

2. Stress

2.1 Introduction

No other concept has dominated the public discussions in India on outsourcing as much as stress has (Datta, 2008; Lakshmi, 2005; Sarkar, 2007; A. Sharma, 2005; Tejaswi, 2005). Outsourcing has generated millions of job opportunities and has contributed to India's economic development among the middle class youth (D'Monte & Mishra, 2007; Sarkar, 2007), but the very mention of global call centers (BPO units) mainly results in outcries over the stressful and supposedly exploitative nature of the industry (cf. Section 1.3/1.4).

In essence, and as described in the introductory chapter, global call centers in India have constantly found themselves at the center of controversy despite many achievements. This holds true not only in the international media because of the supposed job losses in high-income countries (Bhagwati, et al., 2004; Deuel, 2003; Hira & Hira, 2005; Mirchandani, 2008, p. 91; Schwartz, 2004) but also at home. In Indian societal debates, BPO units are mainly criticized for being exploitative and immoral (Huggler, 2006). They are held responsible for inducing highly unhealthy psychological stress among young BPO employees (Tejaswi, 2005). The reasons given for this high stress level include the monotonous work environment, rudeness and racism by foreign clients, as well as the feeling of being cut off from the rest of society because of the nighttime work (Budhwar, 2009; Majumdar, 2005; Pradhan & Abraham, 2005; Subramanian & Vinothkumar, 2009).

This chapter focuses on the BPO employees' perceptions of stress and the question of whether they suffer from stress symptoms to the degree being depicted in Indian public debates. It goes on to discuss why people and the media in India associate BPO units so highly with stress. Subsequently, I examine the coping strategies used by BPO employees to deal with their stress.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Stress in itself is a multifaceted construct. It is handled in differing ways by disciplines ranging from physics (physical strain) to biology (physical, psychobiological, and neurological strain) to socio-behavioral sciences (psycho-social stress) (cf. Pestonjee, 1992). While the earliest academic references to stress (Selye, 1956), which introduced it as a cause of medical illness, tended to treat the concept as a simplistic stimulus-response mechanism (Davidson & Cooper, 1983), later theorists like Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Levi (1987) viewed it as a complex process. These theorists took into account multiple cognitive, emotional, societal, and behavioral aspects of stress, in addition to the physiological ones. According to them, the stress pro-

cess cannot take place without the active involvement of the person undergoing a stressful situation, who has to perceive the situation as stressful and react accordingly by choosing from a number of perceived options available to her/him. This view of stress as an ongoing process also resulted in the differentiation of stress into eustress (the minimum amount of psychological stress needed by an organism to function) and distress (the critical form of stress which causes an individual's normal functioning to be adversely affected) (Nelson & Simmons, 2005). Because of its use in differing context, stress as a concept is difficult to define (Cooper & Dewe, 2004; Jonge & Dormann, 2003) but Lazarus and Folkman's (1986) description of stress based on the relationship between individuals and their environment is often used as a popular definition. They refer to psychological stress as "a relationship with the environment that the person appraises as significant for his or her well being and in which the demands tax or exceed available coping resources" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1986, p. 63).

Given Coleman's (1976) view of modern life as full of anxiety and stress, it is unsurprising that an enterprise combining modern technology and work ethics, such as outsourced call center work, is stressful. As a job in any call center involves direct customer contact, the employees must constantly take part in rapidly occurring interactions and fulfill the various expectations related to services expected by customers (De Ruyter, et al., 2001). The constant switching of roles for the purpose of properly fulfilling the various expectations of different customers, as well as meeting the management's demands for being time-conscious and efficient, gives rise to the most common form of stress found in call centers viz. role stress (De Ruyter, et al., 2001; Dean, 2009; Latack, 1986; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004).

