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Thank you for your assistance.
Stressful demands or helpful guidance? The role of display rules in Indian call centers

Laura M. Little, Debra L. Nelson, Matt Quade, Andrew Ward

A R T I C L E   I N F O
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A B S T R A C T
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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J O U R N A L   C O M M U N I C A T I O N

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, etc. have already moved a substantial portion of their call centers to India. Thus, it is imperative that we understand how display rules are viewed in a non-American environment.

We would like to thank Purva Kansal and Kanu Priya for their help with data collection for this paper.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lmlittle@terry.uga.edu (L.M. Little), debra.nelson@okstate.edu (D.L. Nelson), matt.quade@okstate.edu (M. Quade), award@lehigh.edu (A. Ward).

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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 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...
such as time, money, information and knowledge. As these definitions clearly indicate, what one individual may view as a resource, another individual may not; thus an important component of COR theory is the appraisal of resources. It is important to note that COR theory does not stipulate that this appraisal is a peculiar characteristic of an individual. Instead, appraisals are shared and culturally scripted (Hobfoll, 2001). Normative tendencies regarding how resources are evaluated exist in different cultures (Hobfoll, 1989; Rokeach, 1973) and these normative evaluations may differ across cultures.

Potential cultural differences in normative appraisals are likely reflective of fundamental cultural differences. Previous research has modeled differences in culture along a number of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). As mentioned above, two dimensions that are most germane to the present study, because they relate to individual’s view of management practices, are power distance and individualism–collectivism (DeCarlo & Agarwal, 1999). Power distance refers to the way society distributes power between subordinate and supervisor and involves the degree to which inequalities in this relationship are seen as acceptable (Hofstede, 1980). People in high power distance cultures believe that a very vertical relationship between supervisor and subordinate is appropriate, whereas low power-distance cultures emphasize equality or horizontal relationships.

Individualism–collectivism involves the degree to which individuals in particular cultures are integrated into groups. In individualistic cultures, individuals are expected to look out for themselves, and there is an emphasis on autonomy and independence (Bochner, 1994; Kashima & Callan, 1994). In collectivistic cultures, individuals are integrated into cohesive in-groups and the emphasis is on belongingness, harmony and cooperation (Triandis, 1995). Triandis et al. (1995, 1998) argued that the power distance and individualism–collectivism dimensions of culture could be combined to form a more detailed description of particular cultures. Crossing these dimensions produces four cultural types: horizontal individualism (autonomous self-concept coupled with equality in status), vertical individualism (autonomous with expectations of inequality), horizontal collectivism (the self-concept is closely tied to aspects of the group and the self is seen as an equal to others in that group), and vertical collectivism (the self-concept is closely tied to aspects of the group but the self is seen as different from some group members and inequality is acceptable). The United States is considered the prototype of an individualist society and is characterized as having a low power distance (Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, & Lawler, 2000; Triandis, 1995) making it a horizontal-individualist culture. India, on the other hand, displays very high-power distance (perhaps the highest in the world) and is collectivist in orientation, (Chhokar, 1999; Triandis, 1998) making it a vertical–collectivist culture.

Contrary to previous studies using American samples, in this study, we propose that perceptions of supervisor focus on display rules will reduce emotional exhaustion in Indian call center representatives. This is because their vertical–collectivist culture will allow them to view this type of focus as a resource rather than a demand. This resource, in turn, will allow them to meet the demands of the job, reducing emotional exhaustion and subsequently reducing performance errors and increasing satisfaction.

**Display rules and emotional exhaustion in Indian call center representatives**

Previous research investigating American customer service representatives interacting with American customers indicated that if supervisors focus on rules about the interpersonal aspects of the job (display rules) then an increase in emotional exhaustion is observed (Goldberg & Grandey, 2007; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). Emotional exhaustion is the extent to which employees feel drained and overwhelmed at work (Leiter & Maslach, 1988). As such, emotional exhaustion represents resource loss in the emotional domain (Shirom, 1989), and the increase in emotional exhaustion due to focus on display rules can be explained by COR theory. When supervisors place more importance on interpersonal job demands, they encourage their employees to pay closer attention to these interpersonal aspects of the job (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005). This focus prompts self-regulatory activity, which depletes resources and ultimately results in emotional exhaustion. Supervisory focus on display rules increased emotional exhaustion in an American sample (Wilk & Moynihan, 2005).

