Customer-Employee Rapport in Service Relationships

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Relationships are an important aspect of doing business, and few businesses can survive without establishing solid relationships with their customers. Although the marketing literature suggests that personal relationships can be important to service firms, little specificity has been provided as to which relational aspects should receive attention. In this study, the authors examine one specific aspect of customer-employee relationships, rapport, that they believe may be particularly salient in service businesses characterized by a high amount of interpersonal interactions. Rapport has received relatively little attention in the marketing literature; the goal of this study is to fill this gap in the literature. In two different service contexts, the authors find support for two empirically distinct dimensions of rapport. They also find a positive relationship between these dimensions and satisfaction, loyalty intent, and word-of-mouth communication. They conclude by suggesting future research directions for further academic inquiry of rapport in service contexts.

There have been frequent discussions in the marketing literature suggesting that personal relationships can influence the evaluation of goods and services (Beatty et al. 1996; Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). This is thought to be particularly true for services where a high amount of customer-employee interaction is required in the delivery of the service (e.g., Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990; File and Prince 1993; Jain, Pinson, and Malhotra 1987). However, in spite of the attention that customer-employee relationships have received, little has been done to identify which components or dimensions of these relationships have the strongest impact on outcomes favorable to the firm (e.g., customer satisfaction, loyalty, etc.) (cf. Barnes 1994). Indeed, Gummesson (1994) notes that "it is . . . obvious how much weight companies and consumers give to relationships and how little weight has been given to them in the marketing literature" (p. 16). Czepiel (1990) argues that relational concepts are especially relevant to the marketing of services because of their intangible nature, the extent to which the customer is involved in the production process, and the long-term formal and informal ties providers often establish with their customers. As interactions between employees and customers are repeated over time, particularly as they work together to produce the service (Bowen 1986; Gummesson 1987), the motivation for the development of a social aspect to the relationship necessarily increases (Czepiel, Solomon, and Surprenant 1985). In fact, Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) found that social benefits were rated by consumers as being more important than special treatment considerations as outcomes of engaging in relational exchanges with service firms.

There are a variety of relational constructs that can be examined in assessing their potential to positively influence outcomes favorable to service firms. For example,

Gremler and Brown (1998) identify five different factors comprising a higher order factor they call interpersonal bonds: familiarity, care, friendship, rapport, and trust. In this study, we examine one particular component of customer-employee relationships: rapport. We choose to examine the rapport construct for three reasons. First, although the marketing literature suggests that personal relationships can be important to service firms, little specificity has been supplied as to which relational aspects should receive attention. Therefore, in choosing to concentrate on rapport, we limit the scope of the broad construct of relationship marketing by focusing on one specific aspect of this construct. Second, service exchanges can take many forms. Gutek et al. (1999) suggest that a service relationship occurs when a customer has repeated interactions with the same provider, whereas, at the other end of their continuum, a service encounter is a situation in which a customer has a single interaction with a provider and has no expectations of any future interactions. We believe that rapport has the potential to be applicable across a variety of service interactions regardless of whether the customer has repeated interactions with the same provider. Third, we focus on rapport because of its understudied nature in marketing and its potentially large impact for service firms. Although rapport is likely to be applicable to a variety of settings (e.g., business-to-business, personal selling), we specifically consider rapport in the context of service exchanges because the intangible nature of many service encounters makes the customer-employee interface particularly salient in customers' evaluations of the service (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). When a service is difficult to evaluate, consumers often look to other cues, such as aspects of the interaction, in assessing service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985). Furthermore, due to the customer's central position in service delivery and the simultaneous production-consumption aspects associated with many services, there is often an opportunity for service employees to leverage rapport perceptions. Thus, perceptions of rapport are important for service firms because they may help to positively influence judgments about the service.

The article is organized as follows: We begin this study of rapport by reviewing the construct from a variety of literature perspectives. To identify which components of rapport are particularly important in a service context, we conducted depth interviews of 41 respondents, including both customers and employees. As we will discuss, our findings suggest that two rapport dimensions are particularly salient in service relationships and help form the conceptualization of rapport used in this project; that is, based on our analysis of the depth interviews and our review of the literature, we consider rapport (a) to be the customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a ser-

vice provider employee, and (b) to be characterized by a personal connection between the interactants. We then examine these two dimensions of rapport in two empirical studies (with bank customers and dental patients) and investigate how they relate to several outcomes (satisfaction, loyalty intent, and word-of-mouth communication) important to service firms. Finally, we conclude by discussing implications from our findings, and we provide several directions for further academic inquiry.

DIFFERING CONCEPTIONS OF RAPPORT

Scholars from many disciplines have investigated rapport. The construct has been examined in contexts as diverse as educational settings, roommate relationships, psychotherapist-client interactions, qualitative data collection, and business transactions. Table 1 provides a summary of various rapport studies across several contexts. The table is organized according to context, provides definitions of rapport, and includes antecedents to and outcomes of rapport. Rapport is such a familiar concept that almost everyone can identify when it is present in a relationship, yet pinning down a precise definition is not an easy task. Indeed, as shown by the diverse conceptualizations of rapport in Table 1, rapport has been considered differently in a variety of studies. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) suggest that people experience rapport when "they 'click' with each other or [feel] the good interaction [is] due to 'chemistry' " (p. 286). Rapport has been described as "the quality of the relationship" in investigating psychotherapist-client interactions (Gfeller, Lynn, and Pribble 1987, p. 589), as the "quality of [a] relationship characterized by satisfactory communication and mutual understanding" in looking at college roommate relationships (Carey et al. 1988, p. 175), and as "a quality in the relation or connection between interactants, especially relations marked by harmony, conformity, accord, and affinity" (Bernieri et al. 1996, p. 113). However, as Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1987) point out, "despite its recognized importance to the outcome of interactions, the concept of rapport has not been very clearly delineated" (p. 114).

