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**Exploring the nature of nonprofit work through emotional labor**

(under review)

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**Bio**

**Beth Eschenfelder** (PhD, University of South Florida, 2007) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at The University of Tampa. Her scholarly interests are in interorganizational relationships between and among nonprofits, governments, and communities (including businesses, neighborhoods, and citizen groups), and the communicative practices these entities utilize to foster strong partnerships.

Lewis (in this issue) notes that as scholars strive to make claims about the uniqueness of the nonprofit workforce, such efforts may be problematic due to the developing nature of the independent sector (Frumkin, 2002, as cited in Lewis). Although my experience tells me nonprofit workers<sup>1</sup> are, indeed, unique, I question the validity of such claims and suggest there may be more similarities than differences when looking at workers across the sectors. Looking more closely at nonprofit workers, however, and the characteristics that fuel their passion and keep them engaged, can help scholars and managers identify communication strategies to support, motivate, and inspire these workers. Communication scholarship in this realm is becoming more relevant as the nonprofit sector continues to grow—especially now, when increasing challenges (e.g., budget constraints) to nonprofits may make such work less desirable or fulfilling.

One useful framework for uncovering these communication challenges and strategies in the nonprofit workforce is through the lens of emotional labor and emotions in the workplace. The study of emotional labor and emotions in the nonprofit sector is important (as it is in all sectors), because when not recognized, understood, and mitigated, the practice of emotional

labor can have detrimental effects on employee job satisfaction and overall wellbeing. When managed well, emotions and emotional labor serve an important role in organizational communication to foster feelings of personal accomplishment within and among the workforce. This has broader implications for society, as a whole, due to the significant impact nonprofits have on the quality of public life.

Since Hochschild's (1983) foundational research on flight attendants, emotional labor and workplace emotions have been studied in multiple disciplines, being most commonly featured in sociology, communication, and management literature. Emotional labor involves the production of certain feelings in the worker, the production of feelings in others, and the effort, planning, and control required to express an organization's desired emotions (Hochschild, 1983; Karabanow, 1999; Shuler & Sypher, 2000). Put another way, emotional labor involves the efforts of workers to understand others, have empathy with their situation, and internalize their feelings (Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Such behaviors are demonstrative of the ethic of care many expect from nonprofit workers. Beyond their impact on worker performance, emotions and emotional labor are equally important for worker identity, work relationships, and overall job satisfaction.

Because nonprofit workers are especially bound to the clients they serve, they often go above and beyond the call of duty, even if it means increasing their emotional labor. Workers often have to restrain their own feelings in order to deal with difficult situations and to help clients as best they can. This expectation or self-imposed suppression of worker feelings is called "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983)—governing the expression of emotions, especially in service-based occupations. Other concepts featured in research on emotional labor, regardless of sector, include emotive effort (notion of feeling management), emotive dissonance (the difference between felt and feigned emotions), and emotional attachment (emotional bond or attachment)

(Hochschild, 1983).

The traits and characteristics referenced here are not unique to nonprofit work, nor is the practice of emotional labor. It can be found in any service industry where workers give something of themselves to their clients with whom they likely have no ongoing personal relationship (Steinberg & Figart, 1999). Within for-profit work settings, the impact of emotional labor has been studied with employees of The Body Shop (Martin, Knoppoff & Beckman, 1998), technology workers, (Kunda & van Maanen, 1999), personal selling representatives (Lan, 2002), nail technicians/manicurists (Kang, 2003), financial investment planners (Miller & Koesten, 2008), hairstylists (Cohen, 2010), and frontline service workers in many other industries. A primary focus of research with these for-profit workers is on the service they provide to their customers and the toll emotional labor takes on them.

