Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator in the Emotional Labour – Burnout Relationship: Evidence from Malaysian HR Professionals

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Abstract

The role of emotions amongst employees with extensive interpersonal interactions has been identified as critical for both individual and organisational performance. This particular study examines the relationship between emotional labour, trait emotional intelligence and three dimensions of burnout. Specifically, we examine whether trait emotional intelligence moderates the relationship between emotional labour and burnout. Based on a sample of 136 Malaysian HR professionals, we find that surface acting, but not deep acting, is a significant direct predictor of personal and work-related burnout. More interestingly though, trait emotional intelligence only buffered the effects between deep acting strategies and personal and work-related burnout. The findings from our study contribute to a deeper understanding of the conditions under which emotional labour can be beneficial to employee well-being.

Keywords: Emotional labour; trait emotional intelligence, burnout, Person-Job Fit

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1. Introduction

Employee burnout is being increasingly recognized as an undesirable outcome among employees whose job scope requires a high level of interpersonal contact with clients (Brackett et al., 2010; Grandey, 2003; Kim, 2008; Kulik et al., 2009; Lee and Ok, 2012). Employee burnout can have substantial financial and non-financial ramifications for both individuals and organisations alike (Maslach and Jackson, 1986; Taris and Schreurs, 2009). Consequently, organisations are continuously looking at ways in which to reduce burnout. At the firm-level, organisations may help to reduce employee burnout by providing training awareness programmes (Ozer and Benet-Martínez, 2006), granting employees sufficient autonomy or by creating positive affective climates (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015). Another strategy organisations might adopt is to ensure that they hire the right individuals in order to ensure a good Person-Job fit (Kristof-Brown and Guay, 2011), as research suggests that this may mitigate the negative effects of emotionally demanding jobs (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015).

Emotions are quintessential to human experience and influence one's thoughts but also their actions. How emotions are experienced and displayed at work can strongly influence the extent to which employees experience burnout (Lee and Ok, 2012; Zapf, 2002). The concept of emotional labour has thus emerged as key to understanding how emotions are experienced and displayed at work and their impact on employee well-being (Brackett et al., 2010; Mayer and Salovey, 1990). Emotional labour refers to employees' management of emotions in accordance to organizational display rules (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Certain strategies such as surface or deep-acting (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002; Groth, Hennig-Thurau and Walsh, 2009), as well as displaying of genuine emotions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) may be used by employees to regulate their emotions in the workplace. Revealing or concealing one's emotions in the workplace though remains a matter of

personal preference (Rohrmann et al., 2011). Such decisions may be further complicated by organisational structures and professional roles which may require employees to suppress negative emotions and display positive ones (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003; Schaubroeck and Jones, 2000).

Emotional labour strategies, particularly surface acting, have frequently been linked to poor employee well-being (Grandey, 2000; Ashkanasy, Hartel and Daus, 2002; Bono and Vey, 2005). For instance, several meta-analyses have shown surface acting (Bono and Vey, 2005; Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Wang, Seibert and Boles, 2011) and negative display rules to be positively associated with employee burnout (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003; Montgomery et al., 2006). Nevertheless, a contrasting image of emotional labour has also emerged recently (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015). It has been suggested that deep acting and the expression of genuine felt emotions may actually be beneficial to employee well-being (Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Wang, Seibert and Boles, 2011). Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff (2015) suggested that negative outcomes associated with emotional labour may not necessarily be due to the use of such strategies per se, but rather a product of poor person-job fit. Therefore jobs which require careful self-monitoring of emotional displays, hiring the right persons and providing them with good training may actually lead to positive outcomes.

Nevertheless, much more empirical evidence is needed in order confirm the above assertions and to understand the protective effects of emotional labour on employee burnout (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015; Mustafa, Santos and Gwi, 2014). While impeding the use of emotional labour strategies maybe an unrealistic option in the workplace to reducing burnout, identifying the relevant resources that enable employees to better cope with the stress derived from emotional labour is perhaps more feasible. In this vein, some scholars have shown

employees' trait emotional intelligence (trait EI) to help in the regulation of their internal emotional states (Ashkanasy and Humphrey, 2011a), thus enabling the better coping with the demands of emotional labour (Platsidou, 2010, Mikolajczak et al., 2007). Drawing on trait-congruency theory (Bono and Vey, 2007), we argue that trait EI acts as a coping mechanism and thus moderates the relationship between emotional labour and burnout.

In this particular study, we examine the extent to which trait EI moderates the relationships between the two emotional labour strategies (deep and surface acting) and employee burnout. We test our hypotheses using a sample of 136 Malaysian HR professionals from a large financial institution. As internal service providers (Santos, Mustafa and Gwi, 2014; Torrington, Hall and Taylor, 2011), HR professionals are increasingly being called upon to provide strategic leadership to organisations undergoing change (Boselie and Paauwe, 2005). Accordingly their theymay regularly find themselves having to deal with a range of 'soft' organisational issues (Jacoby, 2003) such as emotionally exhausted and frustrated employees (Frost, 2004; Metz et al., 2012). Hence, finding individuals who can cope with the emotion-laden demands of being a HR professional is of critical importance to organisations and their functioning. The findings from our study contribute to a deeper understanding of the conditions under which emotional labour can be beneficial to employee well-being (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015). Also, by examining non-front line staff, such as HR professionals, we address recent calls in the literature to theorize the positive effects of emotional labour across various occupational groups and organisations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1 Burnout

Burnout is typically viewed as a psychological and physical syndrome resulting from prolonged stress and frustration at work (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). It has important dysfunctional ramifications, implying substantial costs for both individuals and organisations, such as deterioration of both mental and physical health, social and family relationships, decreased job performance, increased intention to leave, absenteeism and turnover (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993). The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1986) remains the most widely used instrument to measure burnout. Several methodological and conceptual problems associated with this inventory have been identified however (Kristensen et al., 2005), prompting critics to advocate the use of alternative burnout measures (see Cox, Tisserand and Taris, 2005). This particular study utilizes the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI) (Kristensen et al, 2005). The CBI is a 19-item questionnaire measuring three burnout sub-dimensions: personal, client and work burnout.

