



Customer orientation dissimilarity, sales unit identification, and customer-directed extra-role behaviors: Understanding the contingency role of coworker support

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 April 2011

Accepted 21 September 2011

Available online 19 October 2011

Keywords:

Customer orientation

Dissimilarity

Organizational identification

Extra-role behaviors

ABSTRACT

Drawing from social identity theory, social categorization theory, and the similarity-attraction paradigm, this study examines how salespeople's dissimilarity from their coworkers in terms of customer orientation relates to their customer-directed, extra-role behaviors (hereafter, customer-directed ERBs). The model proposes that sales unit identification mediates the relationship between dissimilarity and customer-directed ERBs, with higher dissimilarity predicting reduced sales unit identification and reduced identification, in turn, predicting declines in customer-directed ERBs. The model also proposes that coworker support moderates the dissimilarity–sales unit identification relationship, with supportive coworkers attenuating the negative effect of dissimilarity on sales unit identification. Data from 50 sales units and 384 salespeople lend support to the model's hypothesized relationships. Implications for theory and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Customer-oriented salespeople are undoubtedly an invaluable resource to sales organizations. In the extant marketing literature, they have been found to enhance customer satisfaction (e.g., Stock & Hoyer, 2005), customer loyalty (e.g., Jones, Busch, & Dacin, 2003), and sales performance (e.g., Brown, Mowen, Donovan, & Licata, 2002). Further, customer-oriented salespeople are crucial to the development of a market-oriented culture in sales organizations (Conduit & Mavondo, 2001; Lam, Kraus, & Ahearne, 2010), making shared values and beliefs among salespeople integral to business performance (Deshpande, Farley, & Webster, 1993).

However, by definition, customer orientation is an individual difference characteristic that varies across salespeople (Brown et al., 2002). Within sales units, some salespeople will be similar to, whereas others will be dissimilar from, their coworkers in terms of their customer orientation. Recognizing the importance of such individual differences among salespeople, sales organizations regularly undergo cost-intensive needs assessments to uncover heterogeneity (Attia, Honeycutt, & Leach, 2005). Our research addresses the potential importance of these differences among salespeople's levels of customer orientation and examines two deleterious consequences that may stem from dissimilarity.

Specifically, we investigate the negative impact of customer orientation dissimilarity on a salesperson's: (1) sales unit identification and (2) customer-directed, extra-role behaviors (hereafter, customer-directed ERBs). Whereas sales unit identification is a salesperson's sense of

oneness with her sales unit (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), customer-directed ERBs are discretionary behaviors that are intended to satisfy customers (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Customer-directed ERBs can take the form of going out of one's way to assist customers or going beyond the call of duty while handling customer complaints.

The overarching argument of this paper is that customer orientation dissimilarity reduces customer-directed ERBs through the mediating role of reduced sales unit identification. We propose in our conceptual model, and find as a result of our empirical study, that those salespeople who are dissimilar from their coworkers in terms of customer orientation perceive themselves as being members of the out-group. Out-group membership, then, reduces their sales unit identification and, ultimately, their provision of customer-directed ERBs. These deleterious outcomes of salesperson customer orientation dissimilarity make establishing boundary conditions of interest to managers. We propose and test coworker support in this role, predicting that those employees who receive support from their coworkers will not be influenced to the same degree by dissimilarity. Our results support this view, suggesting that salespeople are able to form identity with their sales unit in ways outside of their dissimilarity.

2. Background and hypotheses

2.1. Main constructs and definitions

There are two levels of analysis in the literature when considering relativity within groups (e.g., sales units). At the group level, relativity is termed diversity and is defined as “the collective amount of differences among members within a social unit” (Harrison & Sin, 2005: 196). In other words, group-level diversity refers to sales unit

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heterogeneity. This heterogeneity may be measured in terms of the amount of variance present in a sales unit in terms of demographic variables or work attitudes, for instance (Pelled, Cummings, & Kizilos, 2000).

At the individual level, which is our focus, relativity is termed dissimilarity and is defined as the difference between an employee and her coworkers in terms of some characteristic (Hobman & Bordia, 2006). Of interest to this study, a salesperson may differ from coworkers in terms of customer orientation, making her dissimilar. Indeed, a general finding at the individual level is that dissimilarity negatively affects social integration, which in turn impacts attitudes and behaviors (Liao, Chuang, & Joshi, 2008).

Further, according to the relativity literatures, a salesperson in a given sales unit may be (dis)similar to her coworkers in terms of surface-level and deep-level characteristics (Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998). Whereas surface-level dissimilarity refers to a salesperson's differences from coworkers in terms of easily observable, overt, biological characteristics or physical features, such as gender, age, and ethnicity, deep-level dissimilarity refers to a salesperson's differences from coworkers in terms of nonvisible, underlying characteristics, such as tenure, personality, values/beliefs, and work attitudes (e.g., Liao et al., 2008).

This study's focus is on a salesperson's dissimilarity from coworkers in terms of customer orientation, which is a context-specific form of deep-level dissimilarity. Brown et al. (2002) identify customer orientation in terms of its need and enjoyment dimensions. The former refers to the degree to which an employee has the ability to focus on customer need satisfaction, whereas the latter refers to the degree to which an employee experiences positive emotions (e.g., satisfaction, joy, empathy) as a result of satisfying customers.

