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Does hope buffer the impacts of stress and exhaustion on frontline hotel employees' turnover intentions?

Abstract

This study investigates the effects of challenge and hindrance stressors and exhaustion on frontline hotel employees' turnover intentions and whether hope, as a personal resource, can moderate the deleterious effects of these antecedents on turnover intentions. Data were collected from a sample of 183 full-time frontline employees working in 5-star and 4-star hotels in Northern Cyprus. To ensure the temporal separation of measures, data pertaining to the independent and dependent variables were measured via two questionnaires administered with a time lag of two weeks. Results of the study reveal that hindrance stressors and exhaustion heighten frontline employees' turnover intentions and that hope is a potential antidote to the deleterious impacts of these antecedents on turnover intentions. Thus, managers should consider the candidates' hope levels during employee selection and hiring. Candidates high in hope should be given priority in hiring since such employees can better cope with stress and exhaustion. Management should also consider devising proactive strategies to keep employees high in hope in the organization since such employees can help create a positive work environment, may serve as role models to their colleagues and generate a demonstration effect among current employees with lower levels of hope.

Key words: exhaustion; hope; hotel employees; stress; turnover intentions; Northern Cyprus

Introduction

Employees in frontline service jobs in the hospitality industry determine customers' perceived service quality (e.g., Emir & Kozak, 2011; Kivela & Kagi, 2008) which is a very critical factor influencing tourists' choice of a destination and, more importantly, satisfaction (e.g., Marcussen, 2011; Sheehan & Presenza, 2011). Recognizing this, hotel executives view recruitment and retention of qualified employees as crucial to business success as they see customer satisfaction and retention (Blomme, Rheede & Tromp, 2010; Bowen & Ford, 2004). In their efforts, however, they are constantly reminded of a formidable challenge. Undoubtedly, owing to poor pay, long hours, irregular schedules, limited weekend time off and heavy workload that permeate in the hospitality industry (O'Neill, 2012; Poulston, 2008; Ryan, Ghazali & Mohsin, 2011) many hotel employees want to leave their jobs. Indeed, the

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hospitality industry has been and continues to be characterized by high turnover rates (Blomme et al., 2010; Daskin & Tezer, 2012; Wildes & Parks, 2005).

Some recent developments and trends further exacerbate employees' turnover intentions. First, employees in frontline service jobs in the hospitality industry are increasingly caught in the middle between discerning customers' service excellence demands and management's productivity and performance requirements. This may increase their exhaustion, which is a precursor to turnover intentions (Babakus, Yavas & Ashill, 2009). Second, in today's recessionary economy large scale layoffs leave employees who still hold jobs with additional job demands and increase their stress. Third, rises in incivility and verbal aggression by customers (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005) and coworkers (Andersson & Pearson, 1999) and the pressures of achieving work-life balance (Deery, 2008; Deery & Jago, 2009) inject additional doses of daily stress to the already stressful work environments of frontline employees and fuel their turnover intentions (Deery, 2008; Magnini, 2009).

Given that stressful and demanding situations heighten employees' exhaustion and lead to turnover intentions, it is important to hire and retain individuals whose personalities, skills, and abilities fit the requirements of frontline service jobs. In this context, we contend that hope is one of the important personality variables that should be considered in frontline service jobs. Hope is defined as "a cognitive set that is based on a reciprocally derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed determination) and (b) pathways (planning of ways to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 571). Hope, as an inner psychological resource, can serve as an antidote to the detrimental effects of stress and exhaustion on employees' turnover intentions. We surmise that relative to a variety of techniques to intervene with stress and exhaustion, ultimately individual's own ability, personality and inner psychological resources can overcome stress and exhaustion and their negative consequences.

