## Effects of service employees' negative personality traits on emotional labour and job satisfaction: Evidence from two countries

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### Abstract:

**Purpose:** Frontline service employees' (FLEs) positive personality traits enhance service experiences, for both employee and customer outcomes. Yet, limited research addresses negative personality traits. Drawing on the emotion regulation framework, the purpose of this paper is to propose a conceptual model in which three negative personality traits – Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism (the so-called dark triad (DT)) – represent antecedents, and FLE emotion regulation strategies (surface and deep acting) are mediators, all of which predict job satisfaction. **Design/methodology/approach:** The test of this model includes occupationally diverse samples of FLEs from an individualistic (the USA) and a collectivistic (Japan) country, to assess the potential moderating role of culture. **Findings:** The findings suggest that Machiavellianism relates more positively to surface and deep acting in Japan, whereas psychopathy relates more negatively to surface acting than in the USA. Unexpectedly, narcissism exhibits mixed effects on surface and deep acting in both countries: It relates positively to surface acting in the USA but prompts a negative relationship in Japan. The positive narcissism–deep acting relationship is also stronger for Japanese than for US FLEs. These findings help specify the effects of negative personality traits on important employee outcomes. **Originality/value:** This is the first study that relates service employees' DTs with emotional labor resulting in new avenues for further research. The findings are managerially relevant because they help specify the effects of negative personality traits on important employee outcomes.

**Keywords:** job satisfaction | personality | dark triad | service employees | emotional labour

### Article:

### Introduction

Frontline service employees (FLEs) are the visible face of service firms, with powerful influences on customer perceptions (Delcourt *et al.*, 2017). Accordingly, management research

investigates service employee attitudes and behaviors (Suh *et al.*, 2011), and past research demonstrates that traits provide important, stable predictors of FLEs' attitudes and behaviors (Judge and Zapata, 2015). Most research on FLE outcomes relies on personality models, such as the Big Five (Teng *et al.*, 2012) or emotional intelligence (Chrusciel, 2006), offering robust support for the relationships between desirable employee personality traits and performance outcomes (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Yet, other models of personality also may be important for understanding the job attitudes and behaviors of service workers.

To address this possibility, this study relies on a model of personality referred to as the dark triad (DT; Paulhus and Williams, 2002), which encompasses three maladaptive personality traits: Machiavellianism (Mach), psychopathy and narcissism. These DT traits are not clinical diagnoses, but rather sub-clinical, dysfunctional, individual differences that exist across general populations (Furnham *et al.*, 2013). The limited management research on the DT suggests that these traits are associated with poor job attitudes (Jonason *et al.*, 2015), counterproductive work behaviors (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012), hiding knowledge from co-workers (Pan *et al.*, 2018) and low levels of organizational citizenship behavior (Webster and Smith, 2018).

A common assumption of past research therefore seems to be that the DT is primarily associated with outcomes that the employer seeks to minimize or avoid altogether. However, this assumption can be challenged on the grounds that service organizations often promote (rather than discourage) certain employee behaviors. Specifically, many service firms expect their FLEs to act out mandated emotional behaviors during interactions with customers (Walsh, 2019). But no research has sought to relate the DT to relevant outcomes such as employee emotion regulation strategies or investigate the process by which DT traits influence job attitudes, including job satisfaction, whether nationally or cross-culturally. This oversight is troubling, considering the emerging recognition of the importance of the DT to organizational behavior (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012) and the likelihood that FLEs with high DT traits introduce significant problems in service organizations. For example, it is possible to imagine a high Mach service employee acting duplicitously toward customers. Customers who recognize the duplicitous intent will likely switch the service provider and tell a number of people about the dishonest interaction and bad service they have received.

We theorize that the DT traits influence emotional labor strategies, which, in turn, affect job satisfaction, a potent antecedent of employee outcomes such as citizenship behavior or turnover intention (Chen and Yu, 2014; Ellinger and Wu, 2013). Emotional labor entails managing emotional displays, as part of a work role (Grandey *et al.*, 2013). Effective emotional labor is critical to succeeding in service jobs and can predict important service outcomes, such as job satisfaction and performance ratings (Goodwin *et al.*, 2011; Hur *et al.*, 2015). Because FLEs with substantial DT traits tend to show emotional coldness (Webster and Smith, 2018) and a lack of emotional commitment to others though (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012), these traits may have unique implications for how people experience and regulate their emotional displays – such that they might encourage FLEs to engage in emotional labor by using maladaptive strategies or display unsanctioned emotions to customers. The maladaptive emotional labor strategies adopted by service workers with high DT traits thus may contribute to work problems that also lower their job satisfaction. However, studies into the antecedents of emotional labor strategies that consider employee personality traits are sparse. What is more, there is no research investigating the

antecedent role of the DT traits regarding emotional labor strategies, within or across cultures. Given that emotional labor is found to be associated with consequential employee and customer outcomes (Goodwin *et al.*, 2011; Groth *et al.*, 2009), understanding its antecedents is important.

