Unique Aspects of Stress in Human Service Work

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Two unique stressors associated with human service work are emotional dissonance, particularly the need to hide negative emotions (emotion work), and client/customer-related social stressors. The latter may involve disproportionate or ambiguous client/customer expectations and/or verbally aggressive customers. These stressors affect all human service workers, even though they may vary in the extent to which their work involves lasting relationships with clients/customers, and in the amount of training they have received to deal with client/customer-related social stressors. For example, health professionals typically develop long-lasting relationships with their clients whereas call centre workers may have only a single brief interaction. In accordance with contemporary theories of work stress (conservation of resources, effort-reward imbalance, demand-control-support), we argue that social support and training designed to develop “role separation” are crucial resources needed to help human service workers cope with the unique stressors of their jobs.

“Wouldn’t it be nice if a bad haircut could be returned or resolved to another customer?” (Zeithaml & Bitner, 2000, p. 14). What Zeithaml and Bitner are referring to in this quote is the so-called *uno acto* principle. Indeed, service employees usually have only one opportunity to provide an excellent service. This cannot be achieved if any “repair” is necessary. For example, whenever surgery is unnecessarily applied, when wrong medicine is prescribed or delivered, when social workers fail to remove an at-risk child (they might succeed after failing initially), when a police officer shoots the wrong person, when a psychological therapy plan fails, or when the haircut is bad, no corrective action can fully compensate for this — not from the viewpoint of the customer or client. This situation is typically different in non-service jobs. For example, when car assembly workers make mistakes, quality control procedures may well be able to detect this and fix the problem before the car is delivered to the end customer. There are exceptions of course; for example, mistakes by non-service workers such as train drivers or airline pilots can have disastrous and irremediable effects.

In human service work, there is usually no quality control in between the service employee and the customer. Each employee is fully responsible for high quality and satisfactory service delivery. If a bad haircut could be returned, this would reduce the burden of responsibility and risk and would make human service work perhaps less stressful.

However, high responsibility and risk are probably not the only and perhaps not even the most serious stressors in human service work. Our aim with this article is outlined as follows. After clarifying the concept of human service work, we will consider the kinds of demands that are particularly stressful in human service work. We will also argue that job resources are likely to play an important compensating (buffering) role with these demands. Also, the effects of stress in human service work are likely to be different from those associated with other jobs or occupations, and are therefore worth investigation. The aim we pursue in the present article is not to provide a general overview of previous research on human service occupations (see Dollard, 2003). Rather, we aim to present an overview of the distinctive concepts and related evidence that advance our understanding of stress in human service jobs.

Human Services

Human services, which are sometimes called direct person-related jobs (Mills, 1986), should be distinguished from other kinds of services, which are called indirect person-related jobs. In direct person-related jobs, the primary task is to modify the clients physically or psychologically, as in the case of counsellors, nurses, social workers and teachers (Hasenfeld, 1983, 1992). In other kinds of services the primary tasks are different. For example, the cashier’s primary task in a supermarket is to register the purchased goods, to take in money and to pack the purchases in bags. It is only a secondary task to make the customer feel good. This paper will focus on direct person-related, human
service jobs, in which tangible products are of minor importance compared to the "experiences" customers receive.

In human services, the knowledge, skills, and motivation of the employee, the organisational background and employees' working conditions and the expectations and behaviour of the customers together create the service delivery process (Nerdinger, 1994; Norman, 1984).

Obviously, the expectations and behaviours of customers represent an additional source of work demands, compared with those that exist for non-service jobs. Based on a considerable quantity of qualitative and quantitative research, Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Barry (1988) found that customers desire the following features in the services they are provided: (a) dependability (reliability); (b) prompt delivery (responsiveness); (c) value for money and use of high quality equipment (assurance); (d) physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and written material that look good (tangibles); and (e) individual attention (empathy). On the one hand, many organisations have some idea of what their customers want (i.e., organisational customer perceptions, OCP), by means of customer surveys, customer complaints analysis and so on, and they instruct their employees to behave accordingly. Researchers have shown that this often results in what is called emotion work or emotional labour, which may cause strain for employees. On the other hand, service employees are directly confronted with individual customers, and the behaviour of customers during interactions may also add to employee strain (customer-related social stressors, CSS). To put it differently, customers themselves may add to employee strain at two levels: on an aggregated level in terms of OCP, which affects job design and leads to particular behavioural work demands for employees (e.g., emotional labour), and on an individual level during employee-customer interactions (e.g., CSS).

