

# Emotion and Communication in Organizations

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Emotional communication is central to many jobs (→ Emotion). Stockbrokers express aggression, nurses communicate care, and emotions such as shame, pride, and fear are central in organizational evaluation. Nonetheless, organization studies have traditionally written out emotion, treating it as a private issue, a barrier to effectiveness, or something that should be controlled (→ Organizational Communication). Early research suggested that organizations were and should be rational, scientific entities (→ Bureaucracy and Communication). In this paradigm, if emotions were examined, they were measured as variables of job satisfaction, morale, or commitment. Furthermore, emotions have traditionally been subjugated to the private, personal, feminine sphere (→ Feminist and Gender Studies).

Despite this early resistance, in the past 15 years, increasing numbers of scholars from communication, management, sociology, and psychology have examined emotion formation, expression, and control in the workplace. Researchers have explored how emergent work feelings are an integral part of organizational life (Mumby & Putnam 1992) and how emotional display and “emotional intelligence” (Goleman 1995) are co-opted by organizations to achieve an economic mission. As such, researchers have recognized that emotions are a core part of organizing and that emotionality is not the opposite of rationality or cognition (Planalp 1999), but, rather, is part of organizational processes.

## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

A communicative approach to emotion and organizations emphasizes several key issues (Waldron 1994). First, emotion is not just a reaction, but functions as both a performance and a rhetorical act that achieves specific objectives. Second, emotion is an interactive, negotiated process that is continuously experienced across work groups and relationships. Third, communication not only serves as emotional packaging, but fundamentally constructs feelings. Through interaction and storytelling, employees negotiate cultural expectations of emotion, interpret the emotional displays of others, recreate and make sense of past emotional events, and elicit emotion in others.

Emotions have *several components*, which include (1) a cognitive appraisal of a situation, event, or object (→ Cognition; Appraisal Theory), (2) a feeling of action-readiness, (3) internal feelings, and (4) external physical characteristics. “Feelings” are generally considered subjective experiences that reside in individuals. “Emotions,” in contrast, generally refer to the external display of the affected state, the meaning of which is negotiated and constructed through organizational norms. Emotions are connected to direct objects or causes, while “moods” refer to enduring pleasant or unpleasant feelings with no direct object. The term “affect,” often connected to concepts such as job satisfaction and morale, is usually considered to be a valence that is determined by the appraisal of good or bad.

## **RESEARCH AREAS**

### **Stress and Burnout**

Burnout is generally considered to be a three-dimensional concept characterized by (1) emotional exhaustion (or a “wearing out” from a job), (2) depersonalization or a negative shift in responses to others, particularly clients, and (3) a decreased sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach 1982). Burnout is especially linked to professions that require high levels of client contact, such as teaching, social work, and human service work. Additionally, burnout has been associated with role conflict, close contact with emotional clients, work overload, cognitive dissonance, and lack of organizational identification. Communicative factors that mitigate burnout include social support, strong superior–subordinate relationships, participation in decision-making, and high levels of organizational identification.

Kathy Miller and her colleagues conducted several foundational organizational communication studies of burnout, and operationalized empathy as a two-pronged concept consisting of (1) emotional contagion, in which the caregiver experiences emotional responses parallel to the client’s emotion, and (2) empathic concern, which is a concern about the welfare of the other without feeling parallel emotions of the other. While empathic concern leads to increased satisfaction and decreased burnout, emotional contagion is counterproductive, as it leads to the depersonalization of clients and burnout for the worker (Miller et al. 1988).

### **Emotional Labor**

Sociologist Arlie Hochschild is recognized as being the founder of the emotion labor literature. In her study of the emotional display rules of Delta flight attendants, Hochschild (1983) distinguishes between emotion management and emotion labor. “Emotion management” is the effort that individuals put into making their private feelings align with socially accepted norms, such as looking sad at a funeral or jovial at a party. “Emotion labor” is the commercial exploitation of this process, as when employees are paid to smile, laugh, be polite, or be caring. The bulk of the emotion labor literature focuses upon professions in which employees put on a happy face, such as Disney employees, cruise staff, and waiters. Other research has examined professionals who feign negative or disinterested emotions, such as bill collectors or police officers, as well as health-care workers, who control emotions of disgust and express care.

Communication researchers have examined emotion labor among a variety of professions, including emergency communication call-takers (Shuler & Sypher 2000), teachers (Miller 2002), firefighters (Scott & Myers 2005), and correctional officers (Tracy 2005), among others. This research highlights the importance of everyday activities and organizational structures for socially constructing emotion norms, the purposeful selection and socialization of workers to exhibit certain emotions, the importance of social support in times of organizational tragedy, and the ways employees communicatively deal with emotion labor through storytelling, joking, and venting.

