CHAPTER 12
COMPETENCY LABOR: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR EXAMINING INDIVIDUALS’ EFFORT AND EMOTIONS IN PROJECTING AN IMAGE OF COMPETENCE AT WORK

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the concept of “competency labor” and illustrates its important role in organizational life for both researchers and practitioners. In the contemporary workplace environment individuals face increasing expectations of competence. However, demonstrating competence is no simple task — rather, to demonstrate competence requires a concerted effort in terms of individuals’ affect, cognition, and behavior. Accordingly, new models are needed that can explain these emergent processes. The present work integrates the literatures related to emotional labor and impression management, and builds a theory-based framework...
for investigating the processes (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) of making desired impressions of competency at work and how these processes impact critical individual and organizational outcomes. Our conceptual model proposes how growing demands in the workplace for individuals to display competence affect how they think, feel, as well as act. In sum, our work advocates that a new research stream is needed to better understand the “competency labor” phenomenon and its theoretical as well as practical implications.

Keywords: Emotional labor; impression management; emotions of incompetency; competency expectations

In the rapidly changing contemporary workplace environment, individuals struggle to adapt to increased demand in terms of cognitive and intellectual abilities and to meet high collective expectations of competence (Cascio & Aguinis, 2008). Put simply, a central concern appears to exist for inferring and making judgments of competency in social interactions (Leary, 1995). And, not surprisingly, the growing pressure for outward demonstrations of competency has permeated across most occupations in the marketplace.

Demonstrating competency is a critical part of an individual’s role at work. Accordingly, individuals exert considerable effort to project a desirable image of competency, defined as being perceived as intelligent, talented, and accomplished (Turnley & Bolino, 2001). This effort takes its toll on the abilities of individuals to function effectively and efficiently. In particular, the potential effect of an individual’s emotions regarding a fear of actual incompetency, or even appearing incompetent, can be paralyzing. These emotional experiences elicited by the lack of perceived competency have not yet been systematically researched; only a few studies have scratched the surface of the potential emotional upheaval with respect to fear of appearing incompetent (Good & Good, 1973; Haber, Fitzgerald, Brouer, & Paul, 2012; Tomkiewicz & Bass, 1999; Tomkiewicz, Bass, & Vaicys, 2005) and having feelings of incompetency (Jamieson, 2004; Thériault & Gazzola, 2006).

In the present work, we situate the new construct of competency labor in the theoretical contexts of emotional labor and impression management. We integrate the emotional labor literature and the impression management literature; by combining insights from these two bodies of knowledge we can gain greater insights into how the growing pressure for
individuals to make favorable impressions of competency creates an emotional toll on employees. Accordingly, the focus of this chapter is to address this issue and present the construct of “competency labor” as an important phenomenon in organizational life and by offering a conceptual roadmap for scholars to investigate individuals’ efforts in projecting an image of competence.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, we explore the consequences of competency expectations in the workplace. We then delve into the multiple literatures that inform our theory-based perspective of competency labor. In conclusion, we present our conceptual framework examining the nomological network of competency labor and discuss the implications, and future directions for research and practice, that combining insights from the emotional labor and impression management literature provides.

COMPETENCY EXPECTATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

Increasing concern with competency image in organizational life in recent decades stems from the rise in competency level expectations, and work and information overload; in short, employees on all levels need to be more cognitively and functionally fluid across many domains (Powell & Snellman, 2004). To keep up with competition and technological developments, organizations must push for continuous development and demonstration of higher competency levels of their employees (Maurer, 2001). To achieve their performance goals, organizations exert pressure on their employees to perform; this manifests in organizational norms which demand employees appear superior, competent, and independent (Lee, 2002). Tragically, the effects of work overload have been found to include performance derailment and negation of key personal traits of even the most highly productive and self-efficacious individuals (Brown, Jones, & Leigh, 2005).

Deleterious Outcomes

Insufficient attention has been given to the potentially destructive impact of employees’ need to make favorable impressions of competency in the workplace (Carey & Nahavandi, 1996). Overall, making impressions of
competency at work is stressful. The stress derived from the need to appear competent on a job increases the use of impression management through efforts to protect or alter an image held by a target audience (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Rosenfeld, Giacalone, & Riordan, 1995). When people are under pressure to perform and to appear competent on a job, especially when without sufficient experience or preparation, multiple adverse individual and organizational outcomes can occur (Hobfoll & Shirom, 2001).

