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Understanding the relationship between frontline employee boreout and customer orientation[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Customer-oriented behavior provides an important means to achieve satisfied and loyal customers and thus sustainable competitive advantages. Although a rich stream of research has examined enablers of customer-oriented behaviors, its impediments, such as a lack of challenges at the customer interface, have been neglected. Relying on a qualitative study with 37 frontline employees (FLEs) and on conservation of resources theory, this research examines FLEs' individual responses to boreout at the service encounter. Boreout is a negative psychological state of low work-related arousal, manifested in three main forms: job boredom, a crisis of meaning at work, and crisis of growth at work. This study examines the effect of these individual responses on customer-oriented behavior, using data from 147 FLEs and a validation study with customers. The results indicate that all three boreout dimensions consistently harm customer-oriented behavior; job autonomy, whether induced by the firm or customers, moderates these relationships differently though.

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1. Introduction

Conventional wisdom indicates that customer-oriented behaviors of frontline employees (FLEs) are important to build new and maintain existing customer relationships (Bettencourt & Brown, 2003; Chakrabarty, Brown, & Widing, 2012; Guenzi, De Luca, & Troilo, 2011) and to increase customer satisfaction (Huang, 2011). Particularly for interpersonal services, which require “close, personal contact between customers and employees” (Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom, & Brown, 2005, p. 61), FLEs are the face of the organization in the eyes of the customer (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009). FLEs are “service workers who personally interact with customers in retail and service encounters” (Sirianni, Castro-Nelson, Moralse, & Fitzsimons, 2009, p. 966).

However, approximately 20% of FLEs are demoralized by a lack of challenge, and more than 15% even quit their jobs because of it (Skaer, 2006; Uduji, 2009). Practitioners estimate that this problematic state costs the United States over \$750 billion a year, which is more than \$5000 per employee (Rothlin & Werder, 2008). In parallel, researchers reveal increased service failure owing to a lack of engagement by FLEs (e.g., Harris & Ogbonna, 2002, 2006). Firms' display rules and scripted communication have reduced the variance in customer interactions, making the service delivery process far less exciting (Batt & Moynihan,

2002; Graban, 2010; Grandey, 2000, 2003; Wilk & Moynihan, 2005), and some researchers note that “many service operations are embracing mass production” (Batt, 1999, p. 540).

Despite the service encounter's significance, research is surprisingly silent about customer-related consequences of FLEs' lack of challenges at the service encounter. Research into lack of challenging work indicates that it can lead to undesirable outcomes, including job dissatisfaction, absenteeism, and turnover (Kass, Vadanovich, & Callender, 2001; Melamed, Ben-Avi, Luz, & Green, 1995) as well as reduced work effectiveness (Drory, 1982) and withdrawal (Spector et al., 2006). Most researchers focus on assembly line jobs, but some recent studies suggest that white collar jobs may also be short on challenge (Bruursema, Kessler, & Spector, 2011; Fisher, 1993; Van der Heijden, Schepers, & Nijssen, 2012). In turn, FLEs who suffer from boreout might engage in habitualized behaviors (Van Dyne, Jehn, & Cummings, 2002) and are less innovative (Stock, 2015) rather than seeking the best solution for customers.

To address these possible links, this study examines the effect of low challenges in service encounters and customer-oriented behaviors. Customer-oriented behavior is defined as customer contact employees' ability “to help their customers by engaging in behaviors that increase customer satisfaction” (Stock & Hoyer, 2005, p. 538). To understand low challenges, I investigate a new conceptual phenomenon, FLE boreout, first been mentioned in managerial practice by Rothlin and Werder (2008) and investigated by Stock (2015). According to Stock (2015, p. 574), *boreout* refers to “a negative psychological state of low work-related arousal, manifested in three main forms: a crisis of meaning at work, job boredom, and a crisis of growth at work”. Because low challenges rarely have been examined at the customer interface, this

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study attempts to deepen the conceptualization of boreout and examine its effect on customer-oriented behaviors, in accordance with two main research questions:

1. *How do different boreout dimensions affect customer-oriented behaviors?* Marketing scholars, addressing challenges at the service encounter, have focused mainly on high psychological challenges (e.g., Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, & Moncrief, 1999; Singh, 2000; Singh, Goolsby, & Rhoads, 1994). I strive to shed light on low challenges at the service encounter. According to conservation of resources (COR) theory, the three dimensions of job boreout draw energy from FLEs and, thus, likely affect innovative work behavior.
2. *How does job autonomy affect the relationship between FLEs' boreout and customer-oriented behaviors?* Research in psychology suggests that employees' ways of coping with varying levels of job challenges depend on several contingency factors. Results of investigations relying on COR theory imply that job resources buffer the detrimental effect of a lack of resources at the service encounter (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011; Sonnentag, 2001). In this vein, the job demands–control model (Karasek, 1979) also implies that job autonomy—an important resource for FLEs—affects the relationship between job challenges (or the lack thereof) and behavioral outcomes (Baillien, De Cuyper, & De Witte, 2011; Evers, Frese, & Cooper, 2000; Magee, Stefanic, Caputi, & Iverson, 2012; Miao & Evans, 2013; Van Der Doef & Maes, 1999). Thus, I examine job autonomy as a potential moderator of the relationship between the job's insufficient challenge in the case of boreout and FLEs' customer-oriented behavior.

To the best of my knowledge, no previous study has investigated the impact of FLEs' boreout on their customer orientation. By addressing the aforementioned questions, this study contributes to extant literature in several important respects. First, I provide insights into important FLE strain variables that link to boreout. Relying on a qualitative study, I propose a set of constructs to capture FLE strain, associated with a lack of challenge, that comprises job boredom, crisis of meaning at work, and a crisis of growth at work.

