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Understanding the relationship between frontline employee boreout and customer orientation☆

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ABSTRACT

Customer-oriented behavior provides an important means to achieve satisfied and loyal customers and thus sustainable competitive advantages. Although a rich stream of research has examined enablers of customer-oriented behaviors, its impediments, such as a lack of challenges at the customer interface, have been neglected. Relying on a qualitative study with 37 frontline employees (FLEs) and on conservation of resources theory, this research examines FLEs' individual responses to boreout at the service encounter. Boreout is a negative psychological state of low work-related arousal, manifested in three main forms: job boredom, a crisis of meaning at work, and crisis of growth at work. This study examines the effect of these individual responses on customer-oriented behavior, using data from 147 FLEs and a validation study with customers. The results indicate that all three boreout dimensions consistently harm customer-oriented behavior; job autonomy, whether induced by the firm or customers, moderates these relationships differently though.

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1. Introduction

Conventional wisdom indicates that customer-oriented behaviors of frontline employees (FLEs) are important to build new and maintain existing customer relationships (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Chakrabarty, Brown, & Widing, 2012; Guenzi, De Luca, & Troilo, 2011) and to increase customer satisfaction (Huang, 2011). Particularly for interpersonal services, which require “close, personal contact between customers and employees” (Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom, & Brown, 2005, p. 61), FLEs are the face of the organization in the eyes of the customer (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009). FLEs are “service workers who personally interact with customers in retail and service encounters” (Sirianni, Castro-Nelson, Moralse, & Fitzsimons, 2009, p. 966).

However, approximately 20% of FLEs are demoralized by a lack of challenge, and more than 15% even quit their jobs because of it (Skaer, 2006; Uduji, 2009). Practitioners estimate that this problematic state costs the United States over \$750 billion a year, which is more than \$5000 per employee (Rothlin & Werder, 2008). In parallel, researchers reveal increased service failure owing to a lack of engagement by FLEs (e.g., Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006). Firms' display rules and scripted communication have reduced the variance in customer interactions, making the service delivery process far less exciting (Batt & Moynihan,

2002; Graban, 2010; Grandey, 2000, 2003; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005), and some researchers note that “many service operations are embracing mass production” (Batt, 1999, p. 540).

Despite the service encounter's significance, research is surprisingly silent about customer-related consequences of FLEs' lack of challenges at the service encounter. Research into lack of challenging work indicates that it can lead to undesirable outcomes, including job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and turnover (Kass, Vadanovich, & Callender, 2001; Melamed, Ben-Avi, Luz, & Green, 1995) as well as reduced work effectiveness (Drory, 1982) and withdrawal (Spector et al., 2006). Most researchers focus on assembly line jobs, but some recent studies suggest that white collar jobs may also be short on challenge (Bruursema, Kessler, & Spector, 2011; Fisher, 1993; Van der Heijden, Schepers, & Nijssen, 2012). In turn, FLEs who suffer from boreout might engage in habitualized behaviors (Van Dyne, Jehn, & Cummings, 2002) and are less innovative (Stock, 2015) rather than seeking the best solution for customers.

To address these possible links, this study examines the effect of low challenges in service encounters and customer-oriented behaviors. Customer-oriented behavior is defined as customer contact employees' ability “to help their customers by engaging in behaviors that increase customer satisfaction” (Stock & Hoyer, 2005, p. 538). To understand low challenges, I investigate a new conceptual phenomenon, FLE boreout, first been mentioned in managerial practice by Rothlin and Werder (2008) and investigated by Stock (2015). According to Stock (2015, p. 574), boreout refers to “a negative psychological state of low work-related arousal, manifested in three main forms: a crisis of meaning at work, job boredom, and a crisis of growth at work”. Because low challenges rarely have been examined at the customer interface, this

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study attempts to deepen the conceptualization of boreout and examine its effect on customer-oriented behaviors, in accordance with two main research questions:

1. *How do different boreout dimensions affect customer-oriented behaviors?* Marketing scholars, addressing challenges at the service encounter, have focused mainly on high psychological challenges (e.g., Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, & Moncrief, 1999; Singh, 2000; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994). I strive to shed light on low challenges at the service encounter. According to conservation of resources (COR) theory, the three dimensions of job boreout draw energy from FLEs and, thus, likely affect innovative work behavior.
2. *How does job autonomy affect the relationship between FLEs' boreout and customer-oriented behaviors?* Research in psychology suggests that employees' ways of coping with varying levels of job challenges depend on several contingency factors. Results of investigations relying on COR theory imply that job resources buffer the detrimental effect of a lack of resources at the service encounter (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011; Sonnentag, 2001). In this vein, the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979) also implies that job autonomy—an important resource for FLEs—affects the relationship between job challenges (or the lack thereof) and behavioral outcomes (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Evers, Frese, & Cooper, 2000; Magee, Stefanic, Caputi, & Iverson, 2012; Miao & Evans, 2013; Van Der Doef & Maes, 1999). Thus, I examine job autonomy as a potential moderator of the relationship between the job's insufficient challenge in the case of boreout and FLEs' customer-oriented behavior.