Although competency, and other factors such as superiority, and independence, may be worthy organizational objectives, managers who extol them inappropriately may inhibit their employees from seeking help or promoting efficiency, safety, and innovation (Lee, 2002). Specifically, individuals who sought material, financial, or emotional help implied their lack of experience and knowledge, and appeared incompetent by acknowledging dependence on others. Help-seeking seems to be particularly threatening to an individual’s feelings of competence when it is perceived that asking for help implies inexperience, inferiority, or dependence. Overall, data show that individuals ask less frequently for help for easy or especially important tasks out of a belief they would be perceived as less competent (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). In sum, unfortunately, employees may avoid raising issues or problems for the fear of being seen as lacking knowledge.

Individual responses to pressures to appear competent at work vary with occupation and task-specific consequences. In the medical domain, for example, inferred competency was found to impact nurses’ acceptance and status attribution on members of the in-group (Jamieson, 2004). Those who did not conform to the collectively expected levels of competency on the job were adversely treated. In fact, stereotypes are widely held for individuals and groups who are perceived as incompetent (von Hippel et al., 2005). To compensate, when faced with unfamiliar patient cases, individuals may engage in a frantic intellectual mind racing searching for pertinent knowledge in finding solutions (Thériault, 2003) that may lead to medical errors.

More generally, to appear competent on the job regardless of actual knowledge and capability, individuals may be tempted to protect their competency image by making wrong business decisions with financial repercussions. Despite the proliferation of organizational settings requiring competency, researchers have not yet devoted sufficient attention to understanding the extent of what negative consequences can emerge from the desire to make impressions of competency in the workplace. In particular, individuals’ emotional reactions to competency expectations have been largely unexplored. We focus on this in the following section.
Consensus among researchers and practitioners suggests that emotion is a pervasive force in the workplace that has the capacity to substantially influence an organization and its members (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). However, limited work has explored emotions of (in)competency (EoiC) or emotional experiences related to impressions of (in)competency at work. We know, though, that fears of appearing incompetent manifest as a form of social anxiety (Goldman & Olczak, 1975; Good & Good, 1973; Haber et al., 2012; Haber, Parlamis, Brouer, & Badaway, 2011; Tomkiewicz & Bass, 1999; Tomkiewicz et al., 2005) resulting from actual feelings of incompetency (Jamieson, 2004). Feelings of incompetency can trigger inner doubts of competence levels representing emotions of not being a good enough employee (Thériault & Gazzola, 2006). Other related studies have addressed fear of negative evaluation (Leary, 1983) and fear of self-promotion of sales people (Dudley, Goodson, & Weissener, 1993).

Typically, EoiC are not publicly discussed in the workplace. In fact, social norms in professional occupations often require emotional masking, defined as suppressing positive and negative emotions, in order to create impressions of objectivity and professionalism (Diefendorff & Richard, 2007). Employees who avoid expressing their feelings may engage in activities unsupported by their emotions, or may withhold displaying their dissatisfaction in order to be seen as agreeing with the group (Janis, 1996). Concealing or hiding emotions can induce a number of affective, cognitive, as well as physical consequences (Butler & Egloff, 2003; Gross, 2002; Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998) which are unexamined with regards to EoiC.

COMPETENCY LABOR IN CONTEXT: EMOTIONAL LABOR AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT

Our conceptualization of competency labor draws on work related to emotional labor (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996) as well as facets of behavioral strategies in the impression management literature (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Rosenfeld et al., 1995). In the following section, we review the emotional labor literature and discuss relevant findings from impression management research.
The critical role of emotions in the workplace is evident by the widespread acknowledgment by both researchers and practitioners that emotions are determinants of both individual as well as firm performance (Ashforth, & Humphrey, 1995; Ashkanasy & Daus, 2002; Humphrey, Pollack, & Hawver, 2008). The acknowledgment that emotions play a crucial role within organizations is due, in no small part, to the emergence of the literature related to emotional labor. In particular, Hochchild’s (1979, 1983) explorations of how service-focused employees were expected to “express socially desired emotions as a part of their job role” (Humphrey et al., 2008, p. 152) made it clear that emotions enabled (or inhibited) individuals in their work.

Based on Hochchild’s (1979, 1983) seminal works on emotional labor, researchers have coalesced, in the last two decades, upon the identification schema that there are three types of acting: surface acting, deep acting, and genuine acting. Hochschild described two types of emotional labor, surface acting and deep acting. Surface acting involves employees simulating emotions that are not actually felt by changing their outward appearances (i.e., facial expression, gestures, or voice tone) when exhibiting required emotions. In contrast, deep acting represents an individual’s attempt to (a) exhort feelings in an attempt to evoke or suppress an emotion and (b) relying on trained imagination to actively invoke thoughts, images, and memories to induce the associated emotion. Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) argued that there is a third form of emotional labor as well: genuine, natural, and spontaneous emotional labor. Genuine acting implies that an individual spontaneously experiences and expresses an emotion with very little effortful prompting. When these genuine and natural emotional displays conform to organizational emotional display rules then they can be considered a form of emotional labor.

