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Cross-Cultural Emotional Labor: A Study of NGO Workers in Haiti

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ABSTRACT

Although demand for emotional labor (EL) is at its highest in times of disasters, there is a lack of studies on EL by disaster response and recovery workers in intercultural contexts. Using in-depth interviews and secondary data collected in Haiti, this article focuses on the link between culture and EL. We find that an understanding of the cultural context and the cultural competencies used to effectively navigate that context are central to each step of effective emotional labor performance. These findings help disaster response organizations better understand the value of cultural competence and how it effects the performance of EL.

Introduction

Over the past 20 years, extreme poverty, recurrent political instability, and the worst health indicators in the Western hemisphere have brought thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and NGO workers to Haiti, earning it the name a "republic of NGOs" (Kristoff & Panarelli, 2010). NGO and other aid workers employed by bilateral and multilateral agencies must routinely sustain a high level of emotional labor (EL), which is broadly described as work-required emotion management, or an "affective job demand" (Pandey, 2018). Demand for emotional labor is at its highest in times of disasters when it must be performed in an unfamiliar context, requiring NGO workers to adapt their EL performance based on the cultural norms of those they are serving or working alongside.

What we know about emotional labor in intercultural contexts is still evolving, leaving much unknown about the link between cultural competence and the performance of EL, especially in an international post-disaster context. This article aims to advance the understanding of this link by focusing on the individual aid workers serving in the post-disaster context of Haiti. It specifically examines how cultural competences enhances the performance of emotional labor in complex and exceedingly difficult situations.

This article is based on data from two qualitative studies conducted with aid workers in Haiti, one of the most NGO dense contexts in the world. We argue that there is a direct link between emotional labor and cultural competence, and that a deep understanding of the cultural context and the cultural competencies required to effectively navigate that context are crucial in enabling employees to successfully adapt their emotional labor performance.

This article fills a gap in the emergency management and human resources literature in several ways. First, while recent literature has explored differences in emotional labor within international contexts, there is a lack of understanding on how EL is performed by individuals who routinely shift between these contexts (i.e., international aid workers). Additionally, while several notable studies have explored the importance of emotional labor for domestic emergency workers (i.e., 911 call operators, first responders), there is less known about international NGO workers and the emotional labor required to effectively navigate the challenges of their job.

In the following sections, we review the literature on emotional labor and cultural competence and discuss how they intersect in an international, post disaster context. Next, we discuss the methodology of the studies from which we draw our data. In the section that follows, we present our analysis of 136 in-depth interviews with international post-disaster workers and secondary sources, informed by participant observation, and highlight the intersection between emotional labor and cultural competence. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for international post-disaster organizations and provide directions for future research.

Overview of the literature

Emotional labor

Emotional labor (EL) broadly refers to work that requires a worker to regulate his/her experienced emotions and to visually (facial or bodily) display professionally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions at work. Emotional labor is a job requirement and performed for a wage. While manual labor involves the exercise of physical work, emotional labor requires management and regulation of emotions at work. Emotional labor can take two forms: displaying the professionally appropriate emotions (through facial and/or bodily expressions) without actually feeling them (*surface acting*) or modifying the inner feelings to appear authentic to the intended audience (*deep acting*) (Hochschild, 1983; Mastracci et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2009).

According to Guy et al. (2008), the performance of emotional labor involves four steps (see Figure 1): First, the worker senses the emotional state of the other, with whom they are interacting (emotive sensing). Second, they analyze their affective state and compare their state to that of the other. Third, they must judge how alternative responses will affect the citizens and select the best one. Fourth, they must behave to suppress or express an emotion in order to elicit a desired response.

Scholars from a diverse array of disciplines have written on emotional labor since the beginning of the 1980s, highlighting its importance in the work of health care professionals (Zhang et al., 2021) hotel service providers (Wang, 2020), police officers (Van Gelderen et al., 2007), bus drivers (Scott & Barnes, 2011) and those involved in crisis response (e.g., triage nurses, search and rescue team members) (Mastracci et al., 2012).

