Salespeople's Job Stress: Exploring Stress Contagion From Salespeople to Customers

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ABSTRACT
Based on an experimental study, we investigate whether and how the frontline employee’s experience of work stress is transmitted to the customer in a service encounter, and if so, whether this transmission is accompanied by negative customer reactions (e.g., dissatisfaction with the service, intention to postpone the purchase, intention to engage in negative word-of-mouth, intention to avoid the store in the future).

EXTENDED ABSTRACT
Stress is regarded as one of the major health threats of the 21st century (American Institute for Stress 2011) and generally results from “the relationship between a person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being (Lazarus and Folkman 1984, 21). Considering that people nowadays spend most of their time at work, it is not surprising that work-related stress is most prevalent in their lives (Cannon 2010). Work-related stress both affects the person while he or she is at work and often spills over into non-work domains (e.g., Boles and Babin 1996; Danna and Griffin 1999). Companies have recognized that work-related stress incurs high costs on their side. Not only does work-related stress lead to serious health problems for individuals, but also to employees’ decreased performance, absenteeism, and job turnover (Aamodt 2010; Matteson and Ivancevich 1987; Sullivan and Baghat 1992). The subsequent costs of work-related stress amount to billions of US-dollars for companies (American Institute for Stress 2011).

In particular, frontline employees, like salespeople, are considered to be one of the employee groups that are often highly stressed (e.g., Wa Chan and Wen Wan forthcoming; Hartline and Ferrell 1996). Since frontline employees have regular contact to customers and often advise them regarding products, the management of customer-contact employees faces the risk that the employees’ adverse emotional states might negatively affect the customers and their perceptions of the service. Surprisingly, the questions (1) whether and how the frontline employee’s experience of work stress is transmitted to the customer in a service encounter, and (2) if so, whether this transmission is accompanied by negative customer reactions (e.g., dissatisfaction with the service, intention to postpone the purchase, intention to engage in negative word-of-mouth, intention to avoid the store in the future) have received little attention in the literature so far.

Stress transmission on an interpersonal level is also referred to as stress crossover. Direct stress crossover occurs when one person reveals stress and another person catches this stress (Westman 2001). Emotional contagion may serve as an explanatory mechanism for interpersonal stress transmission and generally describes the process in which emotions are carried over from one person to another (Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson 1994; Song et al. 2011). The idea behind this concept is that individuals have empathic abilities at their disposal which allow them to take over the position of another individual and to experience and share their feelings (Westman 2001). Thus, in the current study we assume that the stress displayed by the salesperson triggers a subconscious empathic reaction in the customer, thereby increasing his or her stress level.

Prior research has mainly investigated subconscious emotional contagion with a focus on positive emotions (Luong 2005; Pugh 2001; Tsai 2001; Tsai and Huang 2002). Dallimore, Sparks, and Butcher (2007) examined the process of negative emotional contagion from customers to service employees. And Du, Fan, and Feng (2011) looked both at positive and negative emotional contagion from the service provider to the customer. Up to now, to the best of our knowledge no research has addressed stress contagion in a service encounter.

In line with prior research on emotional contagion (e.g., Du, Fan, and Feng 2011), we employed a scenario role-play based on an experimental design to investigate the occurrence and extent of the stress transmission from the salesperson to the customer as well as the customer’s subsequent behavioral reactions. We used a one-factor between-subjects design. The independent variable was the emotional display of the salesperson. Three videotapes were produced to represent the three experimental conditions in our study: (1) a stressed emotional display by a male salesperson, (2) a neutral...
(slightly positive) emotional display by a male salesperson, and (3) a positive emotional display by a male salesperson. To test the effectiveness of the manipulation regarding the salesperson’s emotional display, we used an emotional display scale (adapted from Du, Fan, and Feng 2011). The results of the manipulation check supported the effectiveness of our manipulation.

The stimulus materials were filmed in a hardware store operating nationwide to provide a realistic setting. Each videotape began with a short introductory scene, showing how the customer first gets a shopping cart on the parking lot in front of the hardware store and subsequently enters the hardware store, pushing the shopping cart through the store while following the signposting until he or she arrives at the laminate flooring section and walks up to a salesperson to ask for advice. We used an actor to play the salesperson. Throughout the videotapes, the camera filmed from a first-person perspective, so that the camera virtually represented the “eyes” of the customer. Thus, the customer was never shown. Moreover, the customer’s questions for the salesperson appeared only in written language on slides which were blended in at the appropriate position in the film. In general, this procedure is regarded as relatively convenient for participants who are supposed to assume the role of the customer because it excludes any potential bias resulting from gender, age, or physical attractiveness of a customer shown. During the service encounter the camera focused on the head/face and upper body of the salesperson as he began to answer the questions of the customer. All conditions were filmed exactly in the same manner, except for the emotional display shown. The use of only a male salesperson in our scenarios was justified since 70-80% of all the salespeople in hardware stores are men.

Participants (n=276) who were role-playing as customers were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. We first assessed participants’ preencounter state of stress, then asked them to watch the videotape, and finally assessed their postencounter state of stress. Moreover, each participant had to answer several questions with regard to the service encounter (e.g., satisfaction with the service, intention to postpone the purchase) and with regard to their susceptibility to emotional contagion. We drew on existing scales to measure these constructs. In line with theories of stress in psychology (Lazarus and Folkman 1984), we measured stress with affective response indicators that are regarded as typical of stress (e.g., tension, uneasiness, irritation, frustration). In particular, we used a seven-point semantic differential scale (e.g., tense vs. relaxed), with higher scale points indicating a more positive emotional state and lower scale points a more negative emotional state that is typical of stress.

The results of our study indicate that negative emotions typical of stress are contagious in service interactions and trigger greater emotional contagion than positive or neutral emotions. This outcome can be explained by the fact that negative emotions typical of stress are more salient and receive more attention from individuals than positive or neutral emotions. Moreover, we are able to show that customers evaluate the service interaction more negatively in the stressed emotional display condition than in the neutral and positive emotional display condition. Customers are also more inclined to postpone their purchases, to engage in negative word-of-mouth regarding the store, and to avoid the store in the future in the stressed emotional display condition. Interestingly, we are not able to show that customers who are more susceptible to emotional contagion report greater changes in their emotional state than those customers who are less susceptible to emotional contagion.

REFERENCES


