Interpersonal Behaviors During Service Encounter and Their Impact on Service Outcome: An Application of the Interpersonal Circumplex Model

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This research examines client-provider interpersonal exchanges and their impact on service outcome using the interpersonal circumplex model (ICM). This well-established theoretical approach anchored in the two basic dimensions of agency and communion maps interpersonal behavior and its outcomes in a lawful and predictable manner. A naturalistic field study used a prospective, within-episode design to observe both ongoing client-provider interactions and service outcome (32 clients, each being observed in interaction with providers on average for 46.8 service episodes). The pattern of agentic (dominant, submissive) and communal (agreeable, disagreeable) behaviors generally conformed to the basic propositions of the ICM. The results also show that client’s expression of dominance and agreeableness to provider and client’s exposure to provider agreeableness had positive effects on service outcome. Theoretical and managerial opportunities offered by the ICM for studying and designing client-provider interactions are discussed.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction

Consumers and marketing researchers have recently paid an increased attention to the interface between clients and service firms. However, despite its critical importance, the interpersonal aspect of service encounters and its impact on service outcome remain relatively unexplored.

Research into the interpersonal aspect of service encounters typically rely on static measurement tools such as retrospective self-reports to assess the impact of personal exchanges on service outcome. Past studies suggest that a process approach could facilitate the exploration of personal interaction and provide additional insights into its impact on service outcome. Previous research also suffers from limitations in scope of inquiry. First, past research typically focuses on the impact of the providers’ behaviours on service outcome (i.e., the exposure effect from the client’s perspective), whereas few studies explored the impact of clients’ own behaviours (the expression effect) and the interrelationship between provider and client behaviours. Second, past research typically focus on behaviours along the power/control dimension to the exclusion of behaviours on other major dimensions such as affiliation.

The primary objective of the present research is to contribute to our theoretical understanding of interpersonal exchanges that naturally unfold during service encounters and of their impact on service outcomes. We build upon the interpersonal circumplex model (ICM) to examine client-provider interactions in a healthcare context.

Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

The ICM holds that interpersonal behaviours can be characterized as a set of traits organized in a circle defined by two major dimensions, agency and communion. The agency dimension reflects an individual’s strivings for mastery and power that enhance and protect the differentiation of the individual. This dimension is anchored by assured-dominant and unassured-submissive traits. The communal dimension, which is anchored by warm-agreeable traits and cold-quarrelsome traits, reflects strivings for union, intimacy and the participation in the collective.

Evidence suggests that during dyadic interaction, expression of, as well as exposure to certain type of interpersonal behaviours has significant impact on interactants’ subjective well-being and satisfaction. Regarding expression effects, studies show that expression of agreeableness and dominance typically lead to better psychological wellbeing and adjustment outcome than expression of quarrelsomeness and submissiveness. Regarding exposure effects, studies show that exposure to agreeableness and submissiveness is generally associated with better positive interaction outcomes than exposure to quarrelsomeness and dominance. We therefore propose that during service encounters, clients’ expression of agreeableness and dominance will have more positive impact on service outcome than client’s expression of quarrelsomeness and submissiveness, whereas clients’ exposure to provider agreeableness and submissiveness will have more positive impact than exposure to provider quarrelsomeness and dominance.

An important prediction form the ICM is the principle of complementarity, which refers to the extent to which behaviours of interacting partners fit with each other in prescribed ways. Complementarity is specified by similarity on the communal dimension (i.e., agreeableness invites agreeableness and quarrelsomeness begets quarrelsomeness) and reciprocity on the agentic dimension (dominance elicits submissiveness and submissiveness elicits dominance). Past research suggests that complementarity is central to maintaining relationship harmony and that complementary vs. acomplementary behaviours typically lead to better interaction outcomes. We therefore propose that during service encounters client-provider interpersonal behaviours will generally show a complementary pattern, and that complementary interactions will have more positive impact on service outcome than acomplementary interactions.

Method

Research design We adopted a longitudinal, naturalistic design and a process approach, collecting data on a series of service encounters in a natural setting, the dining room of a mid-term geriatric health care facility in Eastern Canada. On-line observation was made of clients’ and providers’ interpersonal behaviours and client’s consumption behaviours over repeated meal episodes.

Participants 32 elderly clients (78.8 ± 12.7 years, 20 females, 10 males; all Caucasians) were recruited as participants. Clients who have insufficient cognitive ability (measured with Mini-Mental Status Examination) and who were in a state of clinical depression were excluded from the study.

Coding of interpersonal behaviours Provider-client interpersonal behaviours were coded using a validated inventory of behavioral descriptors (Moskowitz, 1994) designed to sample the four behavioral characteristics on the ICM. During each meal, coders simply endorsed the behaviours in a given coding list if that behaviour had been observed. Coders had been trained for 30 hours, using videotaped interpersonal exchanges. Inter-coder reliability was maintained at 80% or more over the course of the study.

Consumption behavior The major dependent variable is the amount of food consumed during a meal, which is also the primary service outcome from the perspective of the service providers. Consumption was derived from the estimation of plate leftovers using the Comstock scale. The estimated intake portions were translated into energy and protein intake using a standardized nutrient analysis program.

Results

As expected, correlation analysis of client-provider behaviors yielded a complementary pattern on both dimensions, and the pattern is stronger on the communal dimension than on the agentic dimension. The impact of interpersonal behaviors on service outcome was examined using random coefficient models. Quarrelsomeness was excluded form the model due to its extremely low frequency. Type of meals (breakfast, lunch or supper) and pre-meal hunger (assessed via subjective rating) were treated as covariates. Consistent with expectation, the results show that clients’ expression of dominance and agreeableness made significant contribution to food consumption, whereas the expression of submissiveness had...
Discussion

This study shows that clients’ own interpersonal behaviors, as well as provider behaviors, could significantly impact service outcomes. This study also complements existing literature on service marketing by demonstrating significant impact on service outcome of interpersonal behaviors on both agentic and communal dimensions, suggesting that focusing on one dimension to the exclusion of another could result in incomplete understanding of the interpersonal dynamics and their impact on service outcomes. Finally, this study recommends the ICM as a useful theoretic framework for examining the interpersonal exchanges in service encounters.

REFERENCES