In contrast, we proposed that due to the vertical–collectivist nature of the Indian culture as well as differences due to the nature of the job, display rule perceptions in Indian call center representatives would decrease emotional exhaustion. First, as mentioned above, the Indian culture is a high power distance, collectivist culture (Hofstede, 1980) as opposed to the low power distance, individualist American culture. Greater power distance implies greater acceptance of and reliance on authority and a greater need for rules (i.e., Meade, 1967). Need fulfillment is fundamental to avoiding burnout (Jackson, Turner, & Brief, 1987). Focus on display rules fulfills representatives’ need for rules and authority and can be considered an energetic resource (i.e., information, knowledge).

Collectivism implies subordinating personal to collective goals. Members of collectivist societies consider work and succeeding at work as a duty (Sinha & Sinha, 1990). Focus on display rules gives Indian call center representatives specific information as to the importance of the specific goals of the collective (the organization) and as to how to fulfill their duties within that collective. Indian call center representatives desire rules, and they welcome direction from their supervisor. This direction helps them fulfill collective goals. Again, we propose that this information aligns with specific needs found in a vertical collectivist culture (i.e., need for rules and desire to meet the goals of the collective) and thus, will be viewed as an energetic resource.

This resource will, in turn, reduce resource drain (i.e., burnout) because it aids the representatives’ abilities to fulfill their job duties and meet organizational goals. When less focus is placed on the interpersonal aspects of the job, expectations concerning how to behave when interacting with customers are more ambiguous. This lack of clarity as to behavioral expectations and collective goals from one’s supervisor (a person they expect to be directive) creates emotional exhaustion. Experimental research has shown that Indian subjects were likely to express more preference for authoritarian rather than democratic leaders (Meade, 1967). Furthermore, empowerment led to reduced job satisfaction in an Indian sample (while it increased job satisfaction in an American sample) (Robert et al., 2000).

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The need for focus on rules regarding interpersonal interactions may be exacerbated in this context because Indian call centers are quite different than their American counterparts (Poster, 2007). The typical customer service representative in India (and all those in our sample) works at night and interacts with a culture (in this case, American) that is quite different from his/her own. Interpersonal interactions can be fraught with complexity and difficulty, increasing the likelihood of burnout and specifically emotional exhaustion. Research has shown that Indian call center representatives interacting with American customers report significantly more negative health symptoms than call center representatives interacting with customers within their own culture (Poster, 2005). Ambiguity surrounding how one should act can exacerbate the problem. Focus on display rules gives the representative an understanding of specific expectations regarding their interactions with customers from another culture. Research on expatriates indicates that accurate and specific expectations regarding how to interact with locals (from a culture different from their own), are associated with better adjustment to foreign assignments (i.e. Black, 1988; Shaffer, Harrison, & Gilley, 1999).

When a supervisor focuses on display rules, it fulfills a need for an Indian customer service representative who in turn uses this information as a resource. Display rules provide the Indian call center representative with a specific goal and an understanding of what their organization values, along with guidance concerning how to interact with individuals from a different culture. This is considered a resource for individuals in a vertical–collectivist society because it gives them an indication of what type of behavior is valued in the organization, and reduces the energy drain caused by worrying about the unknown or repercussions for bad performance. Furthermore, it fulfills their expectations that their leader provide direction.

Thus, we hypothesize:

**Hypothesis 1.** Service representative’s perceptions of display rules negatively relate to emotional exhaustion.

**Emotional exhaustion, performance errors, and job satisfaction**

Conservation of resources theory predicts that loss of resources will cause emotional exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion, in turn, is thought to increase errors and reduce job satisfaction. When employees have fewer resources available to them, making mistakes is more likely. Studies investigating medical professionals indicated that increase in emotional exhaustion increases medical errors (i.e., Spence Laschinger & Leiter, 2006; West et al., 2006). Additionally, emotional exhaustion is thought to have enduring psychological consequences, including job dissatisfaction (i.e., Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Tetrick, Slack, Da Silva, & Sinclair, 2000). The work-related resource drain indicative of emotional exhaustion leads employees to become dissatisfied with their jobs.