Past research linking hope to job outcomes such as job performance, turnover intentions, and job satisfaction clearly demonstrates that hope, in fact, impacts job outcomes (e.g., Avey, Luthans & Jensen, 2009; Peterson & Byron, 2008; Yavas, Babakus & Karatepe, 2013). Also limited evidence shows that hope is directly related to workplace stress (cf. Avey et al., 2009). Despite its relevance and significance in frontline service jobs, very little is known about hope as a buffer against the deleterious impact of stress/exhaustion on job outcomes. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the only exception is an empirical study which examines hope as a moderator of the effect of burnout on job outcomes (i.e., in-role performance, extra-role performance) among frontline bank employees (Yavas et al., 2013). The hospitality management literature is devoid of an empirical research about the moderating role of hope.

Derived from Lazarus's theory of stress and emotion (Lazarus, 1999), work stressors can be categorized into 'hindrance stressors' (e.g., lack of resources or resource inadequacies, role conflict, role ambiguity, role overload) and 'challenge stressors' (e.g., pressure to complete tasks, time urgency, level of attention required by job demands) (Podsakoff, LePine & LePine, 2007). Such stressors show *differential* relationships with turnover intentions (Podsakoff et al., 2007). For instance, hindrance stressors heighten employees' turnover intentions. However, there is a dearth of empirical research regarding the effects of hindrance and challenge stressors on turnover intentions in the *hospitality management literature*.

The relationships involving hope and job outcomes such as the ones referred to above must ideally be tested using multiple sources of data or via temporal separation of measures to control for common method bias which is a serious threat to the magnitudes of relationships among study variables

(Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee & Podsakoff, 2003). Noting this deficiency, in their recent review, Line and Runyan (2012) forcefully state that few studies in the hospitality marketing literature control common method bias using procedural remedies such as employing multiple sources of data or temporal separation of measures.

To address the gaps pertaining to the differential effects of hindrance and challenge stressors on turnover intentions and temporal separation of measures, this study examines the role of hope as a moderator between stress, exhaustion and turnover intentions via a sample of frontline hotel employees in Northern Cyprus as a case in point. The present study gathered data pertaining to the predictor variables (i.e., challenge and hindrance stressors) and the criterion variable (e.g., turnover intentions) at two points in time, two weeks apart. Besides adding to the current knowledge base and serving as a frame of reference for future research, the findings of this study may prove useful from a managerial perspective.

Conceptual foundations

Hindrance and challenge stressors as well as exhaustion are prevalent among frontline employees in the hotel industry (Karatepe, Babakus & Yavas, 2012). Employees are likely to display heightened turnover intentions due to such stressors and exhaustion. As a personality variable, hope may reduce the effects of these stressors and exhaustion on turnover intentions.

Stress and exhaustion

Stress and exhaustion are common problems for frontline hotel employees who constantly face internal and external pressures coming from several fronts. On the one hand, the physical stresses of the work (e.g., irregular hours/shifts, being on their feet most of the time, constant rush) can be daunting. On the other hand, the emotional stresses of the job such as emotional labor or display requirements (e.g., smiling when dealing with unpleasant customers, inhibiting undesirable behaviors such as shouting at customers, suppressing negative feelings such as anger) (e.g., Chan & Wan, 2012) and the frequency of expression of positive emotions desired by the organization (which at times may force employees to fake their true emotions) compound the stress levels of frontline employees. Also, heightening the stress levels of frontline employees is continuous participation in unscripted and challenging interactions with customers. These coupled with role ambiguity, resource deficits, and pressures to constantly and consistently deliver superior service increase hotel employees' stress and exhaustion. Multiplying the problems for frontline employees in the hospitality industry and adding to their stress and exhaustion are dramatic changes in today's social and economic conditions.

Two recent meta-analytic studies provide strong evidence about the viability of the hindrance versus challenge stressor taxonomy. Focusing on job performance as a criterion, in a meta-analysis of 82 studies, LePine, Podsakoff and LePine (2005) showed that both hindrance stressors and challenge stressors have significant effects on job strain through which job performance is affected. In a second meta-analysis of 157 studies, Podsakoff et al. (2007) found similar effects of hindrance and challenge stressors on job attitudes and such retention-related criteria as withdrawal behavior, turnover intentions, and actual voluntary turnover.

