

SALESPERSON MULTI-FACETED ROLE AMBIGUITY AND BURNOUT, AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Although sales researchers have gained considerable knowledge regarding the multi-faceted manifestation of burnout over recent years, inconsistent findings of role ambiguity as an antecedent to burnout abound. Given the complex boundary-spanning nature of sales, it is likely that global measures of role ambiguity fail to fully capture the domain and impact of role ambiguity. To help address this gap within the literature, this study provides a foundation that dimensions of role ambiguity impact aspects of the salesperson role differently. Specifically, findings are expected to provide evidence to help mitigate the negative impact of burnout by focusing on specific dimensions of role ambiguity.

Keywords: Salesperson Burnout, Job Performance, Job Satisfaction, Role Ambiguity

2) work-in-progress paper

INTRODUCTION

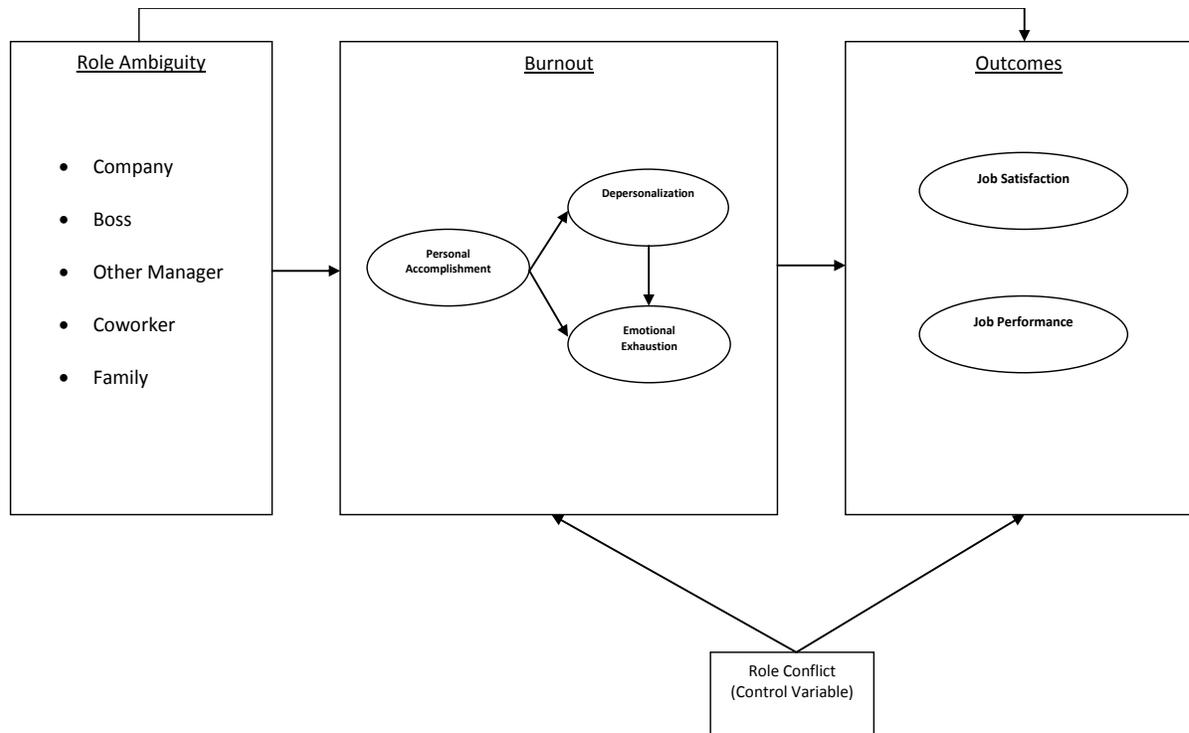
While there has been a resurgence of interest in salesperson burnout (e.g. Hollet-Haudebert, Mulki, and Fournier, 2011; Shepherd, Taschian, and Ridnour, 2011), little is known about the antecedents of the sequenced dimensions of burnout. Given that the sequencing of burnout is different for employees working in the sales field compared to workers outside of the sales field (Lewin and Sagar, 2007), borrowing from other fields (e.g. health care, teaching, and social services) is not a viable option. Burnout has existed as a term in the lexicon of popular culture since the 1970s when psychoanalyst, Herbert Freudenberger (1974), used burnout to describe a general condition of negativity, cynicism, and diminished job interest he witnessed among co-workers (Shepherd et al., 2011). Job burnout has been established as a unique form of stress that is distinguished from depression and can be empirically measured (Cordes and Dougherty, 1993; Maslach and Leiter, 2008). It is widely believed that job-centered burnout is especially prevalent among boundary-spanning positions in which workers have to interact with multiple constituencies and navigate conflicting agendas (Cordes and Dougherty 1993; Parkington and Schneider, 1979).

One antecedent linked to burnout is role ambiguity (Babakus, Cravens, Johnston, and Moncrief, 1999; Lewin and Sager, 2007; Rutherford, Hamwi, Friend, and Hartmann, 2011; Verbeke, 1997). However, role ambiguity has exhibited mixed results as a predictor of burnout (e.g. Boles, Johnston, and Hair Jr., 1997; Hollet-Haudebert et al., 2011), in addition to mixed results regarding other outcomes such as job satisfaction (e.g. Babakus et al., 1999; Boles et al., 1997; Low, Cravens, Grant and Moncrief, 2001; Rutherford et al., 2011) and performance (e.g. Babakus et al., 1999; Low et al., 2001). This may be partially due to an array of issues within the conceptual and methodological domains of both role ambiguity and burnout. Recently, studies have made considerable advances in the conceptual and methodological domains of burnout (Lewin and Sagar, 2007; Rutherford et al., 2011); hopefully, providing the foundation to eliminate the use of single dimension studies of burnout exclusively examining the emotional exhaustion dimension (e.g. Babakus et al., 1999; Boles et al., 1997; Hamwi, Rutherford, and Boles, 2011; Rutherford, Boles, Hamwi, Madupalli, and Rutherford, 2009; Sager, Strutton, and Johnson, 2006). Unfortunately, the study of salesperson role ambiguity has not made the same advances as burnout despite attempts in the early 1990's (Rhoads, Singh, and Goodell, 1994; Singh and Rhoads, 1991). Within sales, role ambiguity research suffers from several major limitations: 1) net suppression issues with role conflict, 2) an entire reverse coded scale often used for measurement (Rizzo, House, and Lirtzman, 1970), and 3) in general, a lack of understanding of role ambiguity as either a global or multi-faceted construct (*see* Churchill, Ford, and Walker, 1974 for issues with global measures).

To address these issues and further our understanding of role ambiguity within the sales literature, the purpose of this study is to identify relationships at the facet level between role ambiguity and burnout in relation to job satisfaction and performance. Findings for this study will: 1) shed light on why results using global measures of role ambiguity in sales research have been inconclusive; 2) further elucidate the process model of burnout for sales; 3) demonstrate that some dimensions of role ambiguity matter more than others; and 4) provide prescriptive advice for managers in warding off burnout and thus aiding in job satisfaction and performance. To accomplish the purpose of this study, first, role theory will be discussed as the theoretical foundation. Then an overview and discussion of issues within the conceptual domain will be provided regarding role ambiguity, burnout, job satisfaction, and job performance (*see* figure 1).

Third, methodological issues will be discussed including the analytic approach, measurement, and sample selection. Following this, results of the analysis will be presented; then a discussion of the substantive advancements from both academic and practitioner perspectives will be provided.

FIGURE 1: THE SALESPERSON BURNOUT MODEL



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