Our proposed model (Figure 1) posits that the DT traits are linked to the emotional labor strategies that FLEs employ while interacting with customers, which affect the FLEs' job satisfaction. We test the relationships in Figure 1 with data from two culturally distinct countries with strong service economies: the USA and Japan (US Central Intelligence Agency, 2018).
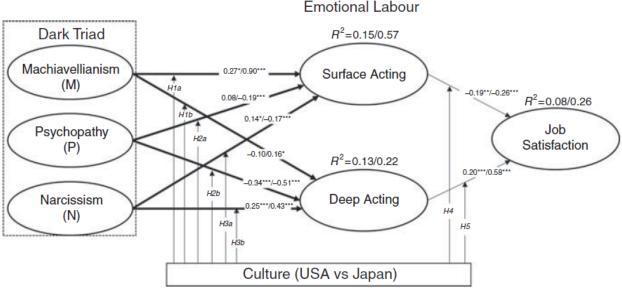


**Figure 1.** Conceptual model and overview of results
**Notes:** All paths are hypothesized relationships. Unbolded paths have been studied previously (e.g., Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011; Judge *et al.*, 2009; Walsh and Bartikowski, 2013). Standardized regression weights and $R^2$-values; Values before the slash pertain to US FLEs while values after the slash pertain to Japanese FLEs. *$p<0.05$; **$p<0.01$; ***$p<0.001$

We contribute to management literature by demonstrating the relevance of DT traits for understanding FLEs' job attitudes. This contribution has practical value; service organizations can benefit from screening out job applicants for customer contact positions who exhibit high levels of "toxic" DT traits (Jonason *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, we contribute to literature by linking DT traits to emotional labor strategies for the first time. Individual differences are central in emotional labor scholarship (Dahling and Johnson, 2013), but scholars have not previously studied maladaptive traits such as the DT. Finally, the cross-country examination advances understanding of the effect of culture on the links between the DT and emotional labor, which is valuable because little is known about the moderating role of culture in DT–outcome relationships, and more studies are needed to examine the DT in other cultural contexts (Jonason *et al.*, 2013; Thomaes *et al.*, 2017).

**The DT model of personality in the workplace**

The DT model consists of three traits: Mach, psychopathy and narcissism. Machiavellianism refers to a person's tendency to "distrust others, engage in amoral manipulation, seek control

over others, and seek status for oneself" (Dahling *et al.*, 2009, p. 219). People scoring high on Mach tend to be disingenuous, exploitative (Whitaker and Dahling, 2013) and uncooperative (Sakalaki *et al.*, 2007).

Psychopathy implies a low regard for societal norms and a lack of concern for others or social regulatory mechanisms (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012). People high in this trait exhibit high levels of impulsiveness and hedonism, placing their own needs and desires before those of others (Paulhus and Williams, 2002).

**Table I.** Synthesis of literature on antecedents of emotional labor strategies

| Authors | Sample/methods | Emotional labor strategy considered | Emotional labor antecedents considered | Findings |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Andrews et al. (2016) | *n* = 276 US employees/snowball sampling | SA | Perceptions of organizational politics, proactive personality, agreeableness | Perceptions of organizational politics positively and proactive personality negatively affect SA |
| Buckner and Mahoney (2012) | *n* = 65 US students, participants completed work-sample task which involved requiring interaction via telephone with customer | SA and DA | Positive display rule, extraversion, emotional stability, self-monitoring, subjective performance | Extraversion negatively affects SA, emotional stability and self-monitoring positively affect SA, positive display rules positively affect DA |
| Diefendorff et al. (2005) | *n* = 270 employed US students/survey | SA and DA | Dispositional variables (emotional expressivity, extraversion, neuroticism, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, self-monitoring) and situational variables (positive display rules, negative display rules, frequency, duration, routineness) | Extraversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness negatively affect SA; neuroticism, self-monitoring and negative display rules positively affect SA; agreeableness, positive display rules and duration of service interactions positively affect DA, routineness negatively affects DA |
| Jung and Yoon (2014) | *n* = 303 South Korean hotel employees/survey | SA and DA | Four dimensions of emotional intelligence (others' emotion appraisal, self-emotion appraisal, use of emotion, and regulation of emotion) | All four dimensions of emotional intelligence positively affect both SA and DA |
| Randolph and Dahling (2013) | *n* = 120 US service employees/snowball sampling | SA and DA | Perceptions of organizational display rules to express positive (suppress negative) emotions | Perceptions of organizational display rules to express positive (suppress negative) emotions positively (negatively) affects DA (SA) |
| Rupp et al. (2008) | *n* = 152 German bank employees/survey | SA | Customer justice perceptions | Customer justice negatively affects SA; effect is stronger for employees low in perspective taking |
| Yoo and Arnold (2016) | *n* = 543 South Korean bank and insurance employees/survey | SA and DA | Customer-oriented attitudes | Customer-oriented attitudes positively affect DA, but negatively affect SA |

People high in narcissism express arrogance and self-centeredness, but these behaviors may stem from a weak sense of self-worth; they seek and crave validation from others, especially those with high social status (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012; Wisse *et al.*, 2015). Although they are not as inherently manipulative or lacking in empathy as people with high Mach or psychopathy, narcissists may become hostile and aggressive if they receive feedback that contradicts their sense of superiority because they need approval and validation to bolster their fragile sense of self-worth (Miller *et al.*, 2010).