Exhaustion refers to “a consequence of intensive physical, affective, and cognitive strain, for example as a long-term consequence of prolonged exposure to certain demands” (Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner & Schaufeli, 2001, p. 500). Continuous exposure to job demands and emotionally stressful situations fuel exhaustion among employees. As discussed in Janssen, Lam and Huang’s (2010) study, exhausted employees experience a lack of energy and feelings of being used up. Babakus et al.’s (2009) research shows that exhaustion is a significant determinant of frontline employees’ turnover intentions.

Hope

Hope, in its everyday understanding, is an expectation of good in the future. Because of its potential links to psychosocial well-being, since the early 1990s, hope, as a psychological trait, has attracted increasing attention from researchers (cf. Brouwer, Meijer, Weekers & Baneke, 2008). One of the best elaborated and investigated theories of hope was developed by Snyder et al. (1991) who conceptualized it as a trait-like cognitive construct encompassing affirmative beliefs about one’s ability to accomplish personal goals.

According to this conceptualization, hope is a cognitive set determined by the reciprocal interplay of two components, pathways and agency (Snyder et al., 1991). The pathways component refers to an individual’s perceived means or routes available to achieve goals. People with high pathways beliefs have the ability to generate possible means of attaining desired goals, can easily identify multiple viable routes to reach their goals, and find alternative routes when their initial strategies fail. Agency component refers to the belief in one’s ability to succeed in using pathways to realize desired aims. High agency is characterized by determination, motivation and energy directed toward meeting one’s goals. While the hope construct shares some features with other constructs (e.g., optimism and self-efficacy), it is different (Luthans, Avolio, Avey & Norman, 2007; Peterson, Gerhardt & Rode, 2006). For example, while hope and self-efficacy are both concerned with beliefs about expected success, they differ in that self-efficacy does not explicitly include the pathways component to the desired outcomes (Peterson & Byron, 2008). Similarly, while hope and optimism are associated with positive expectations, the focus of the expectations differs. The positive expectations associated with hope are specifically directed toward goal attainment whereas the expectations associated with optimism are more general expectations of positive events (Peterson et al., 2006).

High hope people are better equipped to find means by which to overcome their difficulties (pathways), and the confidence to exercise these coping strategies (agency). Research demonstrates that hope is positively associated with behavioral outcomes such as coping and problem solving, and performance in several domains (e.g., school grades, academic) including job performance (Alexander & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Peterson & Byron, 2008). It should be underscored that while, as reviewed in a recent meta-analysis (Alarcon, Eschleman & Bowling, 2009), the relationships between personality variables and exhaustion and stress have been studied, the role of hope in this context is overlooked.

Examining hope in this context is relevant and significant at a time when there is a shift from negative psychology to positive psychology in the study of organizational behavior (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; Yavas et al., 2013) and calls are continuously made to incorporate positive psychology into research (Zellars, Perrewé, Hochwarter & Anderson, 2006). Our study responds to such calls and seeks to determine if hope enables frontline employees to better cope with the detrimental effects of exhaustion and stress and remain in their jobs.

Method

Sample and procedure

Data for the study were collected from frontline hotel employees (e.g., food servers, front desk agents, concierges, bartenders) of several hotels located throughout Northern Cyprus. Managements of 12 five-star and 6 four-star hotels were contacted prior to data collection. Permission was granted by 5 five-star and 4 four-star hotels. Questionnaires were then distributed to the frontline employees of these hotels by the research team. Employees were given assurance of confidentiality (that only the aggregate results would be shared with management) and were requested to fill out the questionnaires in a self-administered manner. By the cut-off date for data collection, a total of 183 usable questionnaires were retrieved.

In terms of the sample structure, a little over half (53%) of the respondents were between the ages of 18-27, 36% between the ages of 28-37 and the rest were older than 37. Almost two-thirds (64%) of the respondents were male. About 36% cent of the respondents had secondary and high school degrees. Approximately 30% had graduated from two-year colleges and about 18% from four-year colleges. Almost all the respondents (94%) had tenures of five years or less and the rest had been with their hotel for six or more years.