COR theory is regarded as universally applicable in that individuals strive to retain resources and avoid the negative impacts of resource drain. However, COR theory may differ culturally in terms of individuals’ appraisals of resources and demands. We expect culture to impact how call center representatives view display rules but we do not anticipate that culture will impact the relationship between emotional exhaustion and errors and job satisfaction. Cross-cultural theory provides some insight into why invariance will likely be present in these relationships. This research suggests that culture influences people’s preferences for specific things as well as preferences as to how things are done (i.e., Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Robert et al., 2000; Triandis, 1994). Culture is a filter through which people interpret information including the appropriateness of managerial practices (Erez, 1994). Culturally-determined perceptions can impact resource appraisal. If managerial practices are appraised as adding to resource reserves, then individuals are likely to view their jobs more positively, and commit fewer errors. Preferences may vary culture to culture, but the impact of lack of resources on one’s cognitive abilities and attitude should be consistent across cultures (Robert et al., 2000).

Finally, we do not predict a direct relationship between supervisor focus on display rules and job satisfaction and performance errors; instead, the impact of display rules occurs through the impact on emotional exhaustion. We propose that display rules in the Indian call center environment are perceived as resources to the call center representative. Such additional resources decrease burnout because they counteract the potential resource drain involved in the interpersonal interaction. The reduction of emotional exhaustion is the mechanism through which these perceived resources (i.e., display rules) impact positive outcomes (reduced errors and increased satisfaction).

**Hypothesis 2.** Emotional exhaustion positively relates to supervisor-rated performance errors.

**Hypothesis 3.** Emotional exhaustion negatively relates to job satisfaction.

**Hypothesis 4.** Service representatives’ perceptions of display rules indirectly and negatively relate to performance errors through emotional exhaustion.

**Hypothesis 5.** Service representatives’ perceptions of display rules indirectly and positively relate to job satisfaction through emotional exhaustion.

**Methods**

**Participants and procedure**

Customer service representatives from 18 different call centers located in a major city in North India were asked to fill out surveys. In order to increase the generalizability of our findings, we asked eight employees and one supervisor from each company to which we...
had access to participate. Of the 18 call centers, four were U.S. companies, one was a New Zealand-owned company, one was a British company and the rest were Indian owned. The recruited sample consisted of 144 full time employees, all of whom dealt exclusively with American customers. Of the 144 employees, 143 completed the self-report survey. Performance error ratings provided by immediate supervisors were available for 137 employees. Forty-nine percent of the participants were female, the average age was 23.86 (SD = 1.91), 100% were Indian, and the average tenure in the current job was 1.07 years (SD = .56). Sixty-one percent of the supervisors were male, the average age was 28.89 (SD = 1.63), 100% were Indian, and the average tenure in the current job was 2.54 years (SD = .57).

Measures

All of our scales were presented in English and were first assessed by several respondents fitting the same profile as our sample to help with accuracy of interpretations. Through this process several minor wording adjustments were made to the scales to facilitate cross-cultural understanding as well as ensure the items were appropriate for this particular job context.

Display rules

Wilk and Moynihan’s (2005) 6-item scale was used to measure employee’s perception of his/her supervisor’s focus on display rules. Customer service representatives were asked to indicate how important they thought specific activities were from their supervisor’s perspective (1) not important at all to (7) very important. Items included “Calming angry customers” (α=.83). Wilk and Moynihan (2005) measured supervisor perceptions of their own focus on display rules so we also collected supervisor perceptions using the same scale (α=.74). However, because our sample size would be severely reduced had we used supervisor perceptions (n = 18 as compared to n = 137) and because supervisor perceptions and subordinate perceptions are significantly correlated (.33, p < .001), we chose to use employee perceptions in our primary model while presenting support for convergent validity between these two referents in an additional analysis.