Much research has examined the detrimental consequences of the DT traits in work settings, namely, they increase counterproductive work behaviors, reduce performance (Furnham *et al.*, 2013; O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012), and relate negatively to job satisfaction (Jonason *et al.*, 2015). However, no prior study has linked DT traits to the job demands associated with emotional labor, either within or across cultures, as Table I reveals. Regarding the lack of cross-cultural research into the DT, Thomaes *et al.* (2017, p. 839) maintain that "our current understanding of dark personality traits is WEIRD (i.e. based largely on research conducted in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic populations" and that this research dearth "is unfortunate not only because these nations house only a minority of the world's population, but also because cross-cultural investigations that include samples from non-WEIRD nations may uncover important differences."

**Relationships across the DT and emotional labor strategies**

This research focuses specifically on FLEs and customer service organizations, with the prediction that emotional labor strategies explain why the DT traits relate negatively to job satisfaction. Service organizations in many countries set emotional display rules that mandate the emotions FLEs should show or hide when interacting with customers (Brach *et al.*, 2015). Complying with these display rules is a crucial part of the in-role performance of FLEs (Diefendorff *et al.*, 2006). To comply with display rules, FLEs typically draw on two strategies during their interactions with customers: surface acting and deep acting (Hochschild, 2012). Surface acting involves faking the appearance of the desired emotion, without changing the underlying, experienced emotions. Deep acting instead involves changing the underlying emotion to yield the desired emotional display, such as by redefining the situation (e.g. thinking of a complaining customer as an agitated person who needs help) or physiological manipulation (deep breathing) (Hochschild, 2012).

The distinction between deep and surface acting is important because surface acting evokes far more negative outcomes for FLEs and organizations. For example, surface acting is positively associated with emotional exhaustion, burnout, absenteeism and turnover (Grandey and Gabriel, 2015; Walsh *et al.*, 2016). In contrast, deep acting generally does not appear related to negative outcomes and it sometimes even is associated with positive outcomes, such as customer satisfaction (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011). Furthermore, meta-analytic results indicate that surface acting relates negatively to job satisfaction, whereas deep acting trends in a positive direction but formally is unrelated to job satisfaction (Bhave and Glomb, 2016). Thus, FLEs must engage in some emotional labor in service jobs to avoid organizational sanctions

(Diefendorff *et al.*, 2006), but the habitual use of surface acting is maladaptive and often associated with poor job attitudes.

In that case, what variables determine the emotional labor strategies that FLEs use? Scholars have explored a wide variety of traits and individual differences that influence emotional labor, including trait affectivity (Brotheridge and Lee, 2002), the Big Five (Judge *et al.*, 2009), self-efficacy (Pugh *et al.*, 2011), proactive personality (Randolph and Dahling, 2013) and demographic variables (Byrne *et al.*, 2011). Despite the depth of this literature, no previous research has examined how DT traits relate to emotional labor or how these relationships might differ by culture.

People high in Mach behave cautiously and think in terms of their long-term personal goals (Jones and Paulhus, 2014), so FLEs high in Mach likely perceive the utility of complying with organizational display rules and engaging in emotional labor. However, high Mach is also strongly associated with the use of deception and faking during interactions with others (Kessler *et al.*, 2010), which aligns with surface acting quite well.

Social norms in collectivistic countries encourage people to suppress their open expression of emotions, especially negative ones (Safdar *et al.*, 2008). A duplicitous interpersonal style also is an accepted means of helping people through social situations (Seymour, 2000). In her study, Winsted (1997) found that Japanese FLEs are perceived to display unnatural smiles, whereas US FLEs are assessed to display a greater range of emotions in customer interactions. Therefore, it may be more socially acceptable for Japanese FLEs high in Mach to adopt a surface acting strategy than it would be for their US counterparts.

However, the pressure of organizational display rules, together with customers' expectation of authentic emotional displays (Groth *et al.*, 2009), suggests that Machs in both countries engage in deep acting to some extent because they likely regard it as a challenge. Japan's high-context culture, where implicit, non-verbal communication is valued (Hall, 1989), may mean that high Mach Japanese FLEs (cf. high Mach US FLEs) are more adept at "reading" customers and deploying genuine-appearing emotions during interactions:

> *H1*. Machiavellianism relates more positively to (a) surface acting and (b) deep acting for Japanese than for US FLEs.

Psychopathy is characterized by impulsiveness, pleasure seeking, low empathy for others, emotional shallowness and coldness (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012). These tendencies suggest that psychopaths are unlikely to be concerned about complying with organizational display rules; their impulsive nature calls into doubt their willingness to follow social norms and rules; and their lack of empathy for others makes it particularly unlikely that they would care about showing proper, integrative emotions to others in service settings. Consequently, psychopathy may discourage emotional labor in general, such that it should relate negatively to both surface and deep acting among FLEs. Although psychopathy is considered a pan-cultural trait, it is not equally pronounced across cultures. For example, people from North America and Western Europe tend to have higher psychopathy scores than those from East Asia (Neumann *et al.*,

2012), which gives cause to expect that DT–outcomes relationships differ in strength and direction for different cultures.

