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The link between perceptions of leader emotion regulation and followers organizational commitment  
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## Abstract

**Purpose-** The aim of this study is to investigate the association between perceptions of leader emotion regulation strategies and followers' organizational commitment. In particular, this study using Social Exchange Theory as a framework examines the association between leader surface and deep acting and followers' affective, normative and continuance organizational commitment.

**Design/methodology/approach-** Survey data were collected from 323 employees of five service sector organizations in Anhui province, China. Further, PLS-SEM technique was used to perform quantitative analysis.

**Findings-** The findings suggest that leader surface acting has a negative influence on followers' affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment. In contrast, leader deep acting has a positive influence on followers' affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment.

**Practical implications-** The findings suggest that leaders should be careful in managing their affective display. They may like to improve their followers' affective commitment, normative commitment and continuance commitment by using deep acting. In contrast, leader surface acting may weaken their followers' affective commitment, normative commitment and continuance commitment.

**Originality/value-** This study extends Social Exchange Theory in the context of emotional labor by examining the link between perceptions of leader surface and deep emotional strategies and followers' affective, normative and continuance organizational commitment.

**Key words:** Leader emotional labor, surface acting, deep acting, affective organizational commitment, normative organizational commitment, continuance organizational commitment

# **The link between perceptions of leader emotion regulation and followers' organizational commitment**

## **1. Introduction**

A brief review of recent advancement in leadership associated literature along with contemporary leadership approaches for instance Transformational approach (e.g., Jin et al., 2016), Charismatic approach (e.g., Bono and Ilies, 2006), and Leader-Member Exchange (e.g., Little et al., 2016) are witnessing the potential and critical role of emotions in leadership related processes and outcomes. However, researchers studying the link between leadership and emotions have been more inclined towards investigating emotional intelligence (e.g., Walter et al., 2011), or discrete emotions and their blend (e.g., Bono and Ilies, 2006; Joseph et al., 2015). A small number of studies have empirically investigated the link between leader emotional behavior and work related outcomes for instance performance (e.g., Liang and Chi, 2013; Sadri et al., 2011). Yet, the mechanism through which emotion regulation as part of leadership role influences followers' attitudes and behavior remains less understood.

Overlooking potential mechanisms restricts the practical implication of research. To address this issue along with recent calls to explore the role of emotion regulation in leadership research (Fisk and Friesen, 2012; Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2015), this study examines the relationship of leader emotion regulation strategies and organizational commitment. Specifically, this study examines the role of leader surface and deep acting on followers' affective, normative and continuance commitment, which signify emotion regulatory behavior from within-organizational viewpoint. Although, researchers have explored the concept of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) from within-organizational viewpoint (Diefendorff and Greguras, 2009; Fisk and Friesen, 2012; Xu et al., 2014), yet the dynamic of emotion regulation that occurs within-workplace remains unclear. An understanding of the implications of emotion regulatory behaviors on followers' organizational commitment is worthwhile because such knowledge can help the organization to engage in the practices that promote the emotional efforts that are helpful for followers' commitment, and eliminate the practices that promote dysfunctional emotional efforts.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), supported by emotional labor literature, this study contends that if the expectations for the emotional content of a relationship are not fulfilled, followers' could be expected to become less committed towards their work and be less likely to give back.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Emotion regulation strategies**

Emotions have the tendency that they may be utilized to communicate the thoughts in both favorable and un-favorable way (McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002). One may utilize one of the three emotion regulation strategies (surface acting, deep acting, and genuine emotions) with an intention to match feelings with work related display obligations. Further, individuals can make distinctions among these dissimilar emotional strategies (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Humphrey et al., 2015).

Emotion regulation is the process of understanding which particular form of emotion individuals hold, when they hold, and how they communicate and experience those feelings (Gross, 1998). Regulating emotions at work is frequently linked to the types of emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983). However, utilizing specific type of emotions to match work related display requirements may be subjected to social, occupational and organizational acceptance (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

In deep acting strategy an actor/leader keeps an eye on emotional indications with an objective of changing emotional response. Actor/leader may utilize attention deployment and/or cognitive change strategies to modify inner feelings to align them with work related requirements (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998). Communication using deep emotional acting is generally perceived reliable by observers/followers.

