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# Deviant behavior in retail, when sales associates “Go Bad”! Examining the relationship between the work–family interface, job stress, and salesperson deviance



Krist Swimberghe <sup>a,1</sup>, Robert Paul Jones <sup>b,\*</sup>, Mahmoud Darrat <sup>c,2</sup>

<sup>a</sup> The University of Texas at Tyler, 3900 University Boulevard, BUS 103, Tyler, TX 75799, USA

<sup>b</sup> The University of Texas at Tyler, 3900 University Boulevard, BUS 122, Tyler, TX 75799, USA

<sup>c</sup> Auburn University at Montgomery, P.O. Box 244023, Montgomery, AL 36124, USA

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## ABSTRACT

The unique role of retail sales associates combined with retailers desire to establish relational selling, make associates vulnerable to work–family conflict (WFC). Unfortunately, research examining how retail sales associates cope with a WFC is limited. This research investigates relationships between WFC, job stress, and three dimensions of salesperson deviance: organizational, interpersonal, and frontline. Findings indicate that WFC has a significant direct effect on all three deviant behaviors, as well as job stress. Interestingly, the relationship between job stress and deviant behavior is not significant. This finding adds to the debate regarding job stress as a mediator between WFC and deviant behavior or outcome variable.

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## 1. Introduction

Retailers as an axiomatic necessity of business must maintain strong bonds with their consumers (Anderson et al., 2007). This axiom becomes even more important when economic conditions increase competition among retailers for continued consumer support (Vida et al., 2000). Research and retailers have long recognized the importance of service delivery by retail sales associates. Quality service delivery can establish and develop strong bonds between the retailer and the consumer (Darlan et al., 2005). However, these stresses to outperform the competition which impact the retailer, can also impact their sales associates.

A significant body of research within industrial/organizational psychology and management has recognized the continued erosion of the boundaries between work and family. A review of 190 work–family studies, published in IO/OB finds that a preponderance of research reflects a negative impact of work–family conflict on job performance (Eby et al., 2005). Demographic changes in family make-up and an increasingly diversified workforce make understanding the impact of work and family stresses on employees more

important and more complicated (Foster, 2005). Increased retail competition driven by high market saturation and economic uncertainty, press work–family-conflict (WFC) and its potential negative impacts to a high industry and research priority. This research examines the relationships between WFC, job stress, and the negative outcomes represented in deviant retail sales associate behavior.

Sales associate “boundary spanning” positions within the retail organization make them particularly vulnerable to WFC. Conflicting demands between customers and company lead to a variety of role stresses (Boles et al., 1997; Goolsby, 1992; Netemeyer et al., 2004; Wetzels et al., 2000). Retailers who increasingly emphasize relational selling and strong customer orientation add additional strain on work/family boundaries for sales associates. Further, sales associates are encouraged beyond relational selling to establish long-term personal relationships with their customers (Ryding, 2010). These customer relationships can require increased accessibility with sales associates resulting in incremental time-demands beyond regular work hours (Beverland, 2001; Gruen et al., 2000; Johlke and Iyer, 2012). Sales associates are pressed to work non-traditional work schedules with shifting weekday and work time assignments before being asked to manage increased demands. Additionally, retail sales associates are often required to work during periods intimately associated with family events such as; religious observances, week-ends, holidays, and more (Esbjerg et al., 2010). These additional psychological strains and increasingly demanding characteristics of

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 903 565 5871; fax: +1 903 566 7372.

E-mail addresses: [kswimberghe@uttyler.edu](mailto:kswimberghe@uttyler.edu) (K. Swimberghe),

[rjones@uttyler.edu](mailto:rjones@uttyler.edu) (R.P. Jones), [mdarrat@aum.edu](mailto:mdarrat@aum.edu) (M. Darrat).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 903 565 5803; fax: +1 903 566 7372.

<sup>2</sup> Tel.: +1 334 244 3215; fax: +1 334 244 3792.

the sales function may lead to greater conflicts between work and family responsibilities.

To date, a number of studies have examined the direct and indirect relationships between sales associates' WFC and emotional exhaustion, satisfaction, and propensity to leave in the retail context (Boles et al., 1997, 2003; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Unfortunately, very few studies have investigated the empirical link between WFC and salesperson work behaviors (Bhuiyan et al., 2005; Darrat et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Netemeyer et al., 1996). This gap is significant as sales associates interact internally with members of the retail organization but also externally with the retailer's customers. Therefore, according to Caruana et al. (2001), sales associate service with internal customers, measured by desired behavior or undesired deviant behavior, affects retailer performance metrics such as shrinkage. Retailer sales performance is impacted through sales associate interactions with external customers' and the associate's ability to develop customer relationships, closing sales, cross-selling, and up-selling (Jelinek and Ahearne, 2006).