Measurement

The study variables were operationalized via multi-item scales. Exhaustion (8 items) was measured via items taken from Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou and Kantas (2003). Responses to these items were elicited on four-point scales ranging from 4 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). Challenge stressors (6 items) and hindrance stressors (5 items) were measured via items taken from Cavanaugh, Boswell, Roehling and Boudreau (2000). Responses to these items were obtained on five-point scales ranging from 1 (*produces no stress*) to 5 (*produces a great deal of stress*). Hope was operationalized via twelve items taken from Snyder et al. (1991). Respondents recorded their answers to these items on four-point scales ranging from 4 (*definitely true*) to 1 (*definitely false*). Turnover intentions were measured with three items from Singh, Verbeke and Rhoads (1996). Responses to these items were elicited on 5-point scales ranging from 5 (*strongly agree*) to 1 (*strongly disagree*). To minimize the possibility of common method bias, data pertaining to the predictor (i.e., challenge and hindrance stressors) and the criterion variable (e.g., turnover intentions) were collected in two waves where the two waves were separated by a time lag of two weeks.

The survey instruments were initially prepared in English and then translated into Turkish via the back-translation method (Perrewé et al., 2002). To ensure that the item contents were cross-linguistically comparable and generated the same meaning, two academicians fluent in both languages further checked the questionnaires. Prior to data collection, the questionnaires administered in both waves were pre-tested with two different pilot samples of five frontline hotel employees and no changes in the wordings of the questions were deemed necessary.

All the scales were valenced in such a way that higher scores consistently indicated higher levels of each variable (e.g., exhaustion, hope, turnover intentions). As reported in Table 1, the internal consistency

reliabilities (coefficient alphas) of the variables, with the exception of exhaustion, were well above the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and reliabilities of variables

Variables	# of items	Mean	SD	Range	Cronbach's Alpha
Challenge stressors	6	13.48	5.63	6-30	0.93
Hindrance stressors	5	13.15	4.85	5-23	0.82
Turnover intentions	3	8.84	3.55	3-15	0.91
Hope	12	34.05	5.24	18-47	0.73
Exhaustion	8	19.08	3.65	8-28	0.67

Results

Stress, exhaustion-turnover intentions relationships

To examine the relationships between stress, exhaustion and turnover intentions, a regression model was run by using two types of stressors (challenge and hindrance) and exhaustion as the independent, and turnover intentions as the dependent variable. The variance inflation factor test (Cohen, Cohen, West & Aiken, 2003) showed lack of collinearity among the independent variables (i.e., VIFs < 2). As can be seen from Table 2, the model proved to be viable. The independent variables collectively explained 34% of the variance in turnover intentions. An examination of the results also showed that hindrance stressors and exhaustion were the significant predictors in the model.

Table 2
Regression analysis: Turnover intentions = f (stressors, exhaustion)

Dependent variable	Independent variables (β coefficients)			R ²	F
	Challenge	Hindrance	Exhaustion		
Turnover intentions	β 0.045	β 0.47*	β 0.27*	0.34	30.92*

* p < 0.0001

Hope as a moderator

Moderation of the form or nature of a relationship is directed by examining for interaction effects in analysis of variance or significant differences in regression coefficients across sub-groups (Arnold, 1982). In this study, to examine the role of hope as a moderator of the relationship between stressors, exhaustion and turnover intentions, we used the sub-group analysis as it depicts the pattern of results more clearly (cf. Kohli, 1989). Specifically, we repeated ordinary least squares regression analysis in sub-groups reflecting low and high scores on the moderator variable, hope.