2.2.1 Role Stress

While stress can manifest in many different forms, including physiological, social, or psychological stress (Aneshensel, 1992; Appley & Trumbull, 1986; Burke, 1991; Melin, et al., 1999), it almost exclusively takes the form of *role stress* in the spheres of occupation and work (Cooper & Dewe, 2004; Lambert, et al., 2005). While every social situation involves taking up and playing multiple roles (Turner, 2001), organizations and institutions tend to impose a number of expectations regarding the roles being performed by an individual. This leads to conflicting role expectations and role stress (Kahn, et al., 1964). Latack (1986) describes role stress as an umbrella term covering all of the features at work which harm, challenge, and threaten employees who handle particular roles in any organization. It is also the most significant cause of negative well-being at work and negatively affects almost every aspect of work including job satisfaction, productivity, organizational commitment, performance, creativity, and interpersonal relations (Hui, et al., 2009; Singh, et al., 2007).

Call center work, being a real-time customer service, requires almost uninterrupted interactions with customers. As in every other service industry, such an interaction requires employees to appear pleasant and competent to customers at all costs, irrespective of their current emotional state. These expectations and obligations make role stress the most common form of stress in call centers (De Ruyter, et al., 2001; Latack, 1986). Furthermore, role stress levels are higher the more repetitive a job is or the more interactions with customers a job involves (Surti, 1982). Both of these conditions, repetitive tasks and high customer interaction, must be fulfilled in call centers (Bakker, et al., 2003; Friedman, 2005, p. 28; Grebner, et al., 2003; Houlihan, 2003). Because of this, stress in call centers is almost exclusively treated as equivalent to role stress alone (Dean, 2009; Tuten & Neidermeyer, 2004).

In addition to requiring constant customer interactions, which is common to every call center, global call center agents are expected to master the knowledge and cultural norms of the caller's country and even to learn to speak with an accent/style that is closer to the one being used by the caller (Shalini, 2009). Quite often, they even take up an anglicized identity so as to appear comfortably 'local' to the calling customer (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2006; Shome, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2005). Thus, the BPO agents are constantly in the act of role-playing their emotions and identities for the customer's benefit. This requires a fair amount of "effort, planning, and control needed to express [the above mentioned] organizationally desired emotion[s] during [telephonic] interpersonal transactions" (Morris & Feldman, 1996, p. 987). The role stress arising out of such a management of personal emotions to convey a customer friendly face is known as *emotional labor* (Hochschild, 2003; Morris & Feldman, 1996).

2.2.1.1 Self-Role Distance

At times, such emotional labor by its very nature can cause discrepancies between the real emotions being felt by the agent and the emotions being displayed for the customer's benefit. For example, when an angry customer is criticizing the agent because of a lack of relevant information or even because of the 'strange' accent of the latter, the agent might, in reality, not be feeling the cheerful attitude that she or he is displaying. This discrepancy between the actual self and the self being enacted gives rise to stress, which has been called *self-role distance* (SRD) (Pareek, 2002) or emotional dissonance (Lewig & Dollard, 2003). As it also represents the conflict between the expectations that one has from one's perceived true identity and the perceived expectations of others - management and customers, for example -which one must fulfill in multiple roles, it can also be called "Role Expectations Conflict" (Pestonjee, 1992, p. 83). Societal expectations to conform to Indian norms being the major source of role stress in India.

2.2.1.2 Personal Inadequacy

The constant need for high performance in a call center in response to constant customer expectations of prompt and satisfying service (being delivered in a neutral or Western accent) can also result in a situation where agents might find themselves falling short of the demands imposed by these expectations. This leads to the manifestation of emotional labor in the form of a feeling of inadequacy at performing one's roles and is referred to as *personal inadequacy* (PI) (Pareek, 2002). In their study on role stress in the IT/ITES industry in India, Aziz, et al. (2000) found that the employees suffered from high PI due to job pressure. They argue that the reason for this might be the dynamic nature of such globalized technological jobs, which force employees to keep enhancing their knowledge and skill sets or face redundancy - making them feel inadequate in meeting the expectation of always being up-to-date.