Service-related Stressors: Emotion Work and Customer-related Stressors

We believe that the concepts of emotion work and CSS represent the most promising recent approach to stress in human services, in addition to what is already known about occupational stress. However, before elaborating on the stressful aspects of emotion work and CSS, we will define what a stressor is. Conservation-of-resources theory (COR; Hobfoll, 1989) defines a stressor as an actual or anticipated loss of valuable resources. Valued resources are those that increase the likelihood of experiencing pleasure by providing positive reinforcers. For example, those features that fulfill basic human needs (e.g., for security, a sense of relatedness, self-esteem, autonomy, mastery, personal growth) represent resources, and a real or anticipated loss (reduction) of them is expected to cause psychological strain. Work stress theories often define stressors as obstacles to task fulfillment (e.g., Semmer, 1996). Such a view is compatible with COR theory because obstacles to task fulfillment may lead to a loss of certain resources. For instance, low role clarity (an obstacle to task fulfillment) may lead to a reduced sense of mastery, while low complexity may threaten feelings of personal growth. Thus, role clarity and an appropriate level of job complexity represent resources. If a supervisor is replaced by another one who, for example, does not set clear goals and does not delegate complex tasks to his or her subordinates, a reduced sense of mastery and/or personal growth may be the consequences, which finally may result in severe stress reactions.

People also aim to gain surpluses in resources, which can then be expended in minimising or decreasing unpleasant experiences when they occur. For example, employees may seek to maintain good relationships with colleagues in order to receive support from them when necessary. A perceived lack of available support (and/or poor social relations at work) in general has been consistently shown to be related to strain, and there is also evidence that social support is particularly useful if other stressors are present (e.g., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Dormann & Zapf, 1999). In the following, we will argue that certain aspects of emotion work and CSS represent stressors in human service work because they may lead to a real or anticipated loss of resources.

Emotion Work

Morris and Feldman (1996, p. 987) defined emotion work as the "effort, planning, and control needed to express organizationally desired emotions during interpersonal transactions" (emphasis added). Strauzins (2000) found emotional work to consist of three main dimensions: (a) companionship (positive interactions); (b) help; and (c) assistance in self-regulation of feelings, and showed how the balance of these components varies in service workers' interactions with their supervisees, their workmates, their clients and at home with the family.

One aspect of emotion work is the requirement to express positive and (sometimes) negative emotions toward customers (e.g., Morris & Feldman, 1996, 1997; Zapf, Vogt, Seifert, Mertini; & Isic, 1999; Zapf, 2002). However, Zapf (2002) argued that this is not per se stressful. Rather, only emotional dissonance should be conceived as stressful. The concept of emotional dissonance was developed by Hochschild (1983). It refers to the frequency of having to display (usually positive) emotions that are not in line with genuinely felt ones (usually neutral or negative emotions). For instance, smiling at a difficult customer may create emotional dissonance. Indeed a recent study of call centre workers confirmed that emotional dissonance was more important than other forms of emotional labour in accounting for variance in emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction (Lewig & Dollard, 2003).

The reason why emotional dissonance causes strain is the requirement by organisations both to down-regulate existing negative emotions and to up-regulate positive emotions. This requires not only that appropriate strategies are available to do so but also a degree of self-control. According to Muraven and Baumeister (2000), self-control strength is a limited resource, and the COR theory predicts that its depletion causes strain (Hobfoll, 1989). Zapf et al. (1999) argued that if emotional dissonance is held constant, the requirement to display positive and/or negative emotions will not relate to strain. The reason is that displaying emotions that are in line with one's current feelings (otherwise there would be emotional dissonance) does not require investment of resources and, consequently, does not cause strain.

Emotional dissonance has been repeatedly associated with ill-health (e.g., Abraham, 1998; Brotheridge & Lee, 1998; Graney, 1998; Morris & Feldman, 1996, 1997; Zapf, 2002). In his review of 12 studies, Zapf (2002) found an average correlation of $r = .32$ between emotional dissonance and emotional exhaustion. However, Brotheridge and Graney (2002) found that only the demand to hide negative emotions was related to burnout, whereas having to display positive emotions was positively related to personal accomplishment. Indeed, the more frequency of display of positive or negative emotions does not exhibit a consistent pattern of relations with employee strain variables (Zapf, 2002).