Personal burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue and exhaustion experienced by a person regardless of their participation in the workforce (i.e. a generic burnout scale). Work-related burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue related to work. Finally, client-related burnout refers to the degree of physical and psychological fatigue experienced by people who work with clients (Kristensen et al, 2005).

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Although the models proposed by Malsach and Kristensen differ, parallels can be drawn between emotional exhaustion and personal burnout as both deal with feelings of fatigue and exhaustion. There are also similarities between work-related burnout and reduced personal accomplishment as both deal with feelings related to one's work-life. Lastly, parallels can also be drawn between client-related burnout and depersonalisation, where the emphasis is on relationships between individuals in relation to their work. The three scales have shown good reliability and criterion-related validity in studies conducted in Danish and Australian samples (Kristensen et al, 2005; Winwood and Winefield, 2004) and have been tested among more than 15 occupational groups (Kristensen et al, 2005; Winwood and Winefield, 2004).

Previous scholars have established that burnout varies across different professions (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) and those employees in the service and caring professions are more likely to experience burnout (Jackson, Schwab and Schuler, 1986; Leiter and Maslach, 1988; Schaufelli, Maslach and Marek, 1993). In this particular study we focus on employees who act as internal, rather than external service providers. Kulik, Cregan, Metz and Brown (2009) described HR professionals as critical internal service providers who are expected to meet the needs of client groups with divergent needs and interests—for example, lower-level employees, line managers, and senior managers. Therefore, many contemporary HR professionals find themselves experiencing multiple demands and responsibilities which can make them prone to role overload and role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964), leading to diminished well-being, performance and burnout (Cooper and Cartwright, 1994).

2.2 Labour and HR Professionals Burnout

Emotional labour refers to the process of managing both the experience and expression of feelings to support or achieve organisational goals (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labour is conceptualised within the rubric of theories on emotional inhibition and emotional repression. Thus, the types of emotions that employees are expected to show in the workplace are often determined by the organisation's emotional display rules or standards for appropriate emotional displays on the job (Diefendorff and Richard, 2003) defined by organisational and social norms. Research has identified three types of emotional labour; surface- and deep-acting (Grandey, 2003; Hochschild, 1983) and genuine emotional expressions (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) .In this particular study we focus on only two, surface and deep acting. Surface acting (SA) refers to the change of emotional expression without changing the inner emotional state (Hochschild, 1983). Employees may surface act by faking a smile to display the organisationally required emotion (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1987). In contrast, deep acting (DA) involves the modification of an employees' inner feelings in order express the organisationally desired emotions (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002). According to Grandey (2000) employees may use attention deployment to facilitate such changes of inner emotions in order to better align with the organizational display rules. While SA and DA allow employees to express organisationally required emotions, the essences of these two strategies are different. For instance, SA tends to focus solely on the display of emotions, while DA may involve the management of an individual's displayed emotions as well as their inner-feelings (Hochschild, 1983)

Conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989) proposes that employees are motivated to build and conserve their resources at work in order to minimize the extent to which they expend resources in emotional labour. Therefore, the imbalance between emotional demands and

resources available to employ emotional labour strategies, or when emotional labour strategies do not generate the desired reward to offset the effort required, may lead to increased employee burnout. Prior research suggests that emotional labour can have differential effects on employee burnout. For instance, several meta-analyses have shown surface acting to have negative effects on employee well-being in general and burnout (Bono and Vey, 2005; Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Wang, Seibert and Boles, 2011). This is often attributed to the fact that SA requires the expenditure of energy and resources to inhibit or supress true emotions. Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff (2015), recently argued that negative outcomes associated with SA may be further attributed to a poor person-job fit as individuals may not identify with their role-related emotions (Van Dijk and Kirk-Brown, 2006).

In contrast, Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff (2015) suggested that DA could actually be beneficial to employees' well-being. Such an assertion is refuted by Wang et al. (2011) and others, who found DA to be statistically unrelated to emotional exhaustion or depersonalization, while other studies have shown DA to be positively related to psychological well-being and a sense of sense of personal accomplishment (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002; Grandey, 2003). While emotions are common to all, individuals may differ markedly in the extent to which they display their emotions (Ekman and Friesen, 1997; Mesquita, 2001). Such differences may indeed be attributed to poor person-job fit which leads to a sub-optimal emotional labour profile (i.e., high use of surface acting and low deep acting) (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015) as well as contextual influences such as culture (Shipper et al., 2003; Ramachandran et al., 2011).

