Customer evaluations of service-oriented organizational citizenship behaviors: Agentic and communal differences

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ABSTRACT

Research shows that service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) influences customer attitudes. In a series of two experiments, the interaction between customer gender and the type of service-oriented OCB (communal or agentic) performed by a female (Study 1) or male (Study 2) service employee was examined using a sample of hospitality recruiters. Study 1 showed that both male and female customers rated the female employee performing the agentic OCB equally, but female customers rated the female employee performing the communal OCB higher than male customers. The results from Study 1 did not emerge for the male employee in Study 2. These results suggest that the interaction effect between the service-oriented OCB type and customer gender only influences customer reactions for female employees, but not for male employees. The results show that the evaluation of service-oriented OCB is particularly susceptible to the influence of gender-role stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Employee service quality continues to be recognized as a vital source for a hospitality organization’s competitive advantage. Establishing a strong competitive advantage through service can help distinguish one hospitality organization over its competitors. As such, there is a growing body of literature examining how service-oriented organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) influences customer perceptions of service quality and satisfaction (e.g., Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Bettencourt et al., 2005; Podsakoff et al., 2009; Yen and Niehoff, 2004). Service-oriented OCB refers to “discretionary behaviors of contact employees in serving customers that extend beyond formal role requirements” (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997, p. 41), and often include service encounters in which service employees go above and beyond their formal duties to provide exceptional service.

The literature on service-oriented OCB from the customer’s perspective has mainly focused on the link between service-oriented OCB and customer reactions (e.g., Hong et al., 2013; Koys, 2001; Podsakoff et al., 2014; Schneider et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2005). While it is evident that service-oriented OCB does indeed lead to more positive customer reactions, there is a lack of research focusing on how demographic characteristics of the customer, such as customer gender, can interact with the type of service-oriented OCB performed by service employees. This is a particularly important gap in understanding how service-oriented OCB affects customer reactions because outside of the service context, extant research shows that female employees benefit less from performing OCB than male employees, particularly when the type of OCB matches the gender roles (e.g., Allen, 2006; Heilman and Chen, 2005; Kacmar et al., 2011; Kark and Waismel-Manor, 2005), suggesting that customer reactions to service-oriented OCB might depend on customer and service employee gender. A clearer theoretical understanding of how customers react to service-oriented OCB will help service firms better manage service-oriented OCB within an increasingly diversified workforce. For example, in a case study of customer satisfaction from hotels rated in TripAdvisor.com, Magnini et al. (2011) found that the most important source of customer satisfaction was service-oriented OCB (e.g., being friendly, helpful, pleasant, and accommodating); more than various characteristics of the hotels (e.g., cleanliness, décor, location, and amenities).

The current study draws from social role theory (Eagly and Wood, 2011) to examine the interaction between customer gender and the type of service-oriented OCB performed by female (Study 1) or male (Study 2) service employees on customer reactions. Social role theory states that because men and women have historically filled different roles in the division of labor, societal generalizations for men and women lead to different perceptions and expectations for men and women in the workplace. Specifically, men are perceived and expected to be agentic and women are perceived and expected to be communal.

We argue that the effect of service-oriented OCB on customer reactions might depend on what type of service-oriented OCB is performed and on the customer’s gender. Thus, the purpose of the current study is to examine how the effect of service-oriented OCB tied to
gender roles (communal versus agentic) interacts with customer gender to influence customer reactions. In regard to customer reactions, the current research focuses on positive behavioral intentions as a customer response to a service-oriented OCB context. Positive behavioral intentions include praise and positive word-of-mouth intentions (Zeithaml et al., 1996). The reason for focusing on positive behavioral intentions is that it is a commonly measured customer reaction to service (e.g., Barroso Castro et al., 2004; Chen and Kao, 2010; Payne and Webber, 2006), which allows us to relate the current results with past research.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Social role theory

According to social role theory, what individuals perceive as gender-appropriate behavior arises from the differential social roles inhabited by women and men (Eagly and Wood, 2011). Women were more likely to engage in communal tasks, such as homemaking and childrearing, whereas men were more likely to be the breadwinners and work in physically demanding roles. Because of this historical division of labor, perceived gender roles led to the expectation that men are agentic while women are communal. Gender roles are socially modeled, learned, and reinforced beliefs about the attributes of men and women. Although not all men behave in agentic behavioral patterns and not all women behave in communal behavioral patterns, on average, men are described in agentic patterns, whereas women are described in communal patterns.

Agentic behavioral patterns, usually attributed to or expected from men, include being aggressive, assertive, independent, and confident, and in the workplace, agency includes speaking assertively, being competitive, influencing others, and initiating tasks. Communal behavioral patterns, usually attributed to or expected from women, include being nurturing, kind, empathic, and sensitive, and in the workplace, communal characteristics include helping others, being cooperative and friendly, and nurturing relationships (Eagly and Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). These agentic and communal gender roles are both descriptive and prescriptive (Rudman and Glick, 2001), such that these gender roles suggest not only how men and women are perceived (i.e., descriptive), but also how men and women are expected to behave (i.e., prescriptive).