Emotional labor literature is structured around two principal themes (see Ganapati et al., 2022; Hsieh et al., 2019; Humphrey, 2021 for a review of public administration studies on emotional labor).[1] The first theme highlights the invisibility and marginalization of its performance despite the centrality of emotive work in most human service jobs, especially those in the public sector
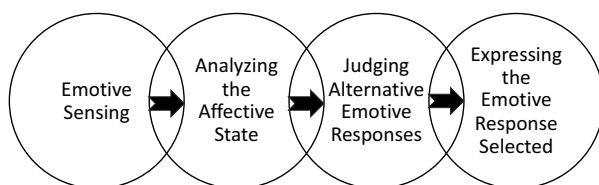
(Costakis & Pickern, 2018; Guy, 2020). The second theme focuses on the consequences of emotional labor—both its benefits and the downsides. Scholars suggest that emotional labor (or its dimensions) enhances client satisfaction (Hsieh et al., 2019; Meier et al., 2006), job satisfaction and pride in work (Guy & Newman, 2004; Hsieh et al., 2012; Jin & Guy, 2009); reduces employee turnover (Ertas, 2019); and contributes to organizational productivity (Meier et al., 2006). In terms of its downsides, research shows that emotional labor can negatively affect those performing it, leading to burnout, mental health impacts, and other consequences (Ganapati et al., 2022; Guy et al., 2013; Hsieh et al., 2012; Kroll et al., 2021; Lu & Guy, 2019).

Cultural competence

Cultural competencies are the set of skills, behaviors, and attitudes that allow an individual to interact and work effectively with those from other backgrounds. Based on the body of literature, cultural competence can be divided into the areas of awareness, knowledge, and skills (Campinha-Bacote, 1999; Knox & Haupt, 2020; Pope & Reynolds, 1997; Rosen, 2000). *Cultural awareness* refers to values, attitudes and assumptions that are vital for successful communication with those who are culturally different from the service provider. Awareness requires self-evaluation, self-reflection, acknowledging one's stereotypes, biases, or culturally based assumptions, and understanding how their culture is perceived by members of other cultures. *Cultural knowledge* involves understanding the worldviews of various cultural groups. This includes knowledge about the history, values, attitudes, and behaviors in other cultures and how members of other cultures interpret their own rules, customs, and laws. *Cultural skills* are the appropriate behaviors, interventions, and strategies resulting from cultural awareness and cultural knowledge (Hochschild, 1983).

Much of our current knowledge on the actual practice of cultural competence comes from management studies done in the private sector (Galbraith, 2000; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Richter et al., 2023), social work (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Nadan, 2017), education (Bustamante et al., 2009; Pintrich, 2003), public health (Vella et al., 2022), international relations (Kohls & Knight, 2004), and more recently emergency management (Haupt & Knox, 2018; Knox & Haupt, 2020; Slobodin & Cohen, 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

Cultural competence is especially important for NGO workers who are involved in international post-disaster contexts as the nature of this work requires NGO workers to interact with beneficiaries, government officials, and

Figure 1. Steps of emotional labor performance. Source: Adapted from Guy et al. (2008).

colleagues from different cultural backgrounds. These interactions require not only a high level of emotional labor, but an understanding of the cultural context and the cultural competencies required to effectively navigate this context (Berry et al., 2014; Bhave & Glomb, 2016).

Cross-cultural emotional labor

The research on emotional labor is evolving from the context of the United States to encompass international settings and cross-cultural components (see, for example, Allen et al., 2014; Guy & Azhar, 2018; Kroll et al., 2021; Yang et al., 2018). Recent scholarly work in public administration has sought to examine the understanding and practice of emotional labor in the global context. Notably, The Palgrave Handbook of Global Perspectives on Emotional Labor in Public Service (Guy et al., 2019) explored the cultural, social, and regional variations in the understanding and enactment of public service emotional labor across 12 countries and six continents. This study revealed, while it is widespread, the impact of emotional labor varies, especially between contexts like the United States and cultures like Bolivia and China (2019, chapters 10 & 11). This research underscores the significance, of recognizing emotive variations to improve emotional labor during cross-cultural interactions.

