

# TRAINING EMOTION MANAGEMENT SKILLS IN THE WORKPLACE – AN INDIVIDUAL LEVEL INTERVENTION ON EDUCATION EMPLOYEES

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**Abstract:** *The paper focuses on designing and implementing an individual resource-based intervention on education specialists in Romania, based on Hochschild's emotional labour model (Hochschild, 1983) and Gross' process model of regulating emotions (Gross, 1999). The main objective was that of training individual emotion management skills to reduce emotional effort and turnover intentions and to increase job satisfaction of employees. The paper presents the structure of the intervention and discusses the efficacy of the training program reported to stated objectives.*

**Key words:** *emotional labour, antecedent-focused regulating strategies, intra-individual interventions in the workplace.*

## 1. Introduction

Emotion management is salient and pervasive in the work of teachers, but several studies on the topic reflect that employees do not always adopt the most efficient regulating strategies [18].

The focus of previous research on the antecedents and consequences of emotional labour shadows the investigation of the internal mechanisms individuals use to regulate their emotions at work. The small amount of research in this area showed two major types of internal regulating processes [2], [3], [17], deep-acting (regulation of internal feeling, attempt to modify the subjective experience of emotions) and surface-acting (regulation of emotional display in accordance with emotional display rules).

The two strategies are used by employees in distinct manner as imposed by the job characteristics or by the personal characteristics such as age, years in service, gender, or personality traits [9], [10].

The main assumption of our study is that emotion management strategies can be adopted in conscious manner and under the voluntary control of the employee, as Cote and her colleagues suggest [6], [7].

The effort made by employee for implementing regulating strategies is associated with negative consequences, such as burnout, decreased job satisfaction and high rates of turnover [9], [11], [24]. The emotional regulation process initiated by Gross specifies that emotion regulation strategies have different impact depending on the moment in which are adopted.

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Deep-acting, conceptualized by Gross as antecedent-focused strategies, are less costly and more efficient than surface-acting, or response-focused strategies [1], [13] Also, the model suggests that the strategies can be automatic, without voluntary control [14].

In educational area, Gross's model is largely applicable. Emotional regulation is salient and prominent for education employee, as many qualitative studies show. Sutton [21], [22], for instance, interviewed teachers who spontaneously spoke about their acts in regulating anger. Most of the teachers have tried to consciously regulate negative emotions and, in a smaller amount, positive emotions like joy or enthusiasm.

The main objective for designing and implementing the present study was that of training individual emotion management skills to reduce emotional effort and turnover intentions and to increase job satisfaction of employees. Both the participants and the organizations benefit from such interventions as the individual/organizational costs and resources involved by performing emotional labour at work can be decreases.

The intervention program involves training and practice of antecedent-focused strategies (deep-acting), which are considered to have less negative consequences when compared with other types of strategies [2], [10]. The diminished impact is explained by the fact that these strategies involve less cognitive resources and can become automatic.

Nowadays there are few studies regarding training of emotional skills in employees. This topic is one of interest for practitioners and less for academicians. The few existing studies approach the topic in regard of emotional intelligence [1]. Daus and Gage [8] conceptualize emotion regulation as a component of emotional intelligence and, therefore, include training

of regulation skills in their program of developing emotional intelligence. Programs such as that presented by the two authors usually include: self-report inventories to identify the used regulating strategies, the generating events, and related personality traits; role-playing; short-films; group readings; group discussions. We took into consideration all these aspects in designing the intervention program within the present study.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Objective and hypotheses of the research

Based on the above theoretical assumptions, the main objective of the study was to train the individual emotion management skills by practice of the antecedent-focused regulating strategies. Training of regulation skills will be associated with positive effects on job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Also, training of regulation skills will diminish the level of emotional effort employees invest when practicing emotional labour at the workplace.

As the objective state the study focuses on conscious and voluntary emotional regulation that implies less cognitive resources. Our approach is an applicative one, capturing the interventions organizations can make to ease employees' engagement in emotional labour.

The hypotheses of the study are:

- Participants in the emotion management training program will make less emotional effort when regulating emotions.
- After attending the emotion management training program, participants will be more satisfied regarding their jobs.
- After attending the emotion management training program, participants will reduce their turnover intentions.

## 2.2. Experimental design

The research uses a within-subjects experimental design, with a single experimental sample, with pre-test and post-test measurements. The experimental intervention was the emotion management training program. Emotional effort, job satisfaction and turnover intentions were the dependable variables, as these variable are most frequent cited as negative consequences of emotional labour in education [12], [16].

Dependable variables were measured with:

- *Hospitality Emotional Labour Scale* [4] (elaborated by Chu & Murmann in 2006) – adapted version on Romanian sample [23] – for assessment of emotional effort;

- *Job-satisfaction Questionnaire* [5] (elaborated by Constantin, 2004) – for assessment of satisfaction towards the organisation of labour, interpersonal climate and rewards;

- One closed-ended item for assessment of turnover intentions (*In the following year, do you intend to change your workplace?*).