These gender roles, placed on women, not only ascribe what women should do, but also what they should not do. Ample research shows that women who are agentic, but not communal, often receive lower evaluations than women who do not violate socially implemented gender roles (for a review see Caleo and Heilman, 2013). This effect is found to be less likely to occur to men; in other words, men who are communal, but not agentic, do not receive the negative evaluations and penalties that women who violate gender roles do. As a result, women are expected to engage in a feminine gender role that reflects communal qualities at work, whereas men can benefit from being communal and agentic at work (Caleo and Heilman, 2013; Wood and Eagly, 2002).

2.2. Gender roles and service-oriented OCB

Employee service quality, particularly service-oriented OCB, is a vital source for a hospitality organization’s competitive advantage (Lu et al., 2016; Tang et al., 2016; Ozduran and Tanova, 2017; Youn et al., 2017). Service-oriented OCB focuses on being extra friendly, empathic, concerned for the welfare of customers (i.e., communal characteristics), and also solving problems, taking initiative when helping a customer, and being conscientious (i.e., agentic characteristics) (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Magnini et al., 2011; Nasrardin et al., 2015). In a qualitative study of hotel employee service-oriented OCB, examples included providing a suit to a customer whose luggage was lost at the airport, cleaning the ice off the windows of a customer’s car, cleaning a food stain off a wedding dress, providing shoes to a customer who lost her shoes, and arranging a schedule for a return customer to stay in the same room on multiple occasions (Torres et al., 2014). Service-oriented OCB also includes anticipating and addressing “customer needs and wants, even before the customer identifies such a need” (Lu et al., 2016, p. 9).

While many service-oriented OCB can be akin to communal behaviors, such as showing extra care and empathy, there are also service-oriented OCB that can be agentic, such as carrying luggage for a customer or cleaning ice off a car. Thus, we argue service-oriented OCB can be communal or agentic. Many agentic characteristics—such as charisma, problem solving, professionalism, and using technical skills to solve problems—have also been recognized as service-oriented OCB (Torres et al., 2014). Likewise, many communal characteristics—such as friendliness, empathy, caring, and showing concern for others—have also been recognized as service-oriented OCB (Bettencourt and Brown, 1997; Bettencourt et al., 2005). Because many service-oriented OCB can be akin to either communal or agentic characteristics, the evaluation of service-oriented OCB may be particularly susceptible to the influence of gender-role stereotypes.

Gender-role stereotypes lead to the expectation that women should engage in communal behaviors, such as being friendly, empathic, and being concerned for the well-being of others (Eagly and Wood, 2011). The current research extends this body of literature to the service-oriented OCB context. We argue that the type of service-oriented OCB (communal versus agentic) performed might influence customer evaluations of a female hotel employee. However, the influence of the type of service-oriented OCB on customer reactions might not be so straightforward and simple. In addition, we argue that, customer reactions to service-oriented OCB might also depend on the customer’s gender.

2.3. Customer gender as a moderator

How customers react to communal versus agentic service-oriented OCB from female employees might depend on the customer’s gender. Several related theories suggest that the interaction between service employee and customer demographics can influence customer reactions. Social identity theory suggests that individuals identify with similar others to develop social groups based on similarity and to positively enhance their own sense of self (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In organizations, salient social identities are often based on demographic characteristics, such as gender (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Research on workplace relational demography theory also suggests that demographic characteristics of organizational members, such as gender composition, help individuals form meaning to their identity group memberships at work. This in turn, leads to an individual’s preference for interactions with people of one’s own group in the workplace (Goldberg et al., 2010).

This line of reasoning has been applied to service encounters, and research shows that the interaction between service employee and customer demographics can influence customer reactions (Leonard et al., 2004; Mattila et al., 2003; Wang and Mattila, 2010). For example, customers often have mixed feelings—in some context positive and in others negative—about intercultural service encounters (Baker et al., 2008; Paswan and Ganesh, 2005; Warden et al., 2003). This research, in addition to social role theory (Eagly and Wood, 2011), suggests that male and female customers will have different reactions to service-oriented OCB from female service employees.

Based on social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and relational demography (Tsui et al., 1989), it was expected that when female employees perform service-oriented OCB, female customers will have higher levels of positive behavioral intentions than male customers for communal service-oriented OCB, but not for agentic service-oriented OCB. This was hypothesized for several reasons. Gender-role stereotypes lead to the expectation that women should engage in communal behaviors (Eagly and Wood, 2011), so when women perform communal
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