Other recent studies on cross-cultural emotional labor in China, Japan, Nigeria, and Turkey shows that the experience of emotional labor can vary significantly across different cultural contexts based on cultural and organizational norms (Babatunde et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2018; Nixon et al., 2019) Culture is often hidden and encompasses how people deal with uncertainty, inequality, and social relationships. These verbal and nonverbal behaviors are influenced by cultural patterns acquired through the socialization process (Choi & Guy, 2020; Hall, 1976). Despite the emerging body of work on cross-cultural emotional labor, it remains underexplored and yet to be understood, especially in the complex context of international disaster response.

International aid context

What we know about the role of culture in an international post-disaster setting indicates that cultural adaptation is a challenge for aid workers, who must look beyond the overt components of culture such as demographics, language, or religion and understand the hidden components, such as power relations, body language, or social structures (Hall, 1976, Heyse et al., 2021; Zweifel, 2003). Hidden components of culture encompass the perceptual patterns resulting from day-to-day immersion in a culture and help shape an individual's sense of space, concept of time, leadership preferences, and attitudes concerning gender roles, equality, and conflict.

During a crisis, the need for effective and rapid cultural competence is amplified as the ways in which individuals handle the complexity of disasters varies greatly across cultures and subcultures (Bjerneld et al., 2004; Guy et al., 2019; Heyse et al., 2021). While our understanding of this is evolving, existing literature does not detail practical strategies and methodologies for aid workers to quickly adapt to these hidden cultural nuances in urgent disaster contexts. Furthermore, the complexities that arise when workers navigate a confluence of multiple cultural biases, both from the local context and their own backgrounds, are under-discussed. This "invisible" or hidden culture, which unconsciously shapes human interaction, presents barriers to effective cross-cultural communication to those unwilling or unable to recognize it. The art of recognizing, honoring, and valuing similarities as well as differences in belief systems, values, and approaches is paramount to emotive sensing and the performance of emotional labor (Berry et al., 2014). It is necessary to not only assess a new culture, but to reflect upon one's own culture which is further complicated when the worker is thrust into a cross-cultural post disaster context (Kroll et al., 2021). This becomes even more pressing as the potential psychological toll on aid workers, given the dual pressure of disaster response and cultural adaptation, is an area ripe for exploration.

This article fills the abovementioned gaps in the literature by studying the emotional labor of those involved in response and recovery, but also by highlighting how intercultural competencies can enhance the performance of EL. It specifically asks: (1) what is the link between cultural competence and emotional labor? (2) how do cultural competencies assist in effective emotional labor performance by international NGO workers? Using emotional labor performance as a framework, we focus on the individual aid workers serving in the post-disaster context of Haiti and examine the link between their emotional labor performance and the cultural competencies needed to perform EL effectively in complex and exceedingly difficult situations.

Methodology

This article draws upon the findings from two projects conducted in Haiti over a period of eight years. The original study focused on the emotional labor of those involved in disaster response and recovery efforts after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. It was funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as part of a larger Florida International University—University of Miami

Haiti Initiative (#3P20MD002288-04S1) (referred to as the NIH study). The second project, funded by the Kimberly Green Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University, was a follow-up conducted to further understand the cultural aspects of emotional labor among these workers.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews (individual and group) and participatory site observation.[2] Each of these methods is detailed below.

In-Depth Interviews

We conducted a total of 136 in-depth interviews for the study. Of these, 86 were part of the original NIH study while 50 of them were conducted for the follow up-study. We used targeted purposive sampling for the study. We first identified international and Haitian government agencies involved in primary disaster response and recovery tasks (e.g., search and rescue, medical aid, shelter provision) after the earthquake. These agencies included the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Organization for Migration (which is now part of the United Nations), American Refugee Committee, World Vision International and the U.S. Army (Southern Command) (see Remington & Ganapati, 2017 for a full list of agencies that participated in the study). Next, we contacted agency representatives, typically their Public Information or Communication Officers or the Country Directors, who then referred us to potential interviewees. We expanded our sample using snowball sampling (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981) and completed our process when we achieved theoretical saturation within and among interviews (Saunders et al., 2018; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) (see Table 1 for the demographic characteristics of our study sample).