It is this *service* requirement that makes emotional labor so prevalent in nonprofit organizations and also makes work in the nonprofit sector challenging and, at times, discouraging. Nonprofit workers often deal with people who are sick, abusive or abused, down on their luck, without homes, or dealing with life histories beyond most people's imagination. Because of difficult situations being faced by these clients, they can be unpleasant to work with, overly demanding, dishonest, manipulative, and disobedient. Thus, researchers theorize that workers in fields such as health care, social service work, and other caring professions are more likely to perform emotional labor (Karabanow, 1999; Shuler & Sypher, 2000; Steinberg & Figart, 1999). They often are passionate about various social causes and are more likely to "self-select occupations that require particular types of emotional labor" (Shuler & Sypher, 2000, p. 75). Many types of nonprofit workers have been featured in studies of emotional labor including, for example, social workers (Meyerson, 2000), youth shelter workers (Karabanow, 1999), human

rights activists (Taylor, Mallinson & Bloch, 2008), domestic violence shelter workers and volunteers (Shuler, 2007), animal shelter volunteers (Taylor, Mallinson & Bloch, 2008), peer-providers of mental health services (Mancini & Lawson, 2009), and retirement center workers (Miller, Zook & Ellis, 1989).

For these workers, it is this tendency toward emotional labor that makes them passionate about their work; this can contribute to job satisfaction and improved services to clients. When passion is intertwined with emotional labor, however, negative consequences may result including the possibility of burnout (see, for example, Fineman, 2000; Karabanow, 1999; Putnam & Mumby, 1993), which can cause decreased job satisfaction in addition to mental and physical distress.

Efforts to understand emotional labor and its influences require recognition and appreciation of workplace emotions. People often think the phenomenon of emotion is not accessible or relevant to studies of social collectives, and emotion “is often treated as ‘inappropriate’ for organizational life” (Putnam & Mumby, 1993, p. 36). To the contrary, emotions are an important tool in defining work relationships (Waldron, 2000, p. 79) and are important in developing and sustaining relationships and responding to relationship conflict. Emotions connect people to one another and to organizations. More specifically, it is emotional life within the organization—relationships with other people—that registers as the organization (Rafaeli & Worline, 2001, p. 110). Putnam and Mumby contend that emotion is the process through which members constitute their work environment by negotiating a shared reality. Emotions are important to help form mutual understanding “by cueing empathy, gaining insights into expectations, building shared interpretations and understanding life histories” (p. 51). Rafaeli and Worline (2001) concur that when people talk about work, they talk primarily about

other people, and talking about other people at work most often involves talking about emotions at work (p. 110).

Depending on the type of work, the emotional labor involved, and other factors, the range of emotions experienced by workers can be vast, including negative emotions. In any work setting that involves performing emotional labor, workers display a broad range of emotions. In a meta-analysis of research on emotions and emotional labor in nonprofit and for-profit settings (Eschenfelder, 2011), several emotions were commonly featured in both settings including: *compassion, contentment, love/liking, joy and pride*. Equally prominent, however, were *anxiety and frustration*. In the nonprofit workplace studies, uniquely identified emotions included *depression and anger*. In for-profit studies, uniquely identified emotions included *stress/tension and manipulation*. Such negative emotions are often cited in studies of burnout, and the combination of positive and negative emotions underscores the tensions that can exist for workers within any service industry. Negative emotions and burnout, when not mitigated through effective communicative strategies and other methods, affect more than one's working condition; they affect one's overall quality of life. Because of the contributions of nonprofit workers to society, it isn't a stretch to claim this has both personal and civic implications.

As previously mentioned, during times of economic and structural uncertainty for nonprofits, emotion and emotional labor become especially relevant and more problematic. Employees' emotional response and emotional labor can be complicated by sudden or significant shifts and changes encountered in their work settings, yet little attention is paid to their emotional issues or how they can be better understood and validated. Through the lens of emotional labor, organizational communication scholars can identify prominent emotions in nonprofits and other service-based work settings, explore motivations of workers, understand factors that contribute

to emotional labor, and theorize about communication strategies to mitigate its effects. In so doing, such scholars will continue to develop the body of research in this area, which in turn, may guide nonprofit executives seeking to improve their management and support of emotional labor in their organizations.

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<sup>1</sup> The majority of studies on emotional labor feature the “worker”—often frontline staff or volunteers who provide direct service to the customer or client. References in this article similarly focus on “workers,” as opposed to managers or directors.