



## Coping with stress: A study of retail banking service workers in Russia

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## ABSTRACT

This study extends previous research on the antecedents and outcomes of frontline employee (FLE) burnout by empirically testing the direct and moderating effects of two coping strategies in a job demand stress–strain (burnout)–job performance model using data from a large Russian retail bank. Contrary to findings from North American–Western research and more limited studies of countries where collectivist values are emphasized, the study findings show that emotional exhaustion plays no mediating role in the job demand stressors–job performance relationship. Self-directed coping buffers the dysfunctional effects of job demand stressors on emotional exhaustion whereas ‘other-directed’ coping buffers the job demand stressors to job performance relationship. Implications of the results are discussed and future research avenues are offered.

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## 1. Introduction

The present study is grounded in the service literature focused on frontline service work where because of their boundary-spanning roles (Bowen and Schneider, 1988), frontline employees (FLEs) play a critical role in service encounter for organizations striving to enhance customer relationships (Babakus et al., 2009; Bitner et al., 1994; Hartline and Ferrell, 1996; Singh, 2000). The services marketing/management and boundary-spanning literatures both suggest that: (1) FLEs play an important part in representing the organization to outsiders (including customers) and enhancing the firm's image and legitimacy through their advocacy of the firm and its products and services (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Bowen and Schneider, 1985); (2) the boundary-spanning position of FLEs provides them many opportunities to share information internally about evolving customer needs and possible improvements in service delivery (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Schneider and Bowen, 1984; Zeithaml et al., 1988); and (3) service quality perceptions and customer satisfaction are largely dependent on FLE service delivery behaviors such as courtesy, personal attentiveness, responsiveness, and keeping promises (Aldrich and Herker, 1977; Parasuraman et al., 1988).

It is through these three dimensions of customer-linking behaviors that FLEs face many challenges including burnout which is a syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, a tendency to depersonalize others and diminished perceptions of ability on the job (see Worley et al., 2008 for a review and meta-analysis). In the workplace context, stressors which are also known as job demands, are widely acknowledged to lead to work strain (burnout), which in turn, leads to higher turnover, lower job dissatisfaction, decreased organizational commitment and compromised job performance (Babakus et al., 2009; Bakker and Demerouti, 2007). Work stressors refer to environmental stimuli that are perceived by employees as troublesome or taxing and include excessive workload (role overload), insufficient resources, role ambiguity or conflict, and work–family imbalance (Gilboa et al., 2008; Michel et al., 2011).

Our review of the extant literature reveals two research gaps. First, although the burnout literature generally acknowledges that burnout plays a mediating role in the job demands stressors–job performance relationship (Babakus et al., 2009; Koeske and Koeske, 1993), the domain of inquiry has largely focused on FLEs in North America and Western Europe (Glazer and Beehr, 2005; Jamal, 2010), where individualistic rather than collectivist work attitudes and behaviors are more prevalent (Hofstede, 2001; Jamal, 2005). Second, it is widely acknowledged in the extant literature that stress does not result from the sources of the pressure itself (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984) and that differences that relate to perceptions, such as coping, should also be considered. Coping characterizes a person's efforts to manage demands i.e., the ways in which individuals choose to respond to stressful situations (Folkman and Lazarus, 1988; Welbourne et al., 2007). Although

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coping strategies are identified as a buffer of stress (Dijkstra et al., 2009; Ivancevich et al., 2005), generalizations from this research are also limited due to conclusions being drawn from an analysis of predominantly North American and other Western country data (Bjorck et al., 2001; Dunahoo et al., 1998; Yeh et al., 2006).

Against this backdrop, by drawing from role theory, cognitive theory of psychological stress, and the stress and burnout literatures, our research has two objectives. First, we extend previous, largely 'Western' research on workplace stress by first, testing specific hypotheses regarding the mediating role of burnout between job demand stressors and job performance of frontline employees in a commercial retail bank in Russia. In the services and marketing literature, Russia is acknowledged to be a collectivist country (Gibbs and Ashill, 2013; Soyez, 2012). The problem of workplace stress should be particularly relevant for Russian service workers given the enormous economic and social change associated with post-Soviet transition over the past two decades (Aleskerov et al., 2008; Soyez, 2012); however, its relationship with burnout and job performance remains unexplored.

Although scholars have empirically investigated relationships between stressors, strain and job outcomes in other contexts where the values of collectivism are emphasized (such as China, India, Taiwan and Japan), we argue that Russians are significantly different from these countries in terms of the collectivist dimension (Ardichvili et al., 2012; Samaha et al., 2014; Tu et al., 2011). Russia for example, has a lower score on individualism (36) (Hofstede and Minkov, 2010) compared to India (48) which falls in the middle between individualism and collectivism (Borker, 2012). China (20) and Taiwan (17) in contrast have the lowest scores demonstrating a highly collectivist culture in both countries where people act in the interests of the group rather than themselves. Alexashin and Blenkinsopp (2005) and Barton and Barton (2011) also argue that Russian workers are working to markedly different sets of expectations and goals from those which characterized the planned economy of the former Soviet Union but without any obvious reference points against which to develop a 'mental model' of Russian management. In contrast China Taiwan and India each have a long mercantile history. Chinese workers for example, can more easily go back to pre-communist ideas to find values for guiding behavior in the workplace which are consonant with Chinese national culture. This is not the case with Russian workers.

