

THE IMPACT PERSONALITY TRAITS, ROLE CONFLICT AND WORK FAMILY CONFLICT ON CUSTOMER ORIENTATION: A REVIEW OF EXTANT LITERATURE

Sudarshan Seshanna, Ph. D.*

Meera Seshanna**

Paper Abstract

A review of extant literature explores the role stress variables such as role conflict and work-family conflict that moderate the relationship between a service employee's personality traits and customer orientation. The paper discusses studies that have established the link between personality traits and customer orientation, and provides an overview of existing theory as well as practice in a relatively unexplored area of interdisciplinary business research.

Findings

The evidence from the extant literature therefore can be used to propose a moderating role for role conflict in the relationships between the big-five personality traits and customer orientation. This is mainly based on the findings that (i) role conflict and work family conflict directly affects service employees' ability to deliver good service to customers and (ii) role conflict and work-family conflict causes emotional exhaustion among service employees, which leads to an inability on the part of the service employee to empathize with customers and to enjoy customer interactions.

Keywords: personality traits, role conflict, customer orientation, work-family conflict

* CMS Business School, Jain University, Bangalore

** Dayanand Sagar Business Academy, Bangalore

Introduction

Customer orientation is a construct that has been studied both at the organizational level as well as at the individual level. For instance, several authors have studied the antecedents and consequences of customer orientation at the organization level (Deshpande, Farley and Webster, 1993; Lin and Germain, 2003; and Rindfleisch and Moorman, 2003). These studies look at the overall customer orientation of the organization and not just that of the individual employees. However, customer orientation at the individual level (that is, among employees) has also received considerable research attention in the past decade (Kelly, 1992; Bettencourt and Brown, 2003; Dean, 2007; and Knight, Kim and Crutsinger, 2007).

Over the past decade, marketing scholars have emphasized the critical role of employee customer orientation in the success of service organizations (Narver, Slater and Mac Lachlan, 2000; Slater and Narver, 2000; Day, 1999; and Han, Kim and Srivastava, 1998). Schneider, White and Paul (1998) in fact found that customer orientation is a critical dimension of service climate. Customer orientation is also found to impact other important outcome variables like customer satisfaction, loyalty and perceived value. For instance Brady and Cronin (2001) found that being perceived as customer oriented leads to greater levels of customer satisfaction and value perceptions and further Chao et al (2007) found that in service organizations, customer orientation moderates the relationship between perceptions of service quality and customer loyalty.

Recognizing the critical importance of customer orientation, numerous studies have looked at customer orientation among service workers in the past (Kelly, 1992; Brown et al, 2002; Dean, 2007; and Lee et al, 2006). Most of these studies have identified important antecedents of customer orientation. These antecedents include employee related dimensions like personality traits (Brown et al, 2002), organizational commitment of employees, job satisfaction (Lee, 2006) and pure organizational facets such as organizational climate (Kelly, 1992). The number of antecedent variables proposed in the context of customer orientation of service employees is

quite large. Further, most of these studies recognize the complexity of interdependent relationships between the antecedent variables.

The role of individual customer orientation is considered to be crucial particularly in the context of service organizations (Peccei and Rosenthal, 2000). Hartline, Maxham and McKee (2000) justify the significance of individual level customer orientation in service organisations based on the argument that a service organisation's customer orientation based strategy can be translated into quality service only through the actions and behaviour of the contact employees. Further, it has been found that service sector employees who exhibit a high level of customer orientation engage in behaviours that lead to greater customer satisfaction (Dunlap, Dotson and Chambers, 1988) as well as customer commitment and loyalty.

Taking into account the critical importance of developing employee level customer orientation, researchers have attempted to understand the antecedents of individual level customer orientation. Some of the antecedents identified include employee related dimensions like personality traits (Frei and McDaniel, 1998; Brown et al, 2002; and Iwanaga, Kanazawa and Watanabe, 2007), organizational commitment of employees, job satisfaction (Lee, 2006) and pure organizational facets like organizational climate (Kelly, 1992). These studies also recognize the complexity of interdependent relationships between the antecedent variables such as the influence of personality traits on customer orientation of service employees and how gender and role conflict moderates the impact of personality traits on the customer orientation of employees.

