

EMOTIONAL EMPATHY DURING SERVICE ENCOUNTERS: THE PRICE FOR CARING

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between Emotional Empathy (EE) and Depressed Mood at Work among front line employees (FLEs). The goal was to test the hypothesis that Depressed Mood increases with displays of Emotional Empathy. One-hundred fifty-nine FLEs completed a survey that measured Emotional Empathy, work strain and related key constructs. Respondents were unaware of the research hypothesis, guaranteed confidentiality and represented a complete random sample. FLEs reported significantly higher levels of work strain associated with displays of Emotional Empathy. Moreover, the Strain-to-Empathy relationship was not mediated by job tenure, FLE sense of task importance or an index of potential role stressors. Unfortunately, the results suggest that FLEs are rewarded for **not** emotionally identifying with their customers; it appears one can escape work strain by emotionally detaching from customers. To the extent that successful service encounters hinge on positive interaction between FLE and customer, managers are challenged to develop practices that facilitate displays of empathy. Potential remedial practices are reviewed.

Key words: front line employee, call center, work stress, emotional Empathy

Emotional Empathy during Service Encounters:

The Price for Caring for the Customer

For years researchers and practitioners alike have recognized that front line employees (FLEs) are critical to the strategic goal of quality service [1;2;3;4;5]. For this reason, investigators have studied FLEs, their performance and factors that

influence that performance such as job design, management practices, personality, skill sets and the dynamics of service encounters [6;7;8;9;10;11;12;13]. One accepted truth stands out across nearly four decades of research: Service jobs are stressful [8;14].

Emotional Empathy (EE) is a more recent theoretical construction in the literature but crucial to understanding service quality. EE is the willingness to invest psychologically in one's work demands [15]. Several conceptual models emphasize the relationship between service quality and the readiness of FLEs to identify with customers, pointing to behaviors consistent with the idea of empathizing [7;10]. However, under stressful conditions, FLEs may not be eager to take the psychological risk of caring for customers if they are overly strained taking care of their own needs. In other words, stressful work and Emotional Empathy (EE) are unlikely companions [11;12;17].

The purpose of this study is two-fold: 1) examine the relationship between Emotional Empathy (EE) and work strain among call center FLEs and 2) investigate how EE fits within the conceptual framework of other sources of stress during service encounters. To fully develop the research hypotheses, we will review the relevant literature beginning with a brief history of call centers.

Call Centers and Work Stress

Call centers are the ubiquitous reminder that we live in a service economy [18;19]. It is difficult to find a consumer who has not interacted with a call center service representative [20;21]. Call centers are the boundary-land where customer and organization meet; the place where service encounters occur. Interestingly, the literature suggests it is also the place where organizations fail their mission of service quality.

Actual marketing management practices in call centers might be at odds with the goal of quality service [20;23]. Dean [19] argues that call centers stress quantity over quality. Others have compared modern call centers to assembly line work in factories [24]. To illustrate, Gilmore [23] reported that call center managers found it easier to measure number of calls rather than quality of calls and that speed was critical to overall success.

Stress and Service Work

Even before the advent of call centers, research acknowledged that service work is stressful. Taxi cab drivers and waitresses emphasized the demeaning and frustrating nature of service encounters more than 80 years ago [25;26]. Similar testimonies were documented among store clerks and musicians in the 1950's [27;28]. As the service economy grew, increased research attention on this type of job painted a picture of service workers as generally underappreciated, underpaid, and under more than a modest degree of stress [8].

As service work earned its reputation [29], a theoretical framework built largely around the idea of role stressors took shape. Caught between the competing demands of customer and organization, researchers hypothesized that FLEs confront an array of stressors centered on role conflict, ambiguity and overload, with negative outcomes for all parties involved. For example, role conflict and role ambiguity reduce quality service and lead to dissatisfaction among service employees [10]. These stressors can also produce burnout among FLEs and increase turnover [11;12;14].

Overall, the empirical evidence clearly indicates that the interface between organization and customer can be an emotionally risky setting with much of the research centered on role stressors. Recently, Emotional Empathy (EE), a construct

related to but different from other role stressors, has emerged as a prime candidate for adding more strain to service encounters.

Service Encounter and Empathy

Evolutionary psychologists view empathy as an evolved function, a compass for navigating a complex social world [30]. Understanding what others think and feel helps *Homo sapiens* form relationships. Fundamentally, empathy is complex pro-social behavior, a product of our genetic history but also learned through experience.