For employees in Western cultures, psychopathy is associated with lower quality job performance (O'Boyle *et al.*, 2012), which likely includes diminished performance in terms of deploying emotions during customer interactions. Psychopaths in Eastern cultures instead may achieve better job performance and fulfill job expectations, in terms of surface and deep acting because they are conscious of social norms that value group goals and contributions to group welfare (Walsh *et al.*, 2015). Compared with Americans, East Asians also experience more interdependent emotions (Kitayama *et al.*, 2000), so Japanese psychopathic FLEs may have better emotion-deployment skills and be more reluctant to ignore or violate group and organizational norms. In contrast, their generally lower work commitment (Boddy *et al.*, 2010) is likely to be reflected in weaker psychopathy–emotional labor links for US FLEs:

> *H2*. Psychopathy relates more negatively to (a) surface acting and (b) deep acting for Japanese than for US FLEs.

Narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-view and sense of superiority (Campbell *et al.*, 2011), but narcissists' grandiose behavior is motivated by their need to secure attention and validation from others to reinforce their fragile self-view (Miller *et al.*, 2010). Narcissists thus might engage in emotional labor that complies with organizational display rules – but not because they actually care about the well-being of customers. Rather, they do so because they can gain approval from supervisors and customers for doing so, which reinforces their ego. Furthermore, people high in narcissism should be agnostic about which emotional labor strategy they employ, such that they will endorse both surface acting and deep acting as valid means to gain critically needed approval from others. It is likely though that narcissism manifests in different ways in Western (i.e. individualistic) and Eastern (i.e. collectivistic) cultures (Thomaes *et al.*, 2017).

Japanese culture is characterized by collectivism, such that social harmony and humility are virtues (Grijalva and Newman, 2015). The overt expression of inflated self-views may be less tolerated than it would be in the USA, where more individualistic values are espoused. Moreover, normative expectations in Japan require emotions to be controlled, more so than in individualistic countries (Safdar *et al.*, 2008), so Japanese FLEs with high narcissism might be more experienced with displaying emotions through surface and deep acting:

> *H3*. Narcissism relates more positively to (a) surface acting and (b) deep acting for US than for Japanese FLEs.

Finally, job satisfaction should relate negatively to surface acting but positively to deep acting. Surface and deep acting evoke different levels of psychological strain (Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2018). For example, to undertake surface acting, FLEs change their outward appearances to display the required emotions (e.g. smiling at customers), such that they may experience role conflicts that create emotional dissonance (Goodwin *et al.*, 2011) and thus suffer lower job satisfaction. In contrast, when FLEs deep act, they attempt to align the required emotions with their true emotions (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011). Because deep acting brings about genuine

emotional displays of the mandated emotions, it should not be negatively associated with job satisfaction (Hülsheger and Schewe, 2011).

Extant research suggests that FLEs from both western and eastern countries perform emotional labor but differ somewhat in the degree to which they find it demanding (Allen *et al.*, 2014). In their effort to attain harmonious interdependence and because connecting with others is a more important normative goal in Japan than in the USA (Markus and Kitayama, 1991), Japanese FLEs likely seek to employ and deploy emotions that best foster connections. Ceteris paribus, they favor genuine emotions and deep acting. However, if situational constraints or display rules require surface acting, they could suffer psychological strain and less job satisfaction. Conversely, if Japanese FLEs are able to engage in deep acting, they should feel good about themselves because they can interact with customers in a culturally prescribed way:

> *H4*. Surface acting relates more negatively to job satisfaction for Japanese than for US FLEs.

> *H5*. Deep acting relates more positively to job satisfaction for Japanese than for US FLEs.

## Method

Procedure and samples

Data in both countries were collected through market research firms, using online questionnaires aimed at customer contact service employees working in B2C environments. The respondents in these convenience samples were told that the questionnaire contained statements about "people working in services with regular customer contact." This open approach helped ensure a sufficient variety of services (i.e. high and moderate contact). A total of 269 US participants responded, with a mean age of 31.9 years (SD=9.9; range from 18 to 69 years), and 51.3 percent of whom were women. The average job tenure of these US FLEs was 4.4 years (SD=3.9).

In Japan, a total of 300 Japanese FLEs completed the survey, ranging in age from 22 to 78 years, with a mean age of 48.6 years (SD=10.5); 29 percent of the Japanese FLEs were women. Their average job tenure was 13.9 years (SD=10.8).

Measures

The FLEs were asked to indicate the extent to which they evoke the three negative personality traits and engage in either emotional labor strategy during a typical transaction, with the following stem: "During a typical interaction with a customer […]." The items were assessed with seven-point Likert scales. Table AI contains the measures and items used in this study. The sample descriptions appear in Table AI.

