

**“EMOTIONAL DISPLAYS: A LEADERSHIP
CHALLENGE”**

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1. Leadership and the New Workplace:

Leadership has been one of the most popular research topics as a means to understand the determinants of success at the workplace and in politics. While leadership has many definitions, the most common one is about the influence relationship between a leader and follower within the organizational hierarchy.

Today's workplace has new rules, new organizational forms and new employees, all posing different and sometimes contradictory demands and constraints on the leaders. The uncertainty and complexity in the environment require organizations to be smaller, flatter and agile, and employees to be more creative and independent. The contemporary leadership theories, by proposing charisma, morality or authenticity as basis of leadership, tried to explain what makes a person a leader and a relationship a leadership relationship. Though one of these theories, such as authentic leadership theory, is quite recently developed, the others were introduced about 30 years ago but I call them contemporary leadership theories to label a shift within positivist leadership literature that coincided with the changes in the business environment and the workplace. Authentic leadership theory (Avolio & Gardner, 2005) is proposed as the umbrella construct of leadership that authentic leaders should challenge expectations and demands of the environment, being true to themselves and acting in moral ways as their aim is to transform the followers.

In order to motivate and inspire the followers, these theories imply the need for the leaders to connect with the employees in a deeper and more personal way than exchange-based relationships that could work in a more stable and less demanding environment.

2. Emotions at the Workplace:

1980s is the period that, like leadership theories beginning to focus on values and emotions when the traditional rational leadership approach proved inadequate to explain the leadership phenomena, emotions research started to gain momentum within US management research especially as purely rational theories no longer explained the employees and their experience at the workplace.

One stream of research within workplace emotions studies is about emotion regulation which is the study of how individuals influence emotions, when they have emotions and how they express them. In the modern society, emotions experienced and expressed impulsively leading to a violation of emotion display rules will cost these uninhibited, free-spirits in various forms. Emotion regulation facilitates skillful social functioning as it is defined in management literature as strategies or processes that are used to manage emotional arousal so that successful interpersonal functioning is possible (Garber & Dodge, 1991). Gross (2001, cited in Elfenbein, 2007) proposes a 4-stages model suggesting that there are different emotion regulation strategies for each stage. According to this model, the last stage of emotion regulation is about regulation of expression of emotions. This is the stage where emotional display rules come into stage, informing the person about “correct” emotions to be displayed (Ekman and Friesen, 1969, cited in Elfenbein, 2007).

Emotional display rules have been studied in relation with emotional labour mostly (Hochschild, 1979), focusing on deep and surface acting as emotion regulation strategies. Surface acting is about displaying emotions that are not felt but expected at the workplace or by customers while deep acting is about changing the emotions themselves to be able to display the right emotions expected at the workplace or by customers. In addition to these strategies about expressing “correct” emotions, research suggests a third way, expression of genuine emotions which is about expressing emotions felt without changing or regulating them (Gardner et al, 2009). The re-conceptualization of emotional labour led to leadership becoming part of emotional display and emotional labour studies that a recent study (Ladkin & Taylor, 2009) drew attention to the need for leaders to balance what is expected from them as “leaderly” or appropriate and authentic.

Genuine expression of emotions by leaders can be perceived negatively when not aligned with emotional display rules (Gardner et al, 2009) or as one study reported leaders with negative facial expressions were rated as credible, honest and trustworthy (Bucy, 2000) while results of another study showed that negative emotional expressions of leaders led to them being rated as less effective leaders (Lewis, 2000).

As explained in the previous section, when leaders fake desirable positive emotions, potential problems arise such as emotional dissonance and exhaustion on the leaders’ side and trust and authenticity issues on the followers’ side. But on the

other hand, when leaders express genuine but negative emotions as opposed to the desirable and appropriate positive emotions are displayed, there is the problem of being rated negatively as a leader though some studies suggest that being able to demonstrate negative emotions can also signal authenticity to followers. Given the contradictory results about the potential dilemmas, I am interested in learning more about the emotional displays by leaders as they are required to be authentic while being constrained by the emotional display rules valid for the organization, their profession and the society in general. The research question is about how employees perceive leaders' emotional displays regarding situational demands that are conflicting in terms of authenticity and appropriateness expected from leaders in the context of workplace with its rules and general tendency towards positive emotional displays.

3. Epistemology and Ontology

Though emotional display rules research started within sociological research tradition and taking social constructionist view, some recent studies focused on psychological aspects and so positivist research paradigm was introduced into this research stream. Authentic leadership studies, though originated within positivist paradigm, also included those studies conducted within social constructionist research paradigm. As a result, while on one side there were studies focusing on entities, variables and relationships between these variables on the other side there were those studies exploring meanings created through relationships in the social world.