Within the service work context, an HR professional's job demands extensive interpersonal interactions with both internal and external clients (Wharton, 1993). Such interpersonal demands often require HR professionals to expend considerable effort and self-control over their

emotions (Hochschild, 1983). HR professionals are also required to obey emotional display rules as representatives of the internal 'face' of the organisation. In their capacity as internal service providers, HR professionals might have to deal with emotionally exhausted employees and toxic situations (Kulik et al., 2010). In order to ensure that employees remain productive and that organisational goals and objectives are being met, HR professionals might resort to faking their emotions in response to specific situations, rather than expressing their anger, in order to maintain a 'caring' image within the organisation (Frost, 2004),

Such faking of emotional expression and the pressure of having to maintain appearances can lead to emotional tiredness and a predisposition to burn-out. These notions are consistent with that of Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) who suggested that SA may cause employees to distance themselves from others, leading to a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Contrastingly, HR professional may choose to display positive emotions as part of their role, leading to an increase in their sense of personal accomplishment (Zapf, 2002). Brotheridge and Grandey (2002) also showed that DA contributes to increased feelings of personal accomplishment as a result of the positive feedback given by satisfied clients. Brotheridge and Lee (2003) further demonstrated that employees who treat clients with authentic displays of emotion may experience less emotional exhaustion. In line with the above, one may reason that the choice of emotional labour strategy employed by HR professionals may have differential effects on their experience of burnout. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1a: HR professionals' surface acting will be positively related to personal-, client- and work-related burnout.

H1b: HR professionals' deep acting will be negatively related to personal-, work- and client-related burnout.

2.3 Trait Emotional Intelligence as a Moderator in the Emotional Labour-Burnout Relationship

Bono and Vey (2007) proposed the theory of trait-congruency to describe how individual traits impact emotional labour strategies. Individuals are likely to experience positive outcomes when they behave in a manner that is congruent with their personality (Judge, Wolfe and Hurst 2009). However, employees are, at times, forced to act in a trait-incongruent manner in order to achieve their personal or organisational goals. Engaging in behaviours that are inconsistent with one's natural personality can come with associated costs- such as burnout (Innstrand et al. 2008). Additionally, the negative effects of emotional labour "*may be stronger for some individuals depending on the extent to which there is a match or mismatch between the employee's personality, job or organisational demands for emotional expression*" (Rohrmann et al., 2011, p. 424). While other studies have examined the Big Five (Judge, Wolfe and Hurst 2009; Mustafa, Santos, Gwi, 2014) with respect to the emotional labour – burnout relationships, this particular study focuses on trait emotional intelligence as a key personality trait.

Emotional intelligence refers to the "*the ability to perceive, respond and manipulate emotional information without necessarily understanding it and the ability to understand and manage emotions without necessarily perceiving feelings well or expressing them fully*" (Mayer and Salovey, 1997: p. 87). The construct has particular relevance to employees whose job scope and roles require substantial interpersonal interactions which are often also emotionally laden in nature (Duas and Ashkanasy, 2005). Two popular approaches to the study of EI are the ability-based approach and the trait based approach.

In this particular study, we adopt the trait-based approach which places EI within the domain of personality. Petrides, Pita and Kokkinaki (2007), assert that the trait based approach can be classified as a second generation model where EI is defined as *"a constellation of behavioural dispositions and self-perceptions concerning one's ability to recognize, process and utilise emotion-laden information"* (Petrides and Furnham, 2003: p. 278), and includes four main dimensions: a) well-being (happiness, self-confidence and optimism); b) sociability (assertiveness, social competence and emotion-management of others); c) self-control (emotion regulation, stress management and low impulsiveness) and d) emotionality (empathy, emotion expression and emotion perception of self and others) (Mikolajczak et al., 2007; Petrides et al., 2007). Despite the different approaches to studying EI, it is generally accepted that the construct provides a useful framework for the identification of specific skills needed to understand and experience emotions (Koman and Wolff, 2008; Mayer et al., 2008), which could, in turn, guide behaviour and thinking in ways that enhance performance.

Traditionally, trait EI has been treated in the literature as a valid predictor of a number of criterion variables such as performance, burnout (Mikolajczak et al., 2007) and emotional labour (Jung and Yoon, 2014; Lee and Ok, 2012; Santos, Mustafa and Gwi, 2015). Recently, trait EI has also been popularised as a moderator. For example, trait EI has been found to stimulate coping for work-related stress and moderate the effects of personality on job performance (Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan, 2003). A few studies have investigated the moderating effects of trait EI on EL (Prentice, 2013) and various outcomes (O'Boyle, Humphrey, Pollack, Hawver, & Story, 2011), finding significant moderating effects between surface acting and individual outcomes such as OCB (Salami, 2007) and strain (Prati et al., 2009). From a trait-congruity perspective, highly emotionally intelligent HR professionals ought to be less likely to experience strain from the use of SA because of

their ability to compartmentalise their work from their personal emotions and their lives (Prati et al., 2009). Similarly, findings concerning the moderating effect of trait EI and deep acting remain inconclusive (Prentice, 2013), with majority of studies finding no significant interaction between deep acting, trait EI and a range of personal outcomes.

HR professionals with high trait EI may have the ability to view issues from multiple perspectives, allowing them to rationalise their use of emotional labour strategies from both personal and work perspectives and adapt their emotions towards the need of others (Johnson and Spector, 2007; Prati et al., 2009). By cognitively reorganising their reactions to focus on the greater good, they are likely to feel less burned out from the use of SA or DA (Johnson and Spector, 2007). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that trait EI may buffer the effects of HR professionals' emotional labour strategies on burnout. Consistent with the above discussion and the inconsistencies in the previous research, we propose the following generic hypotheses:

H2a: HR professionals' trait emotional intelligence will moderate the effects of surface acting on their personal-, work- and client-related burnout.

