

Emotional Labor and Stress Experienced by Construction Project Managers in South Africa

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the manifestation of emotional labor and how it contributes to work related stress and possible burnout as experienced by construction project managers in South Africa. High project delivery demands, such as striving for continuous improvement, global competitiveness and satisfying varying expectations of multiple stakeholders, create a stressful work environment for construction project managers. Emotional labor, shown to be a predictor of stress, is a foreign concept and a neglected field in project management research. This study was based on a survey design. Data were collected from a non-probability purposive sample of 185 construction project managers of whom 105 completed an on-line survey using Survey Monkey. The data collection instrument was based on eight items from the Emotional Labor Scale designed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003) and the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Model (Shirom and Melamed, 2005). The results show that emotional labor in the form of both surface acting and deep acting, is practiced and that high levels of stress and burnout are perceived in construction project managers. The dynamic social structures, due to stakeholder management further add to emotional labor and stress in construction project managers, increasing the possible prevalence of burnout. Managerial implications and recommendations for further research are mentioned.

Keywords: emotional labor, stress, burnout, project managers, construction projects.

Introduction

Project management plays a pivotal part in the South African economy and even more so in the construction or built environment, where work is primarily performed by projects. A construction project is highly dynamic and contains much uncertainty, which in its very nature creates high work-related stress levels (Asquin et al., 2010; Love et al., 2009; Mohr and Wolfram, 2010). A Project Manager's (PM) job is known to be one of the most stressful as the PM is directly responsible and accountable for project success or failure. Pinto et al., (2014) confirmed the prevalence of high job stress and possible burnout in project managers and called for awareness and attention to stress management in project environments. Leung, et al., (2011) recognize this stressful work environment in construction and agree that most construction project managers suffer from stress, as they are "often driven by the time pressures, uncertainties, crisis-ridden environment, and dynamic social structures that are intrinsic to every construction project" (p. 312).

The dynamic social structures referred to by Lueng et al., (2011) are embedded in the complexity of stakeholder relationship management, a key performance area in the PMBOK® Guide – Stakeholder Management (PMI, 2013). Barry and Uys, (2011) found that one of the most important project success factors in South Africa, as rated by project managers, are client/customer satisfaction. Project managers are thus expected to manage stakeholder (customer) relations as a core job role, especially with those stakeholders who have high power and high interest in the project – these are usually people with money and/or high political affiliations. It was established that job role expectations of having to satisfy customers lead to a phenomenon called ‘emotional labor’ (EL) (Hochschild, 1983). EL was found to create elevated stress levels and possible burnout of employees (Grandey, 2003).

Job stress and emotional labor are seemingly inevitable in project work as a project is a unique endeavor of which the end result and outcome must satisfy the requirements of multiple stakeholders and simultaneously balance competing concerns for budget, schedule, quality standards and stakeholder satisfaction. As construction project managers are increasingly having to build positive relations and satisfy stakeholders’ needs in addition to manage project resources and time schedules, further research into work related stress, emotional labor (EL) and burnout of project managers is necessary. Much research has been done lately on emotional labor in the service industry (Gabriel & Diefendorff, 2015), but very little, if any, in project environments. The focus of this study is therefore on the dynamic social structures as stressors mentioned by Lueng et al., (2011) and the possible added job stress experienced by construction project managers due to them practicing emotional labor.

Emotional labor, popularized by Hochschild (1983), refers to the process of employees managing their emotions in such a manner that they conform to organizational expectations of customer satisfaction or service delivery. This regulation of emotions against display rules stipulate which emotions should be expressed whilst on the job. It has been theorized that if employees feel emotions that contrast the display rule they will act by regulating their emotions to display what is required from the organization. People are social beings expressing different emotions on a daily basis, however at work people suppress their emotional display to conform to work environments (Saarni et al., 1998). Gross (1998) defines emotional regulation as the process by which individuals influence their own emotions by choosing which emotions to have, when to have them and how they experience and express these particular emotions. When emotional regulation occurs within the context of the work environment it is called emotional labor (Brown, 2011). Hochschild (1979, 1983) argued that emotional labor in the service industry (as is much of a project manager’s current role - to deliver a service to the stakeholders) is performed by two regulation strategies, being: ‘surface acting’ or ‘deep acting’.