The demographic characteristics of our in-depth interview sample was diverse. 58.8% of our sample were involved in the recovery phase (e.g., camp management, sanitation); the remaining 41.1% were activated for the response phase (e.g., search and rescue, medical). In terms of their gender distribution, a majority of our interviewees were male (58.8%). The ages of our interviewees were between 18 and greater than 65 years old. 65.4% of our interviewees had an international background, representing a wide range of countries (e.g., Kenya, Spain, Iran, Philippines).

For some of these interviewees, Haiti was their first international assignment. Others had significant prior experience, having been involved in the aftermath of several disasters, including Hurricane Katrina, Indonesian Tsunami, Kenya floods, and the civil war in Sudan. The remaining interviewees of Haitian origin (34.5%) either worked for the Haitian government (e.g., police) or for international agencies.

We conducted the interviews face-to-face at locations convenient to the participants, such as their offices, workplaces (e.g., camp sites) or local cafes, or via phone or Skype (e.g., with those who had returned back to their countries after deployment). The interviews were semistructured. The instruments included questions on the emotional aspects of response and recovery work, professional skills that are necessary at work (including cultural competences), consequences of emotional work, the link between emotional work and cultural competencies, and coping mechanisms as well as demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, education) (see Table 2 below for sample questions; the instrument is available upon request). The interviews were in English, Creole or French depending on the preference of our participants. We audio-recorded the interviews with the informed consent of participants and transcribed them verbatim. Non-English interviews were transcribed and translated simultaneously as recommended by other researchers.

Participant Observation

We supplemented the interviews by participant observation, a method that has been under-utilized in emergency management literature, especially in the context of preparedness and response phases (Bustinza et al., 2021). Our observation was unstructured, which involved immersion of researchers in the observation venue without set elements to be studied. The purposes of our observation were to: (1) collect data in its natural setting that was not possible through guided discussions or interviews. (2) capture data on non-verbal exchanges (i.e., body movements, facial expressions, or tone of voice) in addition to verbal exchanges (i.e., conversational interactions) (Marshall & Rossman, 2014) among response and recovery workers and the people they serve; and (3) recognize the differences between what our interviewees said in the interviews and what they

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the study sample.

	Male	Female	Haitian	International	Response Phase	Recovery Phase
NIH Study	58	28	45	41	56	30
Follow-Up Study	22	28	2	48	0	50
Total	80	56	47	89	56	80
Percent	58.8%	41.1%	34.5%	65.4%	41.1%	58.8%

Table 2. Sample interview questions.

	Sample Interview Questions
Emotional Labor	To what extent do you find that you have to manage the emotions of others at work (such as guiding them through sensitive or emotional issues)? By others, I refer to disaster survivors, your supervisors or co-workers.
	To what extent do you think that dealing with emotionally charged issues is a critical dimension of your work?
	What kind of emotions (care, tolerance, affection, sympathy, hope) do you think that your work requires you to display when interacting with others (disaster survivors, supervisors or coworkers)?
Cultural Competencies	When you hear the term "cultural competence," what comes to mind?
	What qualities do you think are most important to have when working with disaster victims in a different cultural context?
	Please tell me about a situation when you felt that Haitian beneficiaries expected to you to behave in a certain way based on their cultural norms.
Link Between Emotional Labor and Cultural Competencies	Please tell me if you think there are any differences in how you manage your emotions (showing or suppressing) in Haiti vs. in other countries. Can you think of any reasons for such difference?
	In your opinion, are there differences in how your international and Haitian colleagues manage their emotions at work? If so, what are the main differences?
	Please tell me about a situation when you felt that Haitian beneficiaries expected to you to behave in a certain way based on their cultural norms.

actually did. As noted by Quarantelli (1997), "field workers who do good participant observations can 'see' things that cannot or will not be reported on in a later interview" (p. 12).

The observation method also allowed us to understand complex and difficult to explain aspects of emotional labor without directly asking or offending our participants. According to Mair et al. (2013), observation is suitable for gathering information about behaviors that are "complex, difficult, or embarrassing for participants to recall or describe" (p. 60). Furthermore, the observation method did not place additional burden on our study participants as it did not require dedicated time from them.