On the other hand, in surface acting an actor/leader merely modifies the physiological and recognizable emotional signs (Grandey, 2000). Verbal, non-verbal indications, together with facial expression, voice tone and gestures may be useful to disguise an individual's actual emotions or articulating the fake emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Further, emotional labor literature has found surface acting linked with unfavorable employees' outcomes owing to mismatch between inner thoughts with work related display requirements such that it may result

in actors' emotional dissonance and burnout (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Erickson and Wharton, 1997).

Similar to Fisk and Friesen (2012) and Gardner and Avolio (1998), this study contends that leaders' more frequently display non-spontaneous emotions and they will depend on the circumstances, draft and screenplay their display. Thus, this study focuses on surface and deep acting and examines the influence of these two emotion regulation strategies on followers' organizational commitment.

## 2.2 Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment has gained significant attention amongst management scholars and practitioners because of its notable impact on several job related outcomes for instance performance, organization citizenship behavior, turnover intention, absenteeism, health and well-being (Meyer et al., 2002). Indeed, numerous organizations are looking for practices that can promote their employees' level of commitment. This study uses three-component model of organizational commitment (Allen and Meyer, 1996; Meyer and Allen, 1984, 1991, 1997) because of its greater acceptability and generalisability across cultures (Bambacas and Bordia, 2009; Cheng and Stockdale, 2003; Eisinga et al., 2010; Ko et al., 1997; Lee et al., 2001; Wasti, 2005; Weng et al., 2010). This model comprises of affective, normative, and continuance components of commitment.

Affective commitment is defined as employees' psychological attachment and identification with the organization. An employee with a strong affective commitment wishes to remain associated with the organization because he/she wants to do so. Normative commitment is defined as sense of moral obligation to the organization and is based on the norms of reciprocity. An employee with a high level of normative commitment remains with organization to reciprocate the privileges he/she receives from organization. Continuance commitment is defined as the recognition of perceived cost attached with discontinuing employment in an organization and an accumulation of side bets. An employee who has continuance commitment remains with the organization because he/she needs to do so. Discontinuing an employment with the organization will give-up such job-related and/or non job-related privileges (e.g., seniority, pension, job skills, status, uproot family, friends networks). Thus, any factor that raises the

perceived cost of discontinuing the job could be considered as forecaster of continuance commitment (Meyer and Allen, 1991).

In particular, the foundation of affective organizational commitment is an employee's personal wish to remain attached with the organization, which mainly comes from emotional attachment with the organization. On the other hand, the foundation of continuance commitment is an exchange mechanism between employee and organization, which mainly comes when an employee chooses to continue employment with the organization because the privileges of doing so are greater than the costs or because costs of discontinuing the employment are greater than privileges. Finally, the normative commitment is based on individual's belief that he/she has the responsibility to the organization which reflects the norms of reciprocity.

### 2.3. Leader emotional labor and followers' organizational commitment

Two theoretical explanations support the link between leader surface and deep emotional strategies and followers' organizational commitment. The first explanation of this research is supported by two emotions models i.e. Social Interaction Model of Emotion Regulation (Côté, 2005) and Emotion as Social Information Model (EASI) (Van Kleef, 2009, 2010). These two models narrate that emotions provide an insight and information to observer/follower about expresser/leader feelings, attitudes and intentions. Also this emotion could provoke an affective reaction to followers in either favorable or unfavorable direction depending on how the followers understand and interpret the motives and social situations underlying leader emotions. Likewise in current study, if followers understand the leaders' emotions as honest and authentic and lack of manipulative motives then it will bring a positive affective reaction to followers. Resultantly, followers may show favorable attitudes for instance higher affective, normative, and continuance commitment. On the other hand, if followers interpret leaders' emotions as unauthentic then it will provoke negative reaction to followers. Resultantly, followers may show unfavorable attitudes for instance lower affective, normative and continuance commitment.