2.2.1.3 Inter-Role Distance

Similar to international migrants, global call center employees work in an almost entirely foreign environment (Sandhu, 2006). But unlike migrants, they return to their societies of origin after every work shift. This constant need to shift between societal roles, as well as between the Indian and a foreign culture, brings them into a situation wherein they have to perform widely different roles - like being an American Yankee as well as an ideal son in a Hindu family. If agents feel that they are not able to switch satisfactorily between these roles, they experience role stress because of the *inter-role distance* (IRD) (Pareek, 2002). In a bi-cultural context like in outsourced call centers, such high inter-role conflicts, which arise because of shuffling the contradictory demands of living in two different cultural situations (viz. American workplace and Indian home), are also known as bi-cultural stress (Thomas & Alderfer, 1989) or cross-cultural adjustment stress (Weaver, 1986), and correspond with Berry's conceptualization of "acculturative stress" (2006, p. 294). Berry clarifies this concept as follows:

[...] individuals experience change events in their lives that challenge their cultural understandings about how to live. [...] In these situations, they come to understand that they are facing problems resulting from intercultural contact that cannot be dealt with easily or quickly by simply adjusting or assimilating to them. (Berry, 2006, p. 294)

2.2.1.4 Role Boundedness

While carrying out their call center duties, BPO employees are expected to be performance-oriented and dedicated to the task at hand. Apart from these employer expectations, they are also expected - both by customers and employers - to enact the role of average Americans or Britons (Nadeem, 2009; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2009). Such constant role-playing and enactment by the agents, both as dedicated employees and Americans/Britons, can lead to a situation where - in an attempt to satisfy the expectations of their employers or their customers - the agents

labor hard emotionally and internalize the enacted role to such an extent that they feel bounded to the enacted role at the cost of their own preferences, values, and true identities (Lewig & Dollard, 2003). In such cases, the act of role-playing carries a rather negative connotation with it and is called “role boundedness” (RB) (Pareek, 2002, p. 548).⁷ According to Pareek (2002, p. 548), role boundedness in the Indian culture is already high, owing to its emphasis on *duty boundedness* or dharma.⁸ Bhatt and Verma (2008) found role boundedness to be especially high among Indian IT/ITES (Information Technology / Information Technology Enabled Services) professionals who work on outsourced projects. They concluded that the reasons for this might be the feeling of forgoing personal pleasures while devoting ones time and energy to the obligations at work. Such a feeling of duty boundedness towards their demanding workplaces conflicts with the employees’ sense of duty boundedness towards the expectations of their families and leads to role bounded stress (Babbili, 1997; D’Mello, 2006; Eckensberger, 2006; Shah, 2009).

2.2.2 Work-Family Conflict

The notion of work and family spheres influencing one another is well established in psychological research (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985; Kanter, 2000; Pleck, 1977). This always has consequences for the individual, as emotions of one sphere are transferred on to the other (Staines, 1980). For example, social support from one’s family can help to counter the stress at work while positive achievements at work can result in positive self-esteem and well-being within the family. But, the influences are often also negative. The inconsistencies and differing demands of the two spheres can and do lead to conflict and role stress for the concerned individual (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Thus, the tighter the boundary between the two spheres, the more they are insulated from the influence of the other. Similarly, the more ambiguous or blurred the boundary, the higher the integration and the more the individual has to juggle between the demands of the two spheres (Frone, 2003; Perry-Jenkins, et al., 2000). All in all, individualistic and high in uncertainty avoidance cultures in the West have had better defined work-family boundaries than the Eastern collectivistic and low in uncertainty avoidance cultures like India, which actually consider the conflict arising from such uncertainties to be inevitable (Peng, et al., 1997; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998; United Nations, 2000).

⁷ Behavioral changes owing to the internalization of role related personality characteristics need not be negative per se (Sarbin & Allen, 1964), as role-playing can also be associated with neutral or even positive internalizations. An example of this is the case of attitude and perceptual changes due to assertiveness training exercises for women (Connaway & Gentry, 1988, p. 57).

⁸ Dharma, in Hinduism and Buddhism, is the moral sense of duty (Bilimoria, 1991; Firth, 2005; Glucklich, 1984; Grimes, 1996; Juthani, 2004).

