# To Express or Not? Emotional Labour and Narratives of Past Relationships

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## Abstract

This study is about the emotional dimension of business relationships, specifically addressing the way boundary spanners speak about negative emotions, in circumstances where negative emotions are usually suppressed more than expressed. Suppressing negative emotion and expressing another, more accepted ones involves the use of emotional labour (Ashforth, and Humphrey, 1993). So far, research has neglected to study emotional labour that is involved in suppressing negative emotions in business relationships. A thematic analysis of narrative data shows firstly how emotional labour is part of manager's relationship ending narratives and secondly, provides ways of how the boundary spanners try to cope and defend themselves in making sense of negatively loaded relationship endings. The preliminary findings offer a rich, but heretofore obscured, account of manager's emotional labour in long term business relationships.

## Introduction

The emotional dimension of business relationships at the level of individuals has received little research interest. This may be due to the bias of focusing on positive or neutral business relationships, which evoke fewer emotions. Indeed, studies on buyer-seller relationships predominantly highlight the benefits of such arrangements, although a minority of studies reminds us about the 'dark side' or liability of relationships (e.g. Anderson & Jap 2005, Fang, Chang & Peng, 2011, Grayson & Ambler 1999, Håkansson & Snehota 2000) or problems and their recovery in relationships (e.g. Salo, Tähtinen, Ulkuniemi 2007, Vaaland & Håkansson 2003). In contrast, channel research has been more interested in opportunism (for a meta-analysis, see Crosno & Dahlstrom 2008) that can evoke strong emotions for the interacting persons. Nevertheless, even the studies that do focus on troubled business relationships or troubles in relationships seldom include a perspective of emotions. This is true also in consumer research; according to a recent review by Gaur, Herjanto & Makkar (2014), the study of emotions has not gained enough research attention.

This study aims to address this issue and focus on the emotional dimension of business relationships. As empirical data we use managers' talk about emotions in business relationships, including the subtext, or where they indirectly talk of emotions. In this way, the paper addresses the boundary spanners talk about emotions they experienced and expressed or suppressed during problematic relationships.

Suppressing emotion and expressing another involves the use of emotional labour and defense mechanisms (Ashforth et al. 2008). Through conducting a thematic analysis of narrative data this study shows how emotional labour is part of manager's stories of relationship endings they have been involved in. In addition, a narrative analysis shows ways that boundary spanners defend themselves when making sense of relationship ending in the narratives.

To reach its aim, the paper builds upon a handful of studies on business relationships (e.g. Ryan & Blois 2010, Tähtinen & Blois 2011) that endorse a view that all human action and decision making is influenced by emotions. We argue that this view is also implicit in the IMP approach interaction model (Håkansson 1982), although so far it has not been much highlighted. Given the scarcity of existing research in business relationship settings, emotion studies from the fields of e.g. sociology, psychology, and management are also applied. The findings from preliminary thematic and narrative analyses offer a rich account of both manager's emotional labour and defenses in long term business relationships.

**Emotional labour**

In business-to-business exchanges there is often the view that interactions should remain professional and objective in order to perform actions based on rational decision making. However, as Ashforth et al (2008) observe, in long term service relationships this objectivity can remain no more than a goal. This is particularly the case when the development of social bonds is regarded as an essential driving force behind the success of the relationship (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995; Wilson 1995; Brennan and Turnbull 1999; Tellefsen 2001). The social relations between people within the relationship are said to facilitate exchange and reduce uncertainty for both parties (Håkansson 1982). The social bonds can also be seen as the most durable aspect of the relationship, where even after the formal ending of a relationship it will be these personal relations, or memories thereof, that may live on (Alajoutsijarvi et al. 2000, Havila and Wilkinson, 2000).

The well-known adage, of course is that relationship between organisations are in fact relationships between people. However, organisational norms and values will either facilitate or restrict the types of relationships that will be formed between people within the relationship (Blomqvist and Levy 2004). Notwithstanding this, as Marchington and Vincent (2004 p. 1037) suggest, "whilst day-to-day actions of boundary-spanning agents are dependent on organisational goals, they have some independence to produce and reproduce patterns of behaviour that bind organisations together or weaken levels of collaboration and trust." Business relationships are enacted on the day-to-day interactions of boundary spanning agents rather than on the direct actions of senior managers. The importance of "*backstage interpersonal dynamics*" (Ring and Van de Ven, 2000, p.179) suggests that as the boundary spanners come to know each other better, the influence of *qua persona* elements will grow. As Ring and Van de Ven (1994, p.103) commented: "*Qua persona* behavior substitutes for role behavior as personal relationships build and psychological contracts deepen.".