## Results

Measures

The internal consistency values for the constructs exceeded the 0.70 guideline in most cases in both samples. One psychopathy item in the Japanese sample revealed a factor loading of less than 0.50, so it was excluded from further analysis; the consistency value then approached the threshold, which seems satisfactory, considering the strong values for all other constructs (see Table AI). Four methods served to assess the convergent and discriminant validity of the constructs. First, the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) of all constructs was greater than all other cross-correlations (see Table II). Second, the AVEs were above 0.50 – except, again, for psychopathy in the Japanese sample, which reached a value of 0.48 – suggesting that the constructs captured much more construct-related variance than error variance. Third, all items loaded most strongly on their intended constructs, with factor loadings greater than 0.60 (cf. psychopathy in the Japanese sample, for which the factor loadings were above 0.55). Fourth, the model fit indices of a confirmatory factor analysis with all six latent constructs are within acceptable ranges (USA: $\chi^2$=425.79, df=172, $\chi^2$/df=2.476, $p$<0.001, CFI=0.943, SRMR=0.074, RMSEA=0.074; Japan: $\chi^2$=460.37, df=152, $\chi^2$/df=3.029, $p$<0.001, CFI=0.918, SRMR=0.093, RMSEA=0.082). These tests suggest that the constructs have adequate convergent and discriminate validity.

**Table II.** US and Japanese sample: descriptive statistics, correlations and reliabilities

| Constructs | US: Mean (SD) | Japan: Mean (SD) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Machiavellianism | 1.95 (1.07) | 3.08 (1.15) | *0.82/0.79* | 0.61 | 0.58 | 0.74 | 0.10 | –0.17 |
| 2. Psychopathy | 1.73 (1.22) | 2.79 (1.19) | 0.68 | *0.81/0.69* | 0.50 | 0.39 | –0.16 | –0.19 |
| 3. Narcissism | 3.32 (1.35) | 2.65 (1.02) | 0.52 | 0.37 | *0.76/0.79* | 0.37 | 0.27 | 0.02 |
| 4. Surface Acting | 3.96 (1.65) | 4.01 (1.53) | 0.37 | 0.30 | 0.29 | *0.86/0.85* | 0.19 | –0.09 |
| 5. Deep Acting | 4.15 (1.65) | 4.16 (1.22) | –0.20 | –0.30 | 0.05 | –0.24 | *0.91/0.85* | 0.45 |
| 6. Job Satisfaction | 4.68 (1.60) | 3.68 (1.28) | –0.14 | –0.35 | –0.02 | –0.23 | 0.24 | *0.96/0.90* |

**Notes:** The diagonal elements (in italic) represent the squared average variance extracted values. Values before the slash pertain to US respondents, values after the slash pertain to Japanese respondents. Values below the diagonal pertain to US respondents; values above the diagonal pertain to Japanese respondents

The threat of common method bias was evaluated for each sample separately. Harman's one-factor test can check for common method variance (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). For the US data, a one-factor model yielded $\chi^2$=3,153.52 and df=189 (cf. $\chi^2$=425.79, df=172, in the measurement model). The one-factor model fitted worse than the measurement model representing all six constructs ($\Delta\chi^2$=2,727.73, $\Delta$df=15, $p$<0.001), so common method bias did not appear to be a threat for the US sample. Similarly, a one-factor model in the Japanese sample revealed a worse fit than the measurement model ($\Delta\chi^2$=1,872.70, $\Delta$df=18, $p$<0.001). A second test involved the inclusion of an unmeasured common latent factor in the model, which contains all indicators that relate to the six separate. When factor loadings with and without the common latent factor are compared, a deviation between factor loadings of more than 0.2 points to common method variance. For the US sample, only one-factor loading dropped slightly more than the difference value of 0.2 (Psychopathy Item 4: $\Delta\gamma$=0.216; see Table AI). For the Japanese sample, all deviations between factor loadings with and without the common latent factor were lower than 0.1. Common method variance therefore is no major concern.

Hypotheses tests

Before testing the hypotheses, we clarified the commonalities and differences among FLEs in these two countries; a series of analyses conducted in the AMOS program test whether the proposed framework is invariant across national samples. First, separate baseline models have to be established for each sample (Byrne, 2010). This step corresponds to the measurement assessments for the two samples, which revealed the same factor structure for both. Then, we calculated two basic structural models that both represented the model depicted in Figure 1 (USA: $\chi^2$=457.18, df=176, $\chi^2$/df=2.598, $p$<0.001, CFI=0.937, SRMR=0.090, RMSEA=0.077; Japan: $\chi^2$=441.32, df=154, $\chi^2$/df=2.866, $p$<0.001, CFI=0.923, SRMR=0.091, RMSEA=0.069). However, as one item for psychopathy had to be deleted in the Japanese sample, to compare models, the analysis continued with composite factor scores, computed for the US and Japanese data separately. Next, an AMOS multi-group model can quantify the group differences. In particular, $\chi^2$ difference tests provide the results from constraining each path of the model in Figure 1. Furthermore, this study relies on the critical ratio difference technique, which results in $z$-scores (Byrne, 2010). The results for each country are in Figure 1.