Second, I unveil some neglected antecedents of customer-oriented behavior. Extant research has focused on the detrimental effects of job demands and stress; I shed light on how boreout, as low strain at the service encounter, represents a hidden threat to customer-oriented behavior, and thus to marketing. The justification of the effects underlying the three dimensions of boreout and customer orientation relies on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011), which proposes that people seek to create circumstances that protect and promote their integrity in social relationships. The focus of this theory is on peoples' reactions to environmental events that affect their resources. In this study, I am interested in customer contact employees' social relationships with customers, noting that interactions with customers likely affect customer contact employees' resources (Auh, Bell, McLeod, & Shih, 2007; Chan, Yim, & Lam, 2010; Fredrickson, 2001; Hobfoll & Schumm, 2002; Miner, Settles, Pratt-Hyatt, & Brady, 2012). With this study, I strive to understand how boreout, affects customer contact employees' customer-oriented behavior.

Third, I detail some conditions that affect the boreout–customer orientation relationship. Relying on the job demands–control model (Karasek, 1979), I identify firm-induced and customer-induced autonomy as important contingency factors.

The findings are also relevant for managers. Managers need to address boreout and to ensure that FLEs are adequately placed at the service encounter to avoid it. In particular, firms should avoid extreme standardization and boredom for their FLEs, while also providing them with sufficient possibilities for learning. The study also reveals some contingency factors that can buffer the detrimental effects of FLEs' boreout. Firms should provide a certain amount of job autonomy to help FLEs cope with boreout; alternatively, they might emphasize the positive, supportive aspects of customer interactions, such as respecting the governance

restrictions provided by customers during encounters and through feedback.

2. Boreout at the service encounter: A qualitative study

The phenomenon of boreout has only recently been introduced to management research by Stock (2015). Although Stock (2015) provides valuable insights about important boreout dimensions based on a quantitative empirical study, we need a more nuanced understanding of how boreout occurs during the service encounter. To investigate this, I therefore conducted a qualitative study.

2.1. Semi-structured interviews

With qualitative interviews, I gained deeper insights into FLE responses to boreout at the service encounter in a natural manner, during the course of conversations (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2004). One researcher interviewed each FLE at his or her workplace. The 37 interviews lasted 23 min on average. To ensure some standardization across interviews, I used an interview guide with standard, open-ended questions for all respondents (Graebner & Eisenhardt, 2004). I also allowed idiosyncratic questions if necessary, for clarification and added detail.

The interviews focused on boreout at the service encounter. They started with a general question about the most important developments that FLEs had experienced in a service encounter in the previous year, which provided the basis for more sensitive questions (Jehn, 1997). These subsequent questions were sufficiently focused but also allowed the FLEs to present their perspectives without being forced into a specific answer (e.g., Kvale, 1996; Morse & Richards, 2002). Information about insufficient challenge was elicited with two focused questions: “Do you sometimes experience a lack of challenges in your work?” and “What do you feel when you experience a lack of challenges in your work?”

2.2. Sample and analytical strategy

The participating FLEs were between 23 and 58 years of age, earned between \$18,000 and \$40,000 annually, and came from various sectors, such as retailing (32.4%), transportation services (29.5%), hospitality (24.4%), and IT/telecommunication services (13.7%).

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (Edwards, 2001). To analyze the data, I used content analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and followed the procedure proposed by Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2009). The analysis of the text passages relied on a hierarchical coding scheme (Eisenhardt, 1989; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Furthermore, to determine the empirical relevance of the constructs, I quantitatively assessed answers to the question about what FLEs felt when they experienced a lack of challenge; each time a respondent mentioned an issue, I counted it. With this frequency count, I determined the number of respondents who mentioned a construct at least once during the interview and the frequency with which each construct was mentioned across all interviews. Table 1 contains example statements that illustrate how a lack of challenge was generally expressed at the service encounter.

2.3. Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews indicated that FLEs experienced a lack of challenge at the service encounter in various ways. They most frequently referred to job boredom as mental strain, associated with boreout at the service encounter (Table 1). In this context, the respondents cited frustration as a chief manifestation of boredom. Respondents also mentioned a crisis of meaning at work and a crisis of growth as strain, due to extreme standardization. Mostly, they believed the firm considered the development of service personnel as being unimportant. In essence, FLEs' responses to boreout seem well

Table 1
Boreout at the service encounter—examples of FLEs' statements and frequency of assigned codes.

"What do you feel when you experience a lack of challenges in your work?"			
Code	Number of respondents mentioning aspect at least once	Times aspect mentioned ^a	Sample statements
Job boredom	23	28	"Eight hours of boredom from eight hours work. The work I have to do can be done in less than one hour" (hotel) "Although nothing happens and it is boring, I am not allowed to do anything else." (hotel) "One has to explain the same things again and again, like a scratched disc" (retail) "I often feel bored at the customer interface because I depend on the customers. In downtimes when few customers show-up it is simply boring" (retail)
Crisis of meaning at work	8	11	"Sometimes, my job is frustrating. I wait for hours for the customer to make a very little deal" (transportation) "At the front desk, the deeper sense of good service gets more and more lost; rather, we have to operate like machines." (travel agency)
Crisis of growth at work	10	16	"My firm does not care of whether I see a deeper sense in my work, as long as I function." (call center) "The spirit of serving customers gets increasingly lost under all this restrictions; often, I do not see any meaning at work." (retail) "There is nothing new...; there is no opportunity to develop myself." (transportation). "My firm does not help me to improve my skills; I could definitely do more and often wish to have more training and development." (IT)

^a Double counts per interview were possible; Notes: N = 37.

captured by job boredom, a crisis of meaning at work, and a crisis of growth at work, as already suggested by Stock (2015).