Tichener [31], a founding father in psychology, described empathy as “placing oneself in the subjective world of another”. Sixty years later, Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry [32] defined empathy as “attending to, caring for, and understanding customer needs” and made it one of the classic five dimensions of service quality – reliability, assurance, responsiveness, tangibles and *empathy*.

More recent work has examined empathy as a mix of skill, emotion, cognition, and behavior. As a skill it underwrites effective interpersonal relations [33;34]. Additionally, recognizing others’ mood and circumstances rests on cognitive processes which lead to an emotional connection [35]. Investigators have also used a functional approach, examining the behaviors that operationalize displays of empathy [36].

Clearly, the idea of empathy resonates throughout the literature on service encounters [37;38;39]. Researchers have used terms such as identity and personal concern to argue that quality service hinges on an emotional connection between FLE and customer [38]. Bitner and her colleagues highlighted the importance of relational moments between FLE and customer [7] and Varca [13] argued that “the ability to put yourself mentally in another person's situation and understand how that person feels” (p. 32) is critical to effective service.

The consequences of Emotional Empathy have also been examined. Pugliesi [40] found both positive and negative effects for workers, as did Zapf and Holz [41]. A study by Schaubroeck and Jones [42] distinguished between situations where workers displayed positive emotions versus negative emotions, concluding that, “the extent to which individuals perceive that they are required to express or suppress certain types of emotional expression may depend as much on their emotional predispositions as it does on the objective characteristics of their organizational roles”.

In terms of customer response, Hennig-Thurau, Groth, Paul, and Gremler [43] found that the authenticity of employees’ emotional display directly affects customers’ emotional states. However difficult it may be for some service workers to exhibit empathy with true authenticity [44] , marketers still use the metaphor of services as theater, visualizing service workers as actors [45;46]. Although the literature underscores the importance of EE for service encounters, a question remains unanswered: Does the service worker pay a price for displaying empathy? Although studies can be mixed, the research consensus is “yes”. Importantly, there is a theoretical frame for understanding why empathy may relate to strain and why FLEs might wish to avoid displaying these behaviors.

Current Research Question

Solomon, Suprenant, Czepiel, and Gutman [47] placed service encounters inside a role theory paradigm, discussing the potential costs of incongruent demands on service providers. Similarly, Bateson [48] described the service encounter as a struggle among FLE, customer, and firm with the service worker residing in that territory between customer and organization. Truly, this skirmish occurs on ground fertile for work strain.

Well before the growth of the service economy, researchers demonstrated that workers physically distance themselves from job stressors through behaviors such as increased absenteeism [49]. In fact, this dynamic is fundamental to human behavior, not just organizational behavior [50]. Environmental stressors – exposure to frigid cold or demands to display empathy toward customers – tax one’s system and break it down over time. The instinctive response is to escape the stressor and the pain that accompanies it. Thus, there is a natural negative reinforcement paradigm that rewards the individual for disaffecting oneself from trying situations and its allied stressors.

Returning to service encounters in call centers, FLEs cannot physically turn away from a customer but "walking away" emotionally would provide some degree of psychological safety. In other words, the perfectly natural response of avoiding the stressor hinges on distancing oneself from the customer. Although the literature boasts the benefits of FLEs emotionally identifying with customers, psychological principles paradoxically suggests it may be in the best emotional interest of the service worker **not** to care about the customer.

The framework outlined above is likely disquieting to customer service managers. It suggests that FLEs might psychologically profit by not emotionally connecting with customers. Our study grew out of practical concern. During a series of focus groups, workers acknowledged the need for empathy during service encounters but quickly pointed to the cost of this type behavior, essentially the psychological tax one pays for consistently caring for the customer. The theoretical and practical implications of our focus group findings urged us to investigate the relationship between empathy and work strain more systematically. Following the conceptual structure summarized earlier, we hypothesized that:

There will be a significant positive relationship between displays of Emotional Empathy and work strain (Depressed Mood at Work).

In sum, after decades of research we do not have a complete taxonomy of the stressors that occur during service encounters and what outcomes are associated with these stressors. Our understanding of classic role stressors is extensive but not our grasp of the precise empathy behaviors that underlie FLE strain. For this reason, we elected to study EE using a field design in a call center setting.

Method

Participants

One hundred fifty-nine call center service representatives participated in this study. They were randomly selected using the last two digits of employee identification number. The sample was stratified across geographical division and represented about 7% of the population.