Central to the concept of emotional labor are the display rules present in all organizations. Display rules represent the explicit, as well as implicit, norms that exist in a workplace regarding what emotions are expressed, both to customers as well as other employees (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). These display rules set the stage for employees to engage in the different forms of acting. For example, the norm of “service with a smile” (e.g., Pugh, 2001) compels workers to engage in surface acting if they are not actually feeling the emotions needed. Or, if they can enable themselves to actually feel a certain way, deep acting may be the form of emotional labor exerted. Diefendorff, Croyle, and Gosserand
(2005) found that employees frequently express their naturally occurring emotions at work and they argued that researchers should pay greater attention to genuine and natural emotional labor.

These display rules for emotions form the core of our extension of this literature to the concept of competency labor. As we noted earlier, the norm within the rapidly changing contemporary workplace is that individuals must display competence. Not unlike the norm of “service with a smile,” the norm of competence demonstration compels employees (of all rank and tenure) to act in accordance with display rules related to competency and related feelings. And, similar to the emotional labor exerted when an individual does not actually feel a certain way we posit that labor also is present when individuals exert effort to display competence. In this case, as above, surface acting resembles the labor engaged in when displaying competence when not actually feeling it. Deep acting, in contrast, resembles the ability of some individuals to actually force themselves to feel a certain way. Although many people feel competent at work and use natural and genuine emotional labor, there are still many people who have low self-efficacy and who use surface acting and deep acting instead of genuine and natural emotional labor. This, then, sets up a situation where individuals must engage in competency labor to comply with the display rules present in the contemporary workplace environment.

Impression Management

A basic premise of impression management theory stems from self-presentation, the basic human motive to be perceived by others in a favorable manner while avoiding being viewed negatively (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982). It refers to people’s concern of attaining an overall desired public image, such as likeability, virtue, attractiveness, level of effort, and competence (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). The motivation for engaging in impression management has been attributed to a number of social theories. Specifically, social influence theory claims that one’s behavior is influenced by others’ behavior within the same population (Levy, Collins, & Nail, 1998). Role theory explores organizational members’ engagement in role enactment (Biddle & Thomas, 1966). Theory of social identity delineates one’s role and self-proclaimed identity in social interactions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Schlenker (1980) emphasized that the concern for impression management arises from the need for social approval, which includes a paradoxical combination of the need for acceptance and
avoiding rejection. These theories suggest that social factors play an important role in impression management. Specific situational factors characteristics, such as target audience characteristics and role constraints, determine the degree to which people control their impressions (Bozeman & Kacmar, 1997; Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Examination of social context, such as collective pressures to appear competent, can explain the motivation behind engaging in impressions of competency at work.

**Impression Management Tactics and Consequences**

Impression management behavioral strategies are interrelated with motives to attain a desired image (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). Numerous taxonomies subsuming various classifications of tactics, both verbal and nonverbal, have emerged (Leary, 1995; Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, & Tedeschi, 1999; Murphy, 2007). Jones and Pittman’s (1982) schema, a widely accepted categorization format, focuses on five main strategies: self-promotion, ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, and exemplification (Bolino & Turnley, 1999; Kacmar, Harris, & Nagy, 2007).

Although behavioral strategies and their taxonomies have consumed much of impression management studies, scant research has been dedicated to tactics with one outcome image of competency. Competency image, which is defined here as being perceived as knowledgeable, skilled, and intelligent in a particular task or within a cognitive domain, has been associated predominantly with self-promotion (Giacalone & Rosenfeld, 1986; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Kacmar et al., 2007; Turnley & Bolino, 2001). Self-promotion, as having a direct influence on attaining a competency image, includes voicing, exaggerating, or highlighting one’s abilities and accomplishments. Self-promotion was found to be specifically effective in creating the attribution of competence in an ambiguous environment (Kacmar, Carlson, & Bratton, 2004). However, “aggressive self-promotion attempts also run the risk of making others feel resentful or jealous” (Rosenfeld et al., 1995, p. 51). Relying on third parties to assert one’s competence may shield one from unfavorable perceptions of using direct self-promotion; even when the intermediaries are not neutral (Pfeffer, Fong, Cialdini, & Portnoy, 2006).