3. Framework of the study

The framework depicted in Fig. 1 uses the three dimensions of boreout as independent variables, as suggested by Stock (2015), with customer-oriented behavior as the dependent variable. Another important element relates to the potential moderating effects of job autonomy, which can be induced by the firm or customers. Because FLEs face generally equivalent firm-related and customer-related boundaries (Lovett, Harrison, & Virick, 1997; Onyemah, Rouziès, & Panagopoulos, 2010), I distinguish between firm-induced and customer-induced job autonomy. *Firm-induced job autonomy* is the extent to which the firm permits FLEs to make decisions about their work activities (Baillien et al., 2011). It includes such issues as freedom to act and determination over what happens in the employee's own work. Similarly, *customer-*

induced job autonomy pertains to the extent to which FLEs are allowed by customers to make decisions about their work activities, such as how they provide the service and respect the rules that govern them.

The framework also incorporates control variables that might affect customer-oriented behaviors. FLEs' characteristics affect customer-oriented behaviors (Brown, Mowen, Donnavan, & Licata, 2002; Grizzle, Lee, Zablah, Brown, & Mowen, 2009), so I control for employees' chronological age and self-efficacy, defined as "a belief regarding one's capabilities to execute a specific task within a given, specific context" (Stajkovic, 2006, p. 1211). Self-efficacious FLEs are more likely to engage with customers (Yang, Kim, & McFarland, 2011). Employees with high self-efficacy also fulfill requirements better (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demereouti, & Schaufeli, 2007) and achieve higher sales performance (Yang et al., 2011). Furthermore, FLEs' attitudes toward their work and their customers affect their customer-oriented behavior (Homburg & Stock, 2004; Susskind, Kacmar, & Borchgrevink, 2003). Thus, I include affective organizational commitment and customer-oriented attitude as

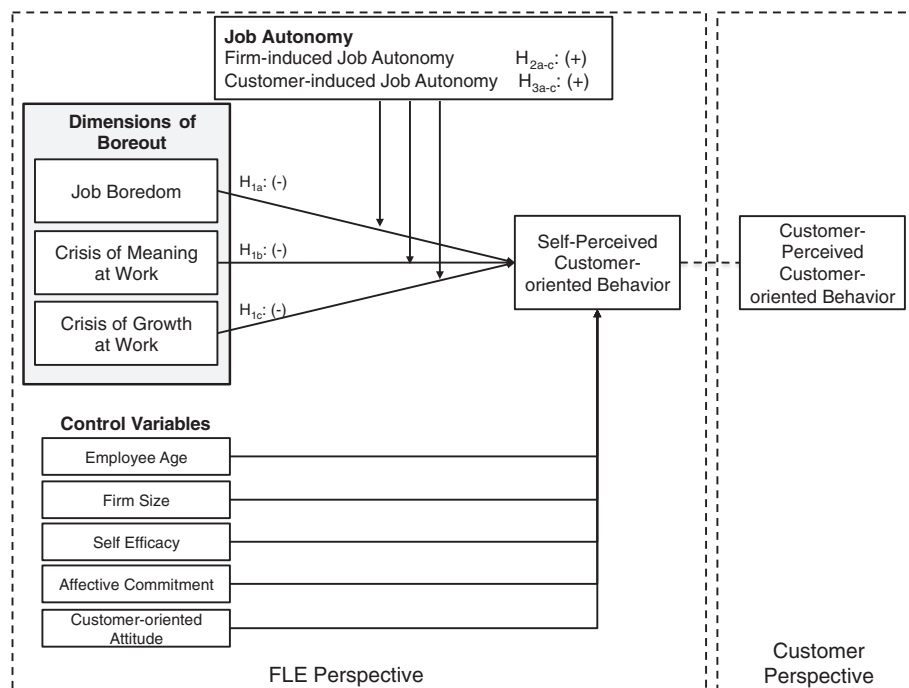


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the study.

additional control variables. Affective organizational commitment is “an affective or emotional attachment to the organization such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in, the organization” (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 2). It can lead to positive employee behaviors, including increased citizenship and performance (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Shore & Wayne, 1993). Furthermore, affective organizational commitment enhances the service quality offered by FLEs (Joshi & Randall, 2001; Malhotra & Mukherjee, 2004). A customer-oriented attitude instead refers to the FLE’s positive affect toward customers (Stock & Hoyer, 2005). It has been shown to enhance customer-oriented behaviors (Peccei & Rosenthal, 2001; Stock & Hoyer, 2005; Susskind et al., 2003).

4. Influence of boreout on customer-oriented behavior

4.1. Main effects

The justification of the main effects relies on conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011), which has been well established in industrial psychology (Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Halbesleben, Wheeler, & Paustian-Underdahl, 2013; Innstrand, Langballe, Espnes, Falkum, & Aasland, 2008). The basic tenet of COR theory is that the loss or anticipated loss of valued resources (including energy) causes mental strain. Resources are “conditions, objects, energies, and personal characteristics that are valued by the individuals or that serve as a means for attainment of these objects’ personal characteristics, energies, and conditions” (Hobfoll, 1989, p. 516). Resources might be internal, such as personal characteristics, energy, or skills, or external, such as favorable work conditions or support from coworkers (Hobfoll, 2001; Innstrand et al., 2008). They are employed by individuals to conduct the regulation of the self and their operation of social relations (Hobfoll, 2011). Furthermore, COR theory predicts that when firms fail to provide these resources, employees become less productive (Hobfoll, 2011).