Unfortunately, the marketing literature also lacks a clear delineation of the rapport construct. Although the value of establishing rapport with potential customers has been recognized (e.g., Busch and Wilson 1976; Nickels, Everett, and Klein 1983; Riordan, Oliver, and Donnelly 1977; Spiro, Perreault, and Reynolds 1977; Weitz 1981; Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner 1992; Woodside and Davenport 1974), few precise definitions or operationalizations of the rapport construct exist in this body of research. De-

TABLE 1
Studies of Rapport in Several Contexts

Author(s)—Context	Description of Rapport	Antecedents to Rapport	Outcomes of Rapport	Comments
Education				
Bernieri (1988)— high school teachers and students	interaction characterized as harmonious, smooth, "in tune with," and "on the same wave length" (p. 121)	• coordinated movement • behavior matching	• successful interactions by certain professions (i.e., psychotherapists, physicians, counselors, and teachers)	• rapport measured by examining various characteristics of the interaction, including enjoyment, liking of other, satisfaction, friendliness, interest, easygoing, cooperative, and humorous
LaFrance and Broadbent (1976)— college instructor and students	sharing a common viewpoint	• mirroring • posture sharing • listener attention • environmental features	—	• found rapport between class and instructor and posture sharing to be positively correlated
LaFrance (1979)— college instructor and students	sharing a common viewpoint	• posture sharing	—	• found rapport between class and instructor and posture sharing to be positively correlated
Perkins et al. (1995)— college instructor and students	expressing an individual interest in students' opinions and feelings and encouraging interaction between instructor and students	—	• positive (student) evaluation of instructor	• in an experimental setting, rapport was manipulated and found to influence students' ratings of instructors (in Study 2, 69% of the variance in the ratings could be accounted for by variation in rapport) • suggest that instructors can establish rapport even in large classes through developing rapport with a single student
Roommate				
Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin (1986)— college roommates	relationship characterized by satisfactory communication and mutual understanding	—	—	• purpose of study was to develop a reliable, unidimensional instrument to measure roommate rapport; started with Anderson and Anderson's (1962) original 50 items and ended up with a 28-item scale
Carey, Stanley, and Biggers (1988)— college roommates	not defined	• time of peak alertness during the day	—	• found roommates who matched on peak alert time reported higher levels of rapport
Carey et al. (1988)— college roommates	quality of relationship characterized by satisfactory communication and mutual understanding (p. 175)	—	—	• study focused on further development of a roommate rapport scale • started with the Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin (1986) 28-item scale and reduced it to a 10-item scale that demonstrated reliability and unidimensionality
Saidia (1990)— college roommates	the quality of relationship characterized by satisfactory communication and mutual understanding (from Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin 1986)	• interpersonal understanding	• satisfaction and success in college	• found those who understand their roommates more have greater rapport

Interviewing

Berg (1989)—qualitative interviewing	not defined	• interviewer appearance • interviewer demeanor	• successful qualitative interviews	• the establishment of rapport is critical to successful qualitative interviews
Goudy and Potter (1976)—qualitative interviewing	(various definitions of rapport provided)	• interviewer characteristics (e.g., gender, age, education, race, previous experience) • similar characteristics of interactants • perceptions of both parties in the social relationship	• respondent motivation • generation of free and frank answers	• conclude by saying "that we de not know what rapport is remains a plausible conclusion from this research" (p. 541)
Aburatani (1990)—life-psychoanalysis `	an emotional tie between the interviewer and the respondent that includes good chemistry between them (p. 50)	—	• better interviewer understanding of the respondent	• suggests that rapport is developed in interviews in three stages, including (a) neutral, (b) rapport, and (c) strong rapport

Psychotherapist

Anderson and Anderson (1962)—psychologist/counselor and client interactions	effective communication in counseling interviews (p. 20)	—	• improved interactions	• developed a 50-item scale for measuring rapport in therapist-client relationships that has been used and refined in several subsequent studies
Charny (1966)—psychotherapy	the level of relatedness in the relationship	• posture mirroring	—	• concluded that postural configurations in psychotherapy are behavioral indicators of rapport
Gfeller, Lynn, and Pribble (1987)—hypnotist-subject interaction	the quality of the relationship	• personal disclosure • verbal reinforcement	—	• suggest rapport might be cultivated by self-disclosure of the provider, a lengthy period of contact, and verbal reinforcement of the subject
Harrigan and Rosenthal (1983)—clinical psychology	open, interested, and warm relationship	—	• satisfaction with health care provider • intention to stay in the relationship	• raters used a 14-item measure of rapport (using bipolar adjective scales) to judge rapport in physician-patient interactions • argue that if rapport does not exist with a health care provider, patients are more likely to be dissatisfied and change physicians
Kritzer (1990)—therapist-client interactions	a "good" interaction (p. 51)	• skill of therapist • behavioral coordination	• better therapist-patient relationship	• suggests rapport is related to empathy, warmth, genuineness, trust, unconditional positive regard, facilitativeness, congruence, affiliation, liking, and attractiveness, as well as balance, harmony, and being "in sync"