Emotions convey information to others (Levenson 1994, Miller & Leary 1992), and may reveal vulnerabilities that the partner can exploit. Expressing negative emotions may elicit dislike and avoidance from the partner. Hence, people tend to suppress negative emotions in relationships where the partner is not responsive to their needs (Clark and Finkel 2005). However, in some business relationships, customers may perceive themselves of higher status than the suppliers, and therefore can more freely express negative emotions (see Graham et al. 2008). Hence, display rules serve as mechanisms in explaining what emotions the representatives of the supplier and the customer are allowed (and not) to express (Matsumoto et al. 2005).

The concept of emotional labour has been used to describe the manner in which people manage their emotions in order to act in what is deemed an appropriate manner (Hochchild, 1983),

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following the expression rules. These feeling rules are recognised, according to Hochshild, (2012) by inspecting how we assess our feelings, how other people assess our emotional display, and by sanctions issuing from ourselves and from them. For different social group, different methods to recognise feeling rules will apply. Where there is a gap between the expected and experienced emotion the individual will experience emotional dissonance. The bridging of the dissonance gap requires both emotional labour and also specific use of emotional defense mechanisms as discussed by Ashforth et al (2008). This labour might remain obscured in business exchanges in situations where emotional detachment and de-emotionalising is normalised and where "emotion work has been accomplished, but it has hidden its tracks with words" (Hoschild, 2012 p. 112). This emotional dissonance can occur even in situations where the boundary spanner will derive satisfaction from interacting with clients or business partners (Ashforth, et al 2008). In other words, expression rules seem to strongly govern business relationships, so strongly, that even researchers seem to follow them and therefore not talk about the positive or negative emotions managers are feeling, but not expressing.

We suggest that the suppression of emotion and expressing a more acceptable one, i.e. emotional labour is particularly present in times of heightened stress, a critical time or crisis in a relationship such as when relationships end (Ryan and Blois 2010, Tähtinen and Blois 2011). This becomes all the more significant given that in long terms business relationships boundary spanners will be required to "continuously interact with specific individuals - individuals who may be needy, likeable, demanding or not respecting" role boundaries and expectations (Ashforth et al, 2008 p 19).

In these stressful times, defense mechanisms such as backstage 'spaces' where boundary spanners can express themselves and their true emotions more freely and garner support for their position are crucial (Hochschield, 2012). The boundary spanner may express the negative emotions that are triggered e.g. by a customer, to a person willing to provide support (Graham et al. 2008). Such persons could be for example family members (Broadbridge 2002), friends, or trusted colleagues. If the person can support, Graham et al. (2008) suggest that their personal relationship can grow stronger and thus could offer a space of mutual support. Other defense mechanisms include a form of distancing or compartmentalising of the role (Ashforth et al 2008) and the use of humour (Yovetich, Dale, and Hudak, 1990). An example of distancing in a business relationship might be the recourse to expressions of 'professionalism' or in compartmentalising we might see expressions such as "it's nothing personal", or "business is business". Further, making a joke about the stressful event downplays its importance, making it feel less threatening and more controllable (Henman 2001).

Those that successfully balance the separation of organisational roles and their private selves are shown to "speak more matter-of-factly" about their emotional labor in clearly defined and sometimes mechanistic ways: "'I get in gear, I get revved up, I get plugged in.' They talk of their feelings not as spontaneous, natural occurrences but as objects they have learned to govern and control" (Hochschild, 2012 p 133).

**Methodology**

In this paper we conceive of the data collection site as a 'backstage setting', where both the authors engaged in a guided discussion about troubled business relationships and their endings with 23 managers undertaking their part-time MBA studies. Of those, 21 agreed that we could use the data they provided during the discussion as empirical data in this paper.

The data include written narrative descriptions of business relationships that had ended or were in the process and where their organization had been in the role of either buyer or supplier. Moreover, the managers had been personally involved in the relationship as a boundary spanner, in direct

