

Case study: emotions in the workplace



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Emotions are essential to humans as they permeate almost every aspect of our lives insofar as they guide our behaviour to fit with contextual demands. Emotions also motivate change and facilitate learning. They inform us when to fight or flight and serve as fundamental social functions. (Gross, 1999).

As emotions are fundamental social functions, all emotional events are situations that are relevant to a person's well being. The type of event varies according to their valence (positive versus negative) and according to the strength of subjective feelings and physical reactions that they elicit in a person.

There has been a number of studies that focus on the components and the importance of emotions. Existing research however lacks the events that cause emotional experiences. This research will focus on understanding the events that and the type of emotional experiences this will cause.

Components of Emotions

Emotion which is a term used widely in everyday language, constitutes a hypothetical construct, i. e., a conceptual and operational definition of an underlying phenomenon that constitutes the object of theory and research. Most modern emotion theorists have adopted a componential approach to emotion, suggesting that an emotion episode consists of coordinated changes in several components.

Most of the theories in the field of recognise that “ emotion” and “ cognition” are intertwined. But emotion is not simply a cognitive process (Frijda, 1988) It is actually recognised as being:

” a psychological construct consisting of several aspects of components: a) the component of cognitive appraisal or evaluation of stimuli and situations, b) the physiological component of activation or arousal, c) the component of motor expression, d) the motivational component, including behaviour intentions or behaviour readiness, and e) the component of subjective feeling state. (Scherer, 1984).

Psychological arousal:

This can be defined as physiological changes such as temperature sensations, respiratory and cardiovascular accelerations and decelerations, trembling muscle spasms, as well as feelings of constrictions in internal organs, are frequently part of emotion descriptions. (Ekman et al., 1983; Frijda, 1986; Stemmler, 2004). These neurophysiological changes in emotional episodes are generally attributed to (1) the emotion eliciting event disturbing ongoing homeostatic regulation and the smooth behavioural coordination, and (2) the preparation of appropriate adaptive responses (e. g., producing the necessary energy for appropriate actions such as fight or flight).

Motor Expression:

Facial and vocal expression, as well as gestures and posture during emotion episodes are generally considered to be central motor components of emotion (Ekman, 1984, 1992; Izard, 1971). Darwin (1872/1998) conceptualized expression rudiments of formerly adaptive behaviours (e. g., <https://assignbuster.com/case-study-emotions-in-the-workplace/>

clenching one's teeth as a rudiment of a biting response). In response, emotion researchers have highlighted the communicative functions of emotion expressions, informing others of an individual's reaction and its corresponding behaviour patterns. (Ekman, 1992; Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1984; Tomkins, 1962).

Subjective Feeling

Individuals verbally report a multitude of qualitatively different feelings, using a rich emotion vocabulary. These internal sensations, often considered as necessarily conscious experiences, constitute irreducible qualities of feeling unique to the specific emotional experience of a particular individual (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Ortony & Turner, 1990). The 'feeling' component of emotion can be conceptualized as a reflection of all changes in components during an emotion episode, i. e., the results of event appraisal, motivational change, and proprioceptive feedback from motor expression and physiological reactions. It is important to define differentially the concepts in this fashion, as the tendency to use emotion (the process as a whole) and feeling (one of its components) as a synonyms results in confusion. (Scherer, 2000)

Behaviour Preparation

Emotion theories of an explicitly componential persuasion have explicitly postulated a motivational function of emotional responses in the form of behaviour preparation or action tendencies (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1984). Emotions interrupt ongoing goal-directed behaviour and produce action tendencies that are specifically adapted to dealing with the environmental

contingency that has elicited the emotional response. Importantly this component of emotion generally prepares a general behaviour readiness as well as several alternative action tendencies allowing the organism to choose according to context and strategic considerations.