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued

Author(s)—Context	Description of Rapport	Antecedents to Rapport	Outcomes of Rapport	Comments
Sheehan (1980)— hypnosis	positive interaction	—	• countering (hypnotized subject responds as intended to hypnosis)	• contends that rapport is more easily interfered with than facilitated in the hypnotic setting
General interactions				
Bernieri et al. (1994)— experimental setting: mutual planning task	overall perception of an interaction	• interactional synchrony (i.e., movement synchrony and posture similarity)	—	• rapport measured with 7-item scale focused on perceptions of the interaction and included (a) involvement, (b) emotional positivity, (c) comfort, (d) harmony, (e) boredom, (f) satisfaction, and (g) focus • focus of the study is on interactional synchrony (which is expected to be highly correlated to rapport)
Bernieri et al. (1996)— experimental setting: debate on a contro-versial issue and cooperative activity	a quality in the relation or connection between interactants, especially relations "marked by harmony, conformity, accord, and affinity" (p. 113)	—	—	• rapport measured by (a) an 18-item scale rating the interaction on cooperative, harmonious, and engrossing dimensions and (b) a 2-item scale (by observers) regarding interactants' general attitudes toward each other • found several behavior cues to be highly correlated with rapport, including mutual eye contact, gestures, mutual silence, body orientation, racial similarity, smiling, and posture mimicry
Gillis, Bernieri, and Wooten (1995)— experimental setting: role-playing on a controversial issue	not defined	• various nonverbal cues including mutual eye con-tact, forward lean of body, gestures, mutual silence, body orientation, racial similarity, smiling, posture mimicry	—	• used a 1-item perceptual measure of rapport and an 18-item measure of rapport that includes behavioral cues • study focuses on observers judging the level of rapport in the relationship between two others • reported low agreement between interactants of rapport
Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1987)— general applications	a generally good interaction among individuals (p. 114)	• coordinated behavior	• coordinated behavior	• in a meta-analysis, found evidence suggesting "nonverbal behavior is a correlate, antecedent, and consequence of rapport" • rapport elements include the degree of (a) group-directed focus of attention by participants, (b) positivity of the interaction, and (c) coordination of the interaction
Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990)— general applications	is expressed when people "click" with each other or feel a good interaction due to "chemistry" (p. 286)	• mutual gaze • postural mirroring • proper turn taking in speaking and listening • various nonverbal be-haviors (smiling, directed gazing, head nodding, forward trunk lean, direct body orientation, posture mirroring, uncrossed arms/legs)	—	• propose a conceptualization of rapport that includes mutual attentiveness (intense mutual interest in each other), positivity (mutual friendliness and caring), and coordination between the interactants • rapport in encounters is indicated strongly by the presence of positivity, warmth, and friendliness

Miscellaneous

Crook and Booth (1997)— electronic mail	establishing a trusting, harmonious relationship with another (p. 6)	—	• improved communication in e-mail messages	• develop a reliable, unidimensional scale of rapport using a 14-item scale (using semantic differential items) that includes items about being honest, sincere, trustworthy, compatible, sensitive, likeable, and caring
Dougherty, Turban, and Callendar (1994)— interviewer–job applicant interactions	not defined	• positive first impression (based on job application form and test scores) • "positive regard" by interviewer of job applicant (supportive questions, agreeing with applicant, laughter, verbal encouragers, positive style, favorable orientation toward a job offer, vocal style)	—	• found mild support for the hypothesis that first impressions (via looking at applicants' applications and test scores) are correlated to applicant rapport with the interviewer • also found interviewers' "positive regard" behaviors to be significantly correlated to applicant rapport with the interviewer
Efstation, Patton, and Kardash (1990)— supervisor-trainee interactions	supervisor support and encouragement of trainees	—	—	• rapport conceptualized as a dimension of working alliance in supervisor-trainee interactions • investigates rapport from both perspectives of the dyad and includes a 7-item measure of supervisor-reported rapport and a 12-item measure of trainee-reported rapport

Sales relationships

Brooks (1989)— salesperson-customer interactions	a harmonious, empathetic, or sympathetic relation or connection to another self	• understanding of another's model of the world • self-disclosure	• increased likelihood of purchase (goods and services)	• contends customers may avoid purchasing a needed product or service simply because of not having established a rapport with the person representing the company
Dell (1991)— vendor–industrial customer interactions	includes "hitting it off" and "being comfortable with the relationship" (p. 103)	• continuity of vendor personnel • amount of time customer spends with a vendor representative • respect • trust • honesty	• organizational customer loyalty • overall quality of the customer-vendor relationship	• found customers believe it is the relationship with their vendors (reflected, in part, by the level of rapport) that most significantly affects their buying decisions • found rapport to be the most difficult and highest level of interaction that vendors and their customers can achieve • contends that rapport is the best indicator of an effective customer-vendor relationship
LaBahn (1996)— advertising agency and client	the perception that a relationship has the right "chemistry" and is enjoyable	• cooperativeness • diligence	• client trust • client disclosure	• developed a 5-item scale to measure interfirm rapport at an organizational level • found support for a model suggesting rapport results from cooperativeness (the degree to which a firm helps a client achieve its objectives) and diligence (the degree to which a firm takes responsibility for correcting problems that arise during interactions)

