

Stressful demands or helpful guidance? The role of display rules in Indian call centers[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper utilizes conservation of resources (COR) theory and two of Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture (individualism and power distance) to examine the impact of display rules on job satisfaction and performance in an Indian call center sample. Contrary to findings in an American sample (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005), we proposed that due to cultural differences as well as differences in the nature of the job among representatives in an Indian call center, supervisory focus on display rules would reduce emotional exhaustion, and in turn, have positive consequences for employee performance and job satisfaction. Using multi-source data in a sample of 137 Indian call center representatives, results confirmed the hypothesized mediating effects of emotional exhaustion on performance and job satisfaction. Implications of these results for future cross-cultural research are presented.

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Introduction

Display rules are the expectations placed upon employees about the interpersonal demands of working with customers (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). Understanding display rules and their impact in organizations such as call centers, whose functions depend on customer service, has garnered much attention in organizational behavior research (i.e., Diefendorff & Richard, 2003; Grandey, 2003; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Recent studies have also investigated the impact of *supervisory emphasis* on these interpersonal demands. Supervisor focus on display rules was positively related to employee emotional exhaustion (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005) and explicit organizational display rules led to higher emotional exhaustion than when display autonomy was present (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007). However, we contend that depending on one's appraisal processes, supervisory emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of work can also be viewed as helpful, serving as a resource for clarifying expectations for employees. For example, both the aforementioned studies were conducted using American samples. Could this relationship be different in other cultures? Using conservation of resources (COR) theory and two of Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of culture, we propose that culture is one such determinant impacting how display rules are viewed by call center employees.

In this study, we investigate the effectiveness of display rules in Indian call centers. We chose India over other countries because it is a rapidly growing and, yet, underrepresented sample in organizational research and because of the clear cultural differences between India and the United States (Hofstede, 1980). As the cost of doing business internationally decreases, more firms from the United States, both large and small, are outsourcing their call center needs to India. Apple, American Express, GE,

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AT&T, Sprint, and IBM all have call centers located in India. In fact, India is the largest provider of offshore services and has been the leader of the A.T. Kearney Global Services Index, a measure that analyzes and ranks the 50 countries worldwide as the best destinations for outsourcing activities, since its inception in 2004 (Jorek, Gott, & Battat, 2009). In 2004, there were approximately 158,000 people working in Indian call centers (Batt, Doellgast, & Kwon, 2005). In 2010, estimates indicate about 800,000 Indian people working in business process outsourcing (BPO) jobs (The Economic Times, 2010). Further, by the end of the fiscal year 2011, it is thought that Indian IT and BPO exports are likely to increase by another 13% to 15% (Das, 2010). Undoubtedly, this is a growing market and, unfortunately, one with which organizational behavior research has *not* kept pace. We surveyed six of the top journals in management in the last ten years (Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology, Journal of Management, Journal of Organizational Behavior, Journal of Vocational Behavior and Personnel Psychology) and found 33 articles published using American call centers as settings. Within those same journals and time period, we found only a single study involving Indian call centers (Ramesh & Gelfand, 2010).

This is particularly unfortunate given the cultural differences between Americans and Indians. We contend that these cultural differences could impact the effectiveness of management practices such as focus on display rules. Hofstede (1980) defined five dimensions in which cultures may differ; however, previous research indicates that the two dimensions most influencing subordinates' relationships with their supervisors are power distance and individualism–collectivism (i.e., DeCarlo & Agarwal, 1999). Because these two dimensions influence how individuals view the relationship between themselves and authority, these cultural differences can impact employee expectations of management practices (Hofstede, 1980). In this study, we propose that supervisory focus on display rules in Indian call centers will be related to a reduction in emotional exhaustion among call center representatives. We contend that understanding the contextual differences in regard to display rules is quite important, because emotional exhaustion is related to organizationally relevant outcomes. We hypothesize that the emotional exhaustion experienced by the Indian call center representatives will subsequently increase performance errors and decrease job satisfaction. We believe that these outcomes are particularly relevant in the customer service arena where accuracy of the response to customer problems is a key driver to overall customer satisfaction (Customer Care Alliance, 2005). Furthermore, job satisfaction has been related to turnover and absenteeism (Mobley, 1977; Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974; Sagie, 1998), two issues which plague this industry (Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2006; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004).

In the sections that follow, we utilize conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions, power distance and collectivism, to present a theoretical framework for our model (Fig. 1) to be examined within the context of Indian call center representatives interacting with American customers.

Theoretical framework

Every occupation has its own specific risk factors associated with job stress and burnout (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003). The factors can be classified as job demands or job resources. Job demands are physical, psychological, social or organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical or psychological effort. Job resources are aspects of the job that are functional in achieving work goals, reducing job demands and the associated psychological and physical costs, and/or stimulating personal growth learning and development (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

Conservation of resources (COR) theory stipulates that when resources are inadequate to meet the demands of the job, a downward spiral of energy loss can occur. When resources are threatened with loss, when resources are actually lost and/or where individuals fail to gain sufficient resources following significant resource investment, stress and job burnout follow. The COR model identifies four specific types of resources: objects, conditions, personal characteristics, and energies. Objects are aspects of physical nature that one values. Conditions, such as marriage, tenure, and seniority, are resources when they are valued and sought after. Personal characteristics include the individual's general orientation to the world and other traits. Energies include things

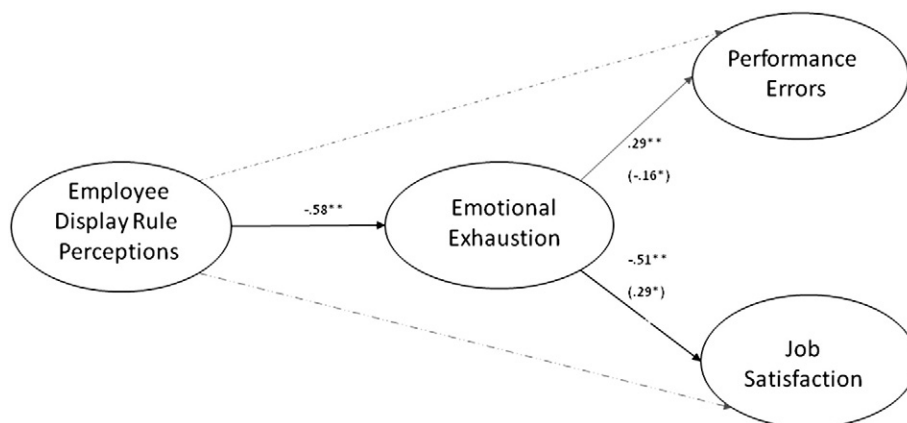


Fig. 1. Theoretical model and path estimates. Indirect effect coefficients of display rules on DVs via emotional exhaustion are in parentheses. --- Additional paths tested in alternative model a. ---- Additional paths tested in alternative model b.

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