Previous studies have widely looked at the influence of customer orientation on salespeople's performance (e.g., Brown et al., 2002), as well as workplace attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Donovan, Brown, & Mowen, 2004). However, we argue that a salesperson's standing within the sales unit in terms of relative customer orientation may matter as much as overall customer orientation. We define customer orientation dissimilarity as an individual-level construct that reflects the magnitude of difference (or distance) between a salesperson and coworkers in terms of customer orientation. It is worth emphasizing that dissimilarity here does not connote higher or lower customer orientation. Dissimilarity is measured as the magnitude of difference, independent of direction (e.g., Harrison et al., 1998; Tsui, Egan, & O'Reilly, 1992). For example, the classification of a highly customer-oriented salesperson depends on whether the sales unit is customer-oriented. If it is, the salesperson will be similar to those in the sales unit, whereas if it is not, the salesperson will be dissimilar.

Our interest in investigating the influence of customer orientation dissimilarity on a salesperson's sales unit identification and, in turn, provision of customer-directed ERBs is in line with the extant literature (e.g., Van der Vegt, Van de Vliert, & Oosterhof, 2003). Previous studies in the field have shown that employees' dissimilarity in both surface-level and deep-level characteristics is likely to have a negative impact on their social integration within the work group (e.g., Harrison et al., 1998; Tsui et al., 1992). Social integration includes both affective and behavioral dimensions and refers to "the extent to which unit members are psychologically linked or attracted toward interacting with one another in pursuit of a common objective" (Harrison et al., 1998: 96). In this study, we capture the affective dimension in terms of salespeople's sales unit identification, which refers to a salesperson's perceived oneness with her sales unit and her propensity to experience sales unit successes or failures as her own (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). We capture the behavioral dimension in terms of salespeople's customer-directed ERBs, which refer to the "discretionary behaviors of contact employees in servicing customers that extend beyond formal role requirements" (Bettencourt & Brown, 1997: 41). Although ERBs encompass several dimensions of behavior

directed at such parties as customers, coworkers, and supervisors, we focus on customer-directed ERBs because of their importance to the effective social psychological functioning of work groups in the sales context (Bettencourt, Brown, & MacKenzie, 2005).

2.2. Relevant theory

Three major theoretical approaches in the literature build on and complement one another to explain the influence dissimilarity has on a salesperson's attitudes and behaviors. First, social identity theory (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986) holds that self-esteem and self-identity are gained through individuals' knowledge and conceptualizations of where they stand in relation to a group. In essence, social identity theory posits that salespeople have a tendency and desire to maintain both self-esteem and self-identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) when conceptualizing themselves in relation to their sales unit.

Second, self-categorization theory (e.g., Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), which is often distinguished from social identity theory because its explanatory power goes beyond that of social identity theory, explains the mechanism through which self-esteem and self-identity are gained during social comparisons. Essentially, the social categorization process enables a salesperson to maximize the benefits associated with social identity because of its self-evaluative nature (e.g., Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). Through this process, salespeople categorize themselves and other coworkers into social categories by using demographic attributes, personality traits, values/beliefs, and work-related attitudes as distinguishing characteristics to do so (e.g., Chattopadhyay, 1999). Social categorization ultimately results in two social categories: in-group and out-group. Salespeople who categorize themselves to be members of the in-group perceive that they possess prototypical characteristics, which are distinguishing features of a group that separate it from others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). In contrast, employees who lack similarity with regards to prototypical characteristics belong to the out-group (Hobman & Bordia, 2006). Previous research has shown that since members of the in-group perceive themselves to be superior to members of the out-group, they maintain positive self-identity and hold a high level of self-esteem within the work group context (e.g., Chattopadhyay, 1999). Through observational analysis in the sales units of the company that participated in this research and parallel to anecdotal evidence that we have perceived elsewhere, we speculate that group membership can be partially explained by salesperson customer orientation. Further support for customer orientation as a prototypical characteristic in a sales unit is provided in the following section.

Third, the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971) takes an even further step and explains how attitudes and behaviors are realized in the workplace after in-group and out-group comparisons are made. The similarity-attraction paradigm predicts that in-group membership will result in social attraction and favoritism insofar as those who share prototypical characteristics relate more with one another than they do with those who are dissimilar (Hobman & Bordia, 2006; Hogg & Hardie, 1991). In contrast, out-group members are evaluated negatively, experience stereotyping and hostility, and are polarized from in-group members (Williams & O'Reilly, 1998). In turn, dissimilar salespeople are likely to generate low quality relationships with coworkers in their sales unit (Chattopadhyay, 1999; Hogg & Williams, 2000).

In summary, social identity theory provides the theoretical foundation for our study and purports that salespeople aim to achieve self-identity and self-esteem through forming conceptualizations of themselves in relation to their sales unit. The formation and consequences of in-group and out-group membership can then be explained using both self-categorization theory and the similarity-attraction paradigm (Chattopadhyay, 1999).

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