Job and Setting

Service representatives handled business-to-business interactions. Their firm provided communication services to other companies. FLEs received customer calls in three general areas – establishing service, service disruption, billing questions. The firm's information system allowed FLEs the freedom to initiate service and respond to almost any inquiry. The job had no sales component and closely resembled service representative positions in call centers throughout the world.

Measures

We used Quinn and Shepard's [51] Depressed Mood at Work scale for the dependent measure. It is a ten-item T-F instrument and a classic index of work strain. The literature differentiates the constructs of work stressor and work strain [52]. Work stressors are viewed as causal to work strain which is an outcome variable, usually a dysfunctional response such as negative affect, lost sleep, or fatigue. The Quinn and Shepard scale [51] measures strain with items such as "I

feel downhearted and blue” and “I find myself restless and can’t keep still”. Reported internal reliabilites for this scale are in the .70-to-.80 range. Our data yielded an $\alpha = .72, p < .001$.

Following an Emotional Empathy theoretical framework, we used seven items that have been validated as an empathy scale in call center settings [17]:

- Show patience with frustrated customer
- Show courtesy and manners
- Show empathy and express regret
- Develop rapport and credibility with customer
- Withhold own frustrations
- Interact with angry customer
- Handle rejection so maintain composure for next customer

We used these items to measure empathy in two ways. The critical independent variable was Display of Empathy as measured by the seven items above. Using a six-point scale ranging from Almost Never-to-Almost all the time, participants indicated how often they engaged in the seven EE behaviors, $\alpha = .82, p < .001$. We also asked FLEs how important each of these behaviors was to their job success using a similar six-point scale ranging from Not at all Important-to-Extremely Important, $\alpha = .81, p < .001$. The Display Empathy scale was essential to the study’s design because we needed to measure the degree to which FLEs emotionally engaged or withdrew from customers. The Importance of Empathy index was used in follow-up analyses examining mediated effects.

Our empathy scale overlaps with, but differs from, measures of related constructs such as burnout, emotional labor and role conflict which often contain cognitive-oriented elements (i.e., I have too much work to do) or mood items (i.e., I feel tired often). The broad conceptual framework surrounding service encounters,

pro-social actions and psychological consequences will obviously link empathy and other constructs, both theoretically and empirically. However, an emphasis on cognition and mood has left a gap in the literature as to what precisely empathy is when we see it in human interactions. We used an operational or behavioral approach to empathy in this study so that our results might address this gap and also lend themselves to practice implications.

We also employed Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn and Snoek's [53] Job-Related Tension scale which is a classic measure of work stressors, that is, it measures constructs such as role conflict and role overload (i.e., I am asked to do things against my better judgment). It is the other side of the Quinn and Shepard's [51] Depressed Mood Work scale. Depressed mood is an index of strain while Kahn et. al.'s instrument measures stressors in the environment that might induce strain. Importantly, the Kahn et. al. scale does not examine empathy and, therefore, offered an excellent means for testing the mediated effects of classic role stressors beyond EE.

Data Collection

All measures were embedded within a larger organizational survey and initially pre-tested for timing and readability. Data were collected in small groups away from the immediate work site. HR staff traveled to selected call centers throughout the corporation and administered the survey in-person in a controlled setting. Initially, FLEs received separate letters from their division managers and the HRM staff explaining the survey's purpose and guaranteeing confidentiality. No line managers or FLEs were aware of the research hypothesis. We had 100% attendance during data collection meetings. We worked in a unionized environment. There was an agreement between labor and management to participate actively in organizational studies; 100% participation was not uncommon.

Results

We received 155 usable surveys. The sample was 85% female, 66.3% White, 21.4% African-American, 9.7% Hispanic and 2.6% other. Service representative job tenure ranged from at least one year to 28 years with a 9.9 year average (STD = 5.08). No participant had a history of job probation due to performance or work grievance.

Descriptive Statistics and Hypothesis Test

Means, standard deviations and correlations among the main variables are displayed in Table 1. The significant correlation ($r = .35$) between Depressed Mood and Display of Emotional Empathy supports the research hypothesis. The relationship between Job Tension (i.e., role stressors) and the other constructs is consistent with previous studies in the area.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Depressed Mood	Job Tension	Displays of Emotional Empathy	Importance of Emotional Empathy
Depressed Mood M = 10.20 STD = 2.0		.49**	.35**	.25**
Job Tension M = 35.70 STD = 7.32	.49**		.19*	.08
Displays of Emotional Empathy M = 23.17 STD = 7.03	.35**	.19*		.72**
Importance of Emotional Empathy M = 32.80 STD = 7.49	.25**	.08	.72**	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .002$ (two-tail)

Hypothesis Test

Emotional Empathy (EE) when regressed against Depressed Mood yielded an $F = 21.81$, $p < .001$. As expected, this result dovetails with the correlations displayed in Table 1 and affirms the hypothesis that work strain is positively related to displays of EE.