Trying to maintain family contacts and old friendships while working in a shift-cycle not in tune with the rest of society has been seen as contributing to their role conflict levels (Mcmillin, 2006; Ramesh, 2004; Singh & Pandey, 2005; Upadhy & Vasavi, 2006). An attempt to switch between the institutions of work and family, which carry with them the additional tag of being associated with different cultures (Biddle, 1970; Lafromboise, et al., 1993), certainly makes the balancing act more challenging. Additionally, the part played by imbalances between work and family in increasing inter-role conflicts has also been empirically established by a number of studies (Babin & Boles, 1998; Bacharach, et al., 1991; Burke, et al., 1979; Grandey & Cropanzano, 1999; Wincent & Örtqvist). In fact, the origin of modern research on what is known as *work-family conflict* (WFC) stems from Greenhaus and Beutell's (1985, p. 77) adaptation of Kahn et al's (1964) work on role conflict. Work-family conflict is defined by them as "a form of inter-role conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77).

More recent studies on work-family conflict tend to look at it as a bi-directional construct. They not only try to ascertain whether people are more stressed because of shifting between family and work roles but also whether the higher stress level they experience is because of the interference of the work sphere on the home sphere or vice versa (Burley, 1989; Gutek, et al., 1991; Macdermid, 2005).

Such a distinction of WFC into work-to-family and family-to-work conflicts (Frone, et al., 1997; Netemeyer, et al., 1996; Williams & Alliger, 1994) also serves as a good indicator of whether BPO employees feel more role bounded to the traditional Indian or to the BPO (sub)culture. This distinction is itself based on boundary theory (Ashforth, et al., 2000; Desrochers, et al., 2005; Kreiner, et al., 2008; Kreiner, et al., 2006; Nippert-Eng, 1996), which states that the boundaries between the two spheres of family and work can be permeable. This means that such boundaries allow psychological and behavioral aspects of the role in either sphere to encroach upon those in the other sphere. These permeable borders allow positive experiences to pass on from one sphere to another, while keeping the negative emotions from spreading into the other sphere (Ashforth, et al., 2000; Rau & Hyland, 2002). Desrochers, et al. (2005), however, argue that with the advance of technological tools like the Internet and mobile phones, the boundaries between the two spheres are becoming increasingly blurred. This has led to the loss of the structural scaffoldings, which helped us keep the conflicts of the two spheres detached from each other. Because of the strong relationship between work-family conflict and the general role conflicts like the role distances (Karve & Nair, 2011; Madhavi & Vimala, 2011; Parveen, 2009; Tankha, 2006), an individual bounded to the roles of both spheres will score high on role boundedness, have greater inter-role distances, and suffer from feelings

of personal inadequacy in trying to keep with the confusing demands. Unless and until the individual has managed to create a good balance between the two spheres, this situation will create a high level of self-role distance. At least one of the two conflicting roles will not be compatible with the individual's self image, as they might prefer a more family-oriented identity over a work-oriented one, and vice versa (S. Desrochers & Leisa D. Sargent, 2004).

In addition to its directional dichotomy, the WFC levels within a particular society or group also serve as an indicator of that society's or group's culture (Luk & Shaffer, 2005). According to the work done by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998), in cultures high in individualism - such as the USA and Western Europe – work and family spheres are kept as separated from each other as possible. In these cultures, colleagues at work do not necessarily fall into the category of friends. In contrast, collectivistic cultures tend to blur the distinction between work and family. Here, colleagues are very often counted as friends, and people tend to continue socializing with them beyond work. Such an integration of the work and family spheres can help to make the switch from one sphere to another easier, but at the same time, it gives one no opportunity to get away from the stressors of either sphere and thus considerably increases role stressors like IRD (Desrochers, Lehoux, Halpern, & Riggio, 2004).