Boreout, which entails a lack of excitement, as indicated by boredom, loss of meaning, and lack of possibilities to grow, constitutes a clear loss of valued resources. It harms FLEs’ job outcomes, “in that it leaves [employees] with fewer resources (e.g., motivation and energy) to invest in their work” (Halbesleben, Wheeler, and Paustian-Underdahl, 2013, p. 493). In other words, FLEs who suffer a loss of resources through insufficient challenge might become so depleted that they are unable to engage in customer-oriented behavior (Innstrand et al., 2008).

As the qualitative study revealed, an FLE’s immediate response to a lack of challenge at the service encounter is *job boredom* (Loukidou, Loan-Clarke, & Daniels, 2009), which is “a state of relatively low arousal and dissatisfaction which is attributed to an inadequately stimulating environment” (Mikulas & Vodanovich, 1993, p. 3). For example, FLEs might experience extensive downtime when they have little or nothing to do but wait for customers (Kass et al., 2001; Loukidou et al., 2009).

As an unpleasant affective state, job boredom is manifested in frustration and a diminished ability to concentrate (Fisher, 1993), reducing FLEs’ resources (Kass et al., 2001; Lee, 1986) owing to lack of challenge. Job boredom derives from a loss of resources associated with a lack of challenge. It hampers the FLE’s ability to meet the firm’s objectives (see Hobfoll, 2011). Bored FLEs are thus less able to fulfill their requirements at the service encounter and are less engaged in satisfying customer needs. Furthermore, behaviors of bored FLEs are largely driven by habituation (Deci, Connell, & Ryan, 1989; Lee, 1986), which likely impedes customer-oriented behavior as well.

The qualitative interviews further revealed, similar to prior research, that FLEs with very low challenges at work “see no meaning in work activities and know well how unimportant the tasks appear [to the firm]” (Rothlin & Werder, 2008, p. 15). Thus, lack of challenge might also be reflected in a *crisis of meaning at work*, defined as the extent to which

FLEs perceive their work as insignificant and of little importance (Douglas, Gilson, & Harter, 2004; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995).

A crisis of meaning at work may derive from a loss of resources associated with a lack of challenges. A FLE, suffering from a crisis of meaning loses the sense that his or her work is really valuable, either for the organization or personally (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). Without this sense of importance, the FLE likely is less able for pursuing organizational goals (Kass, Wallace, & Vodanovich, 2003; Loukidou et al., 2009) and engaging in customer orientation.

Finally, lack of challenge can deplete resources in that a person perceives a lack of opportunities for personal growth in the job (Clay, Aryee, & Chew, 1995; Lemire, Saba, & Gagnon, 1999; Tremblay, Roger, & Toulouse, 1995). FLEs without opportunities to grow likely believe that they do not have interesting experiences at work or chances to develop their task-related and personal skills. This phenomenon entails a crisis of growth (Bakker, van Veldhoven, & Xanthopoulou, 2010). Without these growing experiences, the FLE likely is less able for pursuing organizational goals, which reduces his or her engagement in customer-oriented behaviors. Thus:

H1. *The three dimensions of FLEs’ boreout, (a) job boredom, (b) crisis of meaning at work, and (c) crisis of growth, negatively affect customer-oriented behavior.*

4.2. Moderating effects

I also seek to investigate the contingency effects of varying levels of job autonomy, induced by the firm and customers. *Firm-induced job autonomy* is the extent to which the firm permits FLEs to make decisions about their work activities (Baillien et al., 2011). It includes such issues as freedom to act and the latitude to determine what happens in the FLE’s own work. Similarly, *customer-induced job autonomy* pertains to the extent to which customers permit FLEs to make decisions about their work activities. It includes such issues as freedom to make their work at the service encounter and freedom to provide the service.

COR theory predicts that an employee’s resources buffer the detrimental effects of a loss of resources (Hobfoll, 2001, 2011). Employees can overcome their resource losses associated with a lack of challenge by engaging in recovery experiences (Sonnentag, 2001). In this context, recovery “describes the process by which depleted resources are replenished and restored” (Halbesleben, Wheeler, and Paustian-Underdahl, 2013, p. 493). Recovery experiences fall into four distinct classes: control, mastery experiences, relaxation, and psychological detachment (Sonnentag & Fritz, 2007). While each type of experience works through different mechanisms, the experiences share the common effect of lessening employee stress by offering an opportunity to recover lost resources (Etzion, Eden, & Lapidot, 1998; Fritz & Sonnentag, 2006; Sonnentag & Bayer, 2005; Sonnentag & Natter, 2004).

These resource gains through the service encounter, in turn, might compensate for the burden of boreout, reducing the decrement of customer-oriented behavior. I posit that autonomy, induced by the firm or customers, weakens the detrimental effects of a loss of resources owing to boreout. Specifically, when FLEs feel unchallenged, they stop feeling excited about their work because work-related stimuli decrease (see Kass et al., 2001). Autonomy induced by the firm or customers increases both mastery and control over performance goals, in that it gives FLEs freedom to act to reach work goals at the service encounter. Thus, the detrimental effect of strain due to boreout on customer-oriented behavior should also be weakened.

Particular support for the relevance of job autonomy as important contingency variable comes from the job demands-control model (Karasek (1979), which is frequently applied in research (e.g., De Lange, De Witte, & Notelaers, 2008). Whereas most studies focus on challenging jobs and the interplay with job autonomy (Karasek, 1979;

Tattersall & Farmer, 1995), I instead consider boreout, associated with low challenge.