The second theoretical support of this research is derived from social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958). This theory puts forward that people are likely to give in return favors and kind treatment. Consistent with this theoretical frame, if the expectations for the emotional content of a relationship are not fulfilled, followers' could be expected to become less committed towards their work and be less likely to give back. In deep acting the actor/leader

truly attempts to experience the emotions he/she desires to display as part of work requirements. Emotional authenticity and lack of manipulative motive which are linked with leaders' deep acting will signal to the followers' that supervisor/organization is caring, concerned and values them. Followers' expectations will be fulfilled and followers' will be more likely to give back. Consequently, Followers' will identify with the organization and develop greater compatibility with the organization (affective commitment), generate a moral sense of obligation on the part of followers to reciprocate the benefits received from employment (normative commitment), attach higher cost to discontinuing the organization because of emotional investment from supervisor (continuance commitment). Thus, perceptions of leaders' deep acting will exhibit higher level of followers' affective, normative, and continuance commitment.

In contrast, unauthentic emotional behavior which is linked with leaders' surface acting will signal to the followers' that supervisor/organization does not care/value them. Followers' expectations will not be fulfilled and followers' will be less likely to give back. Further, it could be challenging for the followers' to maintain identification and compatibility with the organization (affective commitment), challenging to reciprocate the benefits received (normative commitment), and they may view little to no risk in discontinuing for potentially equivalent or better opportunity (continuance commitment). Thus, perceptions of leaders' surface acting will exhibit lower level of followers' affective, normative, and continuance commitment. Several empirical studies offer evidence in support of this proposition (Cho et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2015). Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H1a:** There is a negative relationship between leader surface acting and followers' affective organizational commitment.

**H1b:** There is a negative relationship between leader surface acting and followers' normative organizational commitment.

**H1c:** There is a negative relationship between leader surface acting and followers' continuance organizational commitment.

**H2a:** There is a positive relationship between leader deep acting and followers' affective organizational commitment.

**H2b:** There is a positive relationship between leader deep acting and followers' normative organizational commitment.

**H2c:** There is a positive relationship between leader deep acting and followers' continuance organizational commitment.

### **3. Method**

#### 3.1. Participants and procedure

The survey data were collected from employees of five service sector organizations operating in Anhui province, eastern part of China. A total of 550 participants were approached via convenience sampling to participate in this study and 323 usable responses were received (59%). The questionnaire was translated into Chinese language and then back translated into English language with the assistance of two MBA students having bilingual proficiency in Chinese and English. About (63%) participants were female. Ages of (28%) respondents ranged between "21-30 years", (45%) ranged between "31-40 years", and ages of (27%) participants ranged between "41-50 years". Further, about (15%) respondents had experience ranged "between 3 months-less than 1 year", (56%) had experience ranged between "1 year-less than 3 years", (20%) had experience ranged between "3 years-5 years", and (9%) had experience ranged "above 5 years".

#### 3.2 Instruments

##### 3.2.1. Emotional labor

A modified six item scale of Brotheridge and Lee (2003) was used to measure surface and deep acting. A sample item for surface acting is "My supervisor resists expressing his/her true feelings". A sample item for deep acting is "My supervisor tries to actually experience the emotions that he/she must show". All the items were rated on a five points scale (1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).

##### 3.2.2. Organizational commitment

Six item scales of Meyer and Allen (1991) were utilized to measure three dimensions of organizational commitment. All the items were rated on a five points scale (1=strongly disagree, 5= strongly agree).



### 3.3. Common method variance

The current study utilized Harman's single factor test to address the issues connected to Common Method Variance (CMV). The result of this test reveals that no common factor was evident in unrotated factor structure, while initial factor explains less than 50% of variance (Podsakoff et al., 2003). This suggests that findings of the present study are not influenced by CMV.