While conducting observation, we went to where the action was and simply watched and listened to the people. We observed response and recovery workers in such places as the United Nations Cluster Meetings (e.g., Shelter Cluster, Camp Coordination and Camp Management Cluster), offices of their agencies, and the camps of those who were displaced by the disaster. We recorded verbal and non-verbal interactions involving these workers through jottings, which are brief and quick notes taken in the field venue (Emerson et al., 2007). We elaborated on these notes on a daily basis after leaving the observed setting through field notes. Our field notes included both the descriptions of what we observed and our own interpretations of such data (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

Review of Secondary Sources

We also reviewed secondary sources for the study to have a better understanding of the context within which disaster response and recovery workers operated and the skills required of them by their employees (i.e., technical skills vs. emotive skills). These sources included but were not limited to: (1) the minutes of United Nations cluster meetings which brought together different international and domestic stakeholders involved in Haiti's response and recovery for coordination purposes; (2) job announcements (see Remington & Ganapati, 2017 for another study that utilized job announcements as data); (3) news sources; (4) post-disaster laws and regulations; and, (5) other documents published by international agencies (e.g., the World Bank, World Health Organization) and the Haitian government.

After data collection and the initial analysis, we reported our study findings back to response and recovery workers in Haiti. Our reporting took place in the form of a focus group, which was included in the agenda of a U.N. Cluster Meeting on Shelter in Port-au-Prince held in June 2012 (see Witkowski et al., 2021 for a review of emergency management studies that use focus groups). We had ten participants, eight of whom had an international background. The remaining two were Haitians working for international agencies in Haiti. This focus group not only corroborated our study findings but also provided additional insights into the challenges they face in the field (e.g., emotional stress) and how they cope with these challenges.

We exported our data from the interviews, observation, and secondary sources into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Software like NVivo has been shown to help researchers organize and manage qualitative data in addition to enhancing the research's thoroughness, robustness and validity when compared with manual analysis techniques (Davidson & Skinner, 2010; Siccama & Penna, 2008). Our first step in data analysis was pre-coding, which refers to identifying "codable moments," significant passages that capture researchers' attention (Boyatzis, 1998). We then conducted first cycle coding involving initial coding of data, and the second cycle of coding that goes beyond

coded data in order to reorganize, integrate, synthesize, and build theories (Saldana, 2009). As per van Manen's (1990, p. 107) recommendations, the second cycle methods focused on manually identifying themes that were "essential" as opposed to "incidental." They primarily involved developing codes of thematic or conceptual similarity (Focused Coding) and a description of how coding categories and sub-categories relate to one another (Axial Coding).

Results

The in-depth interview analysis showed that there is a direct link and a reciprocal relationship between emotional labor and cultural competence, with effective emotional labor performance hinging on an understanding of the cultural context and the cultural competencies required to effectively navigate that context. In the interviews, aid workers frequently made the connection between emotion management and cultural competence. When asked about emotion management on the job, 74% (n = 101) of interviewees included a cultural element in their response, with these two themes co-occurring in the coding a total of 365 times (see Table 3 on the frequency of co-occurring codes). Using the four steps of emotional labor found in Guy et al.'s (2008) framework, we show how cultural competence is prevalent throughout each step and relevant to its successful performance: emotive sensing, analyzing the affective state, judging alternative emotive responses, and expressing the emotive response selected (behaving).

Step 1: emotive sensing

The first step in emotional labor performance, emotive sensing, co-occurred with cultural competence 91 times within the interview transcripts. Emotive sensing requires the aid worker to assess the emotional state of the citizen quickly and accurately. In this step, the NGO worker must make an assumption about with whom they are interacting and how they are perceived during the interaction. Having such an assumption may be acceptable, to a certain degree, in contexts where the two individuals interacting share the same background or culture. Such an assumption may be counterproductive for the performance of emotional labor when the two individuals are from different cultures, since EL requires an understanding of subtle emotive cues which are deeply influenced by the socialization process that can vary significantly between cultures. This is true in both the recognition and communication of emotion. A failure to recognize embedded contextual clues in nonverbal and verbal communication can lead to the failure of emotion work and confusing and even uncomfortable results for all parties involved. Many of the interviewees highlighted the importance of understanding culturally relative emotive cues, and categorized their misinterpretation as a "disaster," "hinderance", and "frustrating." One aid worker who had been in Haiti for seven years at the time of her interview explained,

> I have worked in an NGO here with hardly any knowledge of Haitian culture and look back and shudder at the damage I probably caused. I believe now that it is probably necessary in any position in any NGO to truly understand Haitians.