Emotional exhaustion

Employees completed the three emotional exhaustion items from the Shirom-Melamed Burnout Measure (SMBM) (2003) which asks respondents to indicate how often they have felt a particular way at work (α=.87). A sample item is “I feel I am unable to be sensitive to the needs of coworkers and customers”. Responses ranged from “never or almost never” (1) to “always or almost always” (7).

Performance errors

The performance dimension (performance errors) was measured using a three-item scale which included items “This employee is prone to mistakes”, “This employee makes errors on calls with customers” and “This employee is inaccurate with customers.” This construct was measured on a 5-point scale from (1) Strongly Disagree to (5) Strongly Agree (α=.85).

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction was measured using Hackman and Oldham’s (1975) three-item general job satisfaction scale which included the sample item “Generally speaking, I like working here” and was measured on a seven-point Likert scale from (1) Strongly Disagree to (7) Strongly Agree (α=.78).

Control

In this study, we felt that tenure might impact perceptions of supervisory focus on display rules because the longer one has been at the organization, the more understanding they may have as to display rule expectations. This increased understanding may impact these individuals’ perceptions of focus on display rules. Tenure may also be related to errors. The execution of meeting display rule expectations could be considered a learned skill. Over time an individual will be able to perform a skill faster, with less effort, and with fewer errors (Kanfer & Ackerman, 1996). The more practice an individual has, practice which the call center representative’s job certainly provides, the faster and more accurately they will perform (Fisk & Schneider, 1983). Thus, the longer an individual has been working in a particular organization, the more the work becomes routine and the fewer mistakes s/he is likely to make. We therefore controlled for employee tenure.

Results

Bivariate and descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. We tested the primary model using structural equation modeling (SEM) in MPlus. Following the suggestion of Williams and Anderson (1994), we used randomly chosen parcels of individual scale items to create indicators of the display rules scale because of the lengthy nature of this scale. Because all other scale dimensions were three items or less, we did not parcel any other variable. We followed the two-step approach recommended by Anderson and

\footnote{The two-factor model consisted of the self-report items loading on one factor and one factor with the supervisory rated performance error items. In the three-factor model we collapsed emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction onto one item.}

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Table 1
Means, standard deviations, intercorrelations, and reliabilities.

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<td>6.49</td>
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<td>(.83)</td>
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<tr>
<td>t1.3 Display rules (Sup)</td>
<td>6.76</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.33</td>
<td>(.74)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>t1.4 Emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>-.51</td>
<td>-.30</td>
<td>(.89)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>t1.5 Performance errors</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>-.27</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.70</td>
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<tr>
<td>t1.6 Tenure</td>
<td>1.07</td>
<td>.56</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>-.28</td>
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Note. N = 137.

** p < .01.
* p < .05.

Gerbing (1988) in that we first tested the fit of a measurement model and then tested the hypothesized model. Additionally, to support the factor structure of our constructs as well as reduce concerns of common method bias, our four-factor measurement model was compared with one, two, and three factor models using confirmatory factor analysis. All alternative models fit the data less well than our hypothesized model based on chi-square difference tests (p < .01). Additionally, the fit indices (CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR) of the alternative models fell below the thresholds of good fit.

Because there was some (although, very little; ICC (1) = .04) evidence of non-independence in the performance errors outcome due to supervisors rating multiple subordinates, we accounted for this non-independence using the Huber–White sandwich estimator which allowed us to robustly account for possible non-independence while still retaining all of the benefits of SEM (the use of latent variables and the ability to test all variables and the indirect effects concurrently in the model). Further, to support the factor structure of our constructs as well as reduce concerns of common method bias, our four-factor measurement model was compared with one, two, and three factor models using confirmatory factor analysis. All alternative models fit the data less well than our hypothesized model based on chi-square difference tests (p < .01). Additionally, the fit indices (CFI, RMSEA, and SRMR) of the alternative models fell below the thresholds of good fit.