Second, acknowledging the need for more research on coping strategies in collectivist cultures (Yeh et al., 2006), and drawing upon Folkman and Lazarus (1980), we incorporate two distinct strategies to cope with stressful situations at work (*self-directed* coping which describes efforts to regulate one's own emotions, and *other-directed* coping in the form of seeking social support) into this conceptual model to test their direct relationships with burnout, as well as their role in buffering the impact that stress has on both burnout and job performance. Coping which describes efforts to regulate one's own emotions is consistent with an interdependent self-construal where individuals attempt to adjust to situations through strategies that focus on changing the self rather than changing the situation (Cross, 1995; de Vries, 2001). In contrast, coping which focuses on efforts to seek the support of others, is consistent with the independent self-construal, where individuals attempt to adjust the situation (manage the source of stress) (Cross, 1995). Following Green et al. (2005) and Triandis (1995) we argue that individualist and collectivist attitudes are not mutually exclusive and that individuals within a society can have both independent and interdependent self-construals (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) which can be influenced by social context and social relations. Although a small number of studies have examined both types of coping as a moderator of stress in countries where collectivist values are emphasized (Bhagat et al., 2010; Siu et al., 2002, 2013), they have largely focused on managerial positions grounded in

the organizational behavior and work psychology literature. They have not examined frontline employees who have specific responsibility for directly enhancing the service encounter with customers. This is the focus of the present study.

We begin by discussing the research model used to guide the study and related literature (see Fig. 1). In so doing, we present hypotheses that relate job demand stressors, burnout, coping strategies and job performance. Second, we present an empirical study that was conducted in a commercial retail bank in Russia. Finally, we present our results and discuss implications for researchers and practitioners.

## 2. Conceptual framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Stress, strain (burnout) and job performance

Although burnout has been conceptualized as being comprised of two (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) or three (plus personal accomplishment) dimensions, of the three, emotional exhaustion occupies central stage as it captures the core meaning of what burnout entails (Leiter, 1991; Shirom, 1989). The entire burnout process commences with emotional exhaustion which is defined as being emotionally over-extended, fatigued and psychologically drained of emotional energy (Wright and Cropanzano, 1998). Although we are interested in burnout, we follow the recent and common practice of using emotional exhaustion as the driver for the burnout episode because it provides the most consistent relationship within its nomological network (Halbesleben and Bowler, 2007; Tourigny et al., 2013), and is most readily portable to other contexts (Sun and Pan, 2008). In Russian, "синдром эмоционального выгорания" translates as 'syndrome of emotional burnout'. Koeske and Koeske (1993) argue that emotional exhaustion represents the essence of burnout while Bakker et al. (2004) acknowledge the relationship between demanding aspects of work and emotional exhaustion in the job demands-resources (JD-R) model (Bakker et al., 2003).

In conceptualizing stress, we focus on hindrance stress in the workplace which includes demands that appear threatening, and have the potential to harm personal growth or gain and trigger negative emotions (Lepine et al., 2005). Hindrance-stressors characterize a lack of resources or resource inadequacies such as role conflict, role ambiguity and role overload (Podsakoff et al., 2007). These stressors are particularly relevant in the Russian workplace (Engle and Dimitriadis, 2007).

Hindrance stress is more likely to lead to emotional exhaustion and compromised job performance because the employee feels a loss of control over the end results of his/her job. Thus, when individuals become emotionally exhausted as a result of threatening job demands, they will not be able to perform well because of diminished emotional energy. When employees are emotionally exhausted, they lack energy and therefore become disinclined to expend scarce resources on behalf of the organization which they

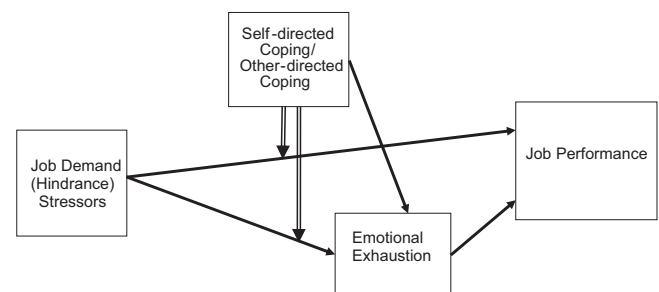


Fig. 1. Research model.

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