H2b: HR professionals' trait emotional intelligence will moderate the effects of deep acting on their personal-, work- and client-related burnout.

Our conceptual model and hypotheses are presented in Figure 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

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3. Method

A self-report questionnaire was developed to collect information using a paper-pencil test. In line with the specific objectives of the paper, the self-report questionnaire focussed on specific questions relating to emotional labour strategies, burnout and trait EI. Each survey packet included a cover letter detailing the research objectives and providing assurances of anonymity, a consent form and self-sealing envelope. Additionally, detailed instructions were also included to stimulate and guide participation. Respondents were required to respond within one month of the receipt of the survey-packs.

3.1 Participants

Participants for this study consisted of HR professionals from a large Malaysian financial institution. The organisation in question has grown significantly both in the industry and regionally over the past decade. Part of this was fuelled by a radical transformation programme with an organisation-wide emphasis on change. As part of the change effort, the organisation in question has placed high value and set high

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expectations of its HR department and personnel in directing and implementing the new change initiatives. HR professionals represent critical frontline internal service providers (Mustafa, Santos & Gwi, 2014) and as such, are not only expected to act as '*strategic partners*' (i.e implementing change initiatives from the top), but also as 'employee advocates' (i.e caring and listening to employee concerns) (et al, 2009). Hence their work can be considered as highly emotion-laden. Furthermore, many HR professionals may often find themselves performing such dual roles with limited resources.

With the assistance of the organisation's HR director, announcements to employees identified as fulfilling the role of HR professionals within the organisation were contacted for the present study. A total of 266 survey packages were distributed through the organisations internal mail system. An electronic email reminder was sent to all HR professionals two weeks after the distribution of the survey packages, reminding them of the deadline to complete the survey. A total of 148 questionnaires were returned in self-addressed envelopes to the authors. In the end, a total of 136 useable responses were obtained as 12 of the returned questionnaires were largely uncompleted, resulting in an overall response rate of 51%. A total of 86 (60%) of respondents were women and were typically between 25-48 years of age. Majority of respondents (63%) had been in their current position for three or more years.

3.2 Questionnaire measures

We measured burnout using the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Kristensen et al, 2005). The CBI measures the three sub-constructs of job burnout: personal (six items), work-related (seven items), and client-related (six items). Example items ''*How often do you feel worn out?*''

for personal-related burnout, *''Do you feel burnt out because of your work?''* for work-related burnout and *"Are you tired of working with clients?''* for client-related burnout. All items were answered on a 5-point likert scale ranging from 1 (never/almost never) to 5 (always). The scale labels were then re-coded to the original format labels of 0 (never/almost never) and 100 (always), so that higher scores indicate increased burnout. The Cronbach's alphas for this particular study were α=.83 for personal, α=.87 for work and α=.81 for client related burnout.

Emotional labour was measured using Brotheridge and Lee's (2003) six-item emotional labour scale. Both surface (SA) and deep (DA) acting consisted of three items each. Example items include *"On an average day at work, how frequently do you resist expressing your true feeling?"* and *"How frequently do you try to actually experience the emotions that you must show?"* A 5-point scale (from 1 = not at all to 5 = always) was used to assess how often HR professionals utilised the described mode of acting in dealing with customers and employees, so that higher scores indicate greater utilisation of a particular mode. Reliability coefficients for SA were α=.60 and for DA α=.60. Although the scales' chronbach's alphas are slightly below the threshold set by Nunally (1978), the coefficients are said to be acceptable for scales with small number of items (Field, 2013). Kline (1999) also notes that it is fairly common for psychological constructs to have alpha values below 0.70 because of the diversity of the construct being measured.

Petrides and Furnham's (2006) 30-item Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire (TEIQue) was used to measure Malaysian HR professionals' trait EI. The TEIQue was constructed with the aim of providing comprehensive coverage of the trait EI domain. The 30-item short form was specifically designed as an efficient measure of global trait EI. Each of the 15 subscales of the TEIQue is represented by two items and organised into four factors namely wellbeing (*"I generally don't find life enjoyable."*), self-control (*"I usually find it difficult to regulate my*

emotions.''), emotionality (*"Expressing my emotions with words is not a problem for me."*) and sociability *("I would describe myself as a good negotiator").* A 7-point likert response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) was used. Published reliability coefficients range from α=.86 to α=.94. Score ranges for this measure are from 30 to 210.

A number of relevant control variables were also included in the questionnaire design. Research has suggested that demographic variables matter with respect to the extent to which individuals experience burnout and how they manage their emotions in the workplace (Hochschild, 1983). For example, empirical research has shown females to be more sensitive in understanding the emotional cues of others and in managing their emotions (Jung and Yoon, 2014). Thus, gender was included as a control variable in this study. Similarly, older employees and those who have been with the organisation for some time are expected to experience less emotional dissonance and job-related burnout (Kruml and Geddes, 2000). Accordingly, age and years of experience as HR professionals (job tenure) were also included as control variables. Age was measured in actual number of years, while years of experience, was measured using three categories namely, less than 1, one to three and more than three years. These were later dummy coded into two variables according to the procedure prescribed by Field (2009).