Cognitive processes

Emotions also have a cognitive component. This component consists of the appraisal processes that drive the coordinated changes in the components described above. Proponents of appraisal theories of emotion suggest that emotional reactions are determined by the subjective evaluation of events with respect to their significance for the well-being and goal attainment of individuals. (Scherer, 2004) In addition, emotions often have strong effects on perceptual and cognitive processes such as attention, thinking, memory, problem solving, judgement, decision making and the like. (Dalgleish et al. 1999)

Furthermore it is important to understand the valence of emotions, hence various researchers have done research on everyday emotional experiences e. g. Boucher, Brandstatter & Elias, Oatley & Duncan, Scherer & Tannenbaum, Scherer, as well as Wallbott, & Summerfield. This research has shown that the most frequent occurring emotional events are generally associated with relationships with other people (eg. Partner, family, friends), work-related situations, attainment of personal goals and life changes. Positive emotional events may include birth of a child, receiving a present, attending a concert or getting a job. Negative emotional events encompass critical situations, such as arguing with a close friend, learning that a family

member is ill etc. (Scherer, 2004). Emotions link structure and agency, meaning that they are the link between social structure and social acting. (Barbalet, 2002).

A widely held view in contemporary emotion psychology is that emotions or at least a core subset of emotions, are organised patterns of more or less specific cognitive, experiential, behavioural (action-related), expressive, and physiological components. This assumption which is frequently motivated by the hypotheses about the evolutionary origin and biological function of emotions is the common denominator of syndrome theories of emotion and it is shared by authors of otherwise fairly different theoretical persuasions. (Ekman, 1992; Izard 1977)

This has an impact on how emotions can either distort individual's perceptions by impairing judgement and biasing information retrieval, or they can improve the accuracy of individual's perceptions by highlighting what is important and what is at stake. (Seo & Barrett, 2007). In studies of escalation of commitment, emotions appear to have a direct influence on the decision of whether to persist or withdraw from a failing situation. An example of this can be demonstrated by Wong and Kwong (2006) where it was demonstrated that the desire to escape the unpleasant emotions people during a decision-making dilemma can lead to de-escalation of commitment. In contrast, a study by Wong and Kwong (2007) found that the possibility of feeling regret can cause people to increase escalation of commitment.

The importance of emotions in the workplace

Organisations involve complex relationships that are interdependent often competitive and compulsory. Employees must often interact with a range of people not necessarily of their choosing. A hierarchical relationships normally characterises most organisations which includes status differences that are primarily caused by an emotional response. (Tiedens, 2001)

In organisations, employee's learn what is expected and what is acceptable by means of social norms (Bettenhausen & Murnighan, 1991; Chatman & Barsade, 1995; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). One type of organisation norm involves the emotions expressed by employees in the workplace (Kelly & Barsade, 2001; Rafaeli & Worline, 2001). Though almost all situations have implicit expectations concerning which emotions are appropriate or inappropriate to express (Ekman, 1973), employees frequently display certain emotions in the workplace in reaction to organisational-specific situations or events (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Martin, Knopoff & Beckman, 1998) and as a way of fulfilling their work roles (Hochchild, 1983; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1991; Sutton, 1991; Van Maanent & Kunda, 1989).

There is consistent evidence that the expression of certain emotions or at least of some specific response components for example, anger, fear, enjoyment, sadness and disgust – the infamous “ basic” emotions is distinctive and universal among the human species. (Ekman, 1993). The expression of other emotions, sometimes dubbed social or self-conscious emotions, such as shame, guilt, grief or embarrassment, does not seem to be universal, although patterns of expression are highly consistent within a socio-cultural setting. It seems patterns of expression are highly consistent

within a socio-cultural setting. It seems that in whatever way the different expressions of these emotions may have evolved, as long as individuals stay in the cultural or social structure setting they were socialized in, they are on the safe side when it comes to interpreting emotion expressions. Thus, emotion expressions are a potent signaling device capable of conveying clues that allow the mutual attribution of underlying feeling states.

Moreover, emotion expressions also allow the inference of other corresponding mental states that are constituent for the emotion expressed. These attributions function as mechanisms that reduce social complexity and intercept double contingency circuits. They furthermore allow foreseeing the consequences of an emotion for individual behaviour, the course of interaction, and the overall group behaviour. (Hortsmann 2003).