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued

Author(s)—Context	Description of Rapport	Antecedents to Rapport	Outcomes of Rapport	Comments
Marks (1994)— salesperson-prospect interaction	not defined	• matching body language • using pacing statements • salesperson appearance • small talk on nonthreatening topics • using humor • using the prospect's name	—	• suggests several behaviors that salespeople might use to establish rapport, including matching body language; using pacing statements that play back a customer's observations, experience, or behavior; salesperson appearance; shaking hands only if prospect initiates the behavior; small talk on topics where agreement is likely to be found; using humor; asking for advice on a particular matter; and remembering and using the prospect's name
Moine (1982)— salesperson-client interactions	not defined	• hypnotic pacing (statements and gestures that play back a customer's observations, experience, or behavior) • properly using the customer's name in conversation • telling stories, anecdotes, or parables	• increased likelihood of purchase	• argues that the techniques of the clinical hypnotist (e.g., mirroring the thoughts, tone of voice, speech tempo, and mood of the customer) can be useful in developing rapport in salesperson-client interactions
Nancarrow and Penn (1998)— telemarketing	(others' definitions of rapport are provided)	• harmony of purpose • salesperson capabilities (knowledge and expertise) • similarity of business and personal values • expressive behavior or mannerisms	• development of a relationship	• in a survey of telemarketers to understand rapport-fostering practices, found 80% of the sample provide their telemarketers with training on listening, 58% provide training on mirroring of a customer's pace, and 22% provide training on neurolinguistic programming • the use of personal and business information about the client was noted as the basis for ensuring telemarketers were "in tune with customers' needs"
Nickels, Everett, and Klein (1983)— salesperson-customer interactions	the perception of having established similarity with another person	• neuro-linguistic programming, which includes pacing behavior, matching voice patterns, matching posture, matching voice tone, matching breathing patterns, matching gestures	• trust • increased sales	• suggest that "the sales encounter is much like a dance, during which a conversation takes place with the customer leading and the salesperson following. Ideally the two soon merge into a couple moving together in rapport" (p. 4) • suggest salespeople use neurolinguistic programming in interactions with customers, including pacing behavior (verbal and nonverbal), matching voice patterns (e.g., speaking the language of the recipient by using descriptive words that match his or her primary thinking mode), matching posture, matching voice tone (e.g., excited, relaxed, loud, etc.), matching breathing patterns, and matching gestures (hand and head movements, smiles, frowns)
Spiro, Perreault, and Reynolds (1977)— industrial salesperson–customer interactions	not defined	• perceived ideological similarity • supporting the self-image of the customer • empathizing with the customer	• progress in the sales-interaction process	• present an integrative conceptual framework of the personal selling process that includes personal affiliation and rapport as vital influences on successful sales performance

Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner (1992)—salesperson-customer interactions	a close, harmonious relationship founded on mutual trust	• common links (e.g., mutual friends, common hobbies, attendance at the same schools)	• greater customer receptivity to the salesperson	• contend customers are more receptive to salespeople with whom they have established a rapport
Service contexts				
Ashforth and Humphrey (1993)—services in general	a sense of genuine interpersonal sensitivity and concern (p. 96)	—	• good service	• rapport between the customer and service provider is a key driver of good service
Berry (1995)—services in general	not defined	—	• ability to customize service to customer's specifications	• contends rapport helps to address customers' desires for more personalized, closer relationships with service providers
Ford and Etienne (1994)—customer service encounters	not defined	• courteous service	—	• contend that courteous service creates a rapport in the service encounter; thus, rapport can be established through casual smiles, engaged eye contact, friendly greetings, and provider sociability and attentiveness
Ketrow (1991)—bank-customer interactions	immediacy (similar to rapport) is the directness and intensity of interaction between two parties	• body orientation toward customer • forward leans • physical distance between provider and customer • head nods and shakes • eye contact	• customer satisfaction	• interestingly, did not find that immediacy related to customer satisfaction • suggests that in some contexts (banks, supermarkets, fast-food restaurants, ticket terminals) receiving immediacy from the clerk may not be an essential condition for retaining customer loyalty
Shapiro (1989)—restaurant-customer interactions	the ability to enter another's world and make him or her feel that a strong common bond has been formed	• observation • flexibility • mirroring	• creation of a personalized service delivery	• contends rapport can be established through flexibility (the provider customizing his or her style to match the other person's style) and mirroring (talking slow or fast, loud or soft, pausing between sentences, hand gestures)

spite a lack of a clear definition of rapport, those studies that have attempted to conceptualize rapport do have some common characteristics. Weitz, Castleberry, and Tanner (1992) define rapport as "a close, harmonious relationship founded on mutual trust" (p. 228). Dell (1991) refers to rapport as "how good customers feel in general about their interactions with the vendor" (p. 101). She suggests that this includes "hitting it off" and "being comfortable with the relationship." LaBahn (1996), in an examination of ad agency–client relationships, defines rapport as "the client's perception that the personal relationships have the right 'chemistry' and are enjoyable" (p. 30). Ashforth and Humphrey (1993) describe rapport as "a sense of genuine interpersonal sensitivity and concern" (p. 96). A common theme running through these studies is that rapport experiences are characterized by an enjoyable interaction in which participants connect on some level.