Gibson and Oberlander (2008) found that hypercriticism can be an indirect strategy for making impressions of competency. At times, individuals act overtly critical to be perceived as knowledgeable and intelligent and they may even choose a discussion topic that stimulates hypercritical evaluations. However, trying to appear smart backfired as it also led to a lower intelligence ratings of an interaction partner.
A set of other indirect tactics includes, for example, ingratiation that can indirectly elicit an attribution of competency through one’s attractiveness and likability (Haber, Brouer, & Fitzgerald, 2009). It is argued that self-handicapping may be used in a defense of one’s competency image and justifications can aim at reducing a negative competency impression after a failed event. Self-presentation by association can be used to enhance one’s intellectual image by associating publicly with highly regarded and competent individuals (Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Cialdini & De Nicholas, 1989).

By way of consequences, impression management has been found to have both positive and negative effects on organizational life. On one hand, studies have found a positive relationship between impression management and performance (Wayne & Kacmar, 1991). Individuals driven to enhance their self-image displayed higher levels of job performance behaviors (Yun, Takeuchi, & Liu, 2007). Turnley and Bolino (2001) demonstrated the effectiveness of impression management tactics in attaining favorable outcome images.

On the other hand, when managed inadequately, impression management can lead to adverse outcomes. Negative perception of employees engaging in impression management might evoke cynicism and decreased group morale (Rosenfeld et al., 1995). This happens when a group member engages in blunt exemplification by staying unnecessarily late at work or in aggressive self-promotion by bragging about his/her accomplishments. Ineffectively performed exemplification can result in lower group cohesion.

Building on this line of thinking, in the following section, we integrate the key tenets of emotional labor (i.e., display rules, emotion regulation) and impression management (i.e., motives and behavioral tactics) and provide an overarching framework for competency labor.

**COMPETENCY LABOR: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

Defined, “competency labor” is the degree of regulating perception of one’s competency, manipulating one’s inner feelings of (in)competency, and outward behavior to display the appropriate competency image in response to competency expectations and display rules dictated in the workplace. Drawing on the emotional labor and impression management literatures, the competency labor framework interplays multiple dimensions: (a) competency expectations; (b) competency display rules; (c) the appraisal and regulation processes of both competency levels and EoiC; (d) the
behavioral responses involving both emotional expression and impression management strategies; and (e) outcomes. The goal of the present work is to provide a starting point for further investigation of the competency labor phenomenon. Our overall model is shown in Fig. 1.

**Competency Expectations**

Occupational roles and organizational elements dictate diverse competency expectations in the workplace. Job descriptions and performance evaluations typically state explicit expectations of competent performance for a particular position or role. Role expectations and desired behaviors are also acquired implicitly through social interactions and pressures from others within the organization (Graen, 1976). Communicating job expectations creates role pressure and psychological role forces. However, these expectations and guidelines do not include rules for displaying competency feelings on a job.

Competency expectations are also formed at an organizational level. Organizational culture shapes members’ core values and behavioral norms (Erez & Gati, 2004), which are acquired and shared through the social

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**Fig. 1.** Conceptual Framework of Competency Labor.
learning processes of modeling and observation, as well as through individual actions (Bandura, 1997). Direction and intensity are key attributes of culture (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988). Direction refers to the actual content of the cultural values and behavioral norms, such as competency levels; while intensity is the strength of its emphasis on the content. Cultural intensity requires cognitive consensus among members and a set of connections between expectations, rewards, and behaviors. A consistent strife for high competency levels throughout an entire organization, for example, would indicate a competency-driven culture with high levels of intensity.

Cooke and Rousseau (1988) found that norms can be subcultural and hierarchical within a control-oriented organization. Organizations might have one strong dominant culture but, at the same time, experience other subcultures within their social structures (Rousseau, 1990). Subcultures within functionally structured firms, for instance, may profess different emphasis on competency levels and their intensity can vary among departments. In essence, competency expectations must be explained as both explicit and implicit formations that embrace occupational roles and various organizational dimensions. A comprehensive understanding of competency expectations in organizations will offer an insight on their competency display rules.

