



Full length article

Investigating the immediate and long-term effects of job stressors on frontline service employees

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ABSTRACT

Two studies investigate the immediate and long-term effects of job stressors on frontline service employees (FSEs). Using cognitive appraisal theory, we develop and test a conceptual model of two job stressors (crowding and emotional labor) that affect coping strategies and job outcomes. Study 1, which is a field experiment, investigates the immediate effects of crowding in a single firm. Study 2 extends the findings of Study 1 and investigates the long-term effects of emotional labor and crowding on FSEs across multiple firms. The results show that crowding has a negative impact on coping strategies and job-related outcomes. In addition, emotional labor can lead to long-term negative outcomes, such as emotional exhaustion and decreased job retention, for some FSEs. Consequently, service organizations should consider strategies or tactics that prevent high levels of customer crowding and help FSEs deal with emotional labor.

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1. Introduction

Frontline service employees (FSEs) are an integral part of the service experience (Singh, 2000) and play a salient role in customers' satisfaction and perceptions of service quality. Service judgments are based primarily on the specialized skills, techniques, and experiences of the employee with whom a customer interacts (Paulin, Ferguson, & Payaud, 2000). In addition, FSEs represent the organization, the brand, and the marketer to customers (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2003). For some customers, FSEs are the only face of the organization they ever see (Hartline, Maxham, & McKee, 2000).

Despite the importance of FSEs, research pertaining to these employees' work environments and service behaviors is lacking (Elmadag, Ellinger, & Franke, 2008; Fisk, Brown, & Bitner, 1993; Wallace & Chernatony, 2009). However, there is growing interest in the services literature to identify the factors that influence the attitudes and behaviors of FSEs (Mascio, 2010). Bitner (1992) stresses the importance of examining the service encounter from employees' perspectives. To provide quality service to external customers, companies must focus on

their internal customers, that is, their employees (Grönroos, 1983). Moreover, organizations need to understand the factors that affect employees' perspectives and performance (Babin & Boles, 1998) to ensure that their attitudes and behaviors are conducive to delivering quality service. This study contributes to this dialog by investigating the following key research question: how do environmental stressors (customer crowding) and work role requirements (emotional display rules) impact FSEs' coping strategies, and consequently, FSEs' job performance?

A key environmental factor for FSEs is the stress they encounter in their work roles (Netemeyer, Maxham, & Pullig, 2005). Two particularly salient types of stressors are physical environment events, such as crowds (Eroglu & Harrell, 1996), and emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983), which can occur when management requires employees to express emotions consistent with the work role. Extant research indicates that both stressors likely impede FSEs' service outcomes (Brown, Mowen, Donovan, & Licata, 2002; Kennedy, Lassk, & Goolsby, 2002; Licata, Mowen, Harris, & Brown, 2003).

To expand the understanding of service outcomes from the employee's perspective, we examine these stressors through the lens of cognitive appraisal theory. In cognitive appraisal theory, appraisal, emotional response, and coping occur in a sequential process. The fundamental proposition of this framework is that the interaction between the person and the environment generates a felt stress for the person who first appraises the situation and then takes action to cope with the stressor (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In addition, dramaturgical perspectives are also used to explain how

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FSEs engage in deep and surface acting as a result of their firm's emotional labor requirements.

We begin this examination with a field experiment study focused on customer service employees of a major airline. Management requires that FSEs exhibit high levels of emotional engagement in all customer interactions (emotional labor), thus creating a chronically stressful environment. We manipulate the levels of customer crowding and test the effects of the acute stressor on immediate FSE outcomes, such as stress, problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies, displayed emotions, and job performance. Employee responses indicate that the felt levels of stress match the pattern predicted by the cognitive appraisal model (Phillips, Tan, & Julian, 2006), thus supporting the theoretical underpinnings of this study. In Study 2, we broaden our investigation of these two stressors through a survey of a broad cross-section of employees and industries. We test the effect of stressors on the long-term outcomes of emotional exhaustion and employee retention. We further explore the construct of emotion-focused coping by investigating the emotional regulation strategies of deep acting and surface acting.