TWO DIMENSIONS OF RAPPORT

To understand what aspects of rapport are prominent in service interactions, we conducted depth interviews with both consumers and service providers. In particular, a judgment sample composed of employees and customers from a variety of service contexts was selected, as the study proceeded, on the basis of experience with previously interviewed respondents (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988; Jorgensen 1989). The customers in the sample were chosen from among those who appeared likely to have used a number of different services and thus would have experience with a variety of service interactions; similarly, employee respondents were selected from services frequently mentioned by the customer respondents. The final sample included 21 customer respondents and 20 service provider employees.[1] Respondents were recruited through a network of acquaintances (cf. Schouten 1991) in a major western metropolitan area of the United States and were thought to be sufficiently diverse in their use of service providers or in the services they provide.

The interviews, which averaged 48 minutes, were primarily conducted in respondents' homes or (for service provider employees) places of business. An interview schedule was generally followed, with deviations allowed to facilitate a smoother information flow. The interviews were conducted as part of a larger study on customer relationships with service providers and included questions to prompt respondents to discuss those situations in which customer-employee rapport developed. All interviews were tape-recorded to allow for a smoother flowing interview and to capture respondents' verbatim comments. To facilitate further analysis, the interviews were subsequently transcribed.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) categorizing process, which "involves sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of 'look-alike' characteristics" (p. 203), was followed in analyzing the interview data. In particular, after all of the interviews were conducted, the transcriptions were read and examined several times, with key phrases highlighted. The goal in selecting these phrases was to identify recurring thoughts, ideas, and perceptions each respondent had in discussing rapport or related concepts. Segments of each respondent's conversation that included thoughts related to rapport were then identified. After several iterations through the data, we agreed that the comments relating to rapport could be organized into two primary categories: enjoyable interaction and personal connection. Although this did not exhaust all components or dimensions of rapport, these two dimensions were clearly the most prominent. Indeed, there was no difference between employees and customers in this regard. Illustrative comments suggesting the importance of an enjoyable experience follow.

> He [hairstylist] does a good job and is likeable. He tells jokes and asks about my family and my work. We both play bridge, so we'll talk about that. So, we can have a nice conversation while he is cutting my hair. He's real personable and has an interesting personality. (AH, 42, F, software project manager)

> We socialize with our customers—there is a camaraderie there. I think that's important to customers because people still want a sense of community, and it's just pleasant to go somewhere . . . with this type of atmosphere. (MH, 34, M, bookstore assistant manager)

> Larry [automobile repair serviceman] at K-Mart has a great personality. He always seems to be positive and in a good mood. He's easy to deal with. Even if he's busy, he takes time to spend a little time with me, talk with me, and ask me how things are. (RS, 58, M, office equipment serviceman)

Other respondents express that a personal connection is an important part of their personal service relationships.

> Most of my customers are my friends. There are a few that don't like you after the process. But, for most, you really get to know them throughout the process. You help them fill out their credit application, you know how many kids they have, you know how much money they make, you know where they work, how long they've worked there. And pretty soon, you find out you both play basketball, you both play golf, you have two daughters and he has two daughters. Whatever. Pretty soon, you start having this bonding thing that goes on. (CL, 36, M, new car salesperson)

If I feel the person is being straight with me, if they are treating me in a humane way and with concern and compassion, if they are authentically connecting with me in helping me get what I want, then it works better than if it is an anonymous, impersonal process. (BS, 32, M, psychologist)

A customer can detect when you are genuinely concerned about them. They really know when you're really trying to take care of them properly. To me, that's what it's all about—to be genuinely interested in them and what they do. We were invited by a customer to come out to their dairy farm because I had expressed an interest in learning about what they did. I was genuinely interested in how many cows they have, how much milk they get out of them every day, that type of thing. (LC, 34, M, auto serviceman)

In summary, our review of the extant literature and the analysis of our interview data suggest that an enjoyable interaction and personal connection are common and important facets of rapport. As such, we examine these two dimensions further.

Enjoyable Interaction

The enjoyable interaction component of rapport is comparable to what Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) term "positivity," described as a feeling of care and friendliness, in their discussion of rapport. It is also similar to the concept of liking, defined as a favorable association with the relationship, which is considered to be one of the basic components in the definition of a relationship (Gupta 1983). In this study, we consider the enjoyable interaction facet of rapport to be an affect-laden, cognitive evaluation of one's exchange with a contact employee. It is important to note that the evaluation of enjoyableness specifically relates to the customer-employee interaction. This can be contrasted with the evaluation of one's level of satisfaction with the final service outcome (Bitner and Hubbert 1994). Because rapport is a relationship-based construct, it is likely to have a greater influence on the evaluation of the interpersonal customer-employee interaction than on the final service outcome.