This explains the reason why emotion expression may influence decision making. This is done by shaping individuals' beliefs about the social environment (Baron, 1992). An emotion can be like a perceptual lens to determine what is potentially threatening to an individual in a particular situation hence determining a belief about the social environment. As the decision making is context is marked by uncertainty, decision makers' behaviour is likely to be strongly influenced by cues in the social environment (Taylor, 1979).

Through experience one will be able to understand and display certain emotion expressions. This is as a result of individuals being able to shape employee's beliefs about what is expected, what is acceptable, and the possible consequences of things going wrong. In this way, emotion expression norms have a direct influence on decision making behaviour.

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These norms help influence beliefs about the social environment. It has been further proven that individuals are more sensitive to negative cues than to positive ones (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Further negative cues elicit stronger affective and behavioural reactions than do positive ones (Cacioppo, Gardner, & Berntson, 1999). Experience and expression of negative emotions drive people to avoid situations that could lead to negative outcomes, such as threats and failure (Carver, 2001; Higgins, 1997).

Based on above some it is in can be deduced that employees learn what is acceptable by means of social norms (Bettenhausen & Murinighan, 1991; Chatman & Barsade, 1995; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

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Therefore we can deduce that emotion expression may influence organizational decision making by shaping individuals' beliefs about the social environment (Baron, 1992). Beliefs concerning emotions expressed in the workplace can affect decision making behaviour by acting as a perceptual lens to determine what is salient to an individual in a particular situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Organizational decision making often occurs in the context of ambiguous cues (Bronckner, 1992; Staw, 1997)

Organisational decision making often occurs in the context of complex and ambiguous cues (Brockner, 1992; Staw, 1997). Because the decision making context is marked by uncertainty, decision makers' behaviour is likely to be strongly influenced by cues in the social environment (Taylor, 1979).

Coworkers' emotion expressions can shape employees' beliefs about what is expected, what is acceptable, and the possible consequences of things going wrong. In this way, emotion expression norms do not have a direct influence on decision making. Rather norms influence individual's beliefs about the social environment.

Emotional fit will help an employee keep his/her emotional resources at optimum levels. The deviation between the activation levels of affective trait and emotional climate will make the workplace emotionally draining environment for the employee. (Gardner and Cummings, 1988).

An important topic in the psychology of emotions is whether an emotional experience and reactions result from innate biological patterns or whether such reactions and experiences are culturally determined. Charles Darwin (1872) was one of the most influential in this discussion, arguing for innate emotion programmes and using an intriguing multitude of research tools now common in cross cultural psychology, such as observations and questionnaires. Other theories of emotion including Tomkins (1962/1963), Izard (1977) and Ekman (1984), followed his line of reasoning and succeeded in demonstrating cross-cultural equivalents of facial expression patterns for some 'fundamental' emotions. On one hand, 'cultural relativists' like Birdwhistell (1970), have proposed that emotional experiences and reactions differ depending on cultural factors. These include the following aspects

namely: the nature of the emotion eliciting the situation (in particular psychological symptoms, nonverbal reactions like facial or vocal expressions, subjective experiences or feeling state of a person and the regulation attempts used to control or manage the situation and the emotional reactions (Wallbott and Scherer, 1985, pp 763-764). That is, in order to address the question of ‘ universality versus ‘ cultural specificity’ of emotion, one has to demonstrate conclusively that situations eliciting specific emotions are the same across cultures, that reactions and symptom patterns accompanying emotional experiences are universal, and that control and coping attempts used to regulate emotional experience are the same worldwide.

The above demonstrates the importance of having an emotional fit as well as the importance of emotions in the workplace.

Emotions are seen as one of the basic functions of the human psyche and therefore play a central role in psychology (Salovey & Mayer, 1990), especially in work and organisational psychology, both in theoretical and applied settings. Emotions exist in everyday workplaces and they impact on people’s performance. Because this impact can sometimes be detrimental, a belief in relegating emotions behind the rule of logic and reason is deeply engrained in modern managers’ psyche. In truth, this belief goes all the way back to the teachings of Plato who saw logic as the path to objective truth, while emotions were simply irrational temptations to be avoided. This belief was entrenched in the principles of scientific management developed by Frederick Taylor in the early 20th century, and continues to permeate modern society (Kapp, 2000). Emotion has represented a tantalizing subject

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for social inquiry because it appears to tell us about our true selves : the self that , after all the thinking and the interacting are done, feeling the welling up of rage , the tender pangs of love , the black emptiness of despair.

