

Smiling as a Job Responsibility and Its Relationship with Happiness After Work

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The question of the connection between nonverbal displays of affect and genuine emotional response is one that has long plagued researchers in the field of communication studies. This study was proposed to examine the relationship between being forced to smile at others as part of a work requirement and the resulting positive or negative emotions after work. The researchers intended to examine whether the required positive affect display actually creates a more unhappy mood over the course of a day of service work. While previous studies in the field have aimed at the relationship between nonverbal displays and negative affect, the design of the present study is unique in that it examined smiling behavior specifically, and surveyed workers who are also enrolled undergraduate students. While the researchers examined but a microculture within the larger demographic, the universality of smiling behavior provided a good degree of generalizability when compared to previous research.

The issue of forced smiling at work is one of utmost importance, especially to those in the target group: college undergraduates. Many of those individuals who are employed while attending school are working in service fields requiring little experience, but a great deal of interpersonal interaction. As presenting a positive attitude while on the job is a steadfast responsibility in these professions, the effects of such constant nonverbal maintenance should be of particular interest to young adults. Additionally, the greater problem of how one's profession affects his or her mood is obviously important, both in terms of workplace satisfaction and depression at home. This study holds great practical applications, as it could point to a prominent link between the type of job one has and his or her happiness, as well between the type of facial expression "faked" and the resulting happiness level. Armed with such information, the work force would be able to better prepare itself for the affects of service jobs,

and remain aware of the connection between the feelings they must portray to the public and their very real emotional state.

A study conducted by Laird (1974) focused on facial expressions, such as smiling and frowning, and the effect those expressions had upon the emotion of the participant. Following the assignment of a facial expression, the participants were then shown positive examples, such as cartoons and playing children, as well as negative examples such as Ku Klux Klan members. After being shown the images, the participants then completed a short checklist of how the images made them feel. It was found that those expressing a smile while observing the images resulted in the portrayal of feelings of happiness and enjoyment, while those who expressed frowns throughout the observing process reported feelings of sadness and aggression. Similar to Laird's research, the current study was conducted with the intent of discovering the connection between smiling and the positive or negative feelings associated with that facial expression. The current study differed, however, by studying these effects in a customer service related work setting, while Laird's study was conducted in a laboratory. Also, while Laird's study took a positive approach to the affect smiling had upon the participants, the current researchers differed, with the beliefs that due to the required behavior of smiling and happiness, that the expression would cause a reverse effect, resulting in unhappiness once finishing that working shift.

Another recent study conducted by Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler (2006) centered its research on the effect that positive emotional labor has on customers and consumers. The use of smiles also played a large role in the research, as the perception of happiness greatly affected others moods, thus causing a linked reaction of happiness to the customer. The researchers of the study tested this effect by using actors to portray customer service

representatives and exhibit varying levels of positive emotion to consumers, using smiles as a means of demonstrating happiness. The research performed by Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul and Gremler displayed similarities to that completed in the current survey as both studies were centered around the work place, as well as examine the level of happiness that smiles provide to certain individuals. Although the two studies focused on different targets in the research, the consumer and the employee respectively, there seems to be a commonality between the two, that similarity being the positive affect that genuine happiness has upon human beings. While the current research originally set out to display the negative effects that forced happiness may have upon the employee, it is demonstrated by past research that the moods felt by individuals is strongly subjected to the attitude displayed by those around them.

In a study performed by Carcioppolo and Frank (2008), the focus of the research was the use of smiling within the realm of advertising, and the affect these smiles had on the consumers. This method was conducted by displaying photographs of both enjoyment and non-enjoyment smiles, as the participants were then asked to distinguish between the two and rate which of the two they found more appealing. Through the observations, it was found that consumers can indeed tell the difference between genuine and forced smiles, and greatly preferred and related their own happiness to the genuine happiness displayed by the employee. Similar to that studied in the current research, both studies focused on the use of smiles in the workplace, establishing the use of obligated happiness and forced smiling as a source of negativity, whether that negativity be felt by the employee or the customer. While the current research was more interested in the unhappiness felt by the employee upon completion of a working shift displaying the obligated happiness, the research conducted by Carcioppolo and Frank greatly assisted in

demonstrating the negative effects that forced smiling can have upon a customer service job position.