Surface acting, involves "Simulating emotions that are not actually felt, which is accomplished by careful presentation of verbal and non-verbal cues, such as facial expression, gestures and voice tone" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993:92). It does not mean the actor does not experience any emotion but instead displays an emotion that is not felt (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993). In surface acting the employee pretends by faking the required emotion and suppresses the felt emotions during the interaction (Grandey, Diefendorff & Rupp, 2013). *Deep acting*, involves a service agent attempting to "actually experience or feel the emotions that one wishes to display" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993:93). Deep acting can also be described as actors ‘psyche themselves’ for a role in the same way, the service provider psyches himself or herself for a desired emotion" (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993:93). In deep acting the employee puts in effort to

feel and express the required emotion by changing the felt emotion to align with the display rule (Grandey, Diefendorff & Rupp, 2013).

The pretense or exertion in regulating emotions during an interaction with stakeholders causes a discrepancy between felt and displayed emotion, termed by Grandey et al., (2013) as 'emotion-rule dissonance'. This engagement of opposing feelings requires effort and can lead to high stress levels (Grandey, Diefendorff & Rupp, 2013) as either distress or eustress in project management (Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014). Previous research on emotional labor indicated that 'surface acting', not as much 'deep acting', is the predictor of distress and burnout, whereas 'deep acting' can actually lead to eustress (Grandey, 2003).

The purpose of this paper is to provide evidence for the manifestation of emotional labor and how it relates to work stress and possible burnout as experienced by construction project managers within the South African built environment. The research questions to be answered are:

- What level of emotional labor is practiced by construction project managers?
- How does the existence of emotional labor relate to stress and burnout in the construction project management environment?
- What are the possible effects of stress, in particular emotional labor related, in construction project managers?

Research methods

A survey design was chosen and the data collection was based on an on-line self-report questionnaire compiled from the Emotional Labor Scale (ELS) designed by Brotheridge and Lee (2003), including five items measuring surface acting and three items measuring deep acting, as well as six items measuring physical fatigue and burnout selected from the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Model (Shirom & Melamed, 2005). A seven point Likert scale was used to test respondents' level of agreement on each item. In addition biographical data to verify the sample group was collected. Due to the sensitive nature of the questionnaire anonymity was required and consent in participating was sought from each respondent.

A non-probability purposive sampling method was chosen as the respondents had to be project managers in construction companies from South Africa. An on-line survey link using Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) was sent to a sample of 185 construction project managers of whom 105 successfully completed the on-line questionnaire. One of the researchers is a construction project manager in a large construction company in South Africa and had access to the population. The possible bias of the participant researcher is acknowledged and was dealt with in the analysis of the data. In using this online tool data integrity was ensured. Survey Monkey captures all responses in a database, thus eliminating possible human error. The data were statistically analyzed using SPSS version 22.

Results

Starting with a biographic description of the sample group as background, the results are reported according to the stated research questions. The results were drawn from a sample of 185 indicating a response rate of 57% (n=105, of which two were spoilt).

Frequency Distribution for Age

The majority of respondents (40%) were between 31 and 40 years of age, following with 25% respondents in the age group 41 and 50 years of age and 20% in the age group of 51-65. The

retirement age is 65 in most organizations within South Africa, however 15% of respondent project managers are post retirement. This age distribution is a reflection of the current project manager profile, as this environment calls for maturity and experience with some post-retirement project managers acting as possible mentors or consultants.

Frequency distribution for Gender

The vast majority (80%) of the respondents were male. This is to be expected as the construction environment is a male-dominated domain. However, irrespective of employment equity and special efforts to attract women to construction, there still is gender inequality in the construction project environment.

Frequency Distribution for Ethnicity

The respondents were predominately (87%) White/Caucasian, with only ten percent (10%) Black Africans and three percent (3%) Asian. This shows that irrespective of South Africa being a democratic country with strict labor legislation on ethnic representation there are still a minority of black project managers in construction.