4. Results

Descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities are presented in Table 1. All variables were screened for normality prior to any analyses being carried out. Work-related burnout was found to be positively skewed. Hence, a square root transformation was performed on the

variable. The newly transformed variable exhibited normality with a skew value as 0.2116, which is deemed acceptable. All other variables were found to be exhibit skew values within +/-2 and kurtosis values within +/-5, accepted criteria for normality (Kendall and Stuart, 1958).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

From the means of the emotional labour sub-scales, it can be seen that scores for SA and DA were considerably similar, suggesting that Malaysian HR professionals do not particularly favour one emotional labour strategy over another. The mean score for trait EI was 137.44, which is slightly lower than the average score of trait EI in Petrides and Furnham's (2006) study, which comprised employed adults in professional occupations (Mmale= 158.1; Mfemale= 156.9). Scores on the various burnout subscales also suggest that Malaysian HR professionals experience higher levels of personal-, work- and client-related related burnout than human service sector employees from the PUMA study which reported an average score of 35.9 for personal burnout, 33.0 for work-related burnout, and 30.9 for client-related burnout (Kristensen et al., 2005).

Pearson's correlations were employed to investigate inter-correlations between study variables (see table 1). Directions of the correlations between trait EI and burnout were consistent with previous research. For instance, trait EI was correlated negatively with all three dimensions of burnout. Similarly, trait EI was found to be negatively correlated with SA and positively correlated with DA. In line with existing

studies, SA was found to be positively correlated with all three dimensions of burnout. However, DA was negatively correlated with only client and personal related burnout, in contrast to previous research which demonstrated a positive correlation with work related burnout.

4.1 Assessing the impact of emotional labour, Trait EI on burnout

In order to establish that multiple regression was appropriate in analysing the direct and indirect effects of emotional labour and Trait EI on burnout, a number of preliminary checks were carried out. First, predictors were examined for multicollinearity. According to Field (2013), predictors in a regression model should not correlate by more than .8. As can be seen in Table 1, SA was not significantly correlated with DA, but moderately correlated with trait EI by .26, whilst DA was not correlated with trait EI, thus confirming that these constructs are indeed distinct. VIF and tolerance statistics were also examined. All VIF statistics for each regression model were in the range of 1-2, which is well below the cut- off of 10 as recommended by Field (2009), whilst tolerance statistics were all in the region of .45 to .9 which is well above the recommended cut-off of .2.

Results of the multiple hierarchical regression analyses examining the direct and indirect effects of emotional labour and trait EI on personal, work-related and client-related burnout can be found in Tables 2, 3 and 4, respectively. Each hierarchical regression was conducted in three separate blocks. In the first block, control variables tenure, gender and age were entered into the equation. In the second block, trait EI and emotion labour were entered. In the third block, the interaction terms between Trait EI surface acting and trait EI and deep acting were entered into the equation.

4.3 Direct effects of emotional labour and Trait EI on burnout

As can be seen in Table 2, control variables (age, gender, and job tenure) explained 18.5% of the variance of personal burnout. In the second block, trait EI and emotional labour strategies contributed to a unique variance of 31.1% of personal burnout. Trait EI and surface acting, were both significant, direct predictors of personal burnout, but not deep acting.

INSERT TABLE 2 & 3 HERE

From Table 3, it can also be seen that control variables accounted for 9.3% of the variance of work-related burnout, with age and job tenure from 1-3 years being significant predictors. Trait EI and emotional labour strategies accounted for a further 43.4% of the variance in work-related burnout. Both surface acting and deep acting directly predicted work-related burnout, albeit deep acting exhibited only a weak but significant relationship with work-related burnout. Trait EI had a strong negative relationship with work-related burnout.

From Table 4 it can also be seen that the control variables (age, gender, and job tenure) in the first step of the regression equation explained 12.1% of the variance in client-related burnout. Trait EI and emotional labour strategies contributed to a further 10% of the unique

variance in client-related burnout. Upon examination of individual predictors however, only trait EI was found to have a significant, negative relationship with client-related burnout.

In sum, Hypothesis 1a was partially supported in that surface acting directly predicted personal- and work-related burnout but not client-related burnout. Hypothesis 1b was not supported, as deep acting had a weak but significant relationship with work-related burnout, but the direction of the relationship was positive instead of negative.

INSERT TABLE 4 HERE

4.4 Trait EI as a moderator of the relationship between emotional labour strategies and burnout.

Table 2 also shows the hierarchical regression analyses examining the interaction of trait EI on the emotional labour strategies of surface acting and deep acting on personal burnout. The combined interactive effects of surface acting and deep acting with trait EI accounted for 3.3% of the variance of the overall regression model. Trait EI only significantly moderated (β= 1.867, p = .000) the relationship between deep acting and personal burnout. The latter is graphically represented in Figure 2, where highly emotionally intelligent individuals experience lower levels

of personal burnout under conditions of high deep acting, and lower levels of burnout in general than individuals with lower levels of emotional intelligence.

INSERT FIGURE 1 & 2 HERE

From Table 3, it can be seen that there was a significant interaction between emotional labour and trait EI which accounted for 5.2 % of the variance of the overall regression model. Specifically, trait EI yielded a significant buffering effect on deep acting and work-related burnout (β= 1.867, p = .042). This is graphically represented in Figure 3, where highly emotionally intelligent individuals experience lower levels of work-related burnout than individuals with lower levels of emotional intelligence, although burnout levels are slightly higher under conditions of high deep acting. From Table 4 it can be seen that there were no significant moderation effects for EI on emotional labour strategies and client-related burnout. In sum, hypothesis 2a was not supported, while hypothesis 2b was partially supported.