The job demands-control model features job autonomy and job challenges and posits that they interact to predict a person's well being (Karasek, 1979). As the detrimental effects of lack of challenge can be buffered by job autonomy (Smulders & Nijhuis, 1999), the well-being of a person in a job with low challenges should improve when he or she has higher rather than lower autonomy. Furthermore, the job demands-control model predicts that situations lacking challenges but having high job autonomy draw less energy from a person than those for which challenges and autonomy are low (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). FLEs with high job autonomy have more freedom to execute their work in an authentic, self-fulfilling manner, which could weaken the detrimental effects of insufficient challenge. Even if the FLE perceives the work as boring, meaningless, or without possibilities to grow, at least he or she has control over work activities. Thus, the FLE loses less energy, which leaves more energy in reserve to cope with lack of challenge at the service encounter. I predict that both firm- and customer-induced job autonomy weaken the boreout-customer orientation relationship in similar ways. That is, FLEs are unique in that they experience strong boundaries, not only with firm members but also with customers (Brady & Cronin, 2001; Di Mascio, 2010; Sirianni et al., 2009), so both firm- and customer-induced autonomy should buffer the detrimental effects of lack of challenge at the service encounter. Thus:

H2. Firm-induced job autonomy weakens the negative effects of the three boreout dimensions, (a) job boredom, (b) crisis of meaning at work, and (c) crisis of growth, on customer-oriented behavior.

H3. Customer-induced job autonomy weakens the negative effects of the three boreout dimensions, (a) job boredom, (b) crisis of meaning at work, and (c) crisis of growth, on customer-oriented behavior.

5. Quantitative study

5.1. Data collection and sample

To test the effects of boreout on customer orientation, I rely on a sample that spans several industries offering various personal services in a business-to-consumer context: retailing, public services, consulting/training, financial services/insurances, IT/telecommunication, reparation services, and health services. I selected the sectors on the basis of preliminary interviews with marketing experts that revealed personal services were particularly relevant in these industries. In a first step, a list of the e-mail addresses of 1000 FLEs was obtained from a professional address provider; these potential participants received requests to participate in the study. This e-mail request also incorporated a link to the electronic questionnaire. To encourage participation, respondents would be entered into a raffle (with prizes including an iPod and Amazon voucher worth \$20). Erroneous e-mail addresses led to the return of 71 messages, so the valid sample included 929 contacts. Three weeks later, 127 respondents had returned questionnaires. After a follow-up e-mail, another 49 respondents completed questionnaires. Of the 176 questionnaires (response rate = 17.6%), 29 were incomplete, so this study relies on 147 completed questionnaires with self-assessments by FLEs.

The comparison of early and late respondents revealed no significant differences in any of the constructs, so nonresponse bias did not seem to be a concern. Among the surveyed FLEs, 60.5% were men. They represented multiple industries: retailing (25.2%), consulting/training (17%), public services (15.6%), financial services/insurance (10.9%), IT/telecommunication (10.2%), reparation services (11.6%), and health services (9.5%). Most of the surveyed FLEs were between 20 and 55 years of age, had a firm tenure of between 5 and 20 years, and earned between \$31,000 and \$63,000 per year.

5.2. Construct measurement

The three-dimensional scale for boreout was measured with a scale developed by Stock (2015). The scale for the moderating variables of firm-induced autonomy was adapted from Hackman and Oldham (1975), the scale for customer-induced job autonomy was adapted from the autonomy scale, originally developed by Stock and Hoyer (2005).

For the operationalization of customer-oriented behavior, I used the scale developed by Stock and Hoyer (2005). The items appear in the Appendix. To ensure reliability and validity of the scales, I calculated Cronbach's alphas and composite reliability. An exploratory factor analysis confirmed the dimensionality of the scales for all constructs in the study. The data clearly indicated a three-dimensional structure of the boreout construct, composed of job boredom (32.1), crisis of meaning at work (29.4), and crisis of growth (19.8). The data in Table 2 also indicate support from the confirmatory factor analysis, such that the results exceed the recommended values (Bagozzi, Yi, & Phillips, 1991; Nunnally, 1978).

Furthermore, I conducted several tests to establish the construct validity of the three boreout dimensions and customer-oriented behavior. Convergent validity requires high correlations between the indicators used to measure the same construct (Bagozzi et al., 1991). I found high correlations for the indicators of job boredom (.45–.69), crisis of meaning at work (.37–.59), crisis of growth (.43–.67), and customer-oriented behavior (.41–.69). The factor loadings also should exceed the recommended value .4 (Bagozzi & Baumgartner, 1994), which is satisfied for the indicators of boredom (.55–.69), crisis of meaning at work (.56–.72), crisis of growth (.68–.84), and customer-oriented behavior (.61–.84). I also used factor reliability to assess convergent validity (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011; Malhotra, Mukhopadhyay, Liu, & Dash, 2012). For boredom (.51–.67), crisis of meaning at work (.54–.79), crisis of growth (.54–.63), and customer-oriented behavior (.49–.63), the threshold value of .4 was exceeded (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988).

For the test of discriminant validity, I followed Fornell and Larcker (1981) and Anderson and Gerbing (1988) and required that the indicators used to measure different constructs were distinct. I thus compared the square root of the average variance extracted (AVE) with the interconstruct correlations (MacKenzie et al., 2011). The square roots of the AVE of job boredom (.50), crisis of meaning at work (.85), crisis of growth (.72), and customer-oriented behavior (.59) all were greater than the interconstruct correlations, in support of discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The descriptive statistics and correlations among the constructs appear in Table 2.

I also undertook further scale development related to the control variables: FLE age, self-efficacy, firm size, affective organizational commitment, and customer-oriented attitude (see the Appendix A). I measured FLE age with a single item. For self-efficacy, I used a 10-item scale, developed by Luszczynska, Scholz, and Schwarzer (2005). Firm size was captured by the number of employees. Affective organizational commitment was measured with a reduced set of three items from Allen and Meyer (1990); customer-oriented attitude was measured with a scale from Stock and Hoyer (2005).