interaction with the representative(s) of the other party. We asked the managers to write the story of the relationship, from the beginning to its end, to form a narrative. Most of the narratives were in text format, but two also include a picture drawn by the manager in question (see Figure 1 as an example).
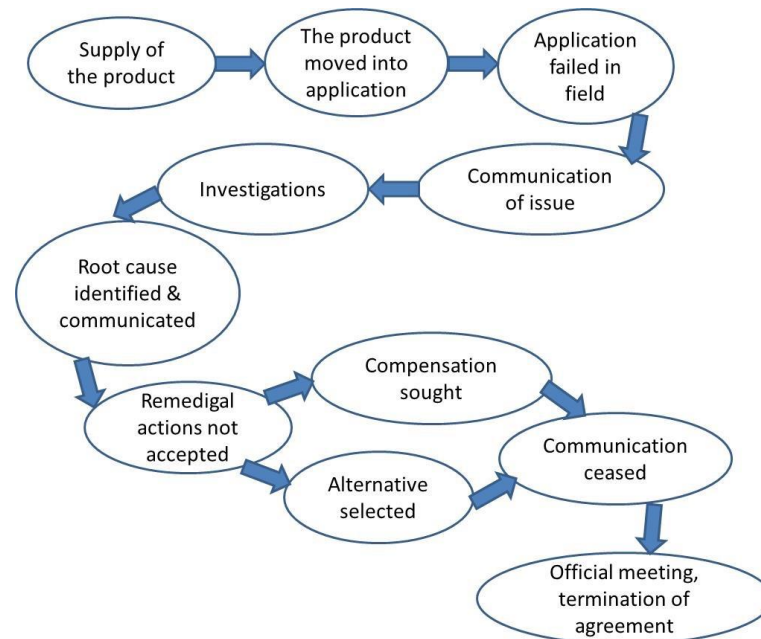


**Figure 1. A visual representation of a relationship ending narrative (reproduced from a hand-drawn figure)**

After the participants had written the storyline, we asked them to write down what emotions they had during the relationship ending process. We did this, because we wanted to compare the emotions that were expressed in the stories to the ones added, when specifically asked to. However, before asking to write about the emotions, we presented some research results on emotions and their involvement in any kind of human action. We did this to help the managers to reveal their felt emotions more freely, in a supporting and trusting atmosphere.

During the discussion, some of the stories were told and elaborated, but not all. Hence, after the session, the written data were first read by both researchers, to get an overview of it. During that reading, both authors made notes on the first impression and what struck as important in the data. Thereafter we discussed and compared our impressions, realizing that the data talked to us in somewhat different ways, owing to the theoretical lenses we had familiarized ourselves with. Hence, we decided to progress with two types of analysis, thematic and narrative, both focusing on the emotions that influenced the actions and therefore the course of the events in the story of the relationship.

Next, the data were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo. Both authors took part in analyzing the data. We note that the data collection took place in English, in an English speaking country, which is the first language of the second author, but not of the first. Therefore, during the analysis, the second author used her cultural capacity more to understand and interpret the text and its connotations.

**Descriptive results; frustrated and angry managers**

First, we took a look at the emotions that were expressed in the narratives, both as part of and when specifically asked for. As shown in Table 1, the narrators expressed more their own emotions, partly also because these were also asked for. However, they did also express emotions of the

counterpart and of their employees. This is quite natural, as the emotions of a person also trigger emotions on others in interaction or witnessing the interaction, and if expressed, are recognized.

On the top of the list, as the most often mentioned ones, are frustration and anger; both very strong and powerful negative emotions. The others that were expressed more than once i.e. disappointment, disbelief and loss or even just once (e.g. furious, unfair, upset) also stress the negative tone of ending. These suggest that some kind of coping mechanisms need to be in place to be able to leave the experience behind and move on in the job.

**Table 1. Emotions in the ending narratives**

| My emotions (how many): | Others emotions (how many) |
|---|---|
| frustration 8 and very frustrated 1 = 9<br>anger 6 and wild anger 1 = 7<br>disappointment 4<br>disbelief 2<br>loss 2<br>felt vindicated 2<br>annoyed 1<br>betrayal 1<br>fear of change 1<br>felt strange 1<br>helplessness 1<br>I was furious 1<br>let down 1<br>nervous (of what the boss thinks about this) 1<br>pride was hurt 1<br>relief 1<br>sense of being wronged 1<br>sense of failure 1<br>unfair 1<br>upset 1<br><br>**20 different emotions** | **My employees (from my eyes):**<br><br>anger 1<br>annoyed 1<br>concerned for the future 1<br>disappointment 1<br>pride was hurt 1<br><br>**5 different emotions**<br><br>**The counterpart (from my eyes):**<br><br>arrogance 1<br>bullying 1<br>defensive 1<br>fearing the consequences 1<br>frustrated 1<br>lack of respect 1<br>rude (to other customers) 1<br><br>**7 different emotions** |

The exceptions to this are when a negative tone is expressed in the narratives such that they become part of the story as 'vindication' and 'relief'. These expressions suggest that once the ending of the relationship was finished, the narrator could get some pleasure out of the otherwise stressing process. However, these expressions represent only a small minority of the emotions, suggesting that for the most, relationship ending is viewed as a negative experience.