(Boellstorff & Lindquist , 2004). The function of emotion evolves into a process that not only permits the evaluation of the consequences of another behaviour but also aids in the prediction of another’s emotional behaviour.

(Darwin, 2005).

Being as we spend most of our time at work, it is important to understand the impact that emotions will have on our fit to an organisation emotionally, the link between emotion and climate of an organization as well as copying responses to an exhausting environment.

Emotional fit will help an employee keep his /her emotional resources at optimum levels. The deviation between activation levels of affective trait and emotional climate will make the workplace an emotionally draining environment for the employee. This proposition is line with the activation theory. Activation theory holds that every individual has characteristic level of activation that he/she is motivated to maintain in his/her environment.

Assuming that emotional climate has an influence on employees’ affective experiences at work and considering the strongly intertwined relationship between activation and emotion, it is plausible to argue that the emotional climate of a workplace comprises a force that can influence the experienced activation level of employees in the workplace. (Maslach, 1982).

When there is an emotional fit, as a copying response to the exhausting impact of the workplace, the employee will attempt to emotionally detach

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himself/herself from other people and develop a depersonalized response to them (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). This tendency will be reflected in the way the employee expresses emotions whilst interacting with others at work. Specifically, when there is a misfit between an employee's affective trait and the emotional climate of his/her workplace, the employee will engage in surface acting while interacting with others, which refers to altering one's displayed emotions to be able to express the desired behaviours at work (Hochschild, 1983). Supporting this argument, prior research has suggested that surface acting can be utilized by employees as a way of buffering themselves from emotional exhaustion. (Conrad and Witte, 1994)

When an employee's emotional resources are depleted as a result of emotional misfit, this will increase his/her tendency to psychologically and physically withdraw from work. From an employee's intention to get back to his/her characteristics level of activation altered by the impact of emotional climate. When the work environment becomes psychologically uncomfortable, the employee's often try to psychologically withdraw from the work environment by engaging in a number of non work related activities, such as daydreaming and spending time on personal matters (Lehman and Simpson, 1992).

When there is an emotional misfit, the employee's task performance will decrease because the excessive amount of tension and stress experienced by the emotionally exhausted employee (Maslach and Jackson, 1981) hinders his/her cognitive and attention capacity to perform his/her task effectively. (Eysenck, 1983). Emotional exhaustion has also been considered to result in lower level of self-efficacy expectations (Brief and Aldag, 1981) and reduced

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sense of personal adequacy, both of which are elements of task performance. (Maslach, 1982).

We can thus assume that the expression of emotions in organisational life can have important consequences for the person displaying the emotion as well as for the person who is the target of this display. (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989).

The impact of culture on emotions

According to Frijda and Mesquita (1995), cultural influences on the emotions process are mediated to a larger extent by the significance an emotion has for an individual. Frijda and Mesquita distinguished among three aspects of emotion that are culturally influences. Frijda and Mesquita distinguished three aspects of emotion that are culturally influenced. First they are considered social consequences of emotions that regulates social expression and suppression of emotions. Second they stressed the importance of norms for experiencing different emotions.

Thirdly they discussed social- cohesive function of emotions. Several ethnographic emotions, particularly in how the expressions of emotions is valued. There are strong cultural difference in display rules (Ekman & Friesan, 1969; Izard, 1980) that are learning when going through the socialisation process (Saarni, 1999). There are also cultural differences in the norms for experiencing different emotions. (Hoschild, 1093). This would be relevant to the discussion regarding social norms that describe how people should feel in specific situations, eg., on a wedding day or at a funeral. In addition to the situational feeling rules, norms for the experience of emotions

can also be present in a society in the form of generalized expectations. This means that the emotions can differ in their desirability and perceived appropriateness across situations. The emotion climate of nations can be characterized by generalized norms for experiencing different emotions and the fact that these norms are subject to historical change. (Stearns, 1994; Stearns & Lewis, 1998).