The measurement model produced good fit to the data (see Table 2). We also tested two alternative models. Although as mentioned above, we do not propose display rules to directly relate to the outcome variables because we contend that resource drain (or lack thereof) will explain this relationship, we acknowledge that rules having general could be viewed as a positive job characteristic and thus impact job satisfaction directly. Furthermore, one could argue that display rules could directly reduce errors in regard to how call center representatives interact with customers. Thus, we verified that our hypothesized model best fit the data by testing alternative model a in which we allowed display rules to predict performance errors. Consistent with our hypotheses, the chi-square differences test between these models (see Table 2) were not significant, supporting the more parsimonious hypothesized model. We also tested alternative model b in which we included only the direct path from display rules to job satisfaction. Consistent with our hypotheses, the chi-square differences test between these models (see Table 2) was not significant, supporting the more parsimonious, hypothesized model.

As can be seen in Fig. 1, display rules negatively related to emotional exhaustion (γ = -.58, p < .01) supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypotheses 2 and 3 were also supported in that emotional exhaustion related to performance errors (γ = -.51, p < .01) and job satisfaction (γ = -.51, p < .01). In regard to the indirect effects hypothesis, display rules were significantly and indirectly related to both performance errors (β = -.16, p < .05) and job satisfaction (β = -.29, p < .05). Thus, Hypotheses 4 and 5 were also supported.

Additional analysis

As mentioned above, Wilk and Moynihan (2005) investigated the impact of supervisor focus on display rules on emotional exhaustion in an American sample. Thus, to support our use of employee perceptions, we ran additional analysis investigating the impact of supervisor focus on display rules on emotional exhaustion, performance errors and job satisfaction. For the additional analysis, random coefficient modeling (RCM) with HLM 6.0 software (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1992; Bryk, Raudenbush, & Congdon, 1994) was used. The outcomes were partitioned into within-person (i.e., sigma squared) and between-person (i.e., tau) variance components. Additionally, the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC) were calculated indicating the amount of between-individual variance contained in each outcome. The Level 1 data in our study were emotional exhaustion, performance errors and job satisfaction.

Table 2
Results of structural nested model comparison.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Model</th>
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<td>60</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t2.5 Hypothesized mediated model</td>
<td>105.78**</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t2.6 Display rules to emotional exhaustion to performance errors and job satisfaction</td>
<td>102.57**</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t2.7 Alternative model a</td>
<td>103.60**</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.96</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 137, *p < .05, **p < .01.
job satisfaction. Level 1 predictors were grand-mean centered within person as per the recommendations of Hofmann and Gavin (1998). Supervisor ratings of focus on display rules represented the Level 2 variable. Following Bliese and Ployhart’s (2002) recommendations, the basic null model was estimated first, specifying just the outcome and no predictors. Results (see Table 3) supported the primary study’s findings in that display rules negatively impacted emotional exhaustion ($\gamma_{10} = -.70$, p < .01) and emotional exhaustion positively impacted performance errors ($\gamma_{10} = .11$, p < .05) and negatively impacted job satisfaction ($\gamma_{10} = -.41$, p < .01).

### Discussion

Given the growth of offshore outsourcing from firms in the U.S. and the U.K., the study of call centers should be expanded to the study of other cultures. Our study focused on call centers in India, but there is growth in offshore call centers in the Philippines, Panama, Turkey, and South Africa. The globalization of call centers has many benefits if the organizations are managed well. To what degree has the pace of our research kept up with the growth of this phenomenon? Can we assume that our theories and management practices work the same way in other countries and cultures? Should we manage a call center in Bangalore, India using the same practices that we use to manage a call center in Austin, Texas?

The results of our study provide preliminary support indicating that failing to recognize cultural context would be a mistake, especially concerning a supervisor’s emphasis on the interpersonal aspects of work. In a U.S. sample, Wilk and Moynihan (2005) found that emotion work, as enacted by call center representatives, is influenced at the supervisory level more so than the job level. In their study, supervisors’ ratings of the importance of display rules (interpersonal job demands) were strongly related to subordinate emotional exhaustion. Having a supervisor who emphasizes the interpersonal requirements of the call center job, in their sample, was more emotionally exhausting.

