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The role of job stress at emotional labor's effect on intention to leave: Evidence from call center employees

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Abstract:

Call centers are contact centers that act as communication facilities between customers and businesses with the help of customer representatives. The call center sector where transactions are carried out largely without face to face communication is known as a sector with the most stressful and is also known with having the highest employee turnover rate. Customer representatives are not able to use any initiative and they have too many workloads; for this reason, they are frazzled. In addition, customer representatives need to play role despite of their natural emotions. This affects the emotional labor behavior of sector employees.

In this study, the job stress' mediating role at emotional labor's effect on intention to leave is investigated. Data was collected from two call centers operating in Bitlis province in Turkey by using survey method. Analyzes were made with the SPSS 23 and AMOS 22 programs through 207 valid questionnaires. In the analyzes made, job stress has full mediating effect at emotional labor variable's surface acting dimension's effect on intention to leave. Due to the correlation analyzes performed, there was a significant relationship between surface acting and natural emotions (expression of naturally felt emotions) dimension of emotional labor variable with job stress and intention to leave.

JEL Classifications: M1, M10, M12

Keywords: Emotional labor, job stress, intention to leave, call center

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Introduction

Call centers, which have become an increasingly important part of today's business world, are labor-intensive service enterprises that are served by millions of customer representatives. Call centers are communication centers where work processes are performed in different ways between customers and businesses. According to the Call Centre Association, a call centre is a "physical or virtual operation within an organisation in which a managed group of people spend most of their time doing business by telephone, usually working in a computer automated environment" (Marr & Neely, 2004, p.5). Thanks to technological advances in communication, call centers have become an environment where firms interact with their potential and existing customers (Aktekin, 2014). Call centers offer a wide range of products and services that enable companies to put into practice many applications to communicate with their customers. Although the vast majority of these applications take place via telephone calls, they can also take place

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via e-mail, SMS, fax, web chat, co browsing, web site (Yavuz & Leloğlu, 2011). In call centers; such as customer retention, complaint management, technical support, debt reminding and collection, campaign management, tele-sales and tele-marketing are carried out through customer service representatives (CSR).

Employees in call centres are commonly referred as call centre agents (CCA) or customer service representatives. Call centre representatives (CCRs) are those individuals who are employed to work in the call centre and deal with the customers' concerns and requests telephonically (Gordi, 2006). One of the common term used to describe customer representatives is agents. Customer representatives are performing voice to voice operations without seeing customers. This makes the quality of service and customer satisfaction depending on the communication ability of the customer representative. Customer satisfaction is affected by employees' emotional experiences during online business processes at call centers (Ishii & Markman, 2016).

Call centers are often characterized by high stress, high turnover, emotional exhaustion (Wallace et al., 2000) and dynamic demands (Örmeci et al., 2014). Despite the increase in the use of online customer service in various organizations, current research on emotional labor has often been performed by face to face contexts and it has been observed that there is not enough study on online employees (customer representatives) (Ishii & Markman, 2016). Call center representatives are expected to display a positive and professional corporate image for their customers. According to Taylor and Bain (1999), many call center agents have problems when they are rejected by customers and they face negative attitudes (Shamsuddin & Rahman, 2014). Call centers are more stressful places than coal mines, and a customer representative works for an average of 15 months (Aca, 1998). At the same time, call centers are places where emotional labor is mostly used. For instance, call center switchboard operators keep talking with a smiling face no matter how irritated they are by a certain customer so as not to get a warning from their supervisors (İrigüler, 2015). Although the relationship between emotional labor, job stress and intent to leave has been discussed for call center employees in the literature, it has not been found that these three concepts are examined together. Our research aims to determine the mediating role of job stress in the impact of call center employees' emotional labor behavior on intention to leave.

Theoretical framework

Concept of emotional labour

The concept of "emotional labor" was first theorized by sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983. When Hochschild compared a steward with a child working in a wallpaper factory in his book *The Manage Heart*, he said that the steward did something that he described as "emotional labor" in physical and mental labor fulfillment. (Hochschild, 1983, p.6). This exercise stated that the steward should either act or suppress their feelings to maintain a pleasing outward appearance towards customer and Hochschild defined emotional labor as a face and bodily image creation management that can be observed by all (1983, p.7). Emotional labor can be also defined as efforts to understand others, to empathize with their situation, to feel emotionally as part of others (England and Farkas, 1986).