**Table III.** Invariance of paths between US and Japanese models

| Causal Paths in the dark triad model | USA (*n*=269) | Japan (*n*=300) | $\Delta\chi^2$ | *p*-value | *z*-score |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Dark triad → emotional labor* | | | | | |
| Machiavellianism → surface acting (*H1a*) | 0.267* | 0.898*** | *55.32* | *0.00* | *12.41\*\*\** |
| Machiavellianism → deep acting (*H1b*) | –0.102 | 0.161* | *4.95* | *0.03* | *3.56\*\*\** |
| Psychopathy → surface acting (*H2a*) | 0.084 | –0.188*** | *12.22* | *0.00* | *–5.11\*\*\** |
| Psychopathy → deep acting (*H2b*) | –0.339*** | –0.512* | 1.176 | 0.28 | –1.57 |
| Narcissism → surface acting (*H3a*) | 0.143* | –0.174*** | *25.57* | *0.00* | *–6.39\*\*\** |
| Narcissism → deep acting (*H3b*) | 0.247*** | 0.432*** | *6.34* | *0.01* | *3.20\*\*\** |
| *Emotional labor → job satisfaction* | | | | | |
| Surface acting → job satisfaction (*H4*) | –0.188** | –0.255*** | 0.03 | 0.86 | 0.19 |
| Deep acting → job satisfaction (*H5*) | 0.202*** | 0.580*** | *21.04* | *0.00* | *5.15\*\*\** |

**Notes:** Cells in italic indicate significant differences. *$p$ < 0.5; **$p$ < 0.01; ***$p$ < 0.001

According to *H1*, Machiavellianism should have stronger positive effects on surface acting and deep acting in Japan. Table III indicates that for both US ($\beta$=0.267, $p$<0.05) and Japanese ($\beta$=0.898, $p$<0.001) FLEs, Mach has an effect on surface acting. In support of *H1a*, this positive effect is stronger in Japan ($\Delta\chi^2$=55.32, $p$<0.001, $z$=12.41). For *H1b*, the results reveal no effect of Mach on deep acting among US employees ($\beta$=−0.102, ns), but a positive effect emerges from the Japanese sample ($\beta$=0.161, $p$<0.05). A significant $\chi^2$ difference test and $z$-score indicate differences between countries, in support of *H1b* ($\Delta\chi^2$=4.95, $p$<0.05, $z$=3.56). The negative effects of psychopathy on surface acting arise only among Japanese FLEs ($\beta$=−0.188, $p$<0.001), but *H2a* still receives support because the results indicate a difference between countries ($\Delta\chi^2$=12.22, $p$<0.001, $z$=−5.11). In contrast, though the proposed negative effect of psychopathy on deep acting is present ($\beta_{US}$=−0.339, $p$<0.001; $\beta_{Japan}$=−0.512, $p$<0.05), *H2b* is not supported because the differences in $\beta$-values are not significant. The predicted positive effects of narcissism are supported for surface acting (*H3a*), as indicated by the positive effect for US FLEs ($\beta_{USA}$=0.143, $p$<0.05; $\beta_{Japan}$=−0.174, $p$<0.05) and the difference that indicates it is stronger than the effect for Japanese FLEs ($\Delta\chi^2$=25.57, $p$<0.001, $z$=−6.39). However, the tests

of *H3b* reveal some surprising results: Narcissism has a stronger positive effect on surface acting in Japan than in the USA ($\beta_{USA}$=0.247, $p$<0.001; $\beta_{Japan}$=0.432, $p$<0.001). The effects differ significantly ($\Delta\chi^2$=6.34, $p$<0.01, $z$=3.20), such that the results reject *H3b*. Interestingly, the DT explains considerably more variance in surface acting (57 vs 15 percent) and deep acting (22 vs 13 percent) for Japanese than US FLEs.

As predicted in *H4*, surface acting is negatively associated with job satisfaction in both countries ($\beta_{USA}$=−0.188, $p$<0.01; $\beta_{Japan}$=−0.255, $p$<0.001). The difference in the magnitude of the estimates across the samples is in the hypothesized direction, but it does not reach statistical significance, so, *H4* is not supported. Consistent with *H5*, deep acting is positively related to job satisfaction in both samples ($\beta_{USA}$=0.202, $p$<0.001; $\beta_{Japan}$=0.580, $p$<0.001). In this case, the difference in the magnitude of the coefficients is significantly different across the two countries and in the hypothesized direction ($\Delta\chi^2$=21.04, $p$<0.001, $z$=5.15). Surface acting and deep acting explain more variance in job satisfaction (26 vs 8 percent) for Japanese than US FLEs.

Indirect effects

Although this study does not include formal mediation hypotheses, the analysis tested for the possibility of indirect effects of the DT traits on job satisfaction through emotional labor. The bootstrapping approach used AMOS to quantify these effects. In a structural model with two potential mediators, an overall indirect effect through both would be quantified automatically, so this investigation of indirect effects entails the combined indirect effect, through both surface and deep acting. For the US sample, a negative indirect effect emerges for Mach on job satisfaction, through both emotional labor dimensions (Mach→job satisfaction: $\beta_{USA}$=−0.09, $p$<0.01 (lower level bootstrap interval (LLBI)=−0.14; upper level bootstrap interval (ULBI)=−0.05)). The results also indicate a negative indirect effect for psychopathy (psychopathy→job satisfaction: $\beta_{USA}$=−0.08, $p$<0.05 (LLBI=−0.14; ULBI=−0.05)). For narcissism, no indirect effect emerges (narcissism→job satisfaction: $\beta_{USA}$=0.05, $p$>0.1 (LLBI=−0.01; ULBI=0.11)). Among Japanese FLEs, indirect effects on job satisfaction arise from psychopathy ($\beta_{Japan}$=−0.24, $p$<0.01 (LLBI=−0.31; ULBI=−0.18)) and narcissism ($\beta_{Japan}$=0.24, $p$<0.01 (LLBI=0.20; ULBI=0.29)) but not from Mach ($\beta_{Japan.}$=−0.11, $p$>0.1 (LLBI=−0.23; ULBI=0.01)).