## Emotional Intelligence

A concept closely connected to emotion management is emotional intelligence (sometimes called EQ). EQ is a big business, producing consultants, scholarly research, and popular press books. The concept is based upon the idea that individuals have “multiple” intelligences and that rationality and emotionality are complementary rather than contradictory.

In the popular press book *Emotional intelligence*, science journalist Daniel Goleman (1995) summarizes the research, claiming that emotionally intelligent people: (1) know their emotions; (2) manage their emotions; (3) motivate themselves; (4) recognize emotions in others; and (5) can handle relationships. While the empirical research backing some of these claims is tenuous (see Dougherty & Krone 2002), research does suggest that emotionally intelligent people can identify and perceive emotion in self and others (e.g., have empathy), and understand, shape, and channel emotions successfully (Fineman 2006).

## Bounded Emotionality and Compassion

“Bounded emotionality” is likely the most referenced emotion and organizing concept emanating from the communication field. In contrast to prevailing views of emotion as either a pathology (e.g., burnout) or something to be rationally managed, bounded emotionality provides an “alternative mode of organizing in which nurturance, caring, community, supportiveness, and interrelatedness are fused with individual responsibility to shape organizational experiences” (Mumby & Putnam 1992, 474). The concept frames emotion in organizations not as a commodity to be controlled but as “work feelings” that are integral to the workplace.

Likewise, research has focused on how emotion, in the form of compassion, can constitute an ameliorative to organizational and employee pain. Compassion includes noticing another’s suffering, imagining the feeling of that person, and easing that pain through verbal and nonverbal communicative responses. Significant compassionate encounters rely on the degree to which individuals are attuned to provide compassion and the amount of organizational support of this behavior. Dutton et al. (2006) have developed a theory of compassion organizing which suggests that organizational structural features can be redirected toward responding to members’ pain. Their research, along with recent work by Miller (2007), has found that caring interactions at work dramatically influence people’s experience of organizations.

## Affective Events and Mood Theory

Affective events theory (AET), developed by Weiss and Cropanzano (1996), has been proposed as an overarching model of emotions in organizations (Fineman 2006). The theory suggests that organizational policies, roles, and events initiate emotional responses in organizational members, which, in turn, affect members’ behaviors and performance. The empirical work associated with AET has found that performance at work is not defined by long-term attitudes about satisfaction, but by the frequency and accumulation of everyday organizational emotional highs (“uplifts”) and lows (“hassles”).

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Consistent with AET, research suggests that positive and negative mood states can determine employees' attitudes and actions. Employees in negative moods are less satisfied, more burned out, and more likely to leave their job. However, those in negative moods are also likely to better process cognitive information and make finer judgments. Positive moods help facilitate creativity and boost optimism (→ Mood Management).

### **Humor and Organizing**

The connection of positive moods and organizational effectiveness has spurred research on humor, laughter, and joking in the workplace. Research has found that employees are individually motivated to engage in joking and/or find certain messages to be funny because of superiority, tension relief, or incongruity (Lynch 2002).

Humorous communication in the workplace has been found to enhance job satisfaction, provide ingroup solidarity, manage the emotions of others, help employees to cope with low-level or dangerous work, construct organizational culture, provide an opportunity to strategically avoid certain topics, issues, or people, reduce burnout and job stress, reveal organizational values and beliefs, help employees adjust to change, and provide an avenue for organizational sense-making (Tracy et al. 2006b).

### **Workplace Bullying**

While sustained attention has been paid to workplace conflict and sexual harassment, generalized emotional abuse is a recently emerging line of research (→ Organizational Conflict). Bullying is negative, persistent, and long-term hostility in the workplace that may or may not be racially or sexually motivated. Bullying is an uneven onslaught of negative behavior in which targets often find themselves unable to escape.

Bullying is largely communicative, coming in the form of insults, nonverbal contempt (e.g., eye rolling), isolation, and discounting the target's voice. Most of the workplace bullying scholarship has been pioneered by Scandinavian and British organizational psychology researchers. American communication scholars have examined the prevalence, harm, and cycle of workplace bullying, the emotional pain of abuse, resistance to bullying, and the difficulty of telling stories about abuse at work (Tracy et al. 2006a).

## **THEORETICAL CONCERNS AND CONTROVERSIES**

Researchers continually grapple with how best to conceptualize emotion. Scientific approaches link emotions to physiological, biological, and psychological impulses, suggesting that emotions derive from genetically based programs of response, instinctual bodily perturbations, facial expressions, and urges to act. The *cognitive approach* urges scholars to explore environmental variables that affect cognitive processes, which in turn affect emotions. If an encounter is congruent or incongruent with the actor's goal, the actor will feel positively or negatively, respectively.