5.3. Common method variance

The measures of the three dimensions of boreout and customer-oriented behavior relied on employees' self-reports (see Table 2), which suggested a threat of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). I conducted two tests to rule out this possibility. First, I applied Harman's single-factor test (Podsakoff et al., 2003) to determine whether a single-factor model with all manifest variables fit significantly worse than the model depicted in Fig. 1. I compared the chi-square value of the single-factor model with the measurement model and determined that the fit of the single-

Table 2
Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and intercorrelations among refined measures (main study).*

Variables	M	S	α	CR	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1 Job boredom	3.1	1.3	.79	.80	(.71)										
2 Crisis of meaning at work	2.5	1.7	.95	.96	.67*	(.92)									
3 Crisis of growth at work	3.4	1.6	.91	.92	.39*	.61*	(.85)								
4 Customer-oriented behavior	5.8	.9	.89	.90	-.26*	-.23*	-.19*	(.77)							
5 FLE age	32.3	9.9	-	-	-.28*	-.33*	-.25*	.19*	(-)						
6 Firm size	3.6	2.1	-	-	-.12	-.17*	.01	-.03	.08	(-)					
7 Self-efficacy	4.9	.9	.90	.90	-.25*	-.05	-.12	.08	.05	-.08	(.73)				
8 Customer-oriented attitude	5.4	1.2	.89	.90	-.08	.11	.06	.53*	.13	-.04	.01	(.82)			
9 Affective organizational commitment	4.3	1.5	.81	.82	-.50*	-.68*	-.56*	.04	.26*	.21*	-.07	-.11	(.77)		
10 Firm-induced job autonomy	4.2	1.6	.81	.83	-.56*	-.53*	-.50*	.00	-.13	-.04	.17*	-.14	.55*	(.80)	
11 Customer-induced job autonomy	3.5	1.2	.83	.83	-.13	.11	.07	-.12	.03	.09	.01	-.10	-.04	-.10	(.83)

Notes: M = mean, S = standard deviation, α = Cronbach's alpha, CR = composite reliability. Diagonal elements in parentheses are the square roots of the average variance extracted for multi-item constructs measured reflectively. N = 147.

* p ≤ .05.

factor model was significantly worse than that of the model with all the constructs. Therefore, the correlations between the observed variables cannot be explained using a single factor.

Second, I included a common method factor in the structural model used to test H2a–c. It loaded on all items measured with customer contact employees' self-reports and, thus, enabled me to control for common method variance in hypothesis testing. To achieve model convergence, I specified all loadings of the method factor to be of the same size, reflecting the assumption that common method variance affects all items equally. In addition, the method factor was specified as uncorrelated with the other constructs, reflecting the assumption that the degree of common method variance was independent of the true magnitude of employees' customer-oriented behavior (Homburg, Müller, & Klarmann, 2011). The results remained stable, so common method bias was not a concern for the current study.

To test the validity of the dependent variable—FLEs' customer-oriented behavior—from a customer perspective, I assessed FLEs' customer-oriented behavior at the customer interface. Because employees' perceived customer-oriented behavior at the customer interface should relate to customers' assessments, I gathered assessments from customers of 52 employees (2–3 customers per employee) who took part in the study. By capturing customer perceptions of customer-oriented behavior at the customer interface, I reduced problems inherent to assessments of customer-oriented behavior that are based solely on self-reported data (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

I asked the customers to assess the FLEs' customer-oriented behaviors during their interaction, again using the scale developed by Stock and Hoyer (2005). The validity measures were satisfactory, according to the Cronbach's alpha values (.92), composite reliability (.93), and average variance extracted (.71). The customer responses were averaged for each employee into a single-group composite value for the data analysis (Van Bruggen, Lilien, & Kacker, 2002). Finally, I calculated the correlation between the employee assessments of their own customer-oriented behavior with the customer assessments. The high correlation (.61, p < .05) affirmed the validity of employees' perceptions of their own behavior.

In this context, I consider this correlation sufficiently high, for two reasons. First, I ran a simple ordinary least-squares regression to check whether the results using customer data differed from the findings using self-assessment data. The results were consistent with the main findings, such that the patterns of coefficients that linked the three boreout dimensions—boredom (.21, p < .10), crisis of meaning at work (.17, ns), and crisis of growth (.26, p < .10)—to customer orientation were similar across both models. Second, prior validation studies with customers indicate that correlations between firm and customer data of .4 and .5 are sufficient indicators of validation (e.g., Homburg, Klarmann, & Schmitt, 2010; Stock, Six, & Zacharias, 2013).

6. Results

In the hypotheses, direct effects from the three dimensions of FLEs' boreout to FLEs' customer-oriented behavior were proposed, but firm- and customer-induced job autonomy were also predicted to moderate these relationships. To test for both direct and moderated effects, hierarchical moderated regression analysis was employed (Aiken & West, 1991). Rather than structural equation modeling, I chose regression analysis for several reasons. First, I investigate a one-stage model that comprises the three boreout dimensions as independent variables and customer contact employees' customer-oriented behavior as a dependent variable. The analysis thus aims to determine variance in customer-oriented behaviors, as explained by the three boreout dimensions, which can be achieved with a regression analysis. Second, I exclusively analyze the direct effects of the three boreout dimensions on customer-oriented behaviors. Structural equation modeling instead would be more adequate for comparing the direct and indirect effects of an independent variable on a dependent variable. This reasoning also is consistent with prior literature that applies regression analyses to within-stage models (Brown & Chin, 2004; Hess, Ganesan, & Klein, 2003; Sousa & Coelho, 2011). For example, Hess et al. (2003) examine the effect of FLEs' recovery activities on customer satisfaction. Matila and Enz (2002) consider the effect of self-declared emotions on FLE performance at the service encounter, and Sousa and Coelho (2011) investigate the influence of FLEs' personal values on creativity.