**General discussion**

Service employees' positive personality traits have been widely studied and shown to enhance customer service experiences, with benefits for both employees and customers. Yet there is limited research on negative personality traits that might hinder job outcomes. We propose a conceptual model of job satisfaction, in which three negative personality traits – Machiavellianism, psychopathy and narcissism – are antecedents, and the employee emotional labor strategies of surface acting and deep acting are mediators. Using data from the USA and Japan, the findings suggest that Machiavellianism positively affects surface acting in both countries, though more strongly in Japan. This DT trait also (positively) affects deep acting, but only among Japanese FLEs. The ability to manipulate others is central to Machiavellianism, yet high Mach US FLEs may perceive a greater need to deploy their emotions to advance their personal goals, rather than to satisfy customers through deep acting. Moreover, Japanese people tend to have a stronger other-orientation (i.e. subordinate their own interests to other people's

needs) than Americans, so US Machs may be less skilled at or experienced with faking or suppressing their emotions during customer interactions.

As expected, psychopathy negatively affects surface acting and deep acting in Japan, but it only affects deep acting in the USA. The predicted positive effect of narcissism on surface acting is confirmed only for US, not Japanese, FLEs. Somewhat surprisingly, this link is negative in Japan. Japanese narcissists certainly seek confirmation of their self-worth and dominance, but they might realize that surface acting, or simply putting on a fake smile, will not provide them with feedback that is consistent with their self-appraisal. Furthermore, Japanese narcissists who crave validation from others might realize that their self-centeredness, coupled with manipulated emotional displays, will be incompatible with cultural expectations of an other-orientation.

The link of narcissism to deep acting is positive in both countries but stronger in Japan, in contrast with the study prediction, which stemmed from the anticipation that Japanese FLEs' cultural-normative expectations would overpower their narcissism and bring about a weaker narcissism–deep acting relationship. However, perhaps these cultural-normative expectations, especially an orientation toward others, have the opposite effect on Japanese narcissists, leaving them more attuned to the needs of others, such that they can better put themselves into the mind of others (Esperger and Bereczkei, 2012). Such culturally honed skills likely require changes to people's inner feelings, which is a core element of deep acting.

Our results also show a similarly strong negative influence of surface acting on job satisfaction in both countries. In contrast, deep acting relates positively to job satisfaction in both countries, though the relationship is stronger among Japanese FLEs. The DT traits and emotional labor dimensions contribute to a greater total explained variance in job satisfaction in Japan than in the USA. Taken together, these findings suggest that DT traits exert significant, important effects on emotional labor and thus job satisfaction, but the effects differ in strength (and direction) across cultures.

Theoretical implications

Because FLEs represent the service organization's face to the customer, their personalities shape interactions with customers and their resulting perceptions. Zhang *et al.* (2008) maintain that FLEs, regardless of the cultural context, need a "service personality" to be truly successful. This notion suggests that FLEs with the "wrong" personality traits might fail to meet organizational expectations, in terms of delivering the desired service experience, and thus suffer from low job satisfaction.

This study contributes to organizational and management theory in several ways. First, past research indicates that FLEs' emotional acting can be partly explained by personality traits because personal dispositions define how FLEs think and behave (Liao and Chuang, 2004). Positive personality traits such as agreeableness have been linked positively to emotional labor (Austin *et al.*, 2008) and job performance (Barrick *et al.*, 1998). Our study contributes to research by addressing whether negative personality traits might affect emotional labor strategies and job satisfaction, which is a key driver of not only FLE turnover and performance but also customer satisfaction.

Second, we extend theory by identifying the differential effects of three DT traits, revealing an intriguing picture of DT effects in two distinct cultures. It might seem reasonable to expect similar effects of the DT on downstream variables in all highly developed service economies, but unique patterns emerge for the USA and Japan.

Third, DT-induced surface acting negatively affects job satisfaction, and DT-induced deep acting promotes job satisfaction in both cultures. In this sense, we also demonstrate the cross-cultural applicability of the three DT measures and the existence of surface acting in Japan, a highly collectivistic culture, which challenges Allen *et al.*'s (2014, p. 32) notion that "the idea of faking emotions may be considered grossly inauthentic and potentially conflict evoking in a collectivistic culture." Our findings are based on two convenience samples, which can be considered a study limitation. For example, convenience samples make it impossible to accurately estimate the sampling error (i.e. the chance variability resulting from sampling a portion of the population rather than the whole population), which is why the validity of population inferences cannot be evaluated (Trzesniewski *et al.*, 2008). This said, given that our primary goal is theory testing, we believe the samples do not pose a significant problem.

Managerial implications

From a managerial perspective, it is notable that FLEs' negative personality traits directly influence their emotional labor strategies and indirectly affect job satisfaction through surface and deep acting. Service organizations may be increasingly forced to be less selective when hiring new employees, emphasizing the need for a better understanding of the DT and its implications for frontline service jobs. Service firms would do well to understand the personality of their FLEs and how different dimensions of a personality with the same valence (i.e. three types of DT) affect job performance in various ways. Armed with this information, firms can establish stronger guidelines for service management.