Average Construction Monetary Value of Projects

This monetary value of project statistic is included to show possible effects of project size on the practice of emotional labor and burnout within construction projects. The following was found:

- 15% of the respondents work on projects exceeding a billion Rand;
- 20% between R250million -1 billion;
- 10% between R250 million and R500 million;
- 15% between R51million and R250 million; and
- 40% between R1 and R50 million.

The level of emotional labor (Surface acting or Deep acting) practiced by construction project managers

In Table 1 the emotional labor practiced by construction project managers are indicated per emotional labor item for Surface Acting (ELSA) and Deep Acting (ELDA).

Table 1: Emotional Labor item descriptive statistics

Variables/Items		Emotional Labor - Surface Acting (ELSA)					Emotional Labor - Deep Acting (ELDA)		
		Put on an act	Fake a good mood	Put on a show	Pretend	Mask	Try to experience emotions	Make an effort to feel	Work hard to feel
N	Valid	103	103	103	103	103	103	103	103
	Missing	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Median		4.00	4.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	4.00	4.00
Mode		4	4	1	1	1	3	4	4
% respondents practicing EL item often to always		50	50	48	36	38	43	56	57

The practice of both surface and deep acting is evident from Table 1 with 36% to 57% of respondents indicating that they often to always practice emotional labor in construction projects.

The most prevalent choice in the majority of cases is “sometimes” to “often” which indicates that emotional labor is practiced by construction project managers in their daily work activities. The respondents indicated in less than 10% of the cases that they “never” practice ‘surface acting’ by managing their facial expressions when dealing with project stakeholders or internal emotions when doing project work.

The practice of surface acting, with 50% of respondents indicating that they “often” to “always” practice: “Put on an act in order to deal with customers/stakeholders in an appropriate way” and “Fake a good mood” when interacting with a stakeholder during the project life cycle is perturbing as this is an indication of having to put in much effort leading to distress and possible burnout. *The practice of ‘deep acting’*, between 43% and 57%, is slightly more than ‘surface acting’, which on the other hand is encouraging as it shows that the enabling side of emotional labor as practiced by construction project managers can enhance project performance (Grandey, 2003) .

The relatedness of emotional labor to stress and burnout experienced by construction project managers

More than 50 % of construction project managers indicate that they experience some form of burnout. The signs of physical burnout is high as indicated in Table 2. Feeling tired, physically drained, fed up and dead batteries are experienced by most respondents.

Table 2: Physical Burnout experienced by construction project managers

Physical Burnout measure item		Feel tired	No Energy	Physically drained	Fed up	Dead batteries	Burned out
N	Valid	102	102	102	102	102	102
	Median	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
	Mode	5	4	4	4	4	4
Percentiles	25	4.00	2.75	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
	50	5.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
	75	5.00	4.00	5.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
% respondents experiencing burnout often to always		84	57	75	71	69	58

In Table 3 the Pearson Correlation test results between Emotional Labor and Burnout indicate that there is a significant moderately positive correlation between ‘Surface Acting’ and all three facets of burnout i.e. physical fatigue, cognitive weariness and emotional exhaustion. ‘Deep Acting’ and burnout does not have any real significant correlation. This is congruent with the findings of Grandey (2000), Brotheridge and Lee (2002). They found ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ as separate constructs and that surface acting is related to all three facets of burnout. Surface acting is prone to cause higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a lowered sense of personal accomplishment than the practice of deep acting. It can be concluded that surface acting is linearly related to distress and subsequent burnout. Therefore the practice of surface acting is one of the antecedents to burnout. Deep acting does not seem to have a high influence on burnout in project managers which correlates with the findings of Grandey (2003) and Kruml and Geddes (2000). When a person represses their actual feelings it leads to burnout, while adapting their feelings to the situation seems to be helpful or at least less harmful to the manager.

The possible effects of stress, in particular emotional labor related, in project managers

The literature shows that extended periods of stress, of which burnout is a facet, will lead to absenteeism, poor job performance and job turnover. The practice of emotional labor and the experience of burnout can lead to a loss in project team perspective, which in turn can lead to a breakdown of team performance. All of these are detrimental to project delivery and the organization. These factors can further lead to overhead costs that an organization must absorb. In addition burnout could lead to negative health outcomes of the project manager and team members, such as psychological distress, depression, injuries and cardiovascular disease (Barkhuizen & Du Plessis, 2014).