Grandy (2000) and Diefendorff, Croyle & Gosserand (2005) stated that the essential points in the definitions for the concept of emotional labor are the same: Individuals regulate their emotions in their workplaces. Some of them have defined emotional labor as showing appropriate emotion (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993), displaying desired emotion (Zapf et al., 1999), regulating emotions and expressions by employees (Zapf et al., 1999), expressing the emotion desired by the organization (Morris & Feldman, 1996). These definitions can be interpreted as; employees manage their emotions and emotional expressions in response to the rules of emotion for payment (Hochschild, 2003). Indeed,

service staff (clinicians, hotel employees, stewards, tour operators, trainers and consultants) often face emotional labor as demand. This labor requires employees' emotions to be organized in the workplace and essentially "play their role" (Wang et al., 2016). As a result, (Hofmann & Stokburger-Sauer, 2017), service employees are requested to express specific emotions in order to meet customers' (Hochschild, 2006) and companies' expectations (Zapf et al., 1999; 2001) in the sense of friendliness (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) as important driver of favorable customer responses (Lam et al., 2010).

In the literature survey on the dimensions of the concept of emotional labor, it is seen that the concept is handled in different dimensions by the researchers. The first of these is the surface acting and deep acting dimensioning by Hochschild. Surface acting is only the adjustment of the given response without internalizing the emotion. In other words, they engage in deception on their feelings, differentiate them from the feelings they really feel, and reflect them to the customers or buyers. Deep acting is the emotional control that leads the employee to feel sincere, that is to say, to consider the feeling that they are obliged to and to consider to rethink they feel. (Hochschild, 1983). The distinction between surface acting and deep acting is conceptually aligned with dramaturgical perspective in which actors (i.e., service employee) perform (i.e., provide service) on stage (i.e., the service environment) in front of an audience (i.e., the customers) (Mishra et al. 2012). Secondly, Ashforth & Humphrey (1993) adds a third dimension to Hochschild's approach as natural emotions (expression of naturally felt emotions). "Natural Emotions" mean that employees show or reflect emotions, regardless of any pressure or other cause, such as surface acting and deep acting dimensions. Thirdly, is a four-dimensional classification by Morris & Feldman (1996), which claims to be the best classification according to them. This classification can be expressed as follows:

- a. the frequency of displaying appropriate emotions
- b. attention to the required viewing rules
- c. the display of various emotions
- d. emotional dissonance that arises as a result of being obliged to express organizationally desired emotions that are not actually felt.

Hochschild (2012) stated that employees may experience emotional dissonance and distress if they have difficulties in fulfilling and modulating their emotions in the direction of organizational demands. Fourthly, dimensioning of emotional effort and emotional dissonance made by Kruml & Geddes (2000). Finally, Grandey's (2000) study which has the basis of Hochschild's study on the use of surface acting and deep acting dimensions and which he pointed regulation of emotions. In the arrangement of emotions, these two dimensions are shaped by a number of demographic variables (such as age, gender, intelligence), situational factors (such as frequency, display rules) and organizational factors (such as manager and colleague support, autonomy). While taking into account the external appearance of the player during the surface acting, they actively engage in the inner perceptions during playing deep acting. The different aspect of deep acting from surface acting is the necessity of harmonizing not only behavior but also emotions to behavioral rules in this method (Grandey, 2000).

Concept of job stress

Stress is the emotion about the unsatisfying life situations that we want to change to be better and it comes and goes quickly with the changes in the conditions (Lazarus, 1989). Job stress can be defined as the tension situation that occurs as a result of the employee's relationship with the environment through communication. In part of the research, while conceptualizing job stress in the field of stress, it is assumed that job stress emerged at the

end of interaction with environment (French, 1974, French and Caplan, 1972; Rogers, & Cobb, 1974). According to this assumption, the work and the environment do not enable the employees to find the appropriate space for their capacity because of the pressure created on the employees, and this situation causes the employee to experience job stress (Efeoğlu & Özgen, 2007). In addition to this situation, a similar eligibility includes McGrath's (1970) stress definition and examines whether a person's skills and abilities meet the job's needs. Another measure of eligibility is the degree to which a business environment meets the needs of a person (i.e., stress equals the difference of opportunity supply and needs) (Blau, 1981).