Follow-up Analyses

Having demonstrated the predicted relationship, we next pursued a series of ancillary analyses with two goals in mind. First, we wanted to test the robustness of the EE effect in the face of mediating variables. Second, we were looking for factors that might be used to manage the strain effects associated with EE. In other words, if the Strain-to-Empathy relationship is mediated by other factors, then implications for service quality are less of a concern and may be reduced through management practices.

One working hypothesis in the research literature is that any negative effects associated with displays of emotional attachment will be reduced if the task is viewed as important by the worker (Hoshchild, 1983). In other words, risking one's emotional well-being in the name of significant ends is worthy behavior and the psychological hazard to oneself is thus reduced with this belief. To test this, we added the Importance of Empathy scale described earlier into a set of regressions.

Following methods suggested by Baron and Kenny [54], we examined mediated effects, that is, we tested if work strain is actually a function of how important FLEs view their job demand for empathy. F-values were significant for Display and Importance of Empathy when run separately. However, Importance of Emotional Empathy eventually dropped out of the mediated regression leaving Display of Emotional Empathy as the only significant factor related to Depressed Mood. As the results in Table 2 indicate, there was no evidence that FLE opinions of the importance of their tasks accounted for the Strain-to-Empathy relationship.

Table 2. Mediated Regressions

Predictor	Coefficient	<i>p</i> -Value
Importance of EL Mediated Regression		
Display EE-to-Strain	.291	<i>p</i> < .001
Importance EE-to-Strain	.246	<i>p</i> < .002
Display EE-to-Importance EE	.621	<i>p</i> < .001
Display EE-to-Strain and Importance EE-to-Strain	.375 -.011	<i>p</i> < .001 ns
Tenure Mediated Regression		
Display EE-to-Strain	.291	<i>p</i> < .001
Tenure-to-Strain	-.139	ns
Display EE-to-Tenure	-.107	ns
Display EE-to-Strain and Tenure-to-Strain	.375 -.056	<i>p</i> < .001 ns
Job Tension Mediated Regression		
Display EE-to-Strain	.291	<i>p</i> < .001
Job Tension-to-Strain	.491	<i>p</i> < .001
Display EE-to-Job Tension	.19	<i>p</i> < .02
Display EE-to-Strain and Job Tension-to-Strain	.440 .266	<i>p</i> < .001 <i>p</i> < .001

Next, we examined the impact of job tenure. Following a “burnout” logic, it is possible that FLEs could succumb to the stresses of displaying EE over time. On the other hand, it may be that FLEs develop coping responses with experience. In either case, job tenure is a potentially mediating factor. Our additional regressions failed to support either working hypothesis. The results in Table 2 indicate that job tenure did not mediate the Strain-to-Empathy relationship.

Finally, we conducted supplementary analyses using the Kahn et. al. Job-Induced Tension scale which is an omnibus measure of role stressors such as role conflict and role overload. We examined this question: Is the strain associated with EE due to other classic stressors present in the work setting? As expected, the Job-Induced Tension variable was significant by itself when regressed against Depressed Mood, $F = 49.42$, $p < .001$ and again significant when combined with Display of Emotional Empathy, overall $F = 34.32$, $p < .001$. This is consistent with

decades of research indicating that role stressors do relate to work strain. However, as the results in Table 2 indicate, Display of Empathy did not drop out of the mediated regression. It appears that displaying empathy is statistically robust and a unique source of strain, independent of other previously investigated stressors.

Discussion

This study adds to the literature in several interrelated ways. First, our results extend the existing research that underscores service work as stressful. Second, it offers a conceptual framework for understanding and further investigating the impact of Emotional Empathy during service encounters. Third, the findings examine what FLEs do during service encounters, a behavioral approach.

Results: Interpretation and Limitations

We attempted to reduce administrative error by ensuring confidentiality, a random sample and voluntary participation as well as collecting data under controlled conditions. Nonetheless, results from one questionnaire and one sample present method variance problems.

