

## IS IT BETTER TO GIVE OR RECEIVE? THE ROLE OF HELP IN BUFFERING THE DEPLETING EFFECTS OF SURFACE ACTING

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The resource-depleting effect of surface acting is well established. Yet we know less about the pervasiveness of this depleting effect and what employees can do at work to replenish their resources. Drawing on conservation of resources theory and the ecological congruence model, we conduct a five-day diary study among customer service representatives (CSRs) to examine the extended depleting effect of surface acting and whether social interactions with coworkers (i.e., giving and receiving help) can mitigate the negative consequences of emotional labor. Momentary reports from 102 CSRs indicate that within-person daily surface acting positively predicted end-of-day emotional exhaustion, and the effect of emotional exhaustion spilled over to work engagement the following day. Analyzing the within-person moderating effects of giving and receiving help at work, we find that giving help buffered the depletion process while receiving help did not. We discuss the theoretical and practical significance of considering the temporality of the resource-depleting effects of surface acting, the role of at-work help giving in buffering the negative effect of emotional labor that could affect the sense of self, and the importance of resource congruence in influencing the efficacy of buffering effects.

### MOVE 1

As firms streamline service interactions to prioritize speed and efficiency, delivering high-quality customer service becomes more demanding than ever before (Zapf, 2002). Service employees are typically expected to adhere to display rules, which require expressing positive emotions and suppressing negative emotions during customer interactions (Hochschild, 1983; Zapf & Holz, 2006). Highly standardized “speed-up” conditions are more conducive for surface acting (Hochschild, 1983), a type of emotional labor (or the effort required to manage one’s emotions) that involves feigning emotional responses according to what the situation requires in line with the display rules to fit the context (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, Fisk, &

Steiner, 2005). Past studies, including two meta-analyses, have revealed that surface acting is harmful to employee well-being (Bono & Vey, 2005; Grandey, 2003; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011), because surface acting consistently predicts emotional exhaustion—defined as “a state of depleted work-related emotional and motivational resources” (Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Paustian-Underdahl, 2013: 493).

### MOVE

2

While extant research has unequivocally emphasized the psychological costs of surface acting, there are a few issues that remain unclear. The first question concerns whether the deleterious consequences of surface acting are only confined within a specific workday, or whether these effects carry forward to affect one’s work the following day. Although some past emotional labor studies have incorporated temporality, they have done so to the extent of addressing the work-to-home domain spillover effects of surface acting within the same day (Wagner, Barnes, & Scott, 2014), and using two-wave surveys that focused on the directionality of the (between-person) relationship between emotional labor and well-being (Cote & Morgan, 2002; Hülshager, Lang, &

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Maier, 2010). As such, illuminating the temporal nature of the depleting effects of surface acting from day to day is far from resolved.

The second question involves what service employees themselves can do to mitigate the depleting effects brought about by surface acting. Specifically, if indeed the consequences of surface acting are enduring and could even spill over to the following workday, it begs the important question of what employees can do *during the workday* to mitigate the negative effects of surface acting, before they even leave the office to go home. In the recovery literature, scholars have argued for the importance of off-work opportunities such as weekends, free evenings, and vacations (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Rook & Zijlstra, 2006; Sonnentag, 2003; Westman & Eden, 1997), and within-day work breaks including lunch breaks (Troughakos, Beal, Green, & Weiss, 2008; Troughakos, Hideg, Cheng, & Beal, 2014), to thwart the emergence of burnout. However, scholars have theorized that restorative opportunities can also happen during the workday, as some work-related interactions can actually be restorative (Lilius, 2012). Given that most people spend a large proportion of their total waking hours in the workplace, empirical research on restorative interactions *during work* is somewhat surprisingly lacking. In this study, we complement and extend the recovery literature, which to date has predominantly examined off-work breaks and activities, by focusing on the restorative functions of work-related social interactions. **MOVE 3**

We examine the carryover effects of surface acting from one workday to the next. Specifically, we focus on the effect of surface acting on next-day work engagement, which indicates the individual's level of personal investment at work (Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Kahn, 1990; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). Taking a within-person approach, we theorize as to why the harmful effects of surface acting extend to the following day's work engagement through emotional exhaustion. Moreover, taking an agentic perspective (Bandura, 1989), we propose that service employees can do something at work to offset the depletion process brought about by emotional labor. We propose that the harmful effects of nonautonomous and externally controlled surface acting can be offset by helping colleagues at work—the former tends to jeopardize the sense of self, while the latter restores it. Drawing on Hobfoll's (1998: 172) ecological congruence or "fitting of resources," which suggests that a matching of resource dynamics is needed to minimize net loss of resources or ensure net gain of resources, we theorize that helping coworkers could buffer the depletion process. Since helping colleagues tends to be autonomous and

self-determined—i.e., an activity "initiated and regulated through choice as an expression of oneself" (Deci & Ryan, 1987: 1024)—it accommodates the experience of regaining one's sense of self.

We also compared the buffering effect of helping coworkers with that of receiving help from coworkers. Receiving help from coworkers is likewise a resource gain dynamic, as the focal employee (recipient) obtains support and informational resources that facilitate task accomplishment (Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008; Grandey & Gabriel, 2014). However, unlike giving help, receiving help at work could be less efficacious in restoring one's sense of self because although help from coworkers may provide information and support, receiving help may not enhance one's self-concept (and may in fact threaten it). Thus, by examining differential moderating effects of giving and receiving help on depletion following emotional labor, we seek support for our theorizing that resources connected to the employees' sense of self are crucial to employee engagement.

Taken together, our study advances conservation of resources (COR) theory, which is the most often invoked theoretical perspective when studying the depleting effects of emotional labor (Grandey & Gabriel, 2014). However, like other resource-based organizational theories, COR has often been criticized for being too broad and imprecise (Halbesleben, Neveu, Paustian-Underdahl, & Westman, 2014; Priem & Butler, 2001). Thus, our overall contribution is to develop a more focused resource-based model by considering (a) the temporality of the resource-depleting effects of surface acting; (b) the role of autonomous activities in buffering negative effects of surface acting; and (c) the role of resource congruence in influencing the efficacy of buffering effects.

## THEORY AND HYPOTHESES

### Surface Acting, End-of-day Emotional Exhaustion, and Next-day Work Engagement

Our prediction that surface acting will positively relate to emotional exhaustion within individuals is based on theoretical arguments and empirical evidence that surface acting entails effortful emotional regulation which could result in depletion of personal resources (Grandey, 2003; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Troughakos, Cheng, Hideg, & Zweig, 2015). Notably, surface acting is detrimental to employee well-being because it threatens the individual's sense of self (Hochschild, 1983; Pugh, Groth, & Hennig-Thurau, 2011). Erickson and Wharton underscored that "attempts to control the emotions of workers