This article contributes to existing literature in several ways. First, it investigates the impact of the physical work environment (or servicescape) on FSEs. Prior research in marketing has focused almost exclusively on customers and how variables in the servicescape affect them (see Ezech & Harris, 2007; Turley & Milliman, 2000), and other studies have focused solely on FSEs (see Baker, Berry, & Parasuraman, 1988; Parish, Berry, & Lan, 2008). Second, this article examines both the short- and long-term consequences of emotional labor and customer crowding in the service environment. In contrast, most studies investigate only the short-term effects of variables in the environment. This study highlights the need for management to understand both the short-term and the long-term consequences associated with variables in the work environment. Third, this article investigates FSEs in both a single firm and a multi-firm/multi-industry context. Most studies use respondents from a single organization. This study examines first how emotional labor and customer crowding affect FSEs in one firm and then how these stressors affect FSEs across multiple firms. This method generalizes the findings to a variety of industries.

Table 1 demonstrates the contributions of this article with respect to marketing and organizational behavior literature. Table 1 also provides examples of work conducted in these two areas of the literature and shows how the current study differs from these studies.

2. Background

2.1. Cognitive appraisal theory

The theoretical framework for this study is Lazarus's (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) cognitive appraisal model. The model's fundamental proposition is that the interaction between a person and the environment creates felt stress for that person. The person then appraises the situation and subsequently takes certain actions to cope with it. When faced with a stressful situation, he or she goes through a cognitive appraisal, or "a process through which the person evaluates whether a particular encounter with the environment is relevant to his or her well-being, and if so, in what ways" (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, & DeLongis, 1986; Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986, p.992). If the person appraises the environmental situation to be stressful, he or she generates potential coping strategies (both cognitive and behavioral activities) that help manage the situation (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

We frame the impact of emotional labor and crowding on FSEs within the cognitive appraisal model. According to the proposed model (see Fig. 1), when faced with emotional labor and crowding, FSEs first appraise the extent to which they experience stress. Evaluations of stress result in a battery of ensuing emotional reactions, the nature and intensity of which are tied directly to the appraisal process. The appraisal then results in the generation of potential coping strategies that the person can employ to manage the stressful situation. In turn, these coping strategies influence the FSE's work outcomes. In Study 1, emotional labor requirements and customer crowding produce stress that leads to problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies, which in turn influence displayed emotions and job performance. In Study 2, perceived crowding and awareness of emotional labor rules lead to the emotion-focused coping strategies of deep and surface acting, which in turn influences emotional exhaustion and employee retention. We model our short-term and long-term approaches after Berry's (1997) acculturation model on stress, coping, and immediate and long-term outcomes.

2.2. Stressors and FSEs

Work environment stressors affect FSE behaviors and performance, and FSEs face many stressors. This study focuses on two

Table 1
Comparing current research with existing research.

Citation	Employee perspective	Investigates variables in work environment	Marketing discipline	Service environment context	Short- or long-term impact	Single or multiple firms
Hui and Bateson(1991)	No	No – (consumers and density)	Yes	Yes – bank and bar	Short-term	Multiple
Areni and Kimm(1994)	No	No – (customers and impact of lighting)	Yes	Yes – retail store	Short-term	Single
Donovan, Rossiter, Marcolyn, and Nesdalee(1994)	No	No- (shopper emotions and shopper arousal and pleasantness of in-store environment)	Yes	Yes – retail store	Short-term	Multiple
Vaccaro, Yucetepe, Torres-Baumgarten, and Lee(2008)	No	No – (consumers and music- retail consistency and lighting)	Yes	Yes – retail store	Short-term	Multiple
Magnini and Parkerr(2009)	Yes	Yes – (atmospheric music)	Yes	Yes – hotel	Short-term	Single
Baker et al. (1988)	Yes	Yes (ambient conditions, esthetics, privacy)	Yes	Yes – bank	Short-term	Single
Parish et al. (2008)	Yes	Yes (convenience, safety, pleasantness)	Yes	Yes – hospital	Long-term	Single
Leather, Pyrgas, Beale, and Lawrence(1998)	Yes	Yes (sunlight, view of window and illumination)	No	No – office	Short-term	Single
Klitzman and Stellmann(1989)	Yes	Yes (air quality, physical layout, distractions & lighting)	No	No – office	Short-term	Single
Oldham and Rotchfordd(1983)	Yes	Yes (openness, office density, work space density)	No	No – office	Short-term	Single
Sundstrom et al. (1994)	Yes	Yes (office noise)	No	No – office	Short-term	Single
Varca (1999)	Yes	Yes (job stress, role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload)	No	No – office	Short-term	Single
Current study	Yes	Yes (crowding and emotional labor)	Yes	Yes – airline and other services	Short- and long-term	Single and multiple

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