The experimental intervention was a training program designed as a short-term intervention. The program lasted for three-months, with weekly group meetings. The intervention was structured on the following modules: general aspects regarding emotions and emotion regulation, antecedent-focused strategies for emotion regulation, evaluation of emotion regulation costs. Each module consisted in several different activities including reflective analysis of situations, reflective diary, role-playing, scripts analysis, analysis of short-films. During the training period, participants voluntarily exercised regulating strategies in the initial phases of emotion generation, which considerably seems to reduce the emotional effort involved. The specific antecedent-focused strategies that

participants trained were, in accordance with Gross's model, situation selection, situation changing, attention deviation, reframing, and cognitive re-interpretation.

The participants were 30 women (the educational sector in Romania is strongly represented by the female gender), working on a full-time basis as school counsellors or support teachers in each level of the Romanian educational system. The participants were organized in two groups, each consisting in 15 participants who attended the program with the same trainer. There were no significant differences between the two groups in pre-test.

## 3. Findings

Regarding the first hypothesis of the study, which stated the positive effect of attendance to the training on emotional effort, the t-test for paired samples showed a significant difference. In post-test participants registered lower levels of emotional effort ( $m = 31.83$ ,  $\sigma = 6.11$  in post-test compared with  $m = 36.41$ ,  $\sigma = 7.25$  in pre-test;  $t = 3.61$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). The effect size calculated for unidirectional hypothesis was  $d = 0.56$ , which indicated a medium effect of the program [20]. After attending the intervention program, participants report that emotion regulation is less costly and less demanding, as the voluntary effort is focused more on modifying reactions in the initial phases of emotions generation [14], [15].

When compared, the two participating groups reported slightly different levels of emotional effort in post-test. We used non-parametric Fisher test to test the association between the attendance to one group and several variables that could interfere – educational level at which participants work and number of hours participated in the training program. The Fisher test was not significant which

allows us to conclude that the two groups were equivalent. Still, the recorded differences might suggest that other variables could interfere with the findings. We suppose that group dynamics might be such a variable.

Regarding the impact on job satisfaction, we took into analysis only those dimensions of job satisfaction previously demonstrated as being associated with emotional labour – satisfaction towards management and interpersonal relations and satisfaction towards organization of labour and communication [5]. The only significant difference between pre-test and post-test was registered for satisfaction toward organization of work and communication ( $m = 40.12$ ,  $\sigma = 6.42$  in pre-test,  $m = 42.16$ ,  $\sigma = 6.93$  in post-test;  $t = 3.58$ ,  $p \leq .01$ ). The effect size for this hypothesis was also medium ( $d = 0.53$ ). Implementation of the training program would lead to a slight increase in the level of job satisfaction, but only on a dimension. Job satisfaction is, as previous research indicates [19], a multi-determined variable, influenced by both internal and organizational factors. The finding that emotional regulation training has an impact on it suggests that more attention should be given to the relevance of emotion in work related attitudes.

Regarding the turnover intentions of participants after attending to the emotion management program, we used non-parametric McNemar test to test the differences between the responses given to the dichotomic item used to assess this variable. The difference between the number of persons intending to change their workplace in pre-test and those intending in post-test was significant (14 participants reported turnover intentions in pre-test, and only 7 in post-test; the value of McNemar test for binominal distribution and bi-directional hypothesis was 0.016). We consider this effect to be an indirect

one because, as Grandey suggests [12], when employees use more efficient strategies for regulating their emotions, they do not evaluate their jobs as demanding and, therefore, they are less willing to leave the organization.

#### 4. Discussion

Design and implementation of an intervention program for training of emotion regulation skills of employees in education is sustained by two arguments at least. Firstly, emotional regulation as part of emotional labour is associated with pervasive negative consequences for both the employee and the organization. These consequences are less severe when the employee adopts efficient strategies (adapted to the situation and less costly). Secondly, emotion regulation can become conscious and under voluntary control. Therefore, any intervention aimed to improve the regulation skills of employees must take into consideration these assumptions.

The lack of consistent work on this specific topic makes difficult and risky the design of any intervention. Both theoretical review and findings of current study proves that Gross's emotional regulation process model is relevant for implementing such a training program.

The efficacy at individual level of the designed intervention program was supported for emotional effort of regulating emotions, for satisfaction regarding organization of work and communication, and for turnover intentions. These findings suggest that the impact of such program is present not only at the level of personal resources involved, but also at the level of attitudes and behavioural intentions.

The small number of participants and the particularities of the work of those participating in the study must be taken

into consideration when extending the results to other populations. Also, the within-subjects design used might artificially generate a stronger research power which affects the validity of the study.

Use of antecedent-focused strategies involve less emotional effort because the regulation is not present at the level of the emotional expression, the physiological level or behavioural level and, therefore, in the final phases of emotion generation. The regulation appears previous to the cognitive evaluation of the event that generates the emotion. In this case, regulation involves changes regarding the situations and not the physiologic or behavioural reaction to it.

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