The concept of emotional dissonance itself does not represent a purely subjective phenomenon. Events at work that are commonly shared by all employees may lead most
to experience negative emotions. In this regard, the concept of customer-related social stressors (CSS) is of particular importance. For example, if aggressive customers are frequently encountered in a certain job (an objective job condition), and if employees are required to display positive emotions (another objective job condition), emotional dissonance should occur. It should be emphasised that emotional dissonance is not identical to negative emotion and/or strain. Rather, emotional dissonance leads to a loss of the capability to regulate one's emotions, that is, the loss of a particular internal resource. As the empirical evidence shows, emotional dissonance is certainly one of the major stressors in human service work. However, CSS have effects above and beyond emotional dissonance. This point will be elaborated in the following section.

Customer-related Social Stressors

In order to investigate whether interactions with customers are inherently stressful, researchers have sometimes measured the frequency or duration of such interactions (e.g., Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2002). However, these aspects of human service work are often unrelated to strain or only show weak relations (e.g., Bulan, Erickson, & Wharton, 1997; Cordes, Dougherty, & Blum, 1997; Dorman, Zapf, & Ilic, in press; Morris & Feldman, 1997). It appears that customers' actual behaviours during service transactions may be more stressful than the length or frequency of interactions with customers. In other words it may be the behaviours that constitute CSS. CSS may not only lead to emotional dissonance, which mediates their effect on strain, but may also directly affect strain themselves.

As mentioned, a theoretical explanation for why CSS cause strain is provided by COR theory, which suggests that individuals seek positive reinforcement. Thus, employees "seek to create and maintain personal characteristics (e.g., mastery or self-esteem) and social circumstances (e.g., tenure or intimacy) that will increase the likelihood of receipt of reinforcement and to avoid the loss of such characteristics and circumstances" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Dorman and Zapf (2003) argue that customer behaviour that (a) threatens employees' sense of mastery or self-esteem, (b) prevents employees from developing good relations with their customers, and/or (c) makes employees feel insecure during interactions with their customers, should be conceived of as instances in which resource loss may occur.

The results of several studies support the notion that customer-related stressors lead to negative organisational and psychological consequences, Grandey, Dickter, and Sin (2002) found that intense verbal abuse by customers of call-centre employees was related to negative mood at work. In turn, negative mood mediated the effect of abuse on job satisfaction and withdrawal behaviours. In a study of negative events at work, Binner, Booms, and Mohr (1994), found that, among those reported, 22% occurred during participants' dealings with "problem customers". In a diary study by Grandey, Tam, and Brauburger (2002) on anger-provoking events encountered by working students, 43% of such events referred to customers' mistreatment of them.

Dorman and Zapf (2003) developed four scales to measure four aspects of CSS: disproportionate customer expectations, (verbally) aggressive customers, ambiguous customer expectations and disliked customers. The relations linking these scales with aspects of burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, low personal accomplishment) were strong compared to those of a variety of other stressors, personality variables and variables of emotion work.

One can conclude that emotional dissonance and CSS are particular stressors that only employees in human service jobs have to face. The question is, what can be done to compensate for their negative effect? This leads to the issue of resources, which we will pursue next. First, however, it is relevant to note that human service occupations vary widely in the emotion work demands they comprise, and also in the amount of explicit training received to carry out this work. For example, therapists and medical professionals often have long-lasting relationships with their clients, of a very personal and intimate kind, and receive extensive training in how to maintain an effective and appropriately professional relationship within this intensively personal context. At the other extreme, call-centre workers may have only one brief interaction with each client, and although they may become upset by having to reply politely to abusive callers, run little risk of becoming emotionally over-involved with particular clients.

Teachers, lawyers, police, managers and other service workers fall between these two extremes. It may be that CSS is particularly likely where the emotional work demands of the job are not matched well to the worker's personal resources.

Resources in Human Service Jobs

Resources have been conceptualised differently in theories on work stress and in COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989). On the one hand, COR theory has conceptualised resources broadly as conditions, objects, energies and personal characteristics "that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects, personal characteristics, conditions, or energies" (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). In COR theory the concept of stressor is used synonymously with the concept of (loss of) resources. On the other hand, theories of work stress typically define job resources as "conditions" that reduce the impact of stressors (i.e., obstacles to task fulfilment) on strain.

Job Conditions as Resources

The most important resource conditions in work stress are control/autonomy and social support. For example, if colleagues withhold social support from an experienced nurse who is dealing with a "problem" patient (e.g., one who is heavy, awkward, dying), this represents a loss of resource, which acts as a stressor. However, if employees are constantly assured of their colleagues' support (even though such help may be rarely required) this assurance represents a resource surplus that may help to buffer the negative impact of resource losses (stressors) in other areas.