2.2.3 Role Stress and Gender

Gender has emerged as one of the most important social constructs in stress research (Turner & Schieman, 2008). Although often used interchangeably in day-to-day language, gender is not the same as sex, which denotes the biological/anatomical differences between men and women (Giddens, 2006). Gender, on the contrary, means “the psychological, social, [and] cultural differences between men and women” and refers to the normative roles learnt by men and women through socialization (Hook, et al., 2002). Individuals generally take up specified gender roles, passed on by the socialization process and learn to adhere to the gendered labels that a society sticks on them based on their sex (Lewontin, 1982).

While some researchers found that there is little or no difference in the perceived role stress between men and women (Guppy & Rick, 1996; Martocchio & O'leary, 1989; Spielberg & Vagg, 1999), many others provide evidence regarding the presence of such differences (cf. Bolger, et al., 1989; Jick & Mitz, 1985; Thiagarajan, et al., 2006).

A number of researchers have found that working as well as non-working women all over the world have higher role stress occurrences than men (Davidson & Cooper, 1992; Greenglass, 2001; Kronenfeld, 1999, p. 476; Long, 2001, p. 102). Globally and across professions, this has mainly been attributed to the gender-role socialization process (Gross, 1992).

2.2.3.1 The Cultural Trap

In head-to-head comparisons of working women and men, women have been found to experience higher job related stress than men (Greenglass, 1991, 2001). This has been largely attributed to the societal pressure on women to work harder and prove themselves against male colleagues (Davidson & Cooper, 1983). Such gender role stereotyping is termed the *cultural trap* (1992). It arises out of preexisting cultural norms in accordance with which women are socialized to think of themselves as unfit to take up tasks requiring assertiveness and high achievement orientation - prerequisites for success in the modern work place, according to McClelland (1961).⁹ Because of this stereotyping, both men and women begin to expect the latter to be low achievers. Davidson and Cooper (1983) further report that the role individual executives perform at the workplace brings with it a set of expectations from others associated with that work. The functions of an executive are especially and fundamentally perceived by both men and women to be performable by males only. Through the mechanism of the cultural trap, this thinking leads to a sense of role inadequacy and role stress among women. The lower a woman's need for achievement, the less role stress she experiences (Gupta & Murthy, 1984). So strong is this tendency for women to take up the traditional gendered role of experiencing lower levels of self-confidence that even in a nation as modern and advanced as the USA, a study by the American Association of University Women (1991) found that adolescent girls show alarmingly high levels of personal inadequacy.

2.2.3.2 Fear of Success

Misra, et al. (2000) studied stress in an international sample of college students and argued that gender-role socialization is also the reason why different stressors influence men and women differently. According to Liu, et al. (2008), while men are reported to experience stress mainly related to finance, work-related power, and job responsibility, women are mostly confronted with stress related to inequality, excessive competition, and social contexts including interpersonal issues, work-family conflict, role conflict, and role ambiguity. These findings are hardly surprising given that women are socialized to be less power-oriented or job-oriented and more relationship-oriented in different cultures around the world (Dharmadhikari, 1981; Iwasaki, et al., 2004).

⁹ This is primarily in the context of masculine cultures, such as India or the USA. Buck (1988) as well as Cooper (1982) have criticized McClelland's (1961) theory of achievement motivation in the context of more gender egalitarian cultures, where - they argue - achievement characteristics like aggression might not be as suitable as interpersonal empathic skills, which might even favor women over men in jobs requiring service-oriented social interaction.

Broverman, et al. (1970) and Nolen-Hoeksema (1987) have suggested that such gender-role socialization discourages women from developing assertive attitudes and skill sets, while it encourages them to develop a feeling of guilt and learned-helplessness because of not being able to perfectly balance the demands of both work and family. This can lead to a situation wherein women actually develop a fear of success or - more precisely even - a fear of the appearance of being successful, as this might cause problems with their established societal roles (Pfof & Fiore, 1990; Surti, 1982). The more traditional a society and the less educated the women, the higher the fear of success is and consequently the total role stress (Blackmore, 1989; Caballero, et al., 1975).