Schuler (1980) also states that in an employee-environment interaction, there is never an equilibrium situation, that is, an employee always has job stress. Chen & Spector (1992) question whether job stress sources perceived by employees or perceived consequences of working are related only to the business environment or not. Similarly, Lazarus (1993) criticizes the work-environment interaction as variable, not constant but changeable, according to the approach that explains the cause of job stress as an imbalance between employee and environment. Parker & DeCotiis (1983) suggest that job stress is a personal perceived circumstances at working environment and awareness of personal functionality as a result of events or a feeling of personal dysfunction.

The stress experienced by employees in the working environment can be defined as job stress or the level of stress experienced by employees and can vary depending on the nature of the person, the nature of the job, and the influence factors outside of work. Stress is different from stimulus and is one step further (Güçlü, 2001). The stimulus causes only a response to the body, while the stress causes the balance of the body to be distorted by stimulus because of exceeding the threshold of tolerance. Tension is the result of stress and is a reaction that occurs in the body due to stress (Şahin, 1995). Perceived job stress can affect physical and mental health because of excessive workload or role conflict, role disagreement and can also negatively affect general feelings about work and job satisfaction (LaRocco et al., 1980). However, current evidence and common-sense show that job stress increases health problems among employees and organizational problems such as employee dissatisfaction, alienation, low productivity, absenteeism and intention to leave (Beehr & Newman, 1978; Schuler, 1980).

Apart from the personalities of the employees, some reasons arising from work and organization affect the stress levels of employees. Stress makers due to organization and work are as follows; organizational politics, organizational structure, work processes, working conditions, interpersonal relations and qualification of work. Other factors, such as economic inadequacies and family problems, also have impact on job stress (Schafer, 1987; Ertekin, 1993; Pehlivan, 1995; Turunç and Çelik, 2010). How we deal with stress is related to the distance or closeness of each of the variables such as gender identity, functional relationship between couples and working conditions (Lazarus, 2006). As a result, research on job stress has emphasized work environments and distinct job characteristics that cause stress for employees rather than individual variables (Chung et al., 2017).

Concept of intention to leave

Researchers investigating the underlying reasons for employees' intention to leave attitudes have examined the area of social employment by using two research approaches. One of these studies explains the intention to leave by focusing on their attitudes and behaviors and secondly managerial and organizational behaviors (Tzafrir et al., 2015). On the other hand, some researchers have examined the relationship of individual factors (especially age, gender, and level of education) on intention to leave (Flinkman et al., 2010; Heinen et al., 2013).

Research suggests that intent to leave may relate to a variety of factors such as workload, lack of social support (Baba et al., 1999; Lambert et al., 2004), job characteristics and burnout (Collinset al., 2010; Özbağ et al., 2014), work-family conflict (Simon et al., 2004), job stress (Lambert et al., 2004; Onay ve Kılıcı, 2011; Tziner et al., 2015), dissatisfaction with salary or low salary (Barron & West, 2005; Collins et al., 2010), leader member exchange and managerial support (Kim & Barak, 2015).

In general, the concept of intention to leave is to leave voluntarily or willingly from the working place (Takase, 2010). Leaving from the workplace usually follows a certain process. One of the most important stages of this process is intent to leave (Price, 1977). Pack et al., (2007) reported that the level of stress and job satisfaction was the main determinant of intention to leave. Layne et al., (2004) found a positive relationship between job stress and intent to leave. The high stress perceived by employees increases their tendency to leave the workplace. Although each employee has the intention of leaving job at different levels, job stress is an important determinant of intention to leave and increases the probability of leaving work (Suarthana & Riana, 2016).

In relation to the intention to leave with the emotional labor, it is necessary to satisfy the three conditions proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986) in the structural equations to be made in order to mention the mediating role of job stress. The following conditions must be obtained to establish a mediation. Firstly in the first equation the independent variable must influence the mediator, secondly in the second equation the independent variable must be shown as it has an effect on the dependent variable. The third and final condition is that the agent in the third equation must have an effect on the dependent variable. If all these conditions are met, then it is possible to talk about an mediating effect if independent variable has less effect on the dependent variable on the third equation than the second (Baron & Kenny, 1986, p.1177)

For this reason, the hypotheses are as follows:

H₁: Job stress has a mediating role in relation to the intention to leave and the surface acting dimension of emotional labor.