Competency Display Rules

Display rules represent a mechanism of emotional regulation and provide standards for emotional expressions in interpersonal situations (Diefendorff & Richard, 2007). From an emotional labor perspective, display rules are used to constrain employee emotional displays in order to facilitate the attainment of organizational objectives. For these reasons, according to Wharton and Erickson (1993), different occupations employ different display rules: integrative rules (bringing people together) are common among sales people; differentiating rules (creating negative feelings in the target) typically occur in law enforcement occupations; masking rules (showing no emotion or suppressing its expression) are often used in professional ranks to attain impression of impartiality and objectivity. Implicit standards for engaging in self-presentational behavior in a particular social context define behavioral expectations across different professions (Bandura, 1997). Display rules for making impressions of competency and expressing EoIC can vary by occupation, job, group, and organization. As
such, expected self-presentational guidelines to convey competency is different for physicians and administrative assistants.

Two types of social expectations have been linked to guiding social interactions: first-order expectation (held by oneself) and second-order expectation (perception of expectations held by others) (Troyer & Younts, 1997). When a discrepancy exists between first- and second-order expectations under equally weighted motives, systemic theory of expectations in social interactions asserts that second-order expectations dominate social interactions, suggesting stronger influence of social norms than individual motives for showing competency.

Social norms regulate behavior in a workplace as the building blocks of an organizational culture. A norm involves individual reflexivity and consists of the felt obligation to behave according to the expectations (Jasso & Opp, 1997). Social norms are important elements for explaining behavior, and they contain implicit rules for acting competent and expressing emotions on a job. They can either restrain or promote verbal claims of self-competency (Haber, Brouer, Fitzgerald, & Paul, 2010).

A notable distinction exists between competence display rules set by target audience (i.e., the organization, superiors, and clients) and actors’ perception of what the audience expects (i.e., employee’s interpretation). Although much of organizational research is based on the actors’ perception of values held by the target audience (Leary, 1995) capturing the incongruence between collective rules and individual perception of these rules may explain variations in individual processing and outcomes in competency labor. Similarly, incongruent competency expectations may also arise from wrongful employees’ assessment of organizationally professed competency expectations. Misinterpretation of these collective rules and expectations may lead to erroneous displays of competency and result in lower performance ratings at work. Unfortunately, to our knowledge, no research has investigated these competency display rules in the workplace.

**Individual Factors**

Individual factors contribute to different interpretations of competency expectations, and impact cognitive, behavioral, and affective processing. Various individual characteristics have been shown to be significant predictors in both emotional labor and impression management. Personality (Perrewé & Spector, 2002), in particular, can affect how people deal with impressions of competency on a job. Personality is referred to as “a system
of mediating processes, conscious and unconscious, whose interactions are manifested in predictable patterns of situational-behavior relations” (Mischel & Shoda, 1995, p. 246). Stable traits have been shown to be important factors on job performance in a variety of contexts (Barrick & Mount, 1991). In an empirical examination within the context of impressions of competency, conscientiousness, and self-monitoring were found to be significant predictors of the fear of appearing incompetent (Haber et al., 2012). Also, political skill (Ferris et al., 2005) has been argued to be positively related to impressions of competency in the workplace (Brouer, Wallace, & Harvey, 2011).

Self-efficacy, individuals’ judgments of their own capabilities (Gist & Mitchell, 1992), can be a crucial factor in emotional and behavioral responses to the pressures of appearing competent. Perceived self-efficacy is a conviction of one’s ability to act whereas an outcome expectation is the judgment of the likely consequence of the behavior (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy with outcome expectancies and goals can serve as either incentives or barriers to behavior and achievement. Four major processes in which beliefs regulate behavior include: cognitive (thought patterns related to performance); motivational (self-motivational and purposive action); affective (nature and intensity of emotional experience); and selective (shaping individual choice for activities and type of environment) processes (Bandura, 1997). The affective process suggests an influence of self-efficacy on EoiC and the selective process on individual’s choice of one’s behavior.

Other Situational Factors

Many situational factors exist that will also affect the way individuals process concerns with competency image and how they experience EoiC at work. For example, responses will vary according to the type of task at hand (e.g., customer service, sales, communication, negotiation, public speaking); complexity of task (e.g., simple, difficult); role (e.g., job position, responsibilities); target audience (e.g., superior, subordinate, individual, or group); target audience characteristics (e.g., moods, personality); and location (e.g., office, client’s site, online). Influences will arise from departmental and organizational levels. They may include leadership styles such as collaborative and authoritative orientation, and facets of culture such as supportive, competitive, or goal-driven. From a broader spectrum, national culture and traditions will also offer environmental cues that will be considered when engaging in impressions of competency.
In summary, integrating competency expectations, competency display rules, individual characteristics, and other situational factors comprise the concept of competency pressures that individuals are faced with at work. Based on the environment and their personal dispositions and past experiences, individuals infer competency display rules regarding how to show competency and express emotions on the job. For each event, they assess situation-specific factors, such as target audience and task difficulty. In response to these competency pressures, individuals then engage in cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes. We discuss these below.