Failure to understand cultural and subcultural propriety can lead to long lasting grievances and misunderstandings. Some aid workers explained how Haitian colleagues feel as though US aid workers lack professionalism and competence—they are often dressed casually, joke during serious situations, and smile too much, while

Table 3. Frequency of co-occurring codes.

Codes	Cultural Competence
Emotional Labor	365
Step 1: Emotive Sensing	91
Assessing the emotional state	62
Client Perception	61
Assumptions about Client	54
Step 2: Analyzing the Affective State	106
Self-awareness	41
Self-reflection	41
Cultural humility	77
Acknowledging biases	67
Step 3: Judging Alternative Emotive Responses	71
Assess the options	66
Size up the situation	67
Deciding	60
Step 4: Expressing the emotive response selected (Behaving)	97
Adaptation	84
Emotive displays	80
Emotion suppression	61
Emotion expression	51

Haitian aid workers dress formally and behave in a reserved manner in most professional situations. As one aid worker explained, *"What I might see as a warm smile, they might see as condescending or disingenuous. I have been accused of both with my intentions misinterpreted."*

Other interviewees discussed how understanding cultural dynamics stemming from the inherent power differences and the poverty/wealth dynamic between international NGO workers and the Haitians helped them decide how they were being perceived (Hsu & Schuller, 2020). Not knowing how one is being perceived can create a disconnect which leads to ineffective emotional labor, with each party viewing the other as unprofessional or disinterested. One aid worker with more than ten years of experience shared,

> In Haitian culture it's really not appropriate for a person in a leadership position to display strong emotion. I talk about my feelings more than my Haitian colleagues and friends, but it certainly has not been acceptable to display emotion (crying, getting angry, etc.). When I have done this in front of others at work, people have lost respect for me.

Step 2: analyzing the affective state

The second step of emotional labor, analyzing, co-occurred in coding with cultural competence 106 times. In this step, the aid worker must analyze *their own* affective state and compare it to that of the service recipient. To do this requires self-awareness, self-evaluation, self-reflection, acknowledging one's stereotypes, biases, or culturally based assumptions, and understanding how one's culture is perceived by members of other cultures. Based on our interviews, most respondents agreed that cultural humility, patience, and understanding their own biases were important elements for clearly understanding an interaction. Referring to the self-awareness used to choose which emotions to display, one interviewee explained *"First understanding yourself and why you do what you do is crucial, absolutely crucial when working with your team, with beneficiaries, with superiors- anyone!"* Many participants, likewise, spoke of the need to be self-aware of their own culture, both individual and national, and to not view Haiti through the lens of their own culture. Other participants stressed the importance of cultural humility, which co-occurred with emotional labor 66 times in the interviews. Cultural humility requires ongoing self-reflection, willingness to learn from those they are interacting with, and a realization that one's own cultural background does not define the reality of those from other cultural backgrounds. One interviewee who suggested that cultural humility was central to effective cross-cultural communication said,

> The basic thing that one must have would be the realization that America isn't the greatest country ever, you don't have the answer to save Haiti, your ideas probably won't work because you don't know the culture, you will fail, and-this is the biggest- that Haitians are amazing, smart people that don't need a savior in khakis and Chacos.

Step 3: judging alternative emotive responses

The third step of the performance of emotional labor, judging, co-occurred with cultural competence in the coded interviews 71 times. In this step, the aid worker must decide between alternative responses and judge which one will illicit the desired response. A cultural understanding teaches response and recovery workers how they can more appropriately interact with beneficiaries and helps them make more informed emotive display decisions. From our interviews, it was clear that cultural nuance and experience within the specific cultural context played a central role when deciding which emotive display would be effective for any given situation. One aid worker described the range of options he would assess when judging how to respond to a beneficiary,

> Sometimes, a beneficiary might just lose it and get angry or hysterical. Maybe it's a medical situation or we had to take away their food assistance, or they're scared. [I] have to assess the options . . . how I will respond, you know? Sometimes we have to draw a line and be firm in our decision, sometimes we reason with them and explain why we did what we did. Or else, I just let them cry . . . we all need to cry sometimes.