## **Method**

The study design employed utilized both quantitative and qualitative measurement strategies, using a combination of demographic questions and previously designed inventory items. This section details the selection and characteristics of the tested sample, and also describes the means via which the variables were measured.

### **Participants**

**Sampling procedures.** Participants were recruited randomly from an undergraduate communication studies course in an eastern public university. The students sampled were provided with the questionnaire while in an academic classroom, during their normal appointed class meeting time. Their participation was confidential and voluntary, with all participants able to withdraw from the study at any time. The study was completed in one sitting, with the participants returning the questionnaires to the researchers upon completion.

**Sample demographics.** A total of 41 students were surveyed, all from the same class. Of those who participated, 65.9% were male ( $N=27$ ) and 34.1% were female ( $N=14$ ). Participant age ranged from 18 to 67 years: 48.8% were 18 years old ( $N=20$ ), 17.1% were 19 years old ( $N=7$ ), 19.5% were 20 years old ( $N=8$ ), 7.3% were 21 years old ( $N=3$ ), 2.4% were 22 years old ( $N=1$ ), 2.4% were 26 years old ( $N=1$ ), and 2.4% were 67 years old ( $N=1$ ). Of the participants, 56.1% were of freshman rank ( $N=23$ ), 9.8% were of sophomore rank ( $N=4$ ), 26.8% were of junior rank ( $N=11$ ), and 7.3% were of senior rank ( $N=3$ ). Participant race spanned four self-identifications, with 4.9% identifying themselves as African American ( $N=2$ ), 85.4% as White ( $N=35$ ), 2.4% as Hispanic American ( $N=1$ ), and 4.9% as “Other” ( $N=2$ ). Of those surveyed,

26.8% were currently employed ( $N=11$ ), while 73.2% were currently unemployed ( $N=30$ ).

Additionally, 63.4% were serving in a job position, or had most recently served in a job position, in which smiling was required ( $N=26$ ), while 31.7% were not ( $N=13$ ).

## Measurement

**Smiling requirement at work.** This variable was measured using a simple, two-page questionnaire administered to the participants by the researchers. Specifically, the smiling variable was measured by a demographic question written by those conducting the study. The question inquired as to whether smiling was a part of that participant's job description at his or her current or most recent job.

**Happiness post-work.** This variable was measured using the same questionnaire, but with a different method. Participants were asked to think about the way they feel after finishing a normal shift at work, and answer a series of questions about happiness accordingly. The scale for said questions, and the questions themselves, were pulled from the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, designed by Michael Argyle of Oxford University. The questionnaire consists of twenty-nine statements, to which participants were asked to either agree or disagree based on a seven point scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Some statements included were positive (i.e. "I feel that life is very rewarding") while others were reversed in structure (i.e. "I am not particularly optimistic about the future").

## Results

Hypothesis one predicted that those participants who are required to smile at work would report being less happy after work than those participants who are not required to smile on the job. To test said hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted ( $t(36)=0.282$ ,  $p=0.780$ ). As the test results show, hypothesis one was not supported by the data collected. The

t-test was conducted to measure the significance level that the smiling variable had in relation to the self-reported happiness of the participants. The results show a very low magnitude of significance, as the significance level value ( $p$ ) is far higher than the 0.05 required to declare a relationship between two variables significant. This is shown further in the mean data of the participants: The mean happiness score for those with “smiling jobs” was 4.2979 ( $SD=0.577$ ), while the mean happiness score for those without “smiling jobs” was 4.2440 ( $SD=0.522$ ). The extremely close mean values demonstrate that smiling at work was not significantly connected to responses on the happiness questionnaire.

### **Discussion**

The present study was performed on individuals who are currently employed in occupations requiring them to smile as a part of their job description, such as a waiter/waitress or customer service agent. The intent of the study was to measure the level of happiness felt by those individuals upon leaving each working shift, and therefore determine if their requirement to smile while on the clock had any negative impact upon the happiness they felt when leaving work for the day. The study was conducted by way of survey, given to students currently enrolled in a Communications 100 course at West Virginia University. The survey consisted of a series of questions, which were to be answered as if the participant had just completed a working shift at their job in which they were required to smile.