Customer Orientation

According to Schneider, White and Paul (1998) customer orientation is a measure of the extent to which the service provider was committed to understanding and meeting the needs of the customer and made an effort to seek their opinions and monitor their feelings. Stock and Hoyer (2005) makes a distinction between an attitude that favors customer orientation and customer

oriented behaviors. Customer oriented behavior is defined in terms of discussing customer needs, helping achieve customer's goals and attempting to influence customers through information rather than assertiveness. In the present study we focus on customer oriented behaviours rather than on attitudes. Past studies on customer orientation at the individual level have considered either sales persons (Saxe and Weitz, 1982; Brown, Widing and Coutler, 1991; Stock and Hoyer, 2005), or service sector employees as subjects (Brady and Cronin, 2001; and Kelly, 1992).

While customer orientation among sales persons have been found to increase sales performance (Boles et al 2001) and buyer seller relationships (Williams and Attaway, 1996); service employee customer orientation has been found to deliver exceptional service quality (Brady and Cronin, 2001; and Yoon, Beatty and Suh, 2001), customer loyalty and customer commitment (Dean, 2007).

The importance of customer orientation among service employees is often underlined through the idea of 'emotional labor'. According to this concept explained by Ashforth and Humphrey (1993), service roles require 'emotional labor' wherein the service provider has to display the appropriate emotion while delivering the service. This idea is reflected in Brown et al's (2002) definition of customer orientation in the services context. According to them, customer orientation is as an employee's predisposition to meet customer needs in an on-the job context, and, for an employee to be customer oriented, he/she should (i) believe in his/her ability to satisfy customer needs and (ii) should enjoy the act of interacting with and serving customers.

Peccei and Rosenthal (1997) in a similar vein define employee customer orientation in terms of an affective and normative component. The affective component refers to the extent to which employees find enjoyment in dealing with customers and find customer service activities intrinsically satisfying while the normative component refers to the extent to which employees feel a sense of duty towards customers and a moral obligation to do their best to them. These

definitions in fact point towards an implicit role for a service provider's personality in determining his/her level of customer orientation.

Orientation in Service Settings

According to Buss (1987), an individual's personality affects the environments he/she choose to embrace or avoid, the reactions that they evoke from others and the tactics they use to influence their environment. Several studies have highlighted the importance of a service provider's personality in determining the service offered or the customer orientation displayed by the service provider. This stream of research has progressed steadily by providing insights to practitioners in recruiting staff in the service sector. Hogan, Hogan and Busch (1984), was one of the pioneers in developing this line of thinking. They developed a personality inventory consisting of six broad factors that explained the level of service orientation of individuals. These factors included such dimensions like intelligence, adjustment, prudence, ambition, sociability and likeability.

They found significant relationship between measures of services orientation and the personality scales among nursing staff in a hospital thereby proving the predictive power of personality traits with regard to service orientation. Further, they also found significant correlations between service orientation and other personality indices across other professions like insurance firm office staff and truck drivers. These results indicate a strong link between personality and service orientation. Subsequently, several other researchers have linked various personality related traits to service related performance (for a review see Hurley, 1998). Most of these studies employ a 'hierarchical model' of the effects of personality on behavior. This model consider personality traits in a hierarchical fashion where basic or more abstract personality traits are presented as determinants of less abstract personality traits often called 'surface traits' (Allport, 1961; Mowen and Spears, 1999).

According to Brown et al (2002) customer orientation can be considered as a 'surface trait'. A surface trait is defined in the context of 'surface behaviors' as opposed to 'focal behavior' of individuals (Allport, 1961). A surface trait is a more enduring disposition to behave in a certain way within a context (Mowen and Spears, 1999). These surface traits explain how individuals behave in a particular context. They are different from basic personal traits since they are the outcome of an interaction between basic personality traits and specific context (Brown et al, 2002). For instance, Harris and Mowen (2001) explain how consumers' basic personality traits influence their inclination to complain or bargain in different contexts.