Other interviewees described the importance of quickly "sizing up the situation" and deciding how to respond to *"keep the peace, or to get the buy in for a project . . . or for your own safety."* During the judging process, one interviewee described how he would "play the movie" in his head. He stated,

> You gotta just choose in the moment. When thinking how to react I try to slow things down in my head and play the movie in my head . . . to think about how my actions may cause a reaction with the client. What do I want to accomplish and how can I get there?

One social worker mentioned that they were more patient, more humble, and more reflective when choosing the correct course of action in the international setting because they *"don't always know all of the cultural reasons behind issues."*

Step 4: expressing the emotive response selected (behaving)

The fourth and final step in emotional labor, behaving, was coded along with cultural competence 97 times in the interviews. In this step, the aid worker must put the decision into action by behaving in a way that suppresses or expresses an emotion in order to illicit the desired response from the beneficiary. It is this step which requires the greatest understanding of the cultural context, as display rules differ between groups, genders, occupations, and classes. In the interviews, aid workers admitted altering their emotive displays and their behavior based on their level of cultural competence and their experience with the cultural nuances of working abroad. According to a camp manager with five years of experience,

> The way I react in Haiti is different to the way I act at home [Canada]. The way I react with the community leaders, or officials, or elected leaders is different than how I act with a local pastor or a school child. It all depends on the context and the situation and the culture of where I am and who I'm with.

For some interviewees who had long term roles in Haiti, the constant cross cultural emotional labor had become an internalized part of their identity. After serving for six years as an aid worker working with Haitians who were displaced after the 2010 earthquake, one interviewee expressed how she had adapted to Haitian culture,

> I feel I show sadness less and resilience more - as part of their culture, even though many situations are deeply saddening, I have adapted to their way. It's better to converse and find a solution even when my emotions want to cry or shut down.

Discussion and conclusion

This study highlights the link between cultural competence and the performance of emotional labor and contributes to the advancement of emotional labor theory and the enhancement of post-disaster aid work. We contribute to the emotional labor, cultural competence, and post-disaster literature by drawing a clear link between emotional labor and cultural competence. Using the existing and widely accepted emotional labor framework, we show how the effective performance of emotional labor hinges on culturally accurate emotive sensing, self-awareness, and the ability to select the most effective emotive response for the context.

Our findings reveal the many nuances of performing emotional labor in cross-cultural interactions, especially during international post-disaster aid work. Cultural awareness, cultural knowledge, and cultural skills combine to facilitate communications and actions that directly impact the worker-service recipient exchange. Emotive work has both an upside (engagement) and a downside (burnout) which become magnified in crisis response (Kroll et al., 2021). Emotive skills inherent in disaster response and cultural adaptation have the potential to strengthen resilience as well as to recognize emotive overload and burnout.

An understanding of culture helps the aid worker understand who they are serving, and the expectations placed upon them by those they are serving or serving alongside. This understanding enables the aid worker to interpret subtle emotive clues such as language, body language and behavior to understand more accurately what is being communicated—the essence of emotional labor. Only then can they effectively execute emotive sensing, judge how alternative responses will affect the other, and decide how to behave to elicit a desired response from the other.

With many high-profile criticisms of aid work, many of them centered in Haiti (Carruth & Freeman, 2021; Hoffman, 2022; Ramachandran & Walz, 2015), it is of utmost importance for organizations to consider how they can strengthen on-site work performance. Cultural misunderstandings and missed opportunities for emotional labor can break down communication between beneficiaries and aid workers and erode the trust which is often necessary for life improving—or even lifesaving—interventions ranging from disease treatment to vaccine distribution to hurricane evacuation. In order to gain the buy in of those they are trying to help, aid workers should design initiatives with cultural nuances in mind.