Although the distinction between technical quality (what is being delivered) and functional quality (the way it is delivered) has been made, we recognize that for many services this distinction is blurred (Edvardsson, Thomasson, and Øvretveit 1994; Grönroos 1982). We consider rapport to be one element of functional quality, which is an overarching concept that we believe encompasses a variety of interpersonal interaction elements (which would also include eye contact, language, and nonverbal gestures), related to the provision of service. Conceptually, we view the enjoyable interaction evaluation to be distinct from the evaluation of the service outcome, because enjoyable interaction is an assessment of the relational aspects of the service. However, in practice, it can be much harder for consumers to separate their evaluations of the provision of the service from their evaluations of the service outcome. Indeed, for some services, the interpersonal aspects of service delivery (e.g., the doctor's bedside manner or the level of confidence instilled by the banker) may have as much to do with one's overall service evaluation as the service outcome (e.g., the physical examination or the home loan). Thus, we argue that satisfaction with an individual will influence satisfaction with the service. This is likely to be especially evident when the service is simultaneously produced and consumed, as in the case of a physical examination with a doctor. In contrast, for services where technical quality and functional quality are more distinct, it is more probable that a consumer can effectively separate his or her satisfaction evaluations. In these situations, it is possible for a customer to have an enjoyable interaction but rate the service outcome as unsatisfactory (and vice versa). For example, the relational aspects involved in a trip to one's hairstylist (e.g., exchanging gossip, discussing aspects of one's life with a sympathetic listener) may lead to a highly enjoyable encounter, whereas the evaluation of the actual service (i.e., the haircut) may be dissatisfying.

Personal Connection

Our notion of personal connection in a service relationship is based on the customer's perception of a bond between the two parties in the dyad. That is, a personal connection represents a strong affiliation with the other person (perhaps unspoken) based on some tie (e.g., close identification with the other, mutual caring, etc.). The customer-employee connection has received attention in recent services marketing literature on commercial friendships (Price and Arnould 1999) and customer intimacy (Stern, Thompson, and Arnould 1998). Using the phrase *authentic understanding*, Price, Arnould, and Tierney (1995) describe relational elements in service transactions well beyond traditional customer contact employee roles. Authentic understanding is developed when "service provider and client engage in self-revelation, expend emotional energy, and connect as individuals" (p. 92). Although their construct is developed in the context of extended, affectively charged, intimate service encounters, it is possible for connections between customers and employees to occur in briefer transactions that are repetitive in nature (e.g., weekly interactions with a dry cleaner) (Czepiel 1990). Indeed, it is not unheard of for customers

and employees to develop strong friendships out of such mundane encounters (Goodwin 1996; Goodwin and Gremler 1996).

Based on phenomenological consumer interviews, Stern, Thompson, and Arnould (1998) assert that many consumers may especially desire employee "relationship partners" who understand them, care about them, and reinforce their values. Understanding, care, and value reinforcement are very consistent with our notion of a personal connection. In support of our premise that rapport is an important element in the development of service relationships, Stern, Thompson, and Arnould argue that relationship development can be emotionally driven rather than motivated by the desire for choice reduction (Sheth and Parvatiyar 1995) or choice augmentation (Peterson 1995).

The personal connection dimension of rapport may facilitate the development of relationships because it can contribute to one's sense of self-definition (Sheaves and Barnes 1996). That is, the way individuals (i.e., consumers or employees) think of themselves is largely driven by the type of people with whom they interact and the nature of those interactions (Felson 1992; Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge 1986). "Through social interaction and the internalization of collective values, meanings, and standards, individuals come to see themselves somewhat through the eyes of others and construct more or less stable self-definitions and a sense of self-esteem" (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999, p. 417). Customers and employees who come to know each other through repeated exchanges over time may become important in each other's sense of self-definition. Thus, to the extent that a personal connection with a service employee contributes to a consumer's sense of identity, we propose that a personal connection is an important aspect of the relationship and will contribute to the consumer's relationship satisfaction and increase his or her desire to maintain the relationship.

An interesting issue to consider is how a personal connection can be developed within the context of a service exchange. Some insight can be gleaned from the social-psychology literature, where Duck (1994) has used the term *psychological similarity* to describe connections between people. Two people can be described as psychologically similar on the basis of common attitudes, personality predispositions, and values. Furthermore, at a higher level, when two individuals characterize the same events or experiences with similar meanings (i.e., understanding), they are psychologically similar (Duck 1994). In the marketing literature, similarity between customers and employees has been shown to have a positive impact on relationship quality (Crosby, Evans, and Cowles 1990).

These similarities have implications for the connection aspect of customer-employee rapport. Although service exchanges do allow for a great deal of communication be-

tween employee and customer, it is unlikely that even extended, ongoing transactions will result in an employee and a customer truly knowing each other (Siehl, Bowen, and Pearson 1992). The psychological similarity construct may help to bridge this gap. Duck (1994) suggests that not only does psychological similarity allow individuals to effectively communicate about a particular topic (e.g., a common interest, viewpoint, etc.), but it also provides a basis for making inferences regarding the other person. Inference making allows individuals to fill in gaps they have in their knowledge of others. If two parties have found similarity in some areas (e.g., attitudes, personality predispositions, or values), in many instances they will assume the other party has a worldview that is consistent with their own (Dixson and Duck 1993). In this manner, a perception of knowing the other party may result in a personal connection within the context of a service exchange.

Another way in which a personal connection may be initiated is through the development of a genuine interest in the other party. Naturally, in the course of transacting business, employees and customers will be mutually involved as they exchange information regarding the provision of the service and other issues not necessarily germane to service delivery. However, mutual interest existing on a more personal and relational level is likely to build stronger bonds between customers and employees and, indeed, may even result in the development of friendships (Goodwin 1996; Goodwin and Gremler 1996). In our view, although most individuals can appear attentive to what another party is saying, being interested implies a higher level of relational development, one that is more likely to result in a personal connection. Personal connection, as we have described it, is consistent with Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal's (1990) mutual attentiveness component of rapport, which they describe as an intense mutual interest brought about through focused involvement with what the other party is saying and doing during the encounter.