Conclusion

In conclusion this section of the paper will answer the research questions with some discussion supported by the literature. Furthermore, managerial implications and recommendations for further research is provided.

What level of emotional labor is practiced by construction project managers?

The results indicate that all levels of emotional labor is practiced by construction project managers. The level of emotional labor practiced, being “surface or deep acting”, differs. “Surface acting” with attributes such as “putting on a show”, “pretending” and “putting on a mask”, is not practiced often. “Deep acting” is practiced more often than “surface acting” by construction project managers. This indicates that project manager’s adapt their felt emotions to organizational expectations and deal with the stakeholders directly and discretely. Construction employees are known to be direct, however the notion of customer service requirements and stakeholder relationship management in projects show the presence of both surface acting and deep acting.

Respondents indicated that they “fake a good mood” and “put on an act” more than often, which show that ‘surface acting’ is required during interactions and engagements with key stakeholders, especially those who have high power and interest in the project. This is congruent with the findings of Grandey (2000), Brotheridge and Lee (2002), who found ‘surface acting’ and ‘deep acting’ as separate constructs and that surface acting is related to all three facets of burnout, making the presence of ‘surface acting’ a predictor of burnout. The practice of ‘surface acting’ has the effect of increased emotional estrangement, reduced job involvement and reduced role identification, whereas ‘deep acting’ has the opposite effect and leads to decreased emotional estrangement, increased job involvement and increased role identification (Grandey, 2003).

What are the possible effects of stress, in particular emotional labor related, in project managers?

It is evident that construction project managers experience emotional labor, stress and burnout in the execution of their work activities. Male project manager seem to be less emotionally exhausted than their female counterparts. Female project managers also seem to be more prone to utilize ‘surface acting’ than their male counterparts, which can accelerate burnout in the long run.

As stakeholder relationship is very important in project management, stress and emotional labor can negatively affect the relationships mainly due to ‘surface acting’ and the possibility of depersonalization and burnout (Grandey, 2003); Kruml & Geddes, 2000). Surface acting is prone to cause higher levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a lowered sense of personal accomplishment than the practice of deep acting. It can be concluded that surface acting is linearly related to burnout. Therefore the practice of surface acting is one of the key antecedents to distress and possible burnout in construction project managers

‘Deep acting’ does not seem to have a major influence on burnout in construction project managers, which correlates with the findings of Grandey (2003), and Kruml and Geddes (2000). When a project manager suppresses their actual feelings (surface acting) it contributes to burnout, whilst adapting their feelings (deep acting) to the situation seems to be helpful or at least less harmful to the manager. ‘Deep acting’ indicates that project managers have to make an effort to experience the emotions that they consider they should feel towards project stakeholders. As evident from this study ‘deep acting’ and burnout does not have any significant correlation.

Managerial Implications

A managerial implication is that emotional labor is indeed part of the construction project managers’ daily work experience. Emotional labor and stress can be detrimental (surface acting and distress) or advantages (deep acting and eustress) to the project manager’s total well-being and subsequent effect the project organization. Acknowledging the presence of emotional labor, and its contribution to stress and burnout, is proven to be a reality in construction project work and needs to be noted. This research strengthens the realization that construction project work is not just about “bricks and mortar”, but that emotions play an important part. Furthermore, projects work also involve feelings and relationships as indicated in this study and not just task delivery. Much more research is needed on emotional work and emotional labor in the project environment as ‘surface acting’ can have a detrimental effect on project delivery and organizational goal achievement. As the project environment becomes more politicized the possibility of ‘surface acting’ might increase during stakeholder interactions and impact on the relationships with subsequent distress and burnout in project managers and team members.

This study has its limitations as the findings cannot be generalized to all project managers and much more rigorous research is needed. A broader study as well as a global study on emotional labor in project management is suggested. Inclusion of a qualitative approach is recommended as further research into emotional labor, stress and burnout of project managers, which could shed deeper insights into emotional labor practices and consequences in the project environment.

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