For example, Mach drives surface acting in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. It also affects deep acting in Japan. The favorable customer outcomes of deep acting (Groth *et al.*, 2009) imply that Japanese service firms might not need or want to screen out high Mach job applicants. In addition, service organizations in western and eastern countries that deliver services in a high throughput manner likely rely on service scripts that stipulate surface acting; they also might hire high Mach personnel for customer contact positions. But hiring these high Machs may cause collateral damage (e.g. co-worker hostility), which should be taken into account for hiring decisions.

In turn, surface acting negatively and deep acting positively affect job satisfaction in both countries. A failure to consider these differential effects may lead to employee exhaustion (e.g. if firms require FLEs to employ surface acting constantly) and customer defection. These findings also emphasize the need for appropriate employee selection procedures that acknowledge the DT personality traits. In four cases (Machiavellianism → surface acting, USA and Japan; narcissism → surface acting, USA and Japan), DT traits drive surface acting, which will exhaust FLEs (Goodwin *et al.*, 2011) and harm customer service perceptions (Groth *et al.*, 2009). Human resources managers that favor deep acting over surface acting thus should strengthen relevant

recruitment and employee selection practices. For example, service firms should measure patterns of personality traits early in the recruitment process, that is, use personality scores to make recruitment decisions (Bateson *et al.*, 2014). Alternatively, service firms could use onboarding programs to align new FLEs high on the DT with corporate goals and values (Cable *et al.*, 2013).

Psychopathy is the only DT trait to have a negative effect on deep acting. Service firms are well advised to avoid psychopathic candidates because their dysfunctional interpersonal behaviors are likely to damage valuable customer relationships.

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# Appendix 1

**Table AI.** Measures

| Items | USA | Japan |
|---|---|---|
| During a typical interaction with a customer […] | | |
| *Dark triad (adopted from Jones and Paulhus, 2014)* | | |
| Machiavellianism | CR = 0.89 | CR = 0.87 |
| […] I have used deceit or lied to get my way | 0.88 | 0.70 |
| […] I tend to manipulate others to get my way | 0.87 | 0.84 |
| […] I have used flattery to get my way | 0.63 | 0.72 |
| […] I tend to exploit others toward my own end | 0.90 | 0.87 |
| Psychopathy | CR = 0.88 | CR = 0.69 |
| […] I tend to lack remorse | 0.88 | — |
| […] I tend to be callous or insensitive | 0.86 | 0.58 |
| […] I tend to not be too concerned with morality or the morality of my actions | 0.84 | 0.56 |
| […] I tend to be cynical | 0.65 | 0.87 |
| Narcissism | CR = 0.85 | CR = 0.87 |
| […] I tend to want others to admire me | 0.78 | 0.86 |
| […] I tend to want others to pay attention to me | 0.73 | 0.82 |
| […] I tend to expect special favours from others | 0.79 | 0.73 |
| […] I tend to seek prestige or status | 0.75 | 0.75 |
| *Emotional labor strategies (adopted from Grandey, 2003)* | | |
| Employee deep acting | CR = 0.94 | CR = 0.85 |
| […] I try to actually experience the emotions I have to show to the customer | 0.87 | 0.60 |
| […] I work hard to feel the emotions that I need to show to the customer | 0.90 | 0.97 |
| […] I make a strong effort to actually feel the emotions that I need to display toward the customer | 0.96 | 0.88 |
| Employee surface acting | CR = 0.89 | CR = 0.88 |
| […] I just pretend to have the emotions I need to display to the customer | 0.95 | 0.88 |
| […] I put on a "mask" in order to display the emotions my manager wants me to display | 0.88 | 0.89 |
| […] I put on a "show" or "performance" when interacting with the customer | 0.73 | 0.76 |
| *Job satisfaction (adopted from Rich, 1997)* | CR = 0.97 | CR = 0.93 |
| All in all, I am satisfied with my job | 0.98 | 0.88 |
| In general, I like working at my company | 0.93 | 0.93 |
| My overall working situation is very satisfying | 0.96 | 0.88 |

**Note:** CR, composite reliability

**Appendix 2**

**Table AII.** Sample characteristics

| Category | USA (*n* = 269) | Japan (*n* = 300) |
|---|---|---|
| Age (in years) | 31.9 (SD = 9.9) | 48.6 (SD = 10.8) |
| Gender (male and female as answer options) | 51.3% female | 29.0% female |
| Tenure (in years) | 4.4 (SD = 3.9) | 13.9 (SD = 10.8) |
| Hierarchy levels (number of levels between person and CEO from "1" = 0 levels to "11" = 10 or more levels) | 5.24 (SD = 4.02) | 4.55 (SD = 3.40) |
| *Industry* | | |
| Hotel | 40 | 20 |
| Restaurant (incl. fast food) | 93 | 35 |
| Telecommunications | 12 | 1 |
| Travel | 1 | 7 |
| Retail Store | 113 | 105 |
| Beauty and welfare | No answer option | 66 |
| Insurance/financial | 5 | 8 |
| Other | 5 | 58 |