## 4. Empirical results

### 4.1. Validity test

A number of empirical indicators were conducted using PLS-SEM to examine reliability and validity of this study. All the factor loadings were greater than .7, the values of composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha were greater .8. In addition, values of average variance extracted were greater than .7, which suggest that this study holds acceptable reliability and validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The values of factor loadings, composite reliability, Cronbach's alpha and average variance extracted are shown in Table 1.

< INSERT TABLE 1 HERE >

### 4.2 Correlation analysis.

Correlations among variables were in line with the proposed hypotheses. The correlation between surface acting and affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment were negative. While, the correlation between deep acting and affective commitment, normative commitment, and continuance commitment were positive. The details of correlation are shown in Table 2.

< INSERT TABLE 2 HERE >

### 4.3 Hypothesis testing.

The current study has tested that surface acting has a significant negative link with followers' affective commitment ( $\beta = -.13, p < .05$ ), normative commitment ( $\beta = -.24, p < .001$ ), and continuance commitment ( $\beta = -.29, p < .001$ ). Thus, H1a, H1b, H1c are supported. The current study also tested

that deep acting has a significant positive link with followers affective commitment ( $\beta=.44$ ,  $p<.001$ ), normative commitment ( $\beta=.41$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and continuance commitment ( $\beta=.12$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Thus, H2a, H2b and H2c are supported.

<INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE>

## 5. Discussion

The current study has offered an empirical verification of the link between leader surface and deep acting and followers' organizational commitment. Parallel to anticipated hypotheses, this study validates that leader deep acting has a significant favorable link with all the three components of organizational commitment i.e. followers' affective, normative and continuance commitment. On the other hand, leader surface acting verifies a significant negative link with followers' affective, normative and continuance commitment. These findings are consistent with the previous research which suggests that emotional labor has the ability to predict organizational commitment (Cho et al., 2013; Shin et al., 2015). The findings also support earlier research on strategic HRM which recommends that fair HRM practices can be helpful in encouraging followers and making them a pillar of competitive gain, which further have added benefits for high performance work systems (Datta et al., 2005).

On the whole, this study adds to extent literature and theory in four important ways. Firstly, the present study offered an extension of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964; Homans, 1958), in the setting of emotional labor via assessing the differential base of deep and surface acting on followers' affective, normative and continuance commitment, therefore, broadens the theoretical understanding of this phenomenon. Secondly, researchers have shown rising interest in reviewing emotional labor outcomes. Thus this study responded these calls by clarifying the mechanism owing to leader surface and deep acting impacts followers' behaviors (Fisk and Friesen, 2012; Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2015), hence, contributes to extent literature stressing the positive/negative outcomes of leader emotions on followers' attitudes. The third theoretical addition is that, so far, extent of emotional labor literature has discussed on employees' emotional labor towards customers'. The present study explored emotional labor from the view point of leaders, hence, introduced a new perspective to the literature. Lastly, the present study provided a validity test of social exchange theory and emotional labor research in a

more collectivist and high power distance Chinese setting (Hofstede, 1993), hence, broadens the generalizability of emotional labor, social exchange theory to a new culture.

### 5.1. Practical implications

Current study offers five significant implications for the organizational leaders and HR practitioners. The main finding of this study is that leader surface and deep acting have differential influence on follower's organizational commitment, which exhibits that leader's emotions have an important role in building/damaging follower's commitment. The main practical implication is that leaders should be careful in how to manage their affective display while dealing with followers, particularly, those leaders who deliberately or inadvertently utilize surface acting. Further, leaders may be offered emotion management training in order to better handle emotional expression. Moreover, leaders may be advised to employ no emotion labor instead of utilizing surface acting for the purpose of staying away from negative outcomes linked to surface acting.

Secondly the current study has implications relating to HR policies. The encouraging influence of deep acting perhaps recognized as an ingredient of cognitive empathy which corporate surface actors' may be deficient in. Top managers should be aware of these effects, further, policy makers may be suggested to make a detailed plan for better scrutinizing the affective state of managers. For example, situation based evaluation; 360-degree evaluation may be effective way in the process of hiring/promotion decisions, in addition to, reviewing the effectiveness of employees and managers.