A Working Definition of Rapport in Service Interactions

In summary, given the variety of conceptualizations found in the literature, we do not claim to have captured the entire conceptual domain of the rapport construct in the enjoyable interaction and personal connection dimensions. However, evidence from our depth interviews suggests that these two dimensions of rapport are particularly salient in service contexts. As such, we use the following as a working definition of rapport in this study: Rapport is a customer's perception of having an enjoyable interaction with a service provider employee, characterized by a personal connection between the two interactants.

Rapport and Its Relationship With Satisfaction, Loyalty, and Word-of-Mouth Communication

These dimensions of rapport are only important to firms to the extent that they influence certain outcomes. Price and Arnould (1999) found commercial friendships to be strongly correlated with three key "marketing objectives: satisfaction, loyalty, and positive word-of-mouth communication" (p. 51). Consistent with their approach, we undertook a quantitative study to examine the impact of perceptions of an enjoyable interaction and a personal connection on (a) satisfaction with the service, (b) customer loyalty intentions, and (c) word-of-mouth communication. Aside from these three outcomes being important for service firms in their own right, their examination also serves to extend some of the past research on the rapport construct.

Rapport and satisfaction. Although the relationship between rapport and satisfaction with particular individuals (e.g., with roommates or therapists) has been examined (e.g., Carey, Hamilton, and Shanklin 1986; Harrigan and Rosenthal 1983; Kritzer 1990), the relationship between rapport and satisfaction with a product or service has not. Therefore, we build on these past studies to examine rapport's relationship with overall satisfaction of the service. This is in line with Gutek et al.'s (1999) call for customer-employee relationship research to use a broader satisfaction measure that goes beyond satisfaction with the customer's experience.

The term *perceived control* has been used in the service literature to describe situations in which customers are able to predict and control events within the service encounter (Bateson 1985). Predictability in a service encounter is thought to lead to higher levels of customer satisfaction (Solomon et al. 1985). Perceived control can be increased when customers and employees form relationships. More specifically, the familiarity that is gained from repeated interactions with the same service provider will contribute to the predictability of the overall service outcome.

We contend that increased rapport should lead to greater satisfaction in service exchanges. In a similar manner, Ennew and Binks (1999) have suggested that close personal contacts and the sharing of personal information will lead to increased overall customer satisfaction for two reasons. First, because of the close relationship, the employee is more likely to have greater knowledge of the customer's unique needs and expectations. This provides the opportunity for the employee to customize the service offering and may lead to higher levels of perceived service quality (Surprenant and Solomon 1987), which is thought to be an antecedent to customer satisfaction (Cronin and Taylor 1992). The second way in which satisfaction may be increased by closer personal contact is through the management of the customer's expectations. With greater contact between service provider and customer comes a higher level of customer awareness for the provider's capabilities. The improved accuracy of the customer's service expectations should result in closer alignment between expectations and performance, thus resulting in higher levels of customer satisfaction (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1994).

Rapport and loyalty. Although the relationship between rapport and initial purchase intentions has been examined (e.g., Brooks 1989; Moine 1982), we extend this idea by examining the relationship between rapport and continuing purchase intent in the form of customer loyalty. Rapport may contribute to relationship strength, which has been conceptualized as the customer's level of commitment to the service provider (Liljander and Strandvik 1995). Degree of commitment has been associated with customer loyalty, where higher levels of relationship commitment are associated with customer loyalty (Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne 1991). Thus, to the extent to which rapport strengthens the relationship between customer and employee, we expect a positive relationship between rapport and loyalty. There are several sources of support for such a relationship in the service literature. Barnes (1997) argues that customer-employee rapport will lead to repeat patronage. Throughout their discussion of commercial friendships, Price and Arnould (1999) provide illustrative quotations that suggest that customers often become loyal as a result of connecting, or developing rapport, with a hairstylist. Furthermore, social benefits have been shown to be a significant, positive antecedent of loyalty to the salesperson, which, in turn, influences company loyalty (Reynolds and Beatty 1999).

Rapport and word-of-mouth communication. If rapport does indeed influence satisfaction and loyalty, as we have argued, then a positive influence of rapport on positive word-of-mouth communication is a logical extension. However, the marketing literature has only recently begun to explore this relationship to any extent. Price and Arnould (1999) found commercial friendships between customers and employees to be strongly correlated with customers' positive word-of-mouth communications about the service provider. Although we acknowledge that the presence of rapport in a customer-employee relationship does not necessarily mean that a friendship will develop, rapport may provide the foundation for customers to communicate the positive aspects of the firm to others.

Whereas we have argued above that rapport will influence evaluations, there has been no work examining the impact of rapport on communicating these evaluations to others. Thus, we include positive word-of-mouth behavior as an important outcome variable in this study of rapport.

In summary, this article thus far has emphasized four points. First, rapport is a familiar concept that suffers from a lack of clear delineation in the literature. Second, rapport appears to be a multidimensional construct. Third, from a study that included 41 depth interviews, we found that two particular dimensions of rapport—enjoyable interaction and personal connection—appear to be particularly salient in services contexts. Fourth, we contend that rapport is related to three outcomes of interest to marketers: satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of mouth communication. The method used to empirically assess these relationships is discussed next.