Using FLEs' customer-oriented behavior as a criterion variable, I ran an initial regression with the control variables (Model 1), to avoid confounding the main effects (Irwin & McClelland, 2001). Next, I added the independent variables of job boredom, crisis of meaning at work, and crisis of growth (Model 2, Table 3). In Model 3, I created interaction terms by multiplying the values for job boredom, crisis of meaning at work, and crisis of growth with the hypothesized autonomy variables, firm-/customer-induced job autonomy, as moderators. For ease of interpretation, I mean-centered the constituent variables (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003).

As shown in Table 3, the findings fully supported H1. All three dimensions of boreout negatively affected customer-oriented behavior: job boredom (H1a = .35, p < .01), crisis of meaning at work (H1b = .34, p < .05), and crisis of growth (H1c = .25, p < .05), consistent with COR theory. Boreout drew energy from employees, which impeded their customer-oriented behavior.

The basic notion underlying the moderator hypotheses was that firm-induced job autonomy (H2a–c) and customer-induced job autonomy (H3a–c) should mitigate the detrimental effects of FLEs' boreout. In support of H2b and H2c, the results reveal interaction effects of firm-induced autonomy on crisis of meaning at work (.30, p < .05) and crisis of growth (.34, p < .01); the detrimental effects of crisis of meaning

Table 3
Regression results for boreout and customer-oriented behavior.

	Model 1 (control variables)	Model 2 (direct effects)	Model 3 (moderator effects)
<i>Control variables</i>			
FLE age	.11	–.03	.05
Firm size	–.01	–.05	.08
Self-efficacy	.01	–.06	–.03
Customer-oriented attitude	.57*	.51*	.39*
Affective organizational commitment	.05	.31*	.26*
Firm-induced job autonomy	–.03	.22*	.11
Customer-induced job autonomy	.05	.11	–.01
<i>Direct effects</i>			
Job boredom	–	–.35*	–.21*
Crisis of meaning at work	–	–.34*	–.37*
Crisis of growth	–	–.25*	–.36*
<i>Moderator effects</i>			
Job boredom × firm-induced job autonomy	–	–	–.25*
Crisis of meaning at work × firm-induced job autonomy	–	–	.30*
Crisis of growth × firm-induced job autonomy	–	–	.34*
Job boredom × customer-induced job autonomy	–	–	.29*
Crisis of meaning at work × customer-induced job autonomy	–	–	–.12
Crisis of growth × customer-induced job autonomy	–	–	.14*
R ² (adjusted R ²)	.36 (.32)	.47 (.42)	.55 (.50)
F-value (F ₁)	8.28 (8.28)*	12.96 (15.59)*	17.10 (10.96)*
Incremental R ²	.36	.11	.08

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients; F₁ = Value of incremental R²; N = 147.

* $p \leq .05$.

at work and crisis of growth were thus buffered by firm-induced autonomy. Yet firm-induced job autonomy negatively affected the relationship between job boredom and customer-oriented behavior ($-.25$, $p < .05$). That is, the negative effect of job boredom grew even stronger when the firm created conditions marked by high job autonomy. Perhaps employees with more freedom to act in their jobs can recognize their lack of excitement, due to boreout, more easily and powerfully. In this case, the resource loss becomes even stronger as employees attain more autonomy from their firm.

With regard to customer-induced job autonomy, the results support H3a and H3c. I reveal some interaction effects of customer-induced job autonomy on the negative effects of job boredom (.29, $p < .01$) and crisis of growth (.14, $p < .05$). However, and contrary to theoretical reasoning, the interaction of crisis of meaning at work with customer-induced job autonomy ($-.12$, *ns*) was not significant. FLEs who lost resources because they consider their job meaningless could not buffer their resource loss through mastery or social experiences with customers.

7. Discussion

Because scholars generally assume that a FLE's customer orientation helps to drive firm success (e.g., Franke & Park, 2006), extensive research has addressed the antecedents of customer-oriented behavior, such as employee characteristics and attitudes (Brown et al., 2002; Grizzle et al., 2009; Stock & Hoyer, 2005). However, this rich stream of research has remained largely silent regarding low strain at the service encounter and its potential effects on customer-oriented behaviors. This gap is surprising, because in business practice, ongoing debates center on how to assign FLEs efficiently, to ensure they are available for customers but avoid overstaffing. Against this background, this study introduces a new conceptual phenomenon at the service encounter—boreout. The results offer valuable insights for academics and practitioners alike.

7.1. Research implications

This study represents a first attempt to conceptualize and examine a largely neglected antecedent of FLEs' customer-oriented behavior. On the basis of qualitative interviews with 37 FLEs, I provide a more fine-grained

perspective on the nature of the three dimensions of boreout: job boredom, crisis of meaning at work, and crisis of growth at work. Accordingly, this study contributes to marketing research in several important respects.

First, the study provides insights on a new phenomenon that represents a neglected threat for marketing. Whereas high strain at the service encounter has been well researched (Babakus et al., 1999; Boles, Johnston, & Hair, 1997; Cravens, Lasko, Low, Marshall, & Moncrief, 2004; Deery, Iverson, & Walsh, 2002; Singh, 2000), the study sheds new light on boreout as an omnipresent element for the customer.

Second, by investigating the effect of boreout on customer-oriented behaviors, my study sheds light on a largely neglected source of customer-oriented behavior. Extant research has focused on FLEs' personality and attitudes (Brown et al., 2002; Grizzle et al., 2009; Susskind et al., 2003); this study examines boreout as an impediment to customer-oriented behaviors. The relatively high additional variance explained by the three boreout dimensions (21%), even when I control for employee characteristics and customer-oriented attitudes, reveals that boreout is an important antecedent of customer-oriented behavior. According to the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979), FLEs suffering from boreout experience a lack of energy and thus, it is hard for them to behave on a customer-oriented manner at the service encounter. The data confirm this warning for all three dimensions of boreout.