H₂: Job stress has a mediating role in relation to the intention to leave and the deep acting dimension of emotional labor.

H₃: Job stress has a mediating role in relation to the intention to leave and natural emotions (expression of naturally felt emotions) dimension of emotional labor.

Research methodology

Research goal

As stated in the literature survey, call centers are places where there is intense job stress, high level turnover and emotional labor are needed too much. In this context, the main purpose of our study is to determine the mediating role of job stress at the effect of emotional labor behavior on intention to leave.

Selection of sample and respondents demographics

Data were collected from two call centers located in Bitlis/Turkey using questionnaire method in order to test hypothesis obtained from the literature. The demographic characteristics of the respondents' is given in Table 1.

TABLE 1. RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

| Demographic characteristics | | | | Demographic characteristics | | | |
|-----------------------------|---------|-----|-------|-----------------------------|----------------------|-----|-------|
| | | f | % | | | f | % |
| Gender | Female | 119 | 57.5 | Educational Level | Primary School | 3 | 1.4 |
| | Male | 88 | 42.5 | | High School | 45 | 21.7 |
| | Total | 207 | 100.0 | | Associate Degree | 111 | 53.6 |
| Age | 18-20 | 18 | 8.7 | | Undergraduate Degree | 41 | 19.8 |
| | 21-22 | 35 | 16.9 | | Graduate Degree | 7 | 3.4 |
| | 23-24 | 81 | 39.1 | | Total | 207 | 100.0 |
| | 25-27 | 46 | 22.2 | Work Tenure | 1-6 | 40 | 19.3 |
| | 28 + | 27 | 13.0 | | 7-12 | 58 | 28.0 |
| | Total | 207 | 100.0 | | 13-18 | 19 | 9.2 |
| Marital Status | Married | 20 | 9.7 | | 19-25 | 42 | 20.3 |
| | Single | 187 | 90.3 | | 26 + | 48 | 23.2 |
| | Total | 207 | 100.0 | | Total | 207 | 100.0 |

The total number of women participating in the survey was 119 (57.5%) and the number of males was 88 (42.5%) and totally 207 respondents participated. The sample of the respondents was established as 18 respondents between 18-20 years old, 35 respondents 21-22, 81 respondents 23-24, 46 respondents 25-27 years old and 27 respondents 28 years old and older. Among the participants, 3 have primary school graduate degree, 45 are high school graduate, 111 have associate degree, 41 have undergraduate degree and 7 have graduate degree. 20 of the participants were married and 187 were single; 40 has 6 months or below, 58 has 7-12 months, 19 has 13-18 months, 42 has 19-25 months and 48 has 26 months and over working experience.

Measures

"Emotional labor" was measured by the scale developed by Diefendorff et al., (2005). In Diefendorff's study, the scale consists of three dimensions: surface acting ($\alpha = 0.91$), deep acting ($\alpha = 0.82$) and expression of naturally felt emotions ($\alpha = 0.75$).

"Perceived Job stress" was measured with 4 item scale ($\alpha = 0.76$) used by Küçükusta (2007).

"Intention to leave" 3 item scale ($\alpha = 0.75$) used by Gülerterkin (2013) was adapted.

All items were measured on a five point Likert-type scale where (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. As a result of the reliability analysis in our study, surface acting $\alpha = 0.92$, deep acting $\alpha = 0.86$, expression of naturally felt emotions (natural emotions) $\alpha = 0.85$, job stress $\alpha = 0.88$ and intention to leave $\alpha = 0.88$ were found. Confirmatory factor analysis revealed that emotional labor has three-dimensional structure, job stress and intention to leave has one-dimensional structure.

Data analysis and results

As shown in Table 1, there was no significant relationship between intention to leave and natural emotions and also job stress and deep acting. Significant correlations were found between the other variables at 0.01 and 0.05 significance levels. The highest correlation relationship was found between intention to leave and surface acting.