Unfortunately, the results portray FLEs choosing between **not** emotionally identifying with the customer or paying the price in increased work strain if they do. The findings clearly fit a negative reinforcement paradigm where it is in the best psychological interest of the FLE to distance her/himself from the stressor, namely Display of Empathy. Since job design in call centers world-wide is quite similar, the present findings may generalize to this setting. Beyond this work environment, there are limitations.

Call centers are fast paced and technology driven. In other service encounters, the FLE-customer interaction is more socially intimate and often relational by nature,

extending beyond one contact. It will be important to examine how EE influences strain in instances where FLEs have more freedom to serve the client. Also, the demand characteristics of face-to-face interaction are absent in call centers. This might reduce the strain associated with EE. These and other confounding factors require further research.

Emotional Empathy: What the Construct Means

Our study differs somewhat from the modal work in this area. The traditional focus on role stressors emphasizes cognition, that is, what people think about their job (i.e., “I have too much work to do.”) Emotional Empathy in this study is behavior. True, we used self-report data, not actual behavioral observation. However, FLEs did indicate the degree to which they engaged in specific behaviors and, therefore, the results speak to actions that relate to strain, not perceptions of one’s work environment. This may help explain the results of the follow-up analyses.

The mediated analyses suggest that the Strain-to-Empathy relationship is independent of classic role stressors measured by the Kahn et. al. scale. Similarly, the mediated analyses with perceived Importance of Emotional Empathy also examined a cognition-to-behavior link but the results again failed to demonstrate mediated effects. On the provocative side, these findings ask if role stress measures bypass an important source of job strain. On a practical note, our behavioral focus may offer a more convenient route to intervention than a pure cognitive approach.

Surprisingly, the data did not fit the burnout literature. In the burnout situation, FLEs lose emotional interest over time as they expend emotional capital coping with job demands (Singh & Rhoads, 1991; Singh, Verbeke, & Rhoads, 1996). There may be a moment in the life of service providers when they begin to detach from work as the cost of EE becomes too great but that moment, if it exists, remains unrevealed in the current data. Overall, we have no evidence that exposure – job tenure – reduces or increases the strain associated with displays of empathy.

In sum, the results argue that Emotional Empathy is not an epiphenomenal construct. Rather, it is likely that EE has been a full member in the legion of stressors that make service work psychologically risky. It accounts for unique variance, poses challenges to worker and supervisor alike, and begs for further understanding.

Managerial Implications

Two conclusions flow from our results. First, there is a clear positive relationship between EE and Depressed Mood. Second, this relationship is dysfunctional from a strategic perspective. The theoretical and applied literature is replete with arguments that emotionally identifying with customers is vital to satisfying service encounters and, in the end, satisfied customers. However, the findings indicate that FLEs are rewarded with low strain if they emotionally detach from customers.

Managers are, therefore, challenged to develop practices that invite FLEs to display empathy toward customers. Some researchers suggest hiring people who are stress resistant [55;56]. However, there is something not right with the idea of scouring the labor pool looking for people who can withstand a stressful job. From a human and a human resources perspective, a better tactic is to strike at the job and its sources of strain.

In spite of a somewhat limited knowledge base, there may be two attack points – one management policy, the other job design. Regarding policy, managers may wish to consider a mix of the following practices:

- Train specific empathy behaviors
- Make empathy behaviors central to performance feedback sessions between supervisor and FLE
- Proactively use call center monitoring systems to measure this type of behavior

- Once measured, reinforce this behavior with social and monetary rewards; essentially work against the negative reinforcement pattern discussed earlier

A second approach rests on examining and changing the natural ecology of service encounters. Investigators have consistently made the case that call center service representatives are too highly controlled by pace and technology (Ferne, 1998; Varca, 2001). Control over one's immediate job environment may reduce strain in two ways. First, it allows workers to escape stressors at their own timing, not a machine's. Second, workers are instinctively motivated to reduce stressors and will likely find methods for doing this if given enough latitude. Our findings indicate FLEs are escaping pain by reducing empathetic display during service encounters. Simple changes in job design that emphasize empowering FLEs may lead to practices that help service providers empathize with customers but avoid the concomitant strain effects.

Conclusion

The present study suggests that Emotional Empathy is significantly related to Depressed Mood at Work. In some ways, this result is not startling. We've known for decades that service encounters are stressful and it makes intuitive sense that psychologically distancing oneself from the customer also distances oneself from the strain associated with caring for that customer. The goals now are to develop a fuller understanding of Emotional Empathy during service encounters and to innovate a set of best practices that increases the likelihood that FLEs will engage in Emotional Empathy.

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