

Introduction:

In recent years, scholarship across disciplines has been concerned with how some people, as part of their professional role, are expected to feel or not feel particular ways in the workplace. This often uncompensated work is called emotion labor (a.k.a. emotional labour). According to Hochschild (1983), emotion labor is the work that professionals (often some groups of people, for example, women, more than others) are expected to perform in order to manage their feelings and "to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). To be "professional," employees in many professions are often asked to hide genuine emotional reactions or portray positive emotions even when they aren't feeling them. These forms of emotion labor are often associated with burnout and emotional exhaustion. However, research has also found that emotion labor can be rewarding or rejuvenating if these emotions are authentic and the individuals feel satisfaction with their job (Martínez-Iñigo et al., 2007).

In this activity, participants will first learn the theory behind emotion labor. Then, they will perform various emotions/roles associated with emotion labor as they complete a group activity. Finally, they will reflect on how they felt as they performed these roles and consider how emotion labor might affect their own professional careers.

Objectives:

As a result of this activity, participants will be able to:

1. Articulate their experiences of performing emotion labor.
2. Analyze the frequency, risks, and benefits of emotion labor expectations in their (future) careers.

Time:

45 minutes.

Group Size:

Small group.

Materials:

Emotion Labor PowerPoint (in [Downloads](#)); slips of paper with emotion labor roles (optional – also in [Downloads](#)).

Intercultural Development Continuum Stages:

- Denial
- Polarization
- Minimization
- Acceptance

AAC&U Intercultural Knowledge and Competence Goals:

Cultural Self-Awareness

- To articulate insights into own cultural rules and biases (e.g., seeking complexity; aware of how their experiences have shaped these rules, and how to recognize and respond to cultural biases, resulting in a shift in self-description).

Empathy

- To interpret intercultural experience from the perspectives of own and more than one worldview.
- To demonstrate ability to act in a supportive manner that recognizes the feelings of another cultural group.

Verbal and Nonverbal Communication

- To articulate a complex understanding of cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication (e.g., demonstrates understanding of the degree to which people use physical contact while communicating in different cultures or use direct/indirect and explicit/implicit meanings).
- To skillfully negotiate a shared understanding based on these differences.

Other Skills:

Emotional Resilience.

Activity Instructions:

1. Introduce the concept of emotion labor using the Emotion Labor PowerPoint. Slides 2-4 provide definitions and theory/scholarship behind emotion labor. The facilitator should ensure that participants understand that emotion labor is a complex concept with benefits and drawbacks.
2. Following the PowerPoint, prepare participants for an experiential activity. We recommend that the facilitator choose from the following activities:
 - [By the Numbers](#)
 - [Working in Unfamiliar Surroundings](#)
 - [Say it in Sequence](#)
 - [Everything's a Six](#)
 - [Count the F's](#)
3. Before beginning the activity, assign the participants roles that they must perform during an entire round of the activity. Those roles are as follows:
 - You must smile and nod the entire time that someone is talking to you and enthusiastically agree with everything they say.
 - Try to genuinely care about how other people are responding emotionally to the activity. Watch their body language, ask people if they're doing okay, and try to express genuine concern and empathy for them.
 - You must hide any frustration or anxiety (or really any other emotion) that you may be feeling, always presenting a neutral facial expression and tone of voice to your team.

Note: These roles are listed on slide 5 of the Emotion Labor PowerPoint. You can also choose to print them out on slips of paper to give to each participant (see Emotional Labor Participant Roles [Downloads](#)). The roles are duplicated once on the document - you can print according to the amount of participants you have.

Note: You can choose to run the activity in two different ways: 1. Do several rounds where everyone plays the same role in each round. 2. If low on time, do one round where everyone performs a different role. If option 2, try to arrange your group in teams of 3; groups with more than 3 can have one or more observer.

4. Once the activity is over, debrief with the following questions:

- How did you feel during the activity as you were performing your role(s)?
- How does what you experienced in this activity connect to past experiences where you had to perform emotion labor?
- How might you be called upon to perform emotion labor in your future or current career? What concerns do you have about this demand on you? What strategies may be helpful to avoid burnout?

Related Tools:

- [Count the F's](#)
- [Don't Just Smile!](#)
- [Emotion Labor in Careers: Case Study Analysis](#)
- [Everything's a Six](#)
- [Just Smile!](#)