After the correlation analysis, a structural model for the research model was established and the goodness of fit values was tested with the Amos 22 program. The model goodness-of-fit values are arranged according to common usage in the literature and

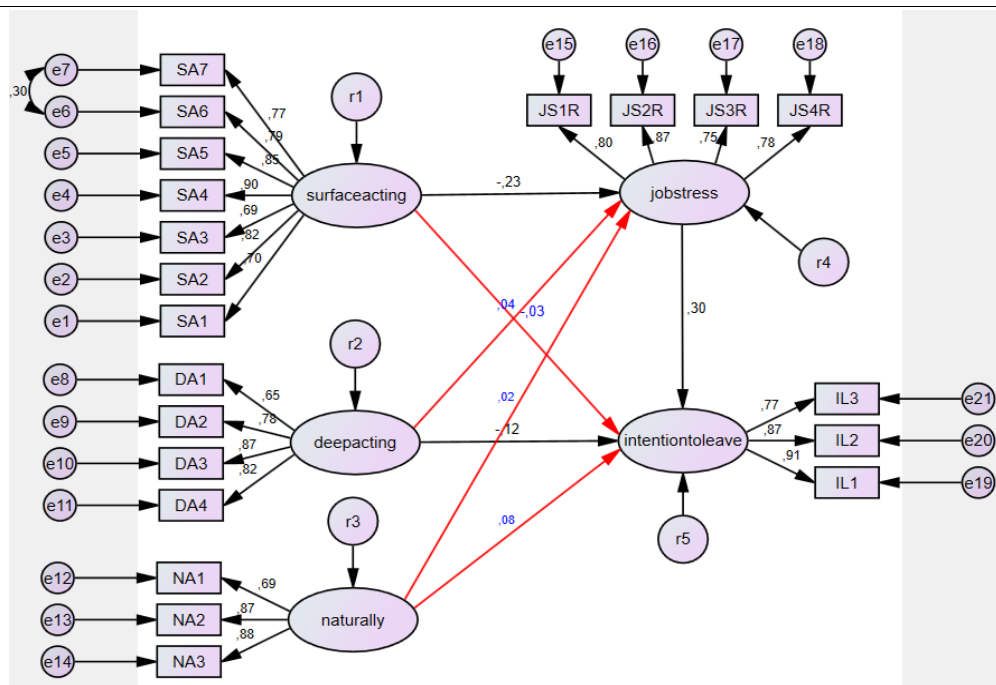
acceptable standards. These standards are; (CMIN/DF< 5), (GFI>0.850), (AGFI>0.800), (CFI>0.900), (NFI>0.800), (TLI>0.800) and (RMSEA<0.080) respectively.

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS

| Variables | Mean | SD | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|------------------------|------|------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| (1) Surface acting | 2.91 | 1.14 | (0.92) | | | | |
| (2) Deep acting | 3.21 | 1.06 | 0.20** | (0.82) | | | |
| (3) Natural emotions | 3.30 | 1.08 | -0.43** | 0.34** | (0.85) | | |
| (4) Job stress | 3.13 | 1.14 | -0.31** | 0.10 | -0.18* | (0.88) | |
| (5) Intention to leave | 2.93 | 1.07 | 0.44** | 0.16* | -0.12 | 0.38** | (0.88) |

Note: ** - significant at level 0.01; * - significant at level 0.05. N - 207.

FIGURE 1. STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL



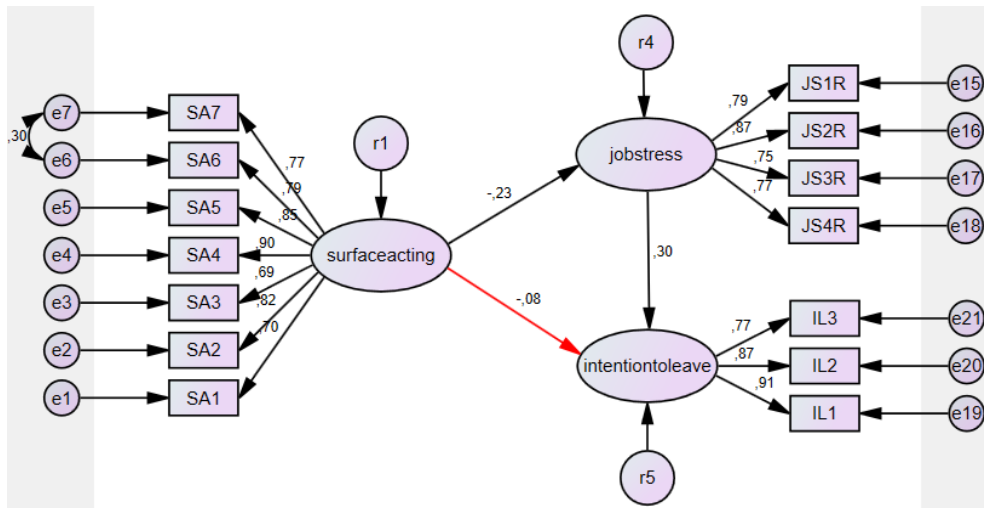
The structural equation model was tested and given in the Figure 1. The values of goodness of fit of the model is obtained as follows; CMIN/DF = 1.932, GFI = 0.871 AGFI = 0.835, CFI = 0.935, NFI = 0.875, TLI = 0.924 and RMSEA = 0.067. According to the analysis results, the model seems to be good. The regression weights of the structural equation model after the corrections made according to the modification indices in order to test the research hypotheses are given in Table 3.