The hypothesis held for the study was that forced smiling while at the workplace would have an effect on the happiness of the employee after completing that working shift. It was believed that because of the obligation of smiles and the perception of happiness required of the employees, that the effects would prove to be negative once those obligations and requirements had been fulfilled. Upon receiving the results of the survey, however, it was found that the

requirement of smiling while at work had nearly no influence on the employees' happiness after completing the shift. These results symbolized a separation held by the participants tested, between their work life and their personal life, and their ability to turn off their employee obligations and leave those requirements at work.

With the results returning an opposite meaning than that of the hypothesis, it was necessary to understand why that was the case. As aforementioned, a major contributor to the results appeared to be the ability of the employees to mentally separate their work life and their home life. In doing so, they were able to fulfill their given requirements while at work, presenting a positive, up-beat attitude for the customers, yet revert back to their personal lives upon leaving the shift, virtually unaffected by their responsibility to portray happiness at work, as artificial as it may be. Another reason found that may hold true is perhaps the positive effect that portraying happiness may provide, by actually creating a genuine happiness in the employee that is instilled even after their working shift is completed.

### **Limitations**

While the results of the survey proved opposite to that of the hypothesis, there were several limitations that may have caused those results to differ. One of those limitations was the lack of eligible participants, which may have caused a shortage of credible information to return accurate results. Due to different factors involved in distributing the survey, such as class size and students available to complete the survey, less than 30 participants actually completed the survey, with less than that currently being employed in a customer service type occupation requiring them to smile and portray happiness while at work. Due to this lack of eligible participants, accurate results were hard to come by. Given more time and resources, recruitment of individuals could have been conducted, thus guaranteeing eligible participants to be the focus



of the survey, which then could have resulted in more accurate findings. Furthermore, additional research could have been completed, surveying a variety of individuals at numerous occupations. Ensuring that those participants completing the study met the needed requirements, the surveys could have returned a more accurate description of how these employees truly feel after a working day, with a plethora of information to better justify the results.

A second limitation to the study was the insufficiency of the participants to visualize themselves directly after a day of work, and the attitudes they may feel at that current time. While a portion of the individuals currently were employed in a customer service type job, being removed from the situation and solely relying upon memory as to their temperament upon leaving work, the answers provided could prove to be skewed from those given promptly after completing their shift. Again, provided with more time and resources to conduct further research, a type of simulation could have been involved in the survey process, placing individuals, both currently employed or unemployed, in a working situation requiring them to smile for an extended period of time, thus receiving immediate and accurate results as to their feelings upon finishing their responsibilities, and the level of happiness they felt upon completion of the simulation.

### **Future Research**

Given the opportunity to further research this area in the future, there are a couple variables in which research could be conducted differently. One area would be to create a more distinct and in depth survey to be completed by the participants. While a general survey can prove to be helpful in providing an overview of how the participants feel upon completion of a working shift, it does, however, fail to ask questions specific to the area being studied, which can cause a lack of certain accuracy when obtaining the results. By creating a more specific survey, it would

allow for the results to be focused on the exact area being looked into. Another area that could conclude promising results is by attaining the answers to the survey directly in the time frame you are looking for the evidence to provide accurate results. By recruiting participants and surveying them directly after they complete a shift in a customer service type job, not only are they qualified to participate in the survey, they are also fresh off their shift, which would provide the most accurate results possible. By combining these variables in future research on this topic, it would allow the opportunity to distinctly find precise outcomes.

In conclusion, the research resulted in an opposite outcome than what had originally been hypothesized. Limitations, such as a shortage of time and funds to conduct a thorough research, as well as a lack of eligible participants, may have hindered the accuracy of the results. While future research involving participants qualified to contribute and a more precisely timed research method may return additional promising and accurate results, the final research findings demonstrated that happiness felt by those serving in a customer service related occupation are nearly unaffected by their obligation to smile and display happiness to customers while at the workplace.