In forming a pair of sub-groups representing low and high sub-groups, the respondents were classified according to their hope scores and the two sub-groups were then formed by selecting approximately the top and bottom 30% of the cases. As a result, 58 respondents were classified as low and 57 respondents as high hope employees. The middle cases were dropped from subsequent analysis to increase the contrast between sub-groups (Arnold, 1982; Kohli, 1989). The Chow test (Dougherty, 2007) was then performed to establish the significance of the difference in the form (intercept and slope) of the regression model across the two sub-groups. Chow's test is defined as:

$$F = \frac{[SSR_N - (SSR_1 + SSR_2)]/k}{(SSR_1 + SSR_2)/N - 2k}$$

where:

SSR_N = Residual sum of squares for the combined data set

SSR_1 = Residual sum of squares for the high group

SSR_2 = Residual sum of squares for the low group

N = Number of observations in the combined data set

k = Number of parameters in the model (i.e., $k-1$ slope coefficients and one intercept)

A statistically significant Chow test would suggest that the estimates of the structural parameters corresponding to the two data sets (high and low hope groups) are different and, therefore, the particular characteristic is a moderator. The Chow tests of the individual regression estimates for high and low hope groups were statistically significant ($F = 58.46, p < 0.0001$) suggesting that hope is a moderator. Furthermore, an independent samples t -test we performed revealed that the turnover intentions of employees with low hope were significantly higher than their high hope counterparts (means of 10.05 vs. 5.79; $t = 7.88, p < 0.0001$).

Discussion

Study contribution and assessment of findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate hope as a moderator of the effects of stress and exhaustion on turnover intentions using data gathered from frontline hotel employees with a time lag of two weeks in Northern Cyprus. This study contributes to the hospitality management literature in the following ways. First, it fills the research gap and examines the moderating role of hope on the relationship between stressors, exhaustion and turnover intentions (Yavas et al., 2013). Second, it fills the gap regarding the differential effects of hindrance and challenge stressors on turnover intentions (Podsakoff et al., 2007). Third, to control for common method bias, it collects data pertaining to independent and dependent variables in two time periods with a two-week time lag (Line & Runyan, 2012).

Results of the study reveal that hope can be a potent antidote to the detrimental effects of stress and exhaustion on turnover intentions. Specifically, results lend credence to the assertion that hindrance stressors and exhaustion heighten employees' turnover intentions, are rampant among frontline employees (Deery & Jago, 2009; Poulston, 2008) and are among the factors triggering turnover intentions (e.g., Babakus et al., 2009). More importantly, results suggest that hope mitigates the detrimental effects of hindrance stressors and exhaustion on turnover intentions. Employees high in hope are able to deal with problems arising from hindrance stressors and exhaustion and consequently display low levels of turnover intentions.

In our study, challenge stressors are not significantly related to turnover intentions. It appears that frontline employees perceive challenge stressors as an opportunity for growth and development. Hence, challenge stressors do not exert any significant impact on turnover intentions. These results are in line with the work of Podsakoff et al. (2007) that reports a direct significant relationship between hindrance stressors and turnover intentions but do not demonstrate a direct significant relationship between challenge stressors and turnover intentions.

Practical implications

An immediate implication of our results is that managers should consider the candidates' hope levels during employee selection and hiring. Candidates high in hope should be given priority in hiring since such employees can better cope with stress and exhaustion. Management should also consider devising proactive strategies to keep employees high in hope in the organization. Retention of employees with high hope can potentially pay dividends in two ways. First, employees with higher levels of hope can help create a positive work environment, may serve as role models to their colleagues and generate a demonstration effect among current employees with lower levels of hope. Second, they may be instrumental in attracting other employees with positive attitudes to the organization.

Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study expands the knowledge base, it has limitations that future research can address. First, the study focuses on a single service sector in a single country. Replications of the study in the same sector in the same locality as well as other service sectors and countries would expand the data base for generalizations and show if the proposition tested here is viable in other contexts. Second, in this study, we showed that hope can moderate the effects of stress and exhaustion on employees' turnover intentions. Investigation of the possible roles of other personality variables (e.g., self-efficacy, locus of control, job resourcefulness, agreeableness, customer orientation) as antidotes to the detrimental effects of stress and exhaustion not only on turnover intentions but also on other organizationally valued job outcomes (e.g., job performance, organizational commitment and job satisfaction) would enrich our understanding. Thus, we culminate with a call for additional research on these intriguing issues.

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