In the present study, the five-factor model has been used for describing personality. The five-factor model or the 'big-five' personality traits have largely come to define the predominant description of personality traits (Walsh, 2004). According to De Raad and Doddenma-Winsemius (1999) as quoted by Liao and Chuang (2004), there is convincing evidence for the validity of the big-five taxonomy through extensive empirical research carried out over the last few decades across several cultures and occupations. Further as Liao and Chuang (2004) argues the use of a unifying taxonomy like big-five personality traits facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and comparison of findings across studies on personality.

In the past decade, several studies have used the big-five personality dimensions as determinants of employee service orientation or service performance. Hurley (1998) found significant relationship between extroversion and agreeableness – components of the big-five personality traits and level of customer service offered by individual employees in a retail setting. Frei and McDaniel (1998) established a relationship between the traits of conscientiousness, emotional stability and agreeability and service worker performance and similarly Liao and Chuang (2004) too found a significant relationship between the big-five personality traits and service worker performance among employees in retail settings.

The big-five personality traits have also been found to be determinants of customer orientation of employees. Brown et al (2002) in one of the most important studies found a significant

negative linkage for the instability dimension of personality and a positive linkage for the agreeableness dimension of personality with customer orientation. The strength of relationships for conscientiousness, instability and openness with customer orientation were however not found to be statistically significant. The customer orientation construct was measured through a self-reported questionnaire and the study was conducted among service workers in food services industry. In a subsequent study Iwanaga, Kanazawa and Watanabe (2007) found statistically significant linkages between openness-to-experience, conscientiousness and agreeableness with customer orientation. In this study too customer orientation was measured using the same scale. However, this study was conducted among salespersons rather than service workers though from a variety of industries.

Both of the studies mentioned above propose a direct relationship between the personality traits and customer orientation without considering the effect of any moderating variable. However, in their meta-analysis of the relationship between the big-five personality traits and job performance, Barrick and Mount (1991) found the strong possibility of variables moderating the direct relationship between the personality traits and job performance. In fact, in their subsequent study, Barrick and Mount (1993) found a significant moderating effect for autonomy in the relationship between the big-five personality traits and job performance.

Several other studies have reported strong moderating effects for several important constructs in studies involving the big-five personality traits as independent variable. For instance, Liao and Chuang (2004) found significant moderating influence for organizational variables like employee involvement, service training and performance incentives in the relationship between the big-five personality traits and employee service performance among retail employees. Further, in another study involving call center employees, Witt, Andrews and Carlson (2004) proved the moderating role of emotional exhaustion in the relationship between conscientiousness and performance. It is therefore important consider the existence of moderating variables in the relationship between the big-five personality traits and customer

orientation. In the next section, we propose the role conflict and work-family experienced by employees as possible moderating variables in the context of this relationship.

Organisational role theory perspective (Kahn et al. 1964) is adopted to support the proposed relationships. The organizational role theory focuses on social systems that are preplanned, task-oriented, and hierarchical. According to this theory, normative expectations and social positions generate roles in organizations. Roles therefore could vary across individuals as normative expectations are subject to both the official demands of the organizations and the pressures of informal groups. Given multiple sources for norms, individuals encounter role conflicts in which they must contend with antithetical norms for their behavior. Such role conflicts produce strain affecting the general performance of the organization (Biddle, 1986). Role theory postulates that individuals, by virtue of their social positions interact with a variety of 'role-partners' who together comprise of an individual's role set (Troyer, Mueller and Osinsky, 2000). For employees who constantly interact with customers in a service set up, the role set would comprise of the managers in the organization, the multitude of customers as well as the members of the family.

According to role theory, a central problem in social interactions involves the adequate enactment of a social role (Goode, 1960; Katz and Kahn, 1966). Often this is because the expectations pressed on an individual from different members of the role set are inconsistent. This results in a paradox causing role conflict. Work-Family conflict is a special kind of role conflict in which the work-role demands interfere with work-family demands (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985). Role theory suggests that as employees have more and more to do for their firm, they have less and less time and energy to do for their family (Hochschild, 1997). The ensuing sections present the main constructs used in the study and subsequent sections develop the hypotheses.