TABLE 3. REGRESSION AND SIGNIFICANCE VALUES OF STRUCTURAL EQUATION MODEL

| Regression | | | Estimate | P |
|------------------|------|-----------------|----------|-------|
| jobstress | <--- | surfaceacting | -0.235 | 0.003 |
| jobstress | <--- | deepacting | 0.042 | 0.573 |
| jobstress | <--- | naturalemotions | 0.015 | 0.817 |
| intentiontoleave | <--- | deepacting | -0.119 | 0.100 |
| intentiontoleave | <--- | jobstress | 0.306 | *** |
| intentiontoleave | <--- | naturalemotions | 0.071 | 0.272 |
| intentiontoleave | <--- | surfaceacting | -0.026 | 0.732 |

Table 3 shows that there is a significant relationship between surface acting on job stress and job stress on intention to leave. There was no significant effect of the other variables between each other. In this case the H₂ and H₃ hypotheses are rejected. The insignificant effects on the model specified in Table 2 were removed from the model and the model was retested.

FIGURE 2. THE MEDIATING ROLE OF JOB STRESS ON THE EFFECT OF EMOTIONAL LABOR ON INTENTION TO LEAVE



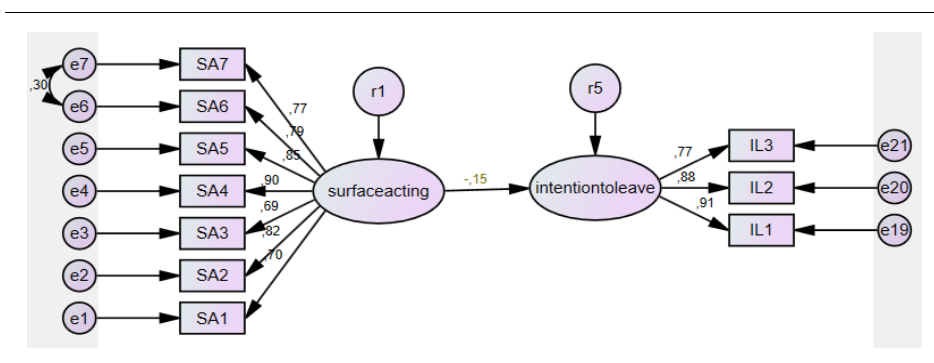
The fitness values of the tested model are; CMIN / DF = 1.636, GFI = 0.927, AGFI = 0.896, CFI = 0.974, NFI = 0.937, TLI = 0.968 and RMSEA = 0.056 respectively. From these values, it is understood that the goodness fit of models is quite good. The regression and significance values of the models were given at Table 4 which were tested in Figure 2.

TABLE 4. MEDIATING ROLE'S REGRESSION AND SIGNIFICANCE VALUES

| Regression | | Estimate | P |
|------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|
| jobstress | <--- surfaceacting | -0.229 | 0.004 |
| intentiontoleave | <--- jobstress | 0.301 | *** |
| intentiontoleave | <--- surfaceacting | -0.085 | 0.274 |

When Table 4's significance values were examined, it was found that surface acting had no significant effect on the intention to leave ($p = 0.274$ $p > 0.05$). However, it is seen that surface acting has a significant effect on job stress ($p = 0.004$ $p < 0.05$) and job stress has significant effect on intention to leave ($p = 0.000$ $p < 0.05$). This indicates that job stress may have a mediating role on between surface acting and intention to leave. However, in order to be able to reveal the mediating role, the direct influence of the surface acting dimension of emotional labor on the intention to leave is also needed to be tested. This is important to test the second condition of Baron and Kenny (1986).