5. Discussion

This study sought to examine the relationship between the emotional labour strategies of HR professionals and burnout. Drawing on trait-congruence theory, trait EI was proposed as a potential moderator in this relationship. Multiple hierarchical regression analyses yielded some interesting results. Our findings make a timely and valuable contribution to the emotions in the work-place literature in several ways.

Firstly, our study provides further empirical evidence regarding which emotional labour strategy can have beneficial or negative effects on employee well-being. On the one hand, our findings confirm earlier meta-analyses regarding the harmful effects of surface acting on employee well-being (Bono & Vey, 2005; Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011; Kammeyer-Mueller et al., 2013; Wang, Seibert, & Boles, 2011). On the other hand, our findings regarding the non-significant effects of deep acting are consistent with meta-analyses of Wang et al. (2011) and Kammeyer-Mueller et al. (2013), who showed that deep acting was unrelated to stress/emotional exhaustion. Broadly speaking, this suggests that deep acting may not necessarily have harmful effects on employee well-being. In addition, by examining the effects of emotional labour strategies on the three dimensions of burnout, the present study has been able to show that the effects of emotional labour on burnout are more complex than previously conceptualized.

The difference in above findings may be attributed to the uniqueness of our sampling frame, which focused on a unique type of service employee, HR professionals. As mentioned previously, HR professionals are individuals who perform a largely "*human or people function*" and act as internal rather than external service providers (Metz et al., 2012; Torrington et al., 2011). Furthermore, individuals who take on such roles may then strongly identify themselves with their role, having be drawn to job because of its inherent caring nature. Such individuals may be more likely to strive to actually feel the emotions they are expected to express; that is they engage in deep acting (Hochschild, 1983). Additionally, cultural and social norms may also influence the use of surface acting by HR professionals (Gunkel, Schlägel and Engle, 2014). Similar to other collectivist societies, Malaysian culture promotes the regulation of one's emotions with the aim of fostering good interpersonal relations. For HR professionals, this could sometimes lead to having to hide their true emotions so as not to foster disharmony in the organisation

and especially with internal clients and fellow colleagues. Consequently, while HR professionals may not experience burnout from dealing with clients directly, the strain associated with surface acting can be a contributor to experiencing personal or work-related burnout. Hence our findings here suggest that one should not only consider the issue of Person-Job fit, but also that of the cultural context in how emotions are used and their effect on individuals well-being.

Secondly, our findings also deepen our understanding of the conditions under which emotional labour can have positive effects on employee well-being. With rare exceptions (see Mikolajcak et al., 2007; Prati et al., 2009; Prentice, 2013; Wang, Seibert and Boles, 2011), few studies have to date examined both emotional labour and emotional intelligence simultaneously. This is surprising given that EI helps one to regulate one's emotions and to reduce strain (Ashraf and Khan, 2014; Lee and Ok, 2012; Mikolajcak et al., 2007; Mustafa, Santos and Chern, 2014; Prati et al., 2009). In this particular study we considered trait EI as a potential moderator in the emotional labour-burnout relationship. In contrast to earlier findings and theoretical expectations, no significant buffering effects for trait EI were found between surface acting and any of three dimensions of burnout (Prati et al., 2009). While trait EI buffered the relationship between deep acting and burnout, it did so only with respect to personal and work-related burnout.

Specifically, we found highly emotionally intelligent HR professionals to experience lower levels of work- and personal-related burnout under conditions of high deep acting, and indeed, lower levels of burnout in general than HR professionals with lower levels of emotional intelligence. Our findings here add further credence to notion that individuals with high trait EI are better able to cope with their emotional labour strategies and are better at reducing the negative effects associated with personal- rather than work-related burnout. As HR professionals

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begin to identify with their roles, a better person-job fit is likely to occur. In such situations, HR professionals may resort to deep acting in order to affirm and reinforce their sense of authenticity and role identity. Our findings provide further empirical support to Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff's (2015) suggestion that employees who are high on emotional intelligence may be a particularly good match for jobs that entail emotional labour. Also, by examining trait EI as a moderator in the EL-burnout relationship, this particular study also addresses calls in the literature to investigate the moderating role of emotional intelligence in emotional labour processes and individual effectiveness (Ashkanasy, Ashton-James and Jordan, 2003; Douglas, Frink and Ferris, 2004).

Finally, much of the existing literature on the emotional labour-burnout relationship to date has focussed on the experiences of frontline service workers (see Prati et al., 2009; Lee and Ok, 2012; Mikolajcak et al., 2007). However, employees who play critical supporting roles in their respective organisations must also engage in emotional labour. Yet, far too little is known about whether the positive or negative effects of emotional labour among frontline service workers can be generalized to other occupational groups (Humphrey, Ashforth and Diefendorff, 2015). Our study sheds light on this area by focussing on the experiences of HR professionals. However, we agree that further work needs to be done in this area.

Limitations and managerial implications

Like any study our study is not without its limitations. Firstly, our study relied mostly on self-report data from a single source. According to Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, and Podsakoff (2003), such an approach may lead to inflated relationships among the variables of interest, and be biased by common method variance (CMV). However, for our measurestheory requires the use of individuals' self-perceptions. A second limitation concerns the cross-sectional design of the study. This makes it difficult to draw inferences about the causal nature of the relationships examined. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, alternative causal paths or changes in causal directions and sequential orders may exist (Giardini and Frese, 2006). However, we argue that the theoretical considerations, as well as the validated moderation effects, should lend validity to the interpretation. Finally, the fact that all respondents worked in a single organisation based in Malaysia and belonged to a single specific occupational group, could lead to some degree of cultural and occupational bias compared with studies utilising a variety of occupational groups and multiple countries (Rousseau and Shperling, 2003).