To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has investigated the impact of FLEs' boreout on their customer orientation. By addressing the aforementioned questions, this study contributes to extant literature in several important respects. First, I provide insights into important FLE strain variables that link to boreout. Relying on a qualitative study, I propose a set of constructs to capture FLE strain, associated with a lack of challenge, that comprises job boredom, crisis of meaning at work, and a crisis of growth at work.

Second, I unveil some neglected antecedents of customer-oriented behavior. Extant research has focused on the detrimental effects of job demands and stress; I shed light on how boreout, as low strain at the service encounter, represents a hidden threat to customer-oriented behavior, and thus to marketing. The justification of the effects underlying the three dimensions of boreout and customer orientation relies on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011), which proposes that people seek to create circumstances that protect and promote their integrity in social relationships. The focus of this theory is on peoples' reactions to environmental events that affect their resources. In this study, I am interested in customer contact employees' social relationships with customers, noting that interactions with customers likely affect customer contact employees' resources (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007; Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010; Fredrickson, 2001; Hobfoll & Schumm, 2002; Miner, Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Brady, 2012). With this study, I strive to understand how boreout affects customer contact employees' customer-oriented behavior.

Third, I detail some conditions that affect the boreout–customer orientation relationship. Relying on the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979), I identify firm-induced and customer-induced autonomy as important contingency factors.

The findings are also relevant for managers. Managers need to address boreout and to ensure that FLEs are adequately placed at the service encounter to avoid it. In particular, firms should avoid extreme standardization and boredom for their FLEs, while also providing them with sufficient possibilities for learning. The study also reveals some contingency factors that can buffer the detrimental effects of FLEs' boreout. Firms should provide a certain amount of job autonomy to help FLEs cope with boreout; alternatively, they might emphasize the positive, supportive aspects of customer interactions, such as respecting the governance

restrictions provided by customers during encounters and through feedback.

2. Boreout at the service encounter: A qualitative study

The phenomenon of boreout has only recently been introduced to management research by Stock (2015). Although Stock (2015) provides valuable insights about important boreout dimensions based on a quantitative empirical study, we need a more nuanced understanding of how boreout occurs during the service encounter. To investigate this, I therefore conducted a qualitative study.

2.1. Semi-structured interviews

With qualitative interviews, I gained deeper insights into FLE responses to boreout at the service encounter in a natural manner, during the course of conversations (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2004). One researcher interviewed each FLE at his or her workplace. The 37 interviews lasted 23 min on average. To ensure some standardization across interviews, I used an interview guide with standard, open-ended questions for all respondents (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2004). I also allowed idiosyncratic questions if necessary, for clarification and added detail.

The interviews focused on boreout at the service encounter. They started with a general question about the most important developments that FLEs had experienced in a service encounter in the previous year, which provided the basis for more sensitive questions (Jehn, 1997). These subsequent questions were sufficiently focused but also allowed the FLEs to present their perspectives without being forced into a specific answer (e.g., Kvale, 1996; Morse & Richards, 2002). Information about insufficient challenge was elicited with two focused questions: “Do you sometimes experience a lack of challenges in your work?” and “What do you feel when you experience a lack of challenges in your work?”

2.2. Sample and analytical strategy

The participating FLEs were between 23 and 58 years of age, earned between \$18,000 and \$40,000 annually, and came from various sectors, such as retailing (32.4%), transportation services (29.5%), hospitality (24.4%), and IT/telecommunication services (13.7%).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (Edwards, 2001). To analyze the data, I used content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and followed the procedure proposed by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2009). The analysis of the text passages relied on a hierarchical coding scheme (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, to determine the empirical relevance of the constructs, I quantitatively assessed answers to the question about what FLEs felt when they experienced a lack of challenge; each time a respondent mentioned an issue, I counted it. With this frequency count, I determined the number of respondents who mentioned a construct at least once during the interview and the frequency with which each construct was mentioned across all interviews. Table 1 contains example statements that illustrate how a lack of challenge was generally expressed at the service encounter.

2.3. Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews indicated that FLEs experienced a lack of challenge at the service encounter in various ways. They most frequently referred to job boredom as mental strain, associated with boreout at the service encounter (Table 1). In this context, the respondents cited frustration as a chief manifestation of boredom. Respondents also mentioned a crisis of meaning at work and a crisis of growth as strain, due to extreme standardization. Mostly, they believed the firm considered the development of service personnel as being unimportant. In essence, FLEs' responses to boreout seem well

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