The most prevalent approach among communication scholars is conceptualizing emotions as *socially constructed*. This standpoint suggests that emotion develops in light of linguistic labels and a repertoire of social practices that are operative within the local

moral order. Similarly, a poststructuralist standpoint highlights emotion as a subjective and interactional process, constructed through multiple contradictory and overlapping discourses (→ Constructivism; Organizational Communication: Postmodern Approaches).

Capturing and making sense of emotion requires *methodological ingenuity*. Organizational burnout, stress, satisfaction, and morale have primarily been measured with self-report surveys. However, most emotion and organizing research has been interpretively analyzed using qualitative data such as organizational stories, dialogue, interactions, nonverbal cues, and pictures drawn by employees (→ Qualitative Methodology). Employee stories allow emotion to be known through embedded lived experience. Ethnographers argue that to write emotionally, scholars must experiment with the format of their representations through creative writing and scholarly performances. Ellis (1991) has developed an “emotional sociology,” which aims to purposely and reflexively portray emotion and evoke those feelings in readers/audience members.

In addition to these epistemological and methodological issues, two emotion and organizing topics are marked with *controversy*. First, researchers continue to grapple with why and to what extent emotion labor is difficult and/or psychologically painful. Some research suggests that emotion labor can be enjoyable, emotionally healthy, and even fun (Shuler & Sypher 2000). People who maintain a positive outlook on life have greater immune functioning and less disease. Furthermore, because individuals often infer their attitudes and beliefs from their behaviors or actions, employees who feign pleasant emotions may be more likely to believe they are happy.

Despite this evidence, the bulk of research has associated emotion labor with *negative psychosocial effects* such as alienation, stress, burnout, depression, cynicism, role alienation, and emotional numbness (Wharton 1999). Discomfort of emotion labor has been linked to “emotive dissonance” or a clash between inner feelings and outward expression (Hochschild 1983). The acting method used also affects the pain of emotion work. “Deep acting,” wherein members internalize the prescribed emotions, is connected to alienation and burnout. Surface acting – in which members do not change their inner feelings, but put effort into changing their outward emotional expression – may not cause estrangement, but may result in an unconvincing performance. Finally, Tracy (2005) suggests that power is a key factor in understanding whether or not employees feel discomfort with emotion labor (→ Organizational Communication: Critical Approaches). Faking low-status emotions that do not align with a preferred identity is much more difficult than feigning those that paint an employee in ways that align with dominant organizational discourses. Furthermore, members can more easily feign low-status emotions when they can also interact with one another “backstage” and resist through using “hidden transcripts.”

Last, the *emotional intelligence concept is controversial* (Fineman 2006). Questions remain over how it is best measured and whether it is distinct from other constructs. EQ has been critiqued for overstating the extent to which individuals can control and channel their own emotions and understating the extent to which EQ can be used not only for good (e.g., charismatic leadership) but also for evil (e.g., manipulative bullying). Because EQ is associated with productivity, it is the most “marketable” of all emotion and organization concepts, and has been criticized for being inappropriately commodified.

## TRENDS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

With a dramatic increase in the use of new communication technologies and alternative organizational structures (→ Telework), questions emerge about whether employees can feel emotionally connected when they are physically in *different spaces* (Fineman 2006). Future research may fruitfully examine how employees develop trust and warmth and avoid loneliness when they work in virtual organizations, telecommute, or work at home.

A second trend is the *positive psychology movement*, and its offshoot, positive organizational scholarship. This research argues that scholars have spent too much time studying what is wrong with organizations, (e.g., bullying, emotive dissonance, burnout) and that attention should be turned to positive organizational emotions (such as well-being, happiness, compassion, love, and pleasure). As such, researchers have been increasingly motivated to study the factors that contribute to optimal and positive functioning of employees and institutions, the goal of which is to enhance the quality of life for workers.

A third trend is examining *emotion and work–family interference/spillover*. Recently, individuals have been exploring how organizational emotional display expectations, as well as issues of stress, burnout, and bullying, are carried with employees when they go home at night. Likewise, women who are expected to do caring and nurturing emotion management both at home and at work have higher levels of stress and depression.

Last, while organizational research has examined the gendered nature of emotion expectations, as it stands, there is little research on emotion and organizing beyond white, professional employees. A fruitful area of future research includes examining the raced and classed nature of emotional labor expectations and characteristics of EQ (→ Organizations, Cultural Diversity in).

SEE ALSO: ▶ Appraisal Theory ▶ Bureaucracy and Communication ▶ Cognition  
▶ Constructivism ▶ Emotion ▶ Feminist and Gender Studies ▶ Mood Management  
▶ Organizational Communication ▶ Organizational Communication: Critical Approaches  
▶ Organizational Communication: Postmodern Approaches ▶ Organizational Conflict  
▶ Organizational Culture ▶ Organizations, Cultural Diversity in ▶ Qualitative Methodology ▶ Social Support in Interpersonal Communication ▶ Telework

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