While many organisations try to reduce stressors, this is not always possible. Enhancing resources, however, represents a promising alternative. In terms of COR theory, even if prevention of resource loss is not always possible, facilitating the gain of resource surpluses in other domains, can be achieved. In a competitive business environment, organisations are often unable to protect their employees fully from stressful customer behaviour, and sometimes employees will have to adhere to display rules that are not in accord with their current feelings. Nevertheless, the negative effects of these conditions on employee health and wellbeing should be mitigated by the provision of appropriate job resources.

Unfortunately, the literature on human service work has so far added little to our knowledge of the specific resources that are useful in service jobs. The general conclusion from occupational stress research is that control/autonomy
(de Jonge, 1995; Karasek & Theorell, 1990), social support (Johnson & Hall; 1988; Kahn & Byosiere, 1992) and physical and emotional rewards (Siegrist, 1996, 1998) represent the major resources in almost every occupation. This is certainly plausible with regard to human service jobs. Indeed, Lewig and Dowall (2003) found that the imbalance between dissonance and rewards (esteem, money, security) rather than the direct effects of dissonance alone, accounted for more variance in emotional exhaustion and job dissatisfaction in call centre workers. However, in order to design service jobs that minimise the impact of service-related stressors, a better understanding of service-related resources is needed. In particular, our knowledge of the empirical evidence for the buffering effect of service-related resources is slender. This is an important aspect because the availability of resources to support the human service professions is under threat in some Western democracies. This is because of the economic rationalist policies adopted by numerous governments that are driven by an ideology of conservatism that fosters individualism rather than communalism (Lonne, 2003).

Nevertheless, some indirect evidence exists. For example, Derrmann et al. (2002) found that, compared with shoe-store clerks and employees in travel agencies, flight attendants experienced high levels of emotional dissonance and had to deal with highly disproportionate customer expectations and verbally aggressive customers; that is, service-related stressors were particularly high for flight attendants. On the other hand, flight attendants had little autonomy and only average levels of support when compared with employees in the other occupations. They also showed slightly higher levels of emotional exhaustion, but interestingly, lower levels of depersonalisation. We believe that this is because flight attendants receive considerable training on how to cope with the particular demands of their occupation. Availability of appropriate, customer-focused training might be an important resource to buffer the negative impact of stressors.

Schneider and colleagues (Schneider & Bowen, 1993; Schneider, White, & Paul, 1998) have also identified availability of appropriate training as an important "facilitative condition" for the development of an organisational service climate. These researchers defined facilitative conditions as organisational efforts towards removing obstacles to work, thus echoing the conceptualisation of job resources in job stress research. Other important resources mentioned are appropriate leadership (e.g., giving feedback and sharing information) and the quality of internal services in an organisation. Together these factors contribute to high levels of perceived service quality and satisfaction of customers. We believe that these resources may also serve as stress buffers for employees. Future research may demonstrate empirically that a joint optimisation of customer value and employee health is possible and necessary (see also Hart & Cotten, 2003).

Coping Strategies as Resources

Some aspects of the match between worker and occupational demands may well derive from the personality characteristics of the worker, with self-selection of those who are "interested in people" into service occupations. However, often the availability of appropriate training will facilitate the development of strategies to cope with stressful encounters at work. Employees may thus learn optimal ways to think and behave when dealing with stressful customers. In human service jobs, this often implies that one has to apply strategies of how to regulate one's own emotions. In most instances, this means employees having to display positive emotions, even when they feel neutral, or even experience negative emotions. Just putting a smile on one's face without actually having changed one's emotional state has been referred to as so-called surface acting (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983). Surface acting means "faking" one's inner feeling in one's emotional display, but it is "faking in bad faith" (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987, p. 32). During periods of surface acting, emotional dissonance between the inner feelings and the expression still exists (Zapf, 2002).

In order to avoid emotional dissonance and thus reduce the impact of stressful encounters on strain, so-called deep acting is recommended (Grandey, 2002; Hochschild, 1983). Through deep acting employees actively invoke thoughts, images and memories to induce a certain emotion. It also resembles a kind of faking, but in this instance it is "faking in good faith" (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). It has been suggested that deep acting is less strongly related to stress reaction than surface acting (Grandey, in press). Deep acting may, however, deplete employees' self-regulation capabilities (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), and COR theory suggests that this may represent a new stressor.