A number of important managerial implications emerge from these findings. Firstly, organisations need their HR professionals to be able and willing to help employees through difficult personal and work circumstances in order ensure staff retention and help them in achieving t organisational goals. Our findings suggest that employee emotional labour is attenuated by their emotional intelligence. Collectively, such findings suggest that it may be important to provide employees in HR positions with training and development in order to develop their trait EI skills (Ozer and Benet-Martínez, 2005).

Secondly, organisations need to realize that HR professionals are *''people who do people work of some kind''* (Demerouti et al., 2001, p. 499) and that much of this work often requires HR professionals to regulate their own emotions. Mann (2004) and Deery, Iverson and Walsh

(2002) have suggested a number of strategies through which the negative effects of emotional labour can be mitigated. Some examples include allowing HR professionals to have scheduled *"down-time"* or arranging job rotation within the organisation. Such approaches can be further complemented with stress management interventions, debriefing and peer support programmes that increase the awareness of the possible adverse health effects associated with regulating ones emotions. Additionally, supportive work superiors and colleagues have been shown to influence the emotional experiences of employees (e.g. McColl-Kennedy and Anderson, 2002). In this regard, promoting greater awareness on the importance of sharing the responsibility of emotionally difficult situations with immediate line supervisors or other colleagues can help reduce the emotional demands placed on HR professionals.

Suggestions for future research

Several promising avenues for future research emerge from this study. Firstly, it is acknowledged that the model presented here is likely to be incomplete. This particular study focused on trait EI as a potential moderator in the relationship between emotional labour and burnout. In addition to an individual's trait emotional intelligence, specific job characteristics like autonomy and frequency of inter-personal interactions or organisational characteristics may also act as potential moderators in the emotional labour- burnout relationship (Erickson and Wharton, 1997). In particular, future research may also wish to explore the combined moderating effects of trait EI, an individual's gender and length of job tenure. Secondly, the emotion regulation-burnout relationship is likely to vary with a country's cultural, economic, and legal conditions, because, to a certain extent, context shapes the behaviour and outlook of individual employees (Nankervis, Chatterjee and Coffey, 2006). Hence

future research may consider cross-cultural studies, particularly those that compare and contrast employees from individualistic and collectivist cultures.

Thirdly, scholars have acknowledged that burnout varies across different professions (Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002) and those employees in the service and caring professions are more likely to experience burnout (Jackson et al, 1986). However, much of the current understanding of burnout in service professions has focused on the experiences of employees who interact with external customers or clients. Future research may also wish to compare the effects of emotional labour on burnout among a range of different occupational groups.

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Table 1: Descriptives and inter-correlations between study variables

	Means	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender											
2. Age			-0.11								
3. 1-3yr JT			-0.09	0.60							
4. 1<yr JT			-0.17*	**0.57****	**-0.39****						
5. EI	137.44	22.20	0.08	-0.06	-0.08	-0.05					
6. SA	9.22	2.46	-0.11	0.09	0.08	-0.03	**-0.26****				
7. DA	9.26	2.32	0.09	0.04	0.03	0.11	0.04	0.09			

8. Personal BO	50.02	19.32	**-0.20****	-0.08	**-0.31****	-0.04	**-0.32****	**0.38****	-0.06		
9. Work BO	45.16	1.49	-0.01	0.17*	**-0.20****	0.13	**-0.29****	**0.46****	0.08	**0.82****	
10. Client BO	49.97	18.24	0.05	**0.23****	**-0.18***	0.08	-0.10	**0.17****	-0.15*	**0.41****	**0.50****

** $p < 0.00$ * $p < 0.05$

Table 2: Direct and Indirect Effects of Emotional Labour, Trait EI on Personal-related Burnout

	β	t	Sig	R Square	Δ R Square	F	Sig	Δ F	Sig
Step 1				0.185		7.856	.000		
Tenure 1-3 yrs	-.433	-4.769	.000						
Tenure below 1 yr	-.256	-2.312	.022						
Gender	-.277	-3.498	.001						
Age	.066	.654	ns						
Step 2				.497	.311	19.034	.000	27.830	.000
Trait EI	-.445	-6.669	.000						
Surface Acting	.227	3.384	.001						
Deep acting	.010	.160	ns						
Step 3				.530	.033	16.646	.000	4.667	.011
Trait EI x SA	.225	.583	ns						
Trait EI x DA	1.477	3.036	.003						

Table 3: Direct and Indirect Effects of Emotional Labour, Trait EI on Work-related Burnout

	β	t	Sig	R Square	Δ R Square	F	Sig	Δ F	Sig
Step 1				0.093		3.540	.009		
Tenure 1-3 yrs	-.281	-2.934	.004						
Tenure below 1 yr	-.142	-1.218	ns						
Gender	-.120	-1.434	ns						
Age	.254	2.402	.018						
Step 2				.527	.434	21.522	.000	41.357	.000
Trait EI	-.528	-8.162	.000						
Surface Acting	.252	3.872	.000						
Deep acting	.122	1.989	.049						
Step 3				.580	.052	20.371	.000	8.251	.000
Trait EI x SA	.054	.149	.882						
Trait EI x DA	1.867	4.058	.042						