Third, this study sheds light on employees' job autonomy as a contingency factor that mitigates some detrimental effects of boreout. However, the results only partly confirm the predictions of the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979). Specifically, I distinguish between firm- and customer-induced job autonomy and find that the two forms affect the boreout–customer orientation relationship differently. Firm-induced job autonomy buffers the detrimental effects of crisis of meaning at work and crisis of growth, yet it strengthens the detrimental effect of boredom, possibly because bored FLEs become even more aware of their unexciting job situation when the firm provides them with more freedom to act. In the case of boredom, the results thus contradict the job demands-resources model. Customer-induced job autonomy buffers the detrimental effects of both job boredom and crisis of growth; however, mastery and social experiences with customers have no influence on the detrimental effect of a crisis of meaning

at work. Customers simply appear unable to help customer contact employees refill their depleted resources due to crises of meaning.

7.2. Managerial implications

For managers, this study provides important insights into a largely unknown, yet omnipresent, phenomenon at the customer interface. Marketing managers should focus on ways to avoid and manage any severe lack of challenges for FLEs. Organizational slack and workplace designs that provide FLEs sufficient space for creativity and self-fulfillment could help to avoid boreout. In contrast, firms often seek to stimulate employees' customer orientation through training programs that teach universal selling techniques or negotiation skills. Although such programs might be somewhat fruitful, overly standardized processes can lead to boreout, which will impede FLEs' customer-oriented behavior. That is, marketing managers need to apply standardization processes at the customer interface with great care.

At the same time, managers should ensure that FLEs have an appropriate level of job autonomy, especially at the service encounter. Such autonomy limits the detrimental effects of a crisis of meaning at work and crisis of growth, even though it worsens the negative effects of job autonomy. Thus, firm-induced job autonomy represents a fruitful instrument for managing FLEs, but only if they are placed appropriately and do not suffer overly much from job boredom.

Furthermore, firms must be careful with their promises to customers about how their FLEs will act. If the firm grants employees some freedom to act at the customer interface, customers should accept that these FLEs possess some degree of autonomy. In turn, these employees become more likely to adopt a customer orientation, even if they are bored or suffer from few learning possibilities.

7.3. Limitations and further research

This study constitutes a first step toward a better understanding of the customer-related outcomes of FLEs' boreout. Despite these contributions, several limitations suggest directions for research. Thus far, marketing research has ignored the problem of boreout at the customer interface. I consider FLEs' boreout a manifestation of insufficient challenge; additional research should specify the three dimensions of FLEs' boreout more closely to detail the potential changes in this phenomenon over time. In this context, researchers might investigate how FLEs' boreout affects customer-oriented behaviors during various phases of the customer relationship, such as acquisition, maintenance, or recovery.

The goal was to understand the customer orientation outcomes of FLEs' boreout. Although I validate I findings with some customer data, the focus of this study is on understanding the psychological processes that affect FLEs' customer-oriented behavior. Additional research could focus more specifically on the customer perspective. For example, does FLEs' boreout spread to other customer-related outcomes, such as customer satisfaction and loyalty? The customer-related outcome variables should be assessed by customers.

Firm- and customer-induced job autonomy served as contingency variables, in accordance with the job demands-control model (Karasek, 1979). Additional research might examine other potentially important moderator variables that reflect relevant contingency factors for customer relationships, such as customer characteristics (e.g., involvement, openness, trust) or relationship characteristics (e.g., interaction frequency, interaction quality).

Appendix Measures and items

Boreout as independent variables

Job boredom
In my job...
... I feel bored.

... I am not fascinated by my tasks.
... I am not able to concentrate.
... I am frustrated.

Crisis of meaning at work
My work seems meaningless.
I don't see any sense in my work.
I suffer from the fact that I do not see any point in my work.
When I think about the meaning of my work I find only emptiness.

Crisis of growth at work
My job offers me opportunities for personal growth and development (r).
My work gives me the feeling that I can achieve something (r).
My work offers me the possibility of independent thought and action (r).
I learn new things in my work (r).

Dependent variable.

Customer-oriented behavior
I try to get to discuss the customers' needs.
I answer the customers' questions about products and/or services as correctly as I can.
I try to influence the customers by information rather than by pressure.
I try to give the customers an accurate expectation of what the product will do for them.
I am willing to disagree with the customers in order to help them make a better decision.
I try to help the customers to achieve their goals.

Control variables.

FLE age (in years)
Firm size (number of employees)
Self-efficacy (Luszczynska et al., 2005)
I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough.
If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want.
It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals.
I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations.
I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.
I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions.
If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.
I can usually handle whatever comes my way.
Affective organizational commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990)
I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside it.
I really feel as if this organization's problems are my own.
Customer-oriented attitude (Stock & Hoyer, 2005)
I consider myself to be very customer-oriented.
I enjoy interacting with customers.
Customer orientation is one of my personal goals.
Customer orientation is very important in my job.
Firm-induced job autonomy (adapted from Hackman & Oldham, 1975).
My firm allows me to...
... work independently.
... determine what happens in my work.
... have a lot of freedom to act in my job.
Customer-induced job autonomy (adapted from Stock and Hoyer, 2005).
My customers ...
... let me chiefly control my work.
... let me largely determine how I provide the service.
... fully understand when I am very busy.
... never demand special treatment.

Notes: Seven-point Likert-type scale with 7 = "strongly agree" and 1 = "strongly disagree" as anchors.

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