Although several strategies and techniques for deep acting exist (for an overview of mood-regulation strategies see Larsen, 2000), we believe that the worker's ability to separate personal emotions from the inherent demands of the job — a kind of role separation — represents one of the best strategies to counteract emotional dissonance and other threats of customer-related social stressors. Let us look more closely at how this role separation has been conceptualised in health care professions where, as noted above, comprehensive efforts are made to prepare practitioners for emotional work demands.

In health care a balance between emotional under- and over-involvement is necessary in the interactions between service providers and their clients. A degree of emotional distance between practitioner and recipient allows practitioners to continue to function in horrifying situations or when asked to treat people they may dislike. Emotional under-involvement on the practitioner's part will be experienced by the client as impersonal and uncaring, and perhaps by the practitioner as depersonalisation (Winsfield, 2003). On the other hand an over-involved emotional relationship, which inappropriately blurs the personal-professional boundary, is seen as both unethical and untherapeutic. The achievement of this balance is a high desirable outcome of professional training, which occurs over long periods and takes the form of both observational learning (watching experienced and prestigious models), and through didactic instruction in communication skills and professional ethics. The term "detached concern" used to be how this desirable balance was described in the medical literature, although Halpern (2001) and others prefer to replace it with "empathy", still with the implication of a caring and respectful attentiveness to the needs of the patient.

In other occupations detached concern can be defined as a paradoxical state in which the service employee is completely "there for" the customer, albeit emotionally detached from the customer's emotional state (e.g., Potter, 1983). Detached concern has been suggested to be among the most efficient moderators to reduce the impact of stressors on professional burnout (e.g., Savicki & Cooley, 1982). This effect has also been established in laboratory experimentation, which has shown that verbal harassment leads to less physical arousal when participants are encouraged to interpret it in a detached manner (Stember, 1997).
In contrast to both depersonalisation (a habituated cynical reaction) and emotional over-involvement, role separation allows the maintenance of positive regard towards the customer whilst differentiating between oneself and one's role. The relationship with the customer is actively re-interpreted as a relation between a representative of an occupation and/or organisation on the one hand and the individual customer who legitimately wants to be served on the other, rather than a personal relation between a customer and the worker's own self. In contrast to depersonalisation, positive regard towards the customers is retained, and a professional attitude allows job performance in the best interests of the client's welfare, autonomy and justice (Medical Professionalism Project, 2002). Role separation as a coping strategy should mitigate the negative effect of emotional dissonance and CSS on strain. It can be taught explicitly, or it can be discovered. For example, parents are frequently confronted with annoying, or disruptive children. They have to expend considerable effort in emotion regulation, such as displaying positive emotions when they are in a negative mood. Role separation in this context would mean considering the child's developmental stage including their needs and wishes, and simultaneously putting one's parental role into perspective rather than focusing on the self. Similarly, role separation should lead to both positive customer outcomes and less employee strain. We argue that the potency of emotion work and/or CSS to act as stressors mainly depends on whether role separation strategies are available to the individual employee.

Accordingly, we believe that the potency of emotion work and customer related social stressors in some specific occupations, for example clergy, should be quiet high. In comparison to all other Australian occupations, the clergy are ranked 5th highest in terms of working hours and work an average of 53.4 hours per week (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). Much of this time is involved in direct contact with the congregation. Unlike many professionals who are able to leave their work at the office and maintain clear limits regarding their private lives, clergy are overly visible and constantly available. A further intrusion to privacy is created by the minister's home often being located next door to the church. This creates the potential for ministers and their family to feel (and sometimes be) under frequent congregational scrutiny. These demands along with clergy members' own self-imposed expectations to fulfill their calling and model Christian ideals of marriage, family and personal life, may lead them to overcommit to their work at a personal level (i.e., not detaching concern) and to experience high levels of burnout (see Cotten, Dollard, De Jonge, & Whetham, 2003). Indeed, for clergy, the potential for role separation (and we think, self-protection), is very limited as members of the clergy are predominantly "personally called" to their vocation.

Strains in Human Service Jobs

When stress in human service work is considered, not only do particular stressors or resources apply, but also certain kinds of strains (i.e., outcomes). A germane strain in the literature on human service work is the concept of burnout. Burnout was first investigated in the helping professions (Maslach, 1982; Leiter & Maslach, 1988; Schaufeli & Enzmann, 1998; Schaufeli, Maslach, & Marek, 1993). Burnout is considered as an indication that employees are no longer able to manage their interaction with clients adequately. Most frequently, the three-dimensional conceptualisation of burnout developed by Maslach (1982) is adopted, according to which burnout represents a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and low personal accomplishment.