Our interviewees highlighted the importance of having clear cultural lenses while also highlighting the importance of emotional labor, stating that, when performed accurately, it can bridge cultural gaps, convey trust, and signal care between the beneficiary and the aid worker. Culturally competent aid workers are able to more accurately sense the emotional needs of those they are serving, and to more clearly understand how they are perceived by those with whom they communicate, especially in terms of nonverbal communication or highly contextualized communication.

Organizations should find ways to help aid workers become more culturally competent so they can enhance their emotive skills, thus experiencing the personal and work-related benefits of the upside of the performance of emotional labor while minimizing its downside.

We recommend that the agencies address acquisition of such skills from both an organizational and individual perspective. This can be done through recruitment,

training, and creating an organizational culture which values diversity and encourages the development of intercultural skills. First, cultural competence and emotional labor must be a normalized part of organizational policies and priorities. This must occur long before a crisis happens. Many of the organizations who responded in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake arrived in Haiti with no prior disaster experience and little cross-cultural knowledge. In the immediate aftermath of a disaster, it is too late to train aid workers in the complexities of cross-cultural work or provide them with the necessary experience and training that will enable them to adapt to their new environment and to work effectively.

Second, these policies must extend to individual employees through policies which expect both cultural competence and emotional labor and facilitate their development. Careful selection of employees can recruit individuals who have a commitment to cultural competence and the personal attributes (e.g., self-awareness) necessary to perform emotional labor well. Adding cultural competence and emotional labor expectations to job descriptions is key (Remington & Ganapati, 2017) and screening questions or personality assessments may help "tip the scales" early on in favor of success (Pandey, 2018). Organizations must also provide an environment for healthy dialogue and exchange between international, domestic employees, and beneficiaries through mentoring and exposure.

As with all studies, there are limitations that are important to keep in mind. First, this study was done in the unique post-disaster context of Haiti. Many fragile and failed states are similar to Haiti in that they experience frequent and persistent complex crises (e.g., hurricanes, cholera, political violence). Over the past decade, civil unrest, violent crime, and public health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic have created new challenges for aid workers serving in Haiti. Given that other developing countries like Haiti are facing similar challenges, the results from the Haitian context are likely to offer important lessons for other contexts. Additionally, because the Haitian NGO landscape is so dense, opportunities abound for sustained interaction between beneficiaries and aid workers, making Haiti an excellent context to study aid worker-beneficiary interactions. Indeed, the community-based nature of the majority of NGOs in Haiti makes the findings of this study of key relevance for organizations wishing to enhance the effectiveness of their programs and their perceived trustworthiness. Second, although data from the two studies were collected at separate times, Haiti and the NGO workers stationed there live under sustained and successive crises, with many aid workers still living and working in regions impacted by the 2010 earthquake. To increase congruency, we replicated the individuals and agencies from the original NIH study. Third, the sample used in this study presents a possible limitation of self-selection bias, since interviewees opted to participate in this study. Yet, individuals in post-disaster response and recovery jobs have also self-selected their career and are, in our experience, passionate about the work they do and very willing to discuss their work. Additionally, while participants self-selected, we approached a wide and diverse pool of organizations in order to include different aspects of response and recovery work.

The recent Turkish-Syrian earthquake is a stark reminder that there is no shortage of contexts for examining the work of emotional laborers in times of heart-wrenching crises. We invite researchers to further examine the relationship between cultural competencies and emotional labor in the performance of work "on the razor's edge" of public and NGO services, both within the United States and abroad. How do cultural competencies assist in effective emotional labor performance when communication relies on the third-party voice of an interpreter? What causes some emotional laborers to burn out while others cope? How should self-care plans and stress management practices be "normalized" in the workplace? What would a "best in class" training for developing emotive skills in different cultural contexts look like? How would one evaluate its efficacy? Do cultural competencies also enhance the relationship quality (e.g., trust, commitment, satisfaction) with stakeholders (see Auger & Cho, 2021; Plaisance, 2022 on relationship quality) for those who perform emotional labor? These are amongst the themes we recommend for future research.

Notes

1. In addition to these two themes, there is an emerging public administration literature which examines the link between emotional labor and public sector motivation (PSM) (Hsieh et al., 2012).
2. Although a survey was collected for both studies, those results are not included here as their focus was not on the cultural aspects of emotional labor.

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