The findings also suggest that these emotional strategies influence followers' organizational commitment in a different way, and perhaps, one emotional strategy may be better than other in specific conditions. Further, than managers may formulate an effective emotional labor strategy is the third implication of this study, so that managers and organizations by utilizing healthier emotional labor practices may obtain positive results.

Prior research has reported on adverse effect of lower commitment, as it can affect workplace efficacy and smooth operation (Meyer et al., 2002). The fourth implication is that managers may avoid from undesirable consequences (lower commitment) by utilizing fair HR policies and practices. Fair HR practices (e.g. proper reward scheme, righteous resource deployment, participation in decision making) may send a favorable indication to followers' that

supervisor/organization is concerned and values them. Consequently, managers perhaps able to handle the issues linked to lower commitment, before it negatively affects other important outcomes.

Lastly the implication is for local and global businesses working in China, where preceding research into these issues has been under-examined. Cultural models suggest that aggressive emotions and behaviors may be less acceptable in high power distance and collectivist cultures (Khilji, 2002). It is therefore important that personnel's working on managerial positions in Chinese businesses should be careful about emotional viewpoint of work, so that they are aware of both desirable and undesirable outcomes linked to their emotional style.

## 5.2. Limitations

The current study has some limitations as well. First, self reporting of all constructs may risk the chances of common method variance (CMV), however, testing of Harman's single factor suggested that findings of current study are not influenced by CMV. Second, the current study was conducted using sample from five service sector organizations which may be different from non-service sector organizations, thus, limit the generalizability of the current study. Third, cross-sectional approach of this study may restrict from portraying any causation among studied constructs. Last, the current study carried out using sample from one province of China (Anhui Province), therefore, results of this study may differ in magnitude in other geographical regions or nations.

## 5.3. Future research

This study offers plenty of opportunities for emotional labor researchers. First, the existing researches have shown some support that surface acting links to unfavorable consequences and deep acting links to favorable consequences, but are there some situations where these links may be overturned or neutralized could be interesting to investigate. Second, it could be interesting to extend this line of research to non-work related consequences for instance work family conflicts. Third, it could be interesting to investigate the predecessors of emotional labor for instance personal attributes and customers mistreatment (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015). Fourth, exploring the role of contextual variables in the existing model for instance (Support, Person-Job Fit, and

emotion self-efficacy) or even role of different motives may be valuable here because people may differ in their motives which might influence their choice of emotional style (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Humphrey et al., 2015). Fifth, it could be valuable if researchers may also incorporate third type of emotional labor (genuine emotions) together with surface and deep acting and test the influence of all these emotional styles on followers and organizational outcomes. Further, extending this line of research employing multi source, multi level dataset and adding more rigorous longitudinal and experimental design by reviewing emotional labor from novel viewpoint of (coworker, subordinate, supervisor) could be helpful in reducing biasness and making the findings of the current study more generalizable. Lastly, it could be interesting if emotional labor researchers may replicate the findings of this study using samples from other geographical regions or nations.

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**Table 1:** Reliability and validity analysis