**Results of the thematic analysis; on emotions and emotional labour**

Firstly, we compared the emotions that were expressed in the narratives with the ones reported when specifically asked for. Where the latter ones were very different, especially reporting more negative emotions than in the stories, this hints of the emotional labour that they were involved in during the relationship.

A few stories included no emotions felt by the manager writing the story, not even when asked for. A few stories lacked any emotions, but when asked, the managers reported quite strong emotions, such as frustration, wild anger, betrayal, sense of being wronged. A few stories included only the

counterpart's emotions, but when asked, the manager expressed some strong emotions, such as regret, fear of change, disappointment, anger. Even when the story included expressions of emotions, they were 'milder' that when asked, as can be seen below.

> From the story: *"... Communication worked well, we thought that way at least. However, one day we received information that they have selected someone else. ..."*

> Emotions when asked: *"Disappointment, anger, feel[ing] that we haven't done enough, frustration"*

We further get the sense that in specific situations managers will feel more or less able to express emotion, even with recourse to 'business-like' language for same. For example, one manager in a public procurement role describes a challenging client, where she engaged in avoidance behaviours (Roth and Cohen, 1986), so as not to be 'in the same room', in attempts to resolve a problem in the relationship. Instead she maintains formal non-verbal communication. This establishment of boundaries and organising of her work to avoid a stressful encounter, points to a form of coping strategy, that will impact on the future 'atmosphere' of the relationship.

> *"If I could have more trust in this particular supplier I would have had an informal meeting with him and engaged with him to a more positive resolution. I had thought about having someone from another department speak to him but again I made a judgement call basis on the personality of the owner of the company." Public Procurement Manager*

This concurs with Ellis and Ybema (2010, 282) who describe how managers are constructing (or indeed deconstructing) *"the relationships that constitute the proximate environment of the network, while simultaneously securing their own position within it"*. What is important in our data is that we can also reveal the emotional dimension to this boundary work, particularly during times of crisis, or conflict in business relationships.

In a further example we can see that a manager's focus on their career can act as another site for emotional labour, but also an important driver in the relationship dynamics. Here we can see how an account manager has a degree of independence from senior management to work, with a team, to maintain an important business relationship (Marchington and Vincent, 2004). However, this independence could also be considered as isolatory, causing the manager to make the decision to withdraw from the situation.

> *"The customers overall lack of respect for the team and their successive changes of agreed to meetings and agendas left me very frustrated – [with a] lack of control. Also [my] pride was hurt as [it was] internally reflecting heavily on me (my perception). I heavily relied on my team in all my deals (technical, functional and industry aspects) - I had executive exposure – so [I was] nervous that it was visible – so this was affecting my career...In the end I withdrew as the Account Manager and [the company] assigned someone else – they continued with the sales process for 6 more months and eventually lost to [competitor]" Sales Account Manager*

In our final example we see further evidence not only of the emotional dimension to business relationship interaction, but also further insights into the challenges for boundary spanning personnel who must interact within external partners, maintain and deliver on the relationship, while at the same time be at the behest of internal organisational dynamics, of which they might have little control. These settings would seem to heighten the emotion or stress experienced, but also raises the question as to 'where' business relationship managers can vent or express these emotions.

*Frustration is key here, [and a] degree of helplessness. Anger that [my] opinions weren't sought or concerns listened to. Emotions definitely impacted [on the situation], [there was] temptation to circumvent the process in play. [I had] negative emotions towards internal players, [and] more sympathy towards external. [There was internal] political power play ongoing, [which] may explain some of attempted justification for this".*     *Manager in customer organisation*

Our preliminary analysis therefore thus suggests that in business-to-business settings, emotional labour is a relevant concept and thus boundary spanners' emotional labour and coping with it should be studied more.

**Results of the narrative analysis**

Our preliminary narrative analysis reveals, so far, four different types of narratives. We argue that the narratives are important means to make sense of what happened, to learn from it, and to adjust to what happened (see Koening Kellas and Manusov 2003).

**"It was inevitable"** We have labeled the first as "It was inevitable". Such narratives were told almost in a teleological manner, the relationship was deemed to end in a way it did, and no-one could have prevented it from happening. This way the narrator can defend her/himself of any fault in the matter, as the reason for the ending is something that violates the rules of the relationship, and thus cannot be resolved. In these narratives, the exit communication is done formally, in writing.