Moderating Role of Role Conflict

Role conflict, a part of role stress has been a central theme of research into boundary spanners (Singh et al.1996). Brown and Peterson (1993) in their meta-analytic study had shown that role conflict directly influences job satisfaction and job performance in boundary spanning employees. Babin and Boles (1996) considers the existence of role conflict as a dimension of a supportive work environment. Significantly, role-conflict was found to be related to emotional exhaustion by Jackson et al (1986) among a sample of teachers and both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among a sample of probationary officers by Whitehead (1987). Since service employees are involved in 'emotional labor' (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993), role conflict can therefore seriously harm both effectiveness and efficiency of employees. In fact Schneider (1980) and Shamir (1980) have shown that the role conflict experienced by employees could hinder an employee's ability to deliver better service.

According to Kahn (1978), role conflict arises on the job when a role incumbent is confronted with incompatible or incongruous expectations that are difficult or impossible to satisfy simultaneously. This could arise if the course of action suggested by one party (eg. the supervisor) is inconsistent with the demands of the other (eg. customer). Bolton and Houlihan (2005) explain typical scenarios faced by call-center employees that could lead to potential role conflict. According to them: "The core process of the call center is that customer calls are fed directly to waiting customer service representatives who talk the customers through a series of structured scripts while imputing responses to and interacting with customer databases so that information or action can be taken or given with immediacy. Calls are measured in terms of time, targets and outcomes and through an automated queuing system and are processed in a production line fashion.

The call process is designed to reduce random elements in behavior and to train monitor and measure performance. Yet at the same time the call center seeks to give each customer the impression of individualized treatment, through personalization by CSR, reflecting the

philosophy of mass-customization". Thus, call center employees are always required to interact with customers within the limits of a well-developed script even though they are always encouraged to show empathy to the customers and attempt to provide what should appear like a customized service. Witt, Andrews and Carlson (2004), points out that this simultaneous need to handle calls quickly in accordance with a script as well as to show enough compassion to create a positive customer experience could lead to emotional exhaustion. Under severe emotional exhaustion, employees could feel being used up, irritable, frustrated and simply being worn out (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Thus affecting their ability to empathize with or enjoy their customer interactions. Witt et al (2004) in a significant study found that a call center employee's innate conscientiousness and emotional exhaustion interact to impact customer service quality.

Moderating role of Work-Family Conflict

Work-Family conflicts occur when work expands to interfere with time that is supposed to be spent with the family. As Netemeyer et al. (2005) says, the conflicts may have their most pronounced effects in the stressful environment of customer service jobs as customer service employees may take their jobs home with them, creating work-family conflicts which may in turn lead to more job stress. With an increasing number of dual income couples in the workforce, with both partners having to contribute equally to familial responsibilities, the likelihood of such conflicts increases (Boles and Babin, 1996). Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) attributes identifies three main factors that are bound to cause work-family conflict: (i) having a limited amount of time to meet both home and work responsibilities while also pursuing personal desires (ii) using behaviours from one domain inappropriately in another and (iii) psychological strain resulting from an individual trying to meet mutually incompatible demands. The effect of work-family conflict on service employees has received some research attention in the recent past (eg. Good et al, 1988; Netemeyer et al. 2004; Netemeyer et al., 2005; Yavas et al. 2008). Most of these studies attempt to link work family conflict faced by service employees and job related aspects like job performance, job satisfaction and turnover intention.

Netemeyer et al. (2005) found that work-family conflicts directly and indirectly impacts a service employee's customer directed extra-role performance and Karatepe and Tekinkus (2006) found a positive relationship between work-family conflict and emotional exhaustion among a sample of bank employees in Turkey. Few studies have, however looked at the moderating role of work-family conflict. The moderating impact of work-family conflict is advanced based on the existing empirical results (though mixed) which propose a negative link between work-family conflicts to work related variables like job satisfaction, job-performance, turnover intention, organizational commitment (for a review please see (Allen et al, 2000). Since these work-related variables have also been associated with customer orientation in past studies, there are ample grounds for exploring the moderating effect of work-family relationship in the relationship between the personality traits and customer-orientation.

The evidence from the extant literature therefore can be used to propose a moderating role for role conflict in the relationships between the big-five personality traits and customer orientation. This is mainly based on the findings that (i) role conflict and workfamily conflict directly affects service employees' ability to deliver good service to customers and (ii) role conflict and work-family conflict causes emotional exhaustion among service employees, which leads to an inability on the part of the service employee to empathize with customers and to enjoy customer interactions.

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