**Cognitive Processes: Competency Appraisal and Regulation**

Cognitive processes involve competency appraisal (conscious effort of comparing one’s competency with what is expected) and competency regulation (realignment or derailment of self-efficacy with expectations). People will engage in the competency appraisal process for assessing a complex set of capabilities and comparing them to collective competency expectations, especially when faced with a challenging assignment that stretches their intellectual and social comfort zone. The cognitive exercise may result in an alignment between these two dimensions. However, when inner reservations about their cognitive capabilities do not match the perceived competency expectations, people will experience competency dissonance, which may propel competency regulation and affective processing of feelings of incompetency.

When individuals appraise own competencies in comparison to competency expectations at work they may consider, consciously or not, four different ratings: (1) actual competency (Kruger & Dunning, 1999); (2) others’ rating of one’s competency (Schlenker, 1980); (3) self-evaluation of own competency (Schlenker, 1980) and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997); and (4) reflected appraisal (perception of how others view one’s competency) (Schlenker, 1980). The first dimension is in the actual capability of an individual on a task as measured in the most objective way. The second aspect represents how others rate one’s competency, taking into account appraisers’ motives, predispositions, and situational factors. Self-evaluation, the third component, refers to the individual’s perception of his/her capabilities, and includes self-efficacy. Self-efficacy concerns the belief and confidence in one’s capability to perform a particular task (Bandura, 1997). Last, reflected appraisal consists of one’s perception of how others view and rate one’s competency level.
In the next step, although not necessarily sequential, individuals may adjust their cognitive view of their competency to reflect dynamic changes in their cognitive processing. During the competency regulation stage, they may increase or decrease their self-efficacy, or remain authentic without altering their initial conception of their skills, knowledge, and abilities for the particular domain. With the goal of reducing competency dissonance, competency expectations assigned to the job may be reinterpreted or downplayed. Taken together, the degree of perceived competency dissonance influenced by situational and personal factors will trigger the onset of EoiC, which will in turn impact the outcome behaviors and actual demonstration of the competency.

* Affective Processes: Emotional Experience and Appraisal

Cognitive processes of competency assessment and regulation efforts will elicit affective processes, which encompass the experience of EoiC. They involve an emotional appraisal stage for assessing one’s feelings of (in)competency. And, just as competency appraisals can lead to competency dissonance, emotional appraisal may result in EoiC discrepancy when there is a perceived difference between how one feels about own competency and how one should express it according to the perceived display rules governing a particular circumstance.

* Emotional Experience

In one, of many, classifications Epstein (1993) categorized eight primary emotions – fear, anger, joy, sadness, acceptance, disgust, expectation, and surprise, which are believed to have simple short-lived structures as compared to complex emotions that involve more cognitive processing. EoiC implies a complex form of fearful anticipation of experiencing negative consequences, including embarrassment, due to a perception of incompetency in the eyes of others.

For a precise treatment of the EoiC construct, temperament, emotions, feelings, mood, affect, and episodes must be examined. Temperament is a relatively stable and biologically rooted pattern of individual differences in emotional responsiveness (Bates, 2000). In contrast to emotions, feelings do not involve neurophysiological changes or action tendency. Moods are differentiated from emotions by lower intensity, longer duration, and diffuseness (Frijda, 1986). Moods arise from unidentified elicitors whereas emotions are conceived as intentional phenomena directed toward an
object. A mood can become a more intensified emotion. Affect is defined as the conscious realization of feelings and emotions, also comprising temperament and mood. Emotion episodes are complex affective phenomena with continuous emotional engagements, inner coherence, and significantly higher intensity than basic emotions (Beal & Trougakos, 2013; Frijda, 1993). The inherent complexity of EoiC suggests that it could embody different forms of emotional experience.

The EoiC might be conceptualized also as anticipatory fear or anxiety (Beck, Emery, & Geenberg, 1985) because it is concerned with the anticipation of a threat to one's competency image. Fear and anxiety have often been used interchangeably and independently, yet a few major differentiating factors have been noted. Whereas fear is a response to a pivotal object of threat, anxiety is experienced when situational meaning occurs without specification of possible harm (Frijda, 1986). In essence, anxiety is “unresolved fear” with similar somatic manifestations as fear. Researchers often combine the fear/anxiety concept and regard it as an emotional state (evoked by a particular elicitor and having shorter duration) or a personality trait characterizing individual response across time and situations (Ohman, 1993). Experiencing EoiC in the workplace might be viewed as anxiety when individuals may not necessarily consciously recognize or are aware of specific stimuli that make them feel doubtful of their competency.