The first type of narrative is particularly fitting with public organizations that are obliged to follow EU's procurement or other legislation, setting the borders for their actions. Nevertheless, we note that whether or not the ending actually was inevitable cannot be said. What we can say is (this is the case with any of the narratives) that a narrative tells us about how the person involved wishes to view and present, or actually views the relationship.

**"We are still here if they want us**" The second type of narrative describes that the ending was initiated and decided by the counterparty, not the manager's organization. Even if there was some problems, the manager's organization tried to resolve them and to continue the relationship. In some stories, a competitor offered better price for the customer. A common feature is that the manager stresses that her/his organization is willing to start the relationship again, without no hard feelings.

**"I was the hero"** This type of narrative presents a story of the manager being aware of the problems in the relationship long before any other in her/his organization. S/he tries to warn superiors, without success. This makes him look bad, but eventually, when the relationship then goes sore, and ends, s/he feels that s/he was right all along and the 'others' should have listened to her/him. Thus, although the relationship at the company level was unsuccessful, the storyteller sees her/himself as the hero of the story and can be proud.

**"I still cannot understand it"** The last narrative that we have analyzed from the data so far is an unfinished one. The plot starts from a long standing and profitable relationship that has dramatically turned into one where the customer shows signs of withdrawal, ending the, for the supplier, very important relationship. The supplier is the narrator and his company is trying to do everything in their power to continue the relationship, but nothing seems to help. Even when telling the story, the manager seems to be looking for help from the first author, because the customer company is from her county. Hence, the story is not complete. In this type of narrative the relationship is either still under the ending process (at least mentally) or even the storyteller is not sure if it will end or not.

Hence, the label "I still cannot understand it". Such a narrative suggests that the storyteller has not made sense of what has happened (so far) and continues to make sense of it.

**Discussion**

In the marketing discipline which has focused on front-line service personnel (after Hochchild, 1983), discussions regarding the emotional labour of managers interacting in long standing customer or supplier relationships are rare. Harris (2002) and O'Donohoe, and Turley (2006) point to the practices and strategies of emotional labour as deployed in professional practice settings. However, our data provides a window onto an alternative setting, that is, the long term business relationship and sheds light on managers' everyday strategies to manage their emotions and follow the expression rules.

We agree with those researchers (e.g. Mainela, 2007) that suggest that that relationships with some qua persona elements can be more valuable than relationships that are restricted to a qua performa mode. However, similarly to Ryan and Blois (2010) we can see here the need for senior managers from both sides of the dyad to be aware of the emotional dimension to boundary work in business relationships. As boundary spanning personnel in long term business relationships, their employees are not only involving qua persona encounters, but also facing personally challenging interactions in situations with tightly controlled display rules. Such situations are, at the very least, distressing to them. Here, we can look at both types of analysis together. For instance although the "*It was inevitable*" narrative suggest a neutral stand to the ending, its point relates more to the plot of the story, than it being stress free. Hence, in one such narrative, the female manager told about situations that had resulted in high levels of emotional labour. This was due to the rules that govern public procurement, meaning that even if her organisation ended the relationship with the suppler, the supplier could tender again in the future and her organization needed to take that into account. Thus, the narrator was working on a basis of 'whatever I say may be taken down and used as evidence'. In this case, the expression rules were 'tight', stemming both from a highly regimented working environment where talk matters as well as from the relational setting.

**Conclusion**

It is not surprising that personnel in boundary spanning roles between organisations will face difficult and challenging encounters with their counterparts in customer/supplier interactions. As discussed, the literature on business relationships acknowledges that managers have a key role to play in the building, maintaining, and ending of business relationships. As they are not completely bound and have some agency in forming of the relationship, this also suggests that there will be some level of potential isolation in dealing with difficult and challenging situations.

In this paper we get a glimpse of some of the strategies used to cope in these emotional situations, including emotional labour and defensing narratives. However, emotional labour is – as the title suggests – hard work. We know little of the kinds of impacts these coping strategies have on the boundary spanning managers themselves, or indeed the dynamics of the dyad. Are these always bracketed off successfully by the manager? Or are there spillovers in future encounters? Nor do we understand the backstage dynamics, how these fuel or temper the emotional state of the boundary spanners. These are questions, we suggest, that are worth further enquiry by business relationship researchers.

Finally, in discussing the themes with the managers and listening to their narratives told during the discussion, humor also seems to help. The tone of the discussion, although also serious in places, was still light, and laughter was used, partly perhaps laughter can sometimes hide insecurity, but partly also because sharing the stories in a safe environment frees the narrator to even laugh at them (Henman, 2001).

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