroy suggests, the expression of emotion is of utmost importance in service occupations. These expressions are intended and marketed as natural, genuine and authentic displays of real emotions: '... Air Canada staff "aren't just trained to be courteous, they're born that way".' (Parkinson, 1991, p.420); 'On PSA our smiles are not just painted on [USA airline jingle]' (Hochschild, 1983, p.89). Almost all occupations, except perhaps the most solitary, include some demands for emotional expression.

Hochschild (1983) calls such work emotional labour and defines it as 'the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display; emotional labour is sold for a wage and therefore has exchange value' (p.7). A key aspect of emotional labour, therefore, is that it has exchange value. One is paid or rewarded for doing it, and in many cases, the display of certain emotions is a job

EXAMPLE 2

Display and feeling rules in company mission statements

'An environment that rewards achievement, enthusiasm, and team spirit ...' (DHL Worldwide Express)

'We will be helpful, courteous ... to each other' (Federal Express)

'We must treat each other with trust and respect' (Ford UK)

'Enjoy your work, and always brighten your working atmosphere' (Honda)

'... contribute as part of an energetic and enthusiastic team' (Safeway Stores)

'Those who work for it are proud of it and feel responsible for its success' (VH Smith)

'Creating an environment of professionalism, integrity and fun' (Sun Life)

'We think and act with a sense of urgency' (IBM)

requirement — the job could not be done unless the emotion was displayed. Hochschild (1983, p.4) describes the way in which trainee flight attendants are instructed in one particular emotional display: 'Now girls, I want you to go out there and really smile. Your smile is your biggest asset. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. Really smile. Really lay it on.'

Hochschild (1983) uses the metaphor of acting to answer two fundamental questions: To what extent do employees engaged in emotional labour really experience the emotions they display, and to what extent do they simply put on a show from which they remain detached? Of course, this distinction is not straightforward (see e.g. Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989), and the notion of 'real' emotions is problematic. Yet it is possible to argue, as Hochschild does, for a distinction between surface acting and deep acting.

Surface acting involves the outward display of emotion without experiencing that emotion, while deep acting involves both a display and the emotional experience. Deep acting usually involves the active invocation of 'thoughts, images, and memories to induce the associated emotion' (Ashforth & Humphry, 1993, p.93). Deep acting (or 'psyching up') at work — as in many everyday contexts — is quite an ordinary activity. Thinking about one's role (e.g. as a criminal interrogator or undertaker) can help to produce the relevant emotions demanded by the situation.

Emotional labour is thought to have both costs and benefits (Ashforth & Humphry, 1993). Obvious benefits are related to increased task performance, while less

obvious costs to individual employees have been identified by Hochschild (1983). Hochschild argues that emotional labour can have negative effects on psychological functioning, including depersonalisation, emotional numbness, and difficulties in emotional relationships outside work. However, in a study of bank and hospital employees, Wharton (1993) found that the effects of emotional labour depended on the level of employees' job autonomy, job involvement and self-monitoring abilities.

Knowing which emotions to display, like most social activities, involves norms or rules. Rafaeli & Sutton (1989, p.10) provide an example of such rules observed in a shop: 'We guarantee to give you: A Friendly Greeting — A Cheerful Smile — A Register Receipt. If we fail at one of these we will send you a \$5.00 gift certificate.' As well as explicit rules such as these, the language used in organisations helps to set the right tone for emotional display. At Disneyland (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989) and McDonald's (Leidner, 1993), for example, customers are referred to as 'guests'. It seems likely that an attempt to set the right emotional and service tone explains why UK rail passengers seem to have become 'customers'.

To what extent display rules are actually followed is likely to depend on various situational and individual factors, such as the employee's abilities and any rewards and sanctions attached to these rules. Also, although employees may have rules to follow, they can differ in the extent to which they feel that displaying emotions should be a part of their job.

The content of display rules will be influenced by, for example, culture and organisation. A good illustration of a cultural difference in display rules is described by Drakulic (1994) in an encounter with a hotel receptionist in Sofia: 'She answered my questions ... as if giving information depended on her goodwill and was not part of her job. And she did not smile.'

Another example of a possible cultural difference, in this case between Israel and the US, is provided by Rafaeli (1989, p.263): 'Customer: "In America, all the cashiers smile." Cashier: "So go to America. What do you want from me?"'

In contrast to norms or rules about the emotion we should display, feeling rules 'define what we should feel in various circumstances' (Hochschild, 1979, p.289). Nurses or teachers, for example, may be expected to actually feel caring towards their

patients and pupils; new managers may be expected to feel enthusiastic and committed to their new organisation. Selection and socialisation can be used by organisations to maintain these feeling rules.

On selecting debt collectors (Sutton, 1991, p.254), one manager commented that 'you can't be a really laid-back type of person because you won't get the results'. Indeed the use of personality testing in selection suggests that it is not simply enough in many jobs for employees to display the correct emotions, but that they must feel them too.

A great deal more is known about expressing emotion in the workplace than perhaps almost any other aspect of emotion at work. It is notable that much of this research has not been conducted by psychologists, and that it views emotion very much as a social and public phenomenon, rather than an individual and private experience (see also Parkinson, 1996).

Other emotion management demands

Organisations also place more subtle demands on employees to display or actually experience particular emotions. In return, employees may be rewarded — not directly in terms of wages, but perhaps by increases in status or greater choice about job tasks.

To give a good impression, employees who are eager for self-advancement may, like waiters trying to get tips, conform absolutely with and even exaggerate emotional displays concerning personal satisfaction with one's job, organisation and performance. For instance: 'I do really like my job, it's a great place to work, and everything's going brilliantly.' At the same time, they may totally suppress any emotion suggesting weakness or vulnerability. Again like waiters trying to get tips, while the employee's immediate co-workers may regard such displays as exaggerated and phoney, the main targets of these displays — the customers or managers — may not.