It is usually argued that burnout results from chronic exposure to specific conditions (i.e., the social interaction between human service providers and their recipients) among people-workers (Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Indeed, burnout is thought "to represent a unique response to frequent and intense client-patient interactions" (Lee & Ashforth, 1996, p. 123; emphasis added). As mentioned above, client-patient interactions become intense if emotional dissonance and CSS are present. However, there are also many non-social work conditions that cause burnout, including role conflict, time pressure, skill under-utilisation and non-contingent reward (for a meta-analysis see Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

Another potential strain, which is of particular importance in human service jobs, is job dissatisfaction, because it is linked to customer outcomes such as customer perceptions of poor service quality and customer dissatisfaction. Most studies have found a relationship between job satisfaction and customer satisfaction (e.g., Bernhardt, Donlu, & Bennett, 2000; Dornann & Kaiser, 2002; Reynolds & Harker, 1992; Schmit & Allscheid, 1995; Tornow & Wiley, 1991; Wiley, 1991). However, the direction of the effect is open to question. For example, a study by Ryan, Schmit, and Johnson (1996) showed that customer satisfaction is more likely to cause employee job satisfaction than vice versa. Presumably, the truth is that both effects occur: that is, satisfied employees show better service performance leading to satisfied customers, and dissatisfied customers exhibit stressful behaviours that cause employee strain in general and low job satisfaction in particular. To put it differently, in human service jobs, employee job satisfaction represents an indicator of both a stress-minimising job design, and a successful service-oriented job design.

Job satisfaction and burnout also represent important sources of employee absenteeism and turnover (Lee & Ashforth, 1996). Indeed, in certain service jobs such as call-centre jobs (Grandey, Dickter, & Sin, 2002; Isic, Dornann, & Zapf, 1999) absenteeism and turnover rates are extremely high. Staff turnover in the Australian call centre industry is estimated to be 18% per year, representing a cost of $530m annually (Information Industries Training Advisory Board, 2001). In high stress call centres, turnover is reported to be almost double the industry average. Stress related absenteeism is estimated to cost the industry $7.5m per year (ACTU Call Centre Unions Group, 2001).

Future Research

Unfortunately, research in services has mainly focused on stressors that apply to almost every kind of job, whether it is in the service sector or not. Therefore, the present state of research does not tell us much about the service-specific stressors of service jobs. Rather, existing research is mainly limited to general job-related stressors and the question is whether general stressors also apply in service jobs. Future research might therefore consider the following questions:

1. Can organisational resources (autonomy, support, rewards) offset the deleterious effects of emotional labour, in particular dissonance, and what is the process?

2. What are the differences between emotion work and its regulation as performed by trained and untrained workers?
3. Is training in how to act more like a professional emotion worker helpful to those carrying out similar work in informal contexts?

4. How can we reduce emotion work stress by new arrangements at the workplace and at the organisational level and facilitate high quality emotion work and satisfied, loyal workers?

5. Currently in Australia greater accountability in the public sector in particular has seen the emergence of ethics departments, and investigative procedures which often focus on problematic service provider-client interactions. How are these procedures perceived by workers? Do they appear to diminish the perceived resources available to them at a time when they are most vulnerable (i.e., take the greatest risk such as restraining a violent offender)? Do increased threats (low resources) make it more difficult for workers to separate "self" from "role", and what are the consequences?

Conclusions

Of course, human service employees may suffer from the same kinds of stressors that people in different occupations are confronted with, such as time pressure or role conflict. The particular stressors in human service work, however, are certain kinds of customer behaviour and emotional labour. They may either indirectly cause strain via emotional dissonance, or directly contribute to strain when they are associated with an actual or perceived loss of resources. Employee strain, in turn, may contribute to customer perceptions of poor service quality and low customer satisfaction. This, in turn, may lead to certain kinds of customer behaviour that represent additional stressors for employees.

Although different service-related stressors have already been identified, knowledge about service-related resources is still lacking. Our article is a step toward identifying unique stressors in human service work and possible solutions. For example, training in appropriate emotional distance appears to hold some promise for offsetting the deleterious effects of emotional labour and CSSs. Greater clarity among human service workers themselves, and social service recipients more generally, about the emotional demands experienced by the range of service providers may lead to greater reciprocity (shown in previous research to reduce customer related stressors, see Dormann et al., 2003), support, acknowledgement and mutual regard (Cotton, Dollard, De Jonge, & Whetham, 2003; Dollard, 2003).

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References


meeting of the Society of Industrial-Organizational Psychology, Toronto, Canada.


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