Retail sales associates often operate with a high level of autonomy which provides ample opportunity to engage in unobserved deviant behavior. A recent study suggested that 40% of sales associates admit to engaging in deviant workplace behaviors and more troubling, 66% feel that their deviant conduct will not result in any significant negative career impact (Darrat et al., 2010). While traditional models argue that job stress plays a facilitating role between WFC, workplace behavior and negative performance (Frone et al., 1992; Thoits, 1991), others assert that WFC has only a direct negative influence on performance (Netemeyer et al., 2005). Therefore, this study will examine in the retail setting, (1) the relationship between work–family interface and salesperson deviance and (2) investigate the role of job stress in this relationship.

## 2. Literature review and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Work–family conflict (WFC)

Work–family conflict has been widely researched outside of marketing. Pioneering research into WFC grew out of research on inter-role conflict conducted by Kahn et al. (1964). Their research investigates the pressures fathers experience from participating simultaneously in multiple, and competing roles. Their research demonstrates that pressure to comply with the demands of one role makes engaging the demands of the competing role increasingly difficult (Kahn et al., 1964). The conflict between work and family is provided as a specific example of this inter-role conflict. Leveraging a variety of extant literature, WFC is expanded to include three major sources of conflict; time-based, strain-based, and behavior-based (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Further integration of the literature results in the development of the widely accepted definition of WFC:

“...a form of inter-role conflict in which the general demands of, time devoted to, and strain created by the job interfere with performing family related responsibilities...” (Netemeyer et al., 1996, p. 401).

WFC is not strictly the domain of married couples. WFC can also impact married and surrogate parents with or without children at home, with employed or unemployed spouses, and with single employees. In fact, it has been suggested that single employees might be even more vulnerable to WFC due to a relative lack of coping resources (Thoits, 1991). Therefore, for this

research, we follow the direction outlined in the literature defining family as

Anyone who is formally or informally considered a sanctioned family member including; spouses, significant others, parents, children, grandchildren, siblings, and children of siblings (Boyar et al., 2003, p. 179).

### 2.2. Work–family conflict and job stress

Although a certain degree of friction between work and family is expected in any occupation, sales and particularly relational selling as exemplified in retail sales, is uniquely vulnerable to WFC. The demands of the sales role often require that the boundaries between the work and family domains are obscured (Maxwell and Ogden, 2006).

Role expectations for the retail sales associate have witnessed a dramatic increase. Retail sales associates need to contend not only with increased administrative demands but also increased customer service responsibilities (Wetzels et al., 2000). Retailers with high expectations, rigid standards, and stringent time constraints, can aggravate sales associate stress through increased conflict between work beliefs and non-work activities. Balancing increasing job demands and non-work obligations makes the role of the sales associate increasingly stressful (Wilson, 1997).

Inter-role conflict and identity theory, suggest that WFC has a direct effect on job stress. This is due to the competing demands of multiple roles associated with work and family on time and cognitive/emotional resources (Frone et al., 1992; Thoits, 1991). We argue that WFC has a unique ability to amplify stress levels for retail sales associates because of the relative importance they place on both work and family roles. Therefore, the following relationship is hypothesized:

**H<sub>1</sub>.** WFC is positively related to salesperson job stress.

### 2.3. Coping with work–family conflict and salesperson deviant behavior

Surprisingly, sparse attention has been given to how sales associates cope with WFC in the retail sales environment and its possible negative behavioral outcomes. Coping represents changes in cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage taxing external/internal demands on personal resources (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). In the current context, coping refers to the methods or behaviors employed by sales associates to manage WFC. These behaviors attempt to alter the retail work situation to relieve employee role conflict.

Sales associates encountering incongruities between work and family roles are forced to manage family, organizational, and customer relationships successfully or risk losing their jobs. However, very few studies have investigated the potentially dysfunctional effects of coping with WFC through deviant behavior (Darrat et al., 2010). Sales associate deviance may be specific to the retail industry as it employs both problem- and emotion-focused coping (Stahl and Caligiuri, 2005).

WFC has been shown to be positively related with sales associate intentions-to-leave (Boles et al., 1997, 2003; Netemeyer et al., 2004). Departure from the retailer represents a sales associate engaging in a long term coping strategy to ameliorate the negative impact of the work–family incongruence, which results in increased employee turnover and reduced retailer performance (Babakus et al., 1996; Moncrief et al., 1997; Schneider, 1987). However, studies suggest that most sales associates tend to engage in more transitory coping mechanisms (Burke, 1998; Netemeyer et al., 1996). Dissatisfied sales associates with a lack of alternative employment options may decide to remain with the retailer until an acceptable alternative presents

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