Table 4: Direct and Indirect Effects of Emotional Labour, Trait EI on Client-related Burnout

	β	t	Sig	R Square	Δ R Square	F	Sig	Δ F	Sig
Step 1				.121		4.732	.001		
Tenure 1-3 yrs	-.295	-3.122	.002						
Tenure below 1 yr	-.248	-2.159	.033						
Gender	.021	.258	ns						
Age	.385	3.703	.000						
Step 2				.221	.100	5.472	.000	5.801	.001
Trait EI	-.249	-3.001	.003						
Surface Acting	.085	1.021	ns						
Deep acting	-.130	-1.655	ns						
Step 3				.235	.014	4.530	.000	1.179	ns
Trait EI x SA	.505	1.026	ns						
Trait EI x DA	.758	1.221	ns						

Figure 1: Conceptual Model and Hypothesis
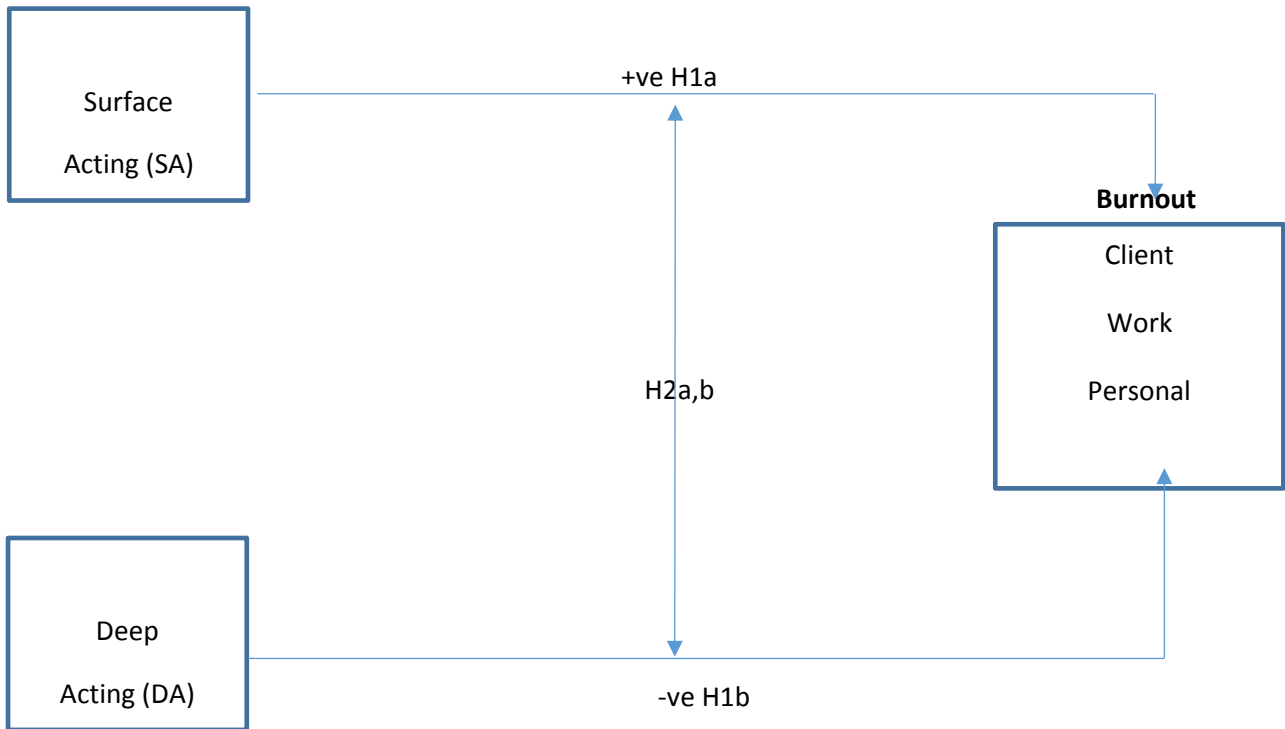
Figure 2: The buffering effect of Trait EI on deep acting and personal burnout
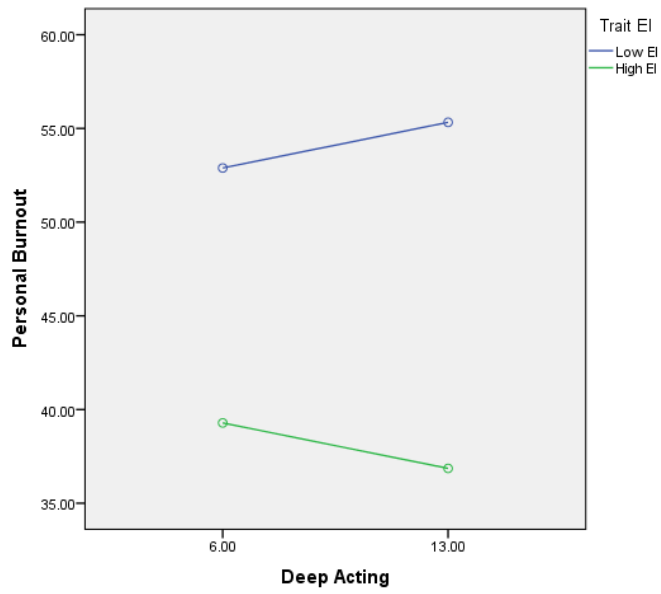
Figure 3: The buffering effect of Trait EI on deep acting and work burnout