Bandura (1997) suggests that anxiety is the response to low self-efficacy of coping in relation to negative outcomes. People experience little anxiety arousal when confronting threats they regard with high efficacy, but, at the same time, those with low coping efficacy will display mounting competency anxiety. When self-efficacy of coping with competency pressures is firmly established, self-doubt or insecurity may be dormant; however, when the vulnerability is activated, it can lead to crippling inhibition, anxiety, and avoidance.

Emotional Appraisal
Emotional experience requires the cognitive ability of objective self-awareness and self-conscious evaluation of the internal bodily state, interpretation of context, behavior of others, and cultural meaning (Lewis, 1993b). When employees cognitively assess their fear of being seen as incompetent in front of others they may interpret their neurophysiological changes to help in the appraisal efforts (Scherer, 1999). Self-conscious evaluations of emotions have been widely studied in organizational research (Lewis, 1993a) and they should include EoiC.
A potential determinant for assessing emotional experience related to competency is found in the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), a social-cognitive approach to affect, which suggests that existence of a discrepancy between the actual self and the “ought self” or the “ideal self.” Failure to reduce the “ideal self” discrepancy is related to sadness and disappointment with oneself, whereas failure to mitigate the “ought self” incongruity is associated with guilt and anxiety. Thus, individuals who experience the “ought self” discrepancy between their actual EoiC and the standards of what they should be displaying might elicit a form of anxiety.

Larsen (1991) distinguishes between emotional content – typical experience over time – and emotional style – typical intensity, level, and variability of emotional reactivity. Examinations of fluctuations in emotional intensity have tied them to behavioral consequences and suggest that they initially increase at onset, reach several intensity peaks, and then gradually decline (Sonnemans & Frijda, 1994). According to the inverted U-curve hypothesis, intensity of emotion episodes can have disturbing and motivating effects on performance, such that moderate arousal results in optimal performance, while high and low arousals end up in performance decrements (Frijda, 1993). Variability in intensity of fluctuations in EoiC may explain behavioral outcomes.

Reduction in emotional intensity over time may be attributed to a habituation phenomenon – a “decrease of response to unconditioned stimuli due to repeated occurrence of those stimuli” (Frijda, 1986, p. 318). The decreased emotional reactivity is especially affected when stimuli are frequent and not too intense. For example, Thériault and Gazzola (2006) found that seasoned medical therapists experience feelings of incompetence less intensely than do new employees, which may imply habituation response coupled with decreased sensitivity to situational demands on the job. Given that competency expectations serve as a continuous stimulus in the workplace, its enduring effect on EoiC might induce a habituation response in a form of cognitive adjustment or decreased reactivity among experienced professionals. In sum, while experiencing EoiC and engaging in emotional appraisal, individuals may identify EoiC discrepancy, which will lead to emotional regulation.

Emotional regulation of EoiC refers to the effort of individuals to modify their EoiC in order to meet competency display rules dictated in the...
workplace. Emotional regulation is a control mechanism over individual’s experience and expression of emotions; it encompasses both affective and behavioral elements.

The general tendency to regulate emotions in organizational life is affected by collective norms (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995). And, the strength of EoiC discrepancy and the role of context will determine what regulatory strategies individuals will select in order to mitigate the difference between their true EoiC and what they are expected to feel and express. Key regulatory strategies from the emotional labor literature, consisting of three major acting strategies: surface acting, deep acting, and genuine expression, are expanded conceptually here to specifically address competency expectations, EoiC, and their display rules in the workplace.

**Competency surface acting** occurs when employees appear competent without actually experiencing the expected feelings of competency as a result of inadequate levels of self-efficacy. Under this strategy, individuals will not attempt to mitigate the perceived competency dissonance or EoiC discrepancy but will rely primarily on faking feelings using surface acting to portray the necessary emotional signals to align with social expectations, the display rules of being seen as “knowledgeable and skilled.”

**Competency deep acting**, on the other hand, arises when people alter their competency appraisals and modify their inner experience of EoiC to align with emotional expression to desired competency displays. Competency deep acting strategy will contribute to both cognitive response of mitigating competency dissonance through the adjustment of self-efficacy levels and to affective processing for reducing EoiC discrepancy by modified feeling and expression to match the “required” display rules of showing competency on a job. For instance, seasoned management consultants, who are assigned new challenging projects may experience competency dissonance and will actively strive to invoke thoughts, images, memories or past experience to conjure the appropriate inner judgments of own abilities to enhance their self-efficacy as well as change how they feel and express their competency standing.