As well as these general displays, organisations also seem to encourage employees to display, and even feel, specific emotions through the use of mission statements. From *Star Trek*, one of the best-known mission statements (and one of the best-known split infinitives) also urges its workers to feel a particular emotion: 'To boldly go where no one has gone before.' Since the earliest use of mission statements in the mid-1980s, it seems that many organisations do attempt to specify what

emotions they would like their employees to feel.

Example 2 gives some instances of such mission statements. While it seems unlikely at all — or indeed any — employees will take such exhortations seriously, it does indicate the seriousness with which organisations and their managers now regard the place of emotion at work.

Once more, with feelings despite its obvious importance, we still know relatively little about emotion at work. Considerable attention has been paid to emotional expression as part of the work role, and this research has therefore been a major focus of this article. However, there is almost no research about the incidence of emotion at work, and the ways in which emotion plays a role in work behaviours.

For psychologists, there appear to be two main challenges. The first challenge is to meet the methodological demands that the study of emotions at work seems to require. When studying quite mundane processes that unfold over time, more-favoured techniques such as questionnaires or interviews seem to be of limited value. Qualitative and quantitative diary studies, experience sampling, observation, and even introspection may prove to be a more effective means of unravelling emotional processes at work.

The second challenge for psychologists is to develop theory which allows us to elaborate and explain the emotion-behaviour-cognition sequences described in Example 1. In such sequences, the straightforward cause-effect reasoning that dominates much psychology is simply not adequate. Such reasoning provides only a very partial account of the complex ways in which emotion is embedded within, influenced, and is influenced by cognitions and behaviours.

In addition, the more traditional psychological idea of emotion as internal, private psychophysiological reactions is less than helpful for understanding how the social context of workplaces both shapes and is shaped by emotions. Perhaps it is only by incorporating sociological perspectives on emotion that a more comprehensive psychological approach to emotion at work can be developed.

Increasing our understanding of emotion at work promises not only to shed light on the more traditional topics of research within organisational psychology, but also to reveal fundamental features of everyday work

experience — a feature so obvious and so mundane that it has somehow been largely ignored.

References

- Ashforth, B.E. & Humphrey, R.H. (1993). Emotional labour in service roles: The influence of identity. *Academy of Management Review*, 18, 88–115.
- Briner, R.B. (1997). Beyond stress and satisfaction: Alternative approaches to understanding psychological well-being at work. *Proceedings of The British Psychological Society Occupational Psychology Conference*, pp.95–100.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, I.S. (1988). *Optimal Experience: Psychological Studies of Flow in Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Drakulic, S. (1994). At the tender mercy of an unsmiling Sofia sphinx. *The Observer*, 24 July.
- Fineman, S. (1996). Emotion and organizing. In S.R. Clegg, C. Hardy & W.R. Nord (Eds), *Handbook of Organization Studies*. London: Sage.
- Fisher, C.D. (1993). Boredom at work: A neglected concept. *Human Relations*, 46, 395–417.
- George, J.M. & Brief, A.P. (1996). Motivational agendas in the workplace: The effects of feelings on focus of attention and work motivation. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 18, 75–109.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, 85, 551–575.
- Hochschild, A.R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast Food, Fast Talk: Service Work and the Routinization of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Parkinson, B. (1991). Emotional stylists: Strategies of expressive management among trainee hairdressers. *Cognition and Emotion*, 5, 419–434.
- Parkinson, B. (1995). *Ideas and Realities of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Parkinson, B. (1996). Emotions are social. *British Journal of Psychology*, 87, 663–683.
- Parkinson, B., Totterdell, P., Briner, R.B. & Reynolds, S. (1996). *Changing Moods: The Psychology of Mood and Mood Regulation*. London: Longman.
- Pekrun, R. & Frese, M. (1992). Emotions in work and achievement. In C.L. Cooper & I.T. Robertson (Eds), *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, Vol. 7. Chichester: Wiley.
- Rafaeli, A. (1989). When cashiers meet customers: An analysis of the role of supermarket cashiers. *Academy of Management Journal*, 32, 245–273.
- Rafaeli, A. & Sutton, R.I. (1989). The expression of emotion in organizational life. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 11, 1–42.
- Rafaeli, A. & Sutton, R.I. (1991). Emotional contrast strategies as means of social influence: Lessons from criminal interrogators and bill collectors. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34, 749–775.
- Sandelands, L.E. & Buckner, G.C. (1989). Of art and work: Aesthetic experience and the psychology of work feelings. In L.L. Cummings & B.M. Staw (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, vol. 11. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Sutton, R.I. (1991). Maintaining norms about expressed emotions: The case of bill collectors. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, 245–268.
- Sutton, R.I. & Rafaeli, A. (1988). Untangling the relationship between displayed emotions and organizational sales: The case of convenience stores. *Academy of Management Journal*, 31, 461–487.
- Van Maanen, J. & Kunda, G. (1989). 'Real Feelings': Emotional expression and organizational culture. In L.L. Cummings & B.M. Staw (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, vol. 11. Greenwich: JAI Press.
- Weiss, H.M. & Cropanzano, R. (1996). Affective events theory: A theoretical discussion of the structure, causes and consequences of affective experiences at work. *Research in Organizational Behaviour*, 18, 1–74.
- Wharton, A.S. (1993). The affective consequences of service work: Managing emotions on the job. *Work and Occupations*, 20, 205–232.

■ Dr Rob Briner is Lecturer in Organizational Psychology at the Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck College, University of London, London WC1E 7HX.
Tel: 0171 631 6755; fax: 0171 631 6750;
e-mail: r.briner@org-psych.bbk.ac.uk.