2.2.3.3 Gender and Work-Family Conflict

The gender-role socialization process also causes working women to take up the responsibility of balancing the traditionally expected role of a family-oriented housewife with her role as a working woman. As per Gutek et al.'s (1991) so-called gender-role hypothesis, working women continue to work a second shift at home, even after contributing to the family's economic security through their employment (Greenhaus, et al., 1987; Greenhaus & Singh, 2004; Pleck, 1977, 1983). The normative pressures on women to continue to hold the main responsibility of caring for the family even when they are employed can also be gauged from the following comment on parental duties in Sweden: "women and men are parents on different terms. [...] A father can choose to take parental leave while a mother is expected to do so" (Parbrink, 2002, p. 8).

The interplay of socialization and role-switching between family and work as a cause of stress is well supported by the classical role-theory (Goffman, 1971; Turner, 1990), which has guided much of the research relating to gender and health (Messias, et al., 1997). Kudielka, et al. (2007) cite multiple studies showing that women experience higher subjective stress than men in various life-situations. They further emphasize that this higher level of work-family conflict among women stems from their playing multiple-social roles, having lower socio-economic status, and having a lower sense of agency/internal locus of control.

2.2.3.4 Indian Society and Role Stress among Women

Because of the growing egalitarianism and the increasingly shared family as well as career responsibilities that men and women have, more and more studies have found evidence against gender differences in WFC in the Western world (Bond, et al., 1998; Frone, et al., 1992; Greenhaus, 2004; Major, 2007; Trends, 2008).

In India though, where cultural norms go against women's participation in the labor force (Desai, 1994), it is still rare for working women to get the much needed family support to cope

with the additional employment burden (Pande-Desai, 2004). Though women are legally entitled to equality with men in the social as well as economic spheres, most attempts among women to try to establish themselves in either of these areas are frowned upon by the society (Singh, 1982). Researchers and social commentators blame the taboos against women exercising their free agency on the Hindu traditional law system (Das, 1993; Forbes & Johnson, 1999; Nath, 2000; Wadley, 1995). Manusmriti (The Laws of Manu) - widely held as the canonical text on dharma and the laws of Hinduism (Bühler, 2004; Roy, 2005; Singh, 1982) - is the origin of the infamous caste system¹⁰ as well as the lowly status of women in Indian society (Hansen, 1999). The Manusmriti goes so far as to deny women any control over their own actions by stating that they do not deserve freedom and cannot be trusted to do anything independently, even in their own houses. It further equates them to being the property of their fathers and - after marriage - their husbands (Karim, 1999; Mitter, 1991; Wadley, 1977). Even today, as a constant reminder of being owned by somebody else, women in most parts of India are given their father's first name as their own middle name, which then changes to that of the husband's after marriage (Shukla, 2008). The situation is not much different among other religious groups in India. In Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, as well as Christian communities, the lowly status conferred to women by Manu has been preserved to a large extent (Altekar, 1959; Ganesh, 1989; Ojha & Rouls, 2004; Singh, 1982). Although Christian women enjoy much more economic and social freedom than women from other religious groups, they too remain subjected to the authority of a patriarchal figure in their respective families (National Committee on the Status of Women in India, 1975).

Given this subordinate role that religion and culture have accorded Indian women, it is not surprising that the dual responsibilities of home and work for working Indian women result in multiple roles and put a much greater strain on them than those who do not work (Gupta, 1982). Because of these socio-cultural pressures, women in India often develop a feeling of guilt in not being able to fulfill their responsibilities in either sphere. This can lead from a severe blurring of the boundaries between work and family to a subsequent role conflict among them (Benni, 2004; Krishnamurthi, 1993; Rau, 2003).

This argument was confirmed by the findings from Surti (1982) that married working women in India show greater inter-role distance stress than unmarried ones, who have to balance the roles between families and work to a much lower degree. The reason for this is, according to Gupta (1982), the rise of inter-role conflict with increasing family obligations after marriage

10 Although India's national constitution, established in 1950, sought to abolish caste discrimination and the practice of untouchability, the caste system remains deeply entrenched in Hindu culture and is still widespread throughout India (Thomas-Slayter, 2003).

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