In our study, we found the opposite. In the Indian call center, employee ratings of the supervisor’s emphasis on display rules (interpersonal job demands) was associated with lower emotional exhaustion. These results support the notion that what American call center representatives view as a stressful demand was seen by Indian call center representatives as a helpful resource, one that may reduce the ambiguity and complexity of a stressful job. These findings suggest that we should not assume that the experience of emotion work in various cultures is equivalent. As suggested by Pal and Buzzanell’s (2008) case study, Indian call center workers who serve customers from different cultures engage in “complex identity negotiations” (p. 46) that differ from the challenges experienced by similar employees in domestic call center situations. Similarly, Poster (2007), based on interviews and case studies, cautioned that employees in transnational call centers are at risk in terms of physical stress and mental instability, along with deleterious effects on family lives and career progress. These workers encounter hybrid cultural experiences that can have unsettling effects, but our study suggests that supervisors who emphasize display rules are engaging in managerial practices that provide resources, in the form of information and guidance, to help call center representatives navigate demands that emanate from work that is global and transnational in nature.

We also investigated the relationships of display rules and burnout with two important work-related outcomes: customer service performance errors and job satisfaction. Supervisory emphasis on display rules related to both outcomes through the mechanism of employee emotional exhaustion. Supervisory emphasis on display rules can have far-reaching positive effects on the Indian call center. Because this focus reduces emotional exhaustion, performance errors are subsequently reduced. Performance errors can be costly to any organization, but in the customer service arena, where accuracy of response is a key driver of overall customer satisfaction and where customer rage regarding how problems are handled is experienced by 70% of callers (Customer Care Alliance, 2005), errors can be particularly disastrous. Display rules also indirectly and positively related to job satisfaction through reduced emotional exhaustion. Job satisfaction has been related to turnover and absenteeism (Mobley, 1977; Porter et al., 1974; Sagie, 1998). We found no direct links between a supervisor’s perceived emphasis on interpersonal demands and making errors or on being satisfied with the job. Instead, these outcomes were influenced through the intra-individual experience of emotion work in the form of emotional exhaustion.

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The theoretical contribution of our study lies in its extension of conservation of resources (COR) theory to a novel cultural context, and the investigation of COR with Hofstede’s cultural framework. One of the central tenets of COR theory is that appraisals are influenced by culture, yet this proposition has been under-researched. COR theory was proposed as an alternative to other appraisal-based theories because of its focus on the environment as seen through the eyes of culture (Hobfall, 2001). We predicted that the vertical-collectivist nature of Indian culture would affect the way the call center workers appraised supervisor focus on display rules. Specifically, we proposed that emphasis on display rules would have a functional effect on emotional exhaustion, and the data supported our prediction. One of the key propositions of COR theory is that resource losses are much more salient than resource gains. We cannot, within the limits of our data, ascertain whether the Indian call center employees viewed display rules as resource gains, or as preventing resource losses, however, our findings suggest that focus on display rules does counteract resource loss. This finer-grained analysis should be pursued in future studies. In addition, our study supports the efficacy of using Hofstede’s cultural dimensions in examining the experience of call center employees.

The practical implications of our study revolve around the finding that differences in appraisals of display rules lead to differences in supervisory effectiveness across cultures. Managerial practices are particularly salient in an industry in which turnover is high, and costly to organizations. Supervisors who emphasize display rules do so with the goal of providing good customer service; yet those who follow this managerial practice in the U.S. may find just the opposite. In the U.S., emphasizing the importance of display rules can lead to call center representative emotional exhaustion, which translates to more errors in customer service, and dissatisfied employees. Through experience, the supervisor may learn that highlighting the interpersonal aspects of work is not functional.

Our findings in India provide a strong counterevidence. Emphasizing the importance of interpersonal demands through display rules in vertical-collectivist cultures where employees interact with customers from other cultures may be received as helpful assistance because such guidance either helps employees gain resources, or prevents resource loss, and thus avoids the risks of emotional exhaustion. In turn, minimizing emotional exhaustion can lead to fewer errors in serving customers, and more satisfied employees. In summary, managers cannot underestimate the impact of culture on perceptions of their practices and behavior, and must not assume that the effects of a particular practice like emphasizing display rules will translate in the same way in a different, especially transnational, setting. Practices that might seem like micromanaging to US managers may be construed as positive resources in complex jobs where clarity and touchstones for customer service are appreciated.