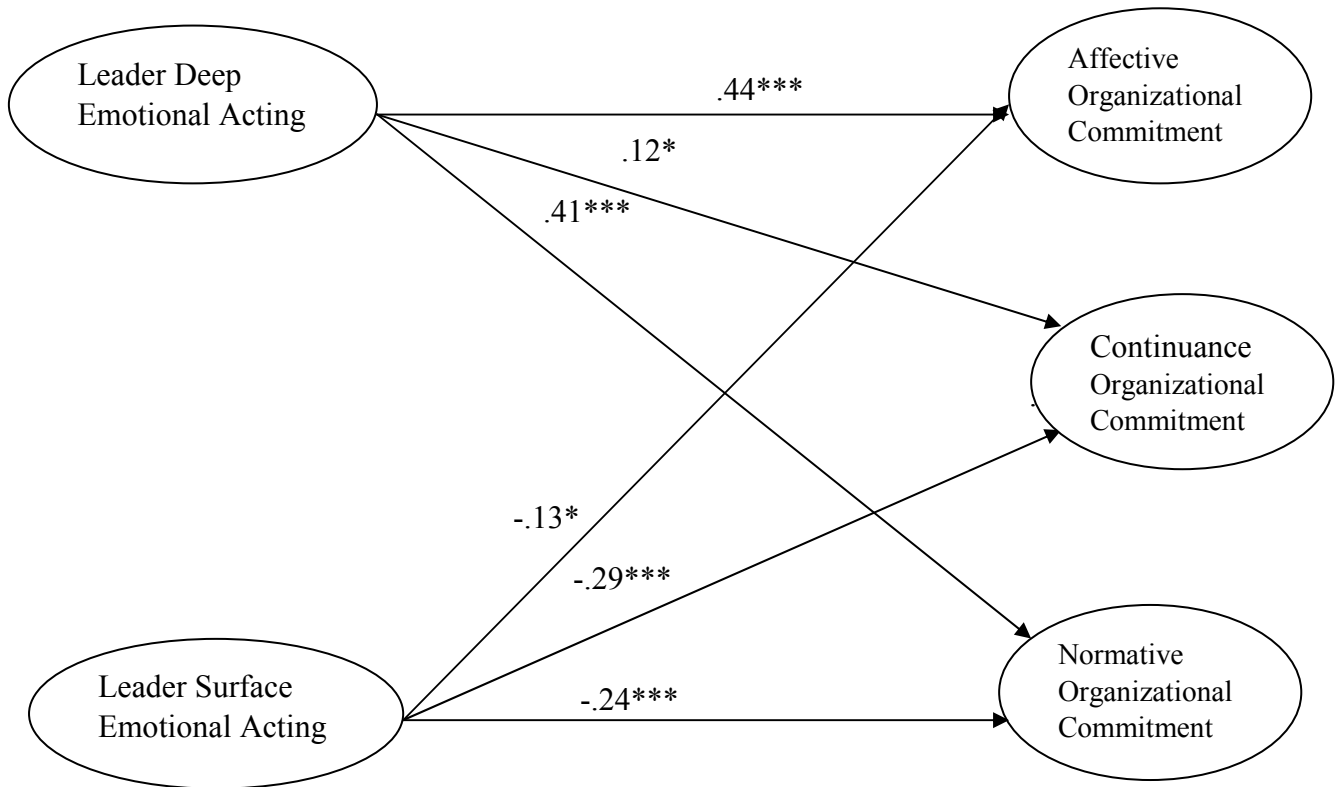
Variables	Average Variance Extracted value (AVE)	Factor Loading value	Composite reliability	Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ )
Normative commitment	0.835	0.828-0.959	0.968	0.960
Continuance Commitment	0.838	0.895-0.927	0.969	0.961
Affective Commitment	0.724	0.776-0.918	0.940	0.923
Surface Emotional Acting	0.796	0.871-0.904	0.921	0.872
Deep Emotional Acting	0.781	0.859-0.913	0.915	0.860

**Table 2:** correlations among variables

	Deep acting	Surface acting	Affective commitment	Normative commitment	Continuance commitment
Deep acting	<i>(0.88)</i>				
Surface acting	-0.08	<i>(0.89)</i>			
Affective commitment	0.42***	-0.13*	<i>(0.85)</i>		
Normative commitment	0.40***	-0.24***	0.59***	<i>(0.91)</i>	
Continuance commitment	0.12*	-0.24***	0.43***	0.10	<i>(0.92)</i>

Note: \*\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$ , Square roots of average variances extracted (AVEs) shown on diagonal, in italic font. Off-diagonal elements are the correlations among variables

**Figure 1 Path analysis**



\*\*\* $p < .001$ , \* $p < .05$

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