FIGURE 3. THE RELATIONSHIP OF SURFACE ACTING AND INTENTION TO LEAVE



The model goodness of fit values belongs to surface acting in relationship to intention to leave are; CMIN/DF= 1.435, GFI=0.959, AGFI=0.932, CFI=0.989, NFI=0.966, TLI=0.985 and RMSEA=0.056 respectively. It can be seen that the model goodness fit values are very good.

TABLE 5. REGRESSION AND SIGNIFICANCE VALUES OF INTENTION TO LEAVE AND SURFACE ACTING RELATIONSHIP

| Regression | | Estimate | P |
|------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|
| intentiontoleave | <--- surfaceacting | -0.156 | 0.049 |

It has been found that there is no significant effect of surface acting on the intention to leave as in the Table 4 ($p > 0.05$, 0.274) where the regression and significance values of the model for which the mediating effect was tested. However, as seen in Table 5, it appears that surface acting has a significant effect on the intention to leave ($p < 0.05$, 0.049). This shows that job stress has a mediating effect in relation to surface acting and intention to leave; also shows that it provides the conditions for the mediating effect as Baron & Kenny (1986) suggest. As a result, it is seen that the regression weight related to the intention of leave and surface acting (Figure 3) is (-0.15), and the regression weight is (-0.08) as in the model in which the mediating effect is tested (Figure 2). This situation provides the condition "Independent variable must reduce its effect or completely eliminate its effect on the dependent variable" as Baron & Kenny (1986) indicated. In this case, H1 hypothesis was accepted.

Discussion and conclusion

Employees in the service sector and especially those using telephone and etc. must include their intellectual and emotional efforts to their works. This can be expressed as emotional labor and this is especially important for call center employees who must have happy tone of voice, have to be friendly with their customers, gentle and naive. It is inevitable that these employees may have some problems on their behalf because they are obliged to act other than their feelings. These problems may occur because of being watched by camera system, restricted rest stops, obligation to be patient and calm despite insult etc. The call center sector is widely known to have a high staff turnover rate and a high level of stress. Due to this importance, in this research the emotional labor behavior of the call center and mediating effect of job stress on intention to leave as a result of these behaviors were examined.

As a result of the analyzes, it is seen that job stress has a mediating effect at emotional labor's (which has three dimensional structure) relation to the intention of leave and the surface acting dimension. It has been found that deep acting and expression of naturally felt emotions dimensions have no mediating effect. These findings are congruent with the findings of the study made by Çelik & Yıldız (2016). In the analysis of correlation, it was found that the highest correlation relation was between surface acting and intention to leave. This result was found to be the same as the findings of the researches of Yürür & Ünlü (2011) and Pala & Tepeci (2014). It can be said that feeling hypocrisy towards customers and reflecting unreal feelings make employees harder to stay and continue to their jobs. In addition, surface acting has been shown to have a moderately negative relationship to expression of naturally felt emotions (natural emotions). It can be said that this result is the theoretically expected result. Because there is a opposite relation of exhibiting emotions with hypocrisy and exhibiting emotions naturally. The relationship between surface acting and job stress has been found to be inversed. It can be said that the level of job stress decreased as the customer representatives increased their ability to play surface acting roles. Continuous surface acting of employees indicates that they are becoming familiar with the negative reactions of customers or buyers. As a matter of fact, call center employees tend to leave job because of limited employment opportunities in the region where the research is conducted. Since the job opportunities are low, they have to work due to necessity. This situation supports the duration of continuous of the job and ability of playing surface acting. The relationship between job stress and intention to leave was positive in the study. This situation is similar to previous studies (for example, Layne et al., 2004, Yenihan et al., 2014, Suarathana & Riana 2016) in the literature. Customer representatives' intention to leave the job increases as their job stress levels increase.

Despite the supportive empirical findings in the theoretical context exist, the desired results according to theoretical aspects could not be found and this can be perhaps as a

result of another situation. As a matter of fact, call center employees have voice to voice relations other than face to face or one to one. This may cause different behavior patterns with differentiations. In this respect it is necessary to increase the similar researches on call center employees to enrich the theoretical context.

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