In addition, there are cross-cultural implications from our study that are important. In taking calls from Americans, the Indian call center representatives in our study faced an ambiguous task. In emphasizing display rules, the supervisors act to reduce the ambiguity of whether the representatives should act like the customer or simply be themselves. The guidance concerning how to manage the cross-cultural interactions may serve to reduce emotional exhaustion.

Our study has some limitations that should be mentioned. Causality among the variables cannot be inferred because of the cross-sectional design. Future studies using COR theory would benefit from longitudinal designs, particularly because of COR theory’s proposition of loss spirals, which can only be detected over time. The potential for common method variance also exists, but correlations among the some of our study variables approach zero (Brannick, Chan, Conway, Lance, & Spector, 2010). Additionally, the four-factor model was supported when compared to three, two and one factor models which helps to minimize this concern. Supervisors, who provided data on performance errors, rated up to eight employees; therefore non-independence could exist in our data set. However, using the Huber–White sandwich technique allowed us to report estimates that are independent of between-group effects. Furthermore, because we asked one supervisor to rate up to eight employees per organization, this technique accounts for any group-level effects at the supervisory level and the organizational level (these levels are equivalent in our data set).

Additionally, as previously mentioned, Wilk and Moynihan (2005) measured supervisor perceptions of their own focus on display rules, whereas our primary model contained employee perception of supervisor focus on display. We collected and analyzed supervisory perceptions and determined that the nature of the results was the same regardless of whether we used supervisory perceptions or employee perceptions. This evidence of convergent validity supports the use of employee perceptions in our primary model.

There are many opportunities for future research in offshore, outsourced call centers. One fruitful strategy would be to investigate other cultural dimensions as they impact resource appraisals using COR theory. The Indian ethic of hospitality, for example, could make an emphasis on display rules more positively construed within that culture. ‘Atididi Devo Bhava’ (Sanskrit) reflects a time-honored rule for conduct in India, meaning guest is God and should be treated like a deity. Expressions of this custom include putting vermillion on the forehead of the guest, or welcoming a guest by placing a garland around his/her neck. So prevalent is this saying that the Indian Ministry of Tourism has mounted an entire campaign around it. Perhaps this cultural value extends to customers as well as tourists, thereby reminding the Indian call center representative of a time-honored custom amid interactions with hostile and angry customers. Future studies might also focus on whether display rules function in the same manner when call center representatives in other cultures are serving customers from their own culture. Future studies should also investigate the intermediary processes that link display rules and emotional exhaustion. For example, it may be that clear display rules change the service representative’s view of the job (i.e., make it clear that it is just a job) and therefore reduce emotional exhaustion.

The examination of the call center experience in other cultures is warranted. In addition to India, call centers can also be found in Ireland, Turkey, the Philippines, and Panama, with predicted expansion in South America and South Africa. Such settings would be appropriate for examining COR theory in conjunction with other appraisal-based theories of job stress and burnout. Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) cognitive appraisal theory, for example, focuses on individual appraisals of stressors, rather than on culturally-
determined appraisals. It would be of value to ascertain whether these are competing or complementary theories in a variety of cultural settings. In summary, we need to ramp up our research on the translation of theories and managerial practices across cultures. Call center outsourcing in India has not been uniformly successful. Delta Airlines has recently closed its call centers in India, and several companies, including Dell, United Airlines, and Chrysler have scaled back their call centers in India, citing, in part, customer complaints about the quality of service and commensurate decreases in customer satisfaction (Prada & Sheth, 2009). It is our hope that other researchers will join us in partnering with management practitioners to help understand the role of culture in effective management, thereby contributing to the success of global ventures.

**Uncited references**

Huber, 1967

Schneider and Fisk, 1982

Singelis et al., 1998

White, 1982

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