**Competency genuine acting** is when competency dissonance and EioC discrepancy are lowest. Here, evoked feelings of competency require little effort to attain desired competency display goals. Fueled by cognitive appraisal of the alignment between self-efficacy and expected competency levels, emotions of competency trigger genuine emotional and behavioral responses for portraying a desired image of competency. Genuinely
portrayed professional competence will elicit genuine expressions of related emotions.

**Behavioral Strategies**

In addition to emotional regulation, individuals may rely on other tactics to make a more desirable impression of competency. While performing a task, they may choose to reinforce their image of a desired expertise through self-promotion and other indirect tactics discussed earlier. Further research needs to empirically validate an entire spectrum of effective choices for those desperately seeking ways to appearing competent.

**Individual and Organizational Outcomes**

Emotional labor and impression management research highlight a wide range of potential effects on individual, group, and organizational levels. Emotion regulation alone, for example, has been found to lead to affective, cognitive, and social consequences (Gross, 2002). Expressive suppression — consciously inhibiting emotional expressions while being emotionally aroused — impacts social interactions, such as distraction, reduced rapport, disrupted communication, formation of an inhibited relationship, and increased stress (Butler & Egloff, 2003). Emotional inhibition diminishes cognitive performance as it influences expressive behavior, physiology, and subjective emotional experiences (Gross & Levenson, 1997). Further, usage of impression management has been studied with regards to performance (e.g., Keller, 2002), job interviews (e.g., Delery & Kacmar, 1998; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005), employee assessment (e.g., McFarland, Yun, Harold, Viera, & Moore, 2005), employee selection (e.g., Arup, Toh, & Pichler, 2006; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Van Iddekinge, McFarland, Raymark, 2007), and job stress (e.g., Mayes & Ganster, 1988). In addition to the above, the examination of the effects of competency labor in the workplace shall include, for example, decision making, sales, customer satisfaction, patient safety, burnout, deviant and unethical behavior, corporate image, and public relations among others.

Overall, the framework conceptually integrates five key elements that comprise competency labor. In light of competency expectations and display rules, individuals respond to competency pressures by engaging in
cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes, which affect work-related outcomes.

**FUTURE RESEARCH FOR MANAGING COMPETENCY LABOR IN THE WORKPLACE**

Research focusing on the competency labor will provide organizations with a better understanding of the implications of the competency pressures in the workplace. It will offer ways of addressing impressions of competency and EoiC in order to mitigate adverse consequences. Organizations typically do not profess normative behaviors for situations when employees feel incompetent; in fact they are hidden and implicit. As a result, individuals rely on own individual interpretations for behavioral guidance.

Future studies may indicate that organizations should manage their competency norms through systematic and strategic training as well as proactive communication. Perhaps, employees could be encouraged to express their apprehension of incompetency more freely in carefully designed social sharing settings to avoid expensive cover-ups. Because emotional responses are learned through direct experience or by observing others vicariously (Bandura, 1997) leaders should explicitly communicate display rules and demonstrate appropriate response mechanisms for dealing with impressions of competency on a job. The openness in discussing EoiC may help shape finer organizational culture with optimized levels of EoiC. Studies may suggest that nurturing employees’ EoiC particularly among young, new, disabled, or elderly employees could diminish their potential harmful effects on well-being, stress, and performance. As a way of facilitating help-seeking behaviors, for example, organizations could make it less threatening for people to feel incompetent, inferior, or dependent in a workplace (Lee, 2002).

In summary, competency labor research should empower practitioners with tools on how to (a) measure the extent of competency expectations and display rules in their institutions; (b) understand the spectrum of negative consequences arising from competency labor; (c) modify organizational culture to manage implicit and explicit norms for handling competency expectations; (d) help employees with coping mechanisms with EoiC and competency pressures; (e) identify demographic characteristics and traits of employees who may be prone to experiencing EoiC; (f) promote acceptance and expression of EoiC in the workplace; and (g) manage impressions of
competency as a competitive advantage. Organizations should be able to incorporate competency labor research findings into their training programs, human resources selection, performance evaluations, and strategy.

In conclusion, the introduction of “competency labor” in this chapter aims to attract emotional labor scholars to focus on examining the onset, experience, and regulation of EoiC. Many questions on the competency labor phenomenon remain and it is crucial for this unexamined area to receive more systematic theoretical and empirical attention.

REFERENCES


