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COMMENTARY

# Work: What is it good for? Almost everything!

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Mumby (2019), in his provocative article, playfully asks, "Work: What is it good for?", and answers his own question by stating, "Absolutely nothing!" We reach quite a different answer to his question and feel that work is good for "almost everything." In particular, we want to address comments that he made about the negative effects of emotional labor and about organizational attempts to regulate employees' emotions. Indeed, we feel that the overwhelming evidence is that work is good for people's emotional states and their overall well-being.

## Emotional labor and emotion regulation

Mumby, along with his colleague Linda Putnam, wrote one of the classic articles on how organizations attempt to regulate and control employees' emotions (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). This article, along with the seminal work of Arlie Hochschild (1979), had a profound influence on the subsequent research on emotional labor. Indeed, these authors influenced our first author's early work on emotional labor and on emotions in the workplace. Hochschild, along with Mumby and Putnam, outlined some of the negative effects of organizational attempts to control employees' emotions. Likewise, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993, 1995) recognized and further defined some of the more harmful effects of organizational influences on employees' emotions. They, like Hochschild, argued that surface acting (i.e., portraying emotions that one does not actually feel) can cause dissonance, feelings of inauthenticity, and stress for employees. Meta-analytic reviews have confirmed that surface acting is indeed associated with negative outcomes for employees (e.g., Hülsheger & Schewe, 2011). Nonetheless, Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) also recognized the myriad positive effects that emotion regulation has for employees, organizations, and for society at large. They argued that these negative effects may not occur when employees use "deep acting" (i.e., they summon up and try to experience the emotions they want to display) and when employees identify with their role. Moreover, they also argued for a third form of emotional labor, natural and genuine emotional labor, which occurs when peoples' natural emotions spontaneously match what the occupational display norms specify. For example, a nurse may genuinely feel sympathy and concern when treating an injured child and thus would not need to use either surface acting or deep acting in order to comply with the norm to display sympathy and compassion.

Mumby (2019), in his current focal article, continues with the overly negative view of the effects of performing emotional labor on employee well-being. In contrast to this negative perspective, recent reviews have found that there is a "bright side" to emotional labor (Humphrey, Ashforth, & Diefendorff, 2015). Based on their scrutiny of four meta-analyses on emotional labor, Humphrey and his colleagues concluded that "deep acting does not harm employee well-being, and deep acting is positively related with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and customer satisfaction" (2015, p. 749) Moreover, they also found support for the beneficial effects of natural and genuine emotional labor.

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Mumby (2019) gives considerable attention to how organizations attempt to control and regulate employees' emotions. We agree with him that organizations set emotional display rules and attempt to regulate their employees' outward displays of emotions. Mumby ascribes negative consequences to employees from these attempts to regulate their emotions and even their personal identities. We certainly agree with him that some employees feel stress and emotional dissonance from these efforts, plus feelings of inauthenticity. However, we feel that organizational influences on employees' emotional displays can in many instances, indeed, perhaps in most cases, have beneficial effects for organizations, customers, society-at-large, and most especially for the employees themselves. As Humphrey (2008) states in his article, "The Right Way to Lead With Emotional Labor," negative effects from emotional labor generally occur when managers attempt to regulate their employees' emotional labor in heavy-handed and unsophisticated ways. These heavy-handed approaches generally offer little autonomy to the employees in how to perform emotional labor and are instituted in a coercive way. Moreover, these poor practices are often accompanied by an overall set of other ineffective managerial practices and poor working conditions. However, under conditions of good leadership and working conditions, employees taught the "right way" to perform emotional labor can benefit tremendously from performing emotional labor. Not only will they have higher job performance, but they will also experience better relationships with their customers and clients, with their co-workers and managers, and also experience more personal satisfaction from their jobs. They are more likely to identify with their job and thus to experience less alienation and dissonance while at work.

Mumby (2019) goes into length in his commentary about how organizations shape and manipulate employees' emotions and attitudes. The general tone of Mumby's article suggests that industrial and organizational (I-O) psychologists are (perhaps unwittingly) tools of management that dupe workers into adjusting their emotions to fit organizational norms geared to ever increasing productivity. In contrast to this, the "bright-side" perspective argues that I-O psychologists can play an important role in improving employee well-being. Humphrey et al. (2015) found that when there is an appropriate person–job fit that performing emotional labor is beneficial to employee well-being. I-O psychologists play an important role in organizations by helping employees find the jobs that are the best match for their individual personalities. This does help improve employee productivity, but more directly it improves how happy employees are with their jobs—isn't that a good thing?

Also, what is wrong with improving productivity? Mumby (2019) is quite transparent in stating that critical theorists are "anti-managerial," and his commentary repeatedly describes efforts to increase productivity as exploitation. This ignores the fact that increases in productivity are responsible for the tremendous improvement in the standard of living across the developed world. Indeed, this productivity increase has not only improved the material standard of living for consumers, but it has also dramatically improved the quality of work life for employees.

Mumby's (2019) commentary also assumes that employees have only two choices when reacting to organizational attempts to regulate their emotions: either dissent and resistance or passive and unwitting compliance to organizational attempts to manipulate them. We believe that employees play active roles in regulating their own emotions at work, and that this does not have to take the form of dissent. Some evidence for this comes from meta-analyses of emotional intelligence at work. Employees higher on emotional intelligence have higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment, and lower turnover intentions (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2017). Mumby's commentary implies that highly committed employees have been conned into being loyal; however, we believe that emotionally intelligent employees can better handle the normal challenges of the workplace and build effective working relationships with their clients, coworkers, and managers, and that their organizational commitment is a logical and intelligent response.

A cross-cultural meta-analysis has also found that emotionally intelligent leaders have employees with higher task performance and who also perform higher levels of organizational citizenship behaviors (Miao, Humphrey, & Qian, 2018). From Mumby's (2019) perspective, this could be a

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sign that leaders use their emotional intelligence to manipulate their followers and to act in Machiavellian ways. However, another meta-analysis offers compelling evidence to refute this: emotional intelligence is negatively related to Machiavellianism (Miao, Humphrey, Qian, & Pollack, 2019). Empathy is a key component of emotional intelligence, and we believe that emotionally intelligent leaders treat their followers with empathy and compassion, and that this explains their followers' higher performance.

In conclusion, we believe that work offers a myriad of positive benefits to workers, ranging from material wealth to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a sense of identity and meaningfulness.

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