I am interested in learning about the meaning people give to workplace emotional experiences and expressions and more specifically, leaders' emotions and genuine emotions for the leaders, if any. Concepts such as appropriate and acceptable emotions indicate the shared nature but which is also context-dependent. The context-dependency and relational nature make positivist approach an unlikely one to study a topic such as emotions at the workplace that we would require a different tool than a scale as proposed by the positivists to find "the truth". The positivist paradigm, in my view is a more fitting approach for natural sciences but social world does not operate with universal laws and "truth" that is waiting to be explored by the scientist. As a result, my approach towards studying social world and concepts such as leadership and emotions which are, in my view, can not be quantified or translated into a scale because of their dynamic and very subjective nature. But on the other hand, I do not propose studying each individual's views as a unique case, focusing on idiosyncrasies

and rather will use individual views to find commonalities and patterns to reflect the shared nature of social world and meanings given to social experiences.

Ontological standing of the proposed study is idealism which is based on the assumption that social world has no independent reality other than the meanings we give to it. Reality is created and maintained in a circular fashion that our minds make reality as we give meaning, which then is perceived by us, the creators, as real that our creations are shared and become part of everyday life so much that we take these as granted. Idealists compare and contrast natural and social world that unlike other inhabitants of the natural world, humans create interpretations, meanings and the social world itself which is maintained and modified as social life and interactions continue (Blaikie, 2008). The idealist ontology allows researchers to be aware of the nature of social phenomena that it is a product of social life and interactions where participants are both subjects and objects of meaning-making. Constructionist epistemology proposes the idea of knowledge residing in interactions and meanings, as a way to study this circularity of social phenomena.

Epistemological standing of this study is constructionism which is based on the assumption that knowledge is discovered through an external reality or produced by reason independent of reality either. Knowledge exists as people interact with others and make sense of these interactions that while constructivists focus on individual side of sense-making, social and shared nature of meaning is what social constructionists focus on. Multiple realities exist in a social context which is a consequence of social stratification and multiple groups creating their own reality due to different ways of understanding and viewing the world. So despite focusing on the shared nature of created reality, social constructionism takes differences and idiosyncrasies into consideration in the social world but at a higher level than the individual level when compared with social constructivism (Blaikie, 2008).

As suggested in the following section, interviews would be the right method to be used in a study based on idealist ontology and constructionist epistemology with the assumptions that reality is created and shaped by human interactions and processes as opposed to entities creating the reality that then takes a life of its own.

4. Methodology:

In order to explore this potential problem, interviews can be conducted with adults who have work experience. Although there are scales developed about emotional labour and emotional display rules, qualitative research would provide us

with richer data to explore these dilemmas that characterize the new workplace. Other than richness, information gathered through interviews would reflect the dynamic character of work life, a target that can not be reached using static, quantitative methods such as scales.

Interview protocol should initially be based on the literature search but would also require some modifications to be made, regarding terminology used or questions to be added or omitted. For this purpose, a pilot study should be run with participants that have characteristics similar to those of our target population: people with work experience. Interview protocol should include questions on leadership, acceptable emotions at the workplace and non-acceptable emotions at the workplace, leader-appropriate emotions as well as the issue of leaders being genuine versus being appropriate and their perception of such a situation, if any.

Actually, as part of a class assignment I conducted 4 interviews with people who have work experience and though it was a convenience sample, this study provided me with some interesting. First of all, the *rules of the game* and corporate culture were mentioned a lot as the background to set the rules and expectations regarding emotional displays in general. Though a wide range of emotions are present at the workplace, there is a general preference for neutral and positive emotions at the workplace that they are perceived as motivating and professional. Professionalism is the common denominator when describing appropriate emotions for every employee and especially the leaders. Leaders are expected to balance right mix of emotions at the right place as the *rules of the game* or professionalism demands. Being professional addresses our dilemma of being genuine versus being leaderly that the leader should read each and every situation, to act appropriately and not excessively in any direction, no emotion or too much emotions are both unacceptable for leaders.

These results can lead us towards designing an interview protocol with open-ended questions that include a modified version of our original items as well as new ones that have emerged during the pilot study interviews. Professionalism, corporate culture and gender were such issues that all participants talked about as related with workplace emotions and leaders' emotions. They need to be included as new items to explore the meanings and understand the context for the answers of the participants and probe these answers in the light of these related concepts.

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