METHOD

Overview of Analytical Procedures

We used a self-report questionnaire to empirically investigate rapport. Two sets of respondents, bank customers and dental patients, are included in the study. Multi-item scales are used to measure each of the two rapport components as well as the three outcome constructs described earlier. The data analysis proceeds according to the two-step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988). First, the measurement model is estimated. In this study, the measurement model consists of the five latent factors described earlier. An assessment of reliability, discriminant validity, and convergent validity of the two rapport scales is included in the measurement model assessment. Second, a structural model representing the series of path relationships linking the two rapport components with the other three constructs is specified. In particular, the two dimensions of rapport (enjoyable interaction and personal connection) are specified as exogenous variables that are allowed to covary, and three outcomes thought to be consequences of rapport (satisfaction, loyalty intent, and word-of-mouth communication) are specified as endogenous variables (see Figure 1). The final step in the analysis is to estimate the path coefficients between the two rapport dimensions and the outcome variables using the CALIS procedure of SAS.

Samples

We used a self-report questionnaire with each of the two samples included in this study. The two samples are as follows:

FIGURE 1
Rapport Dimensions and Related Outcomes
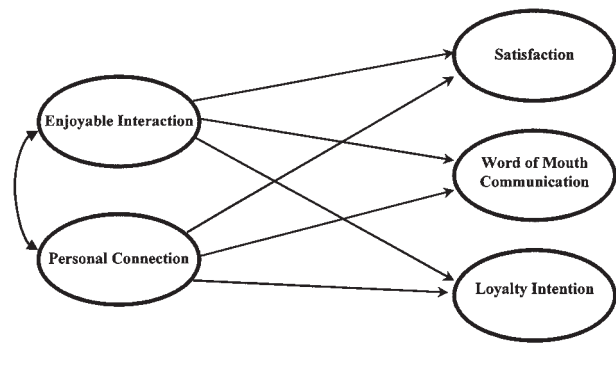
Bank sample. The first sample consists of 3,390 randomly selected retail customers from one district of a large bank in the southwestern United States that serves 40,000 households. Those selected received a survey and a prestamped return envelope through the mail. A total of 1,328 usable surveys (39%) were returned. Of these respondents, 52% are women, the average age is 48.4 (with a range of 18 to 90), and the average length of time as a customer of the bank is 13.2 years (varying from 6 months to 60 years).

Dental sample. As a contrast to the bank customer sample, a dental context was selected, in part because it is characterized by longer transactions and interactions that are of a more personal or intimate nature. For the dental sample, 484 patients who visited a dental practice in a large, southwestern metropolitan area over a 3-month period were asked directly by the staff to participate in the study. Surveys were mailed directly to an additional 437 patients. Of the 921 surveys distributed to the dental patients, a total of 399 usable surveys (43%) were returned. Of these respondents, 58% are women, the average age is 47.6 (ranging from 19 to 89), and the average length of time as a patient is 8.7 years (varying from 1 week to 28 years).

Measures

The 11 items for the two rapport dimensions included in the study, enjoyable interaction (6 items) and personal connection (5 items), were generated from several sources: in-depth interviews with service customers, other similar relational constructs in previous studies, and a review of the rapport literature. (Table 2 includes the items used to measure each of the constructs.) For the rapport items, respondents were asked to think of the employee

TABLE 2
Measurement Model Results

Measurement model	Overall Model Fit[a]			
	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI
	1331.5 / 921.3	220 / 220	.965 / .923	.960 / .918

Construct and Scale Items[b]	Internal Consistency			
	Standardized Loading[c]	Composite Reliability	Coefficient Alpha	Average Variance Extracted
Enjoyable interaction		.957 / .956	.955 / .954	.788 / .784
In thinking about my relationship with this person, I enjoy interacting with this employee.	.927 / .942			
This employee creates a feeling of "warmth" in our relationship.	.913 / .910			
This employee relates well to me	.908 / .926			
In thinking about my relationship, I have a harmonious relationship with this person.	.902 / .892			
This employee has a good sense of humor.	.892 / .896			
I am comfortable interacting with this employee.	.773 / .729			
Personal connection		.929 / .936	.927 / .934	.724 / .746
I feel like there is a "bond" between this employee and myself.	.887 / .882			
I look forward to seeing this person when I visit the bank.	.874 / .856			
I strongly care about this employee.	.843 / .895			
This person has taken a personal interest in me.	.851 / .808			
I have a close relationship with this person.	.798 / .875			
Satisfaction		.967 / .951	.966 / .939	.853 / .799
Based on all of my experience with this bank, I am very satisfied with the banking services it provides.	.922 / .952			
My choice to use this bank was a wise one.	.945 / .966			
Overall, I am satisfied with the decision to use this bank.	.948 / .973			
I think I did the right thing when I decided to use this bank for my banking needs.	.924 / .930			
My overall evaluation of the services provided by this bank is very good.	.878 / .585			
Loyalty intent		.874 / .868	.860 / .830	.700 / .701
I intend to continue doing business with this bank over the next few years.	.856 / .953			
As long as the present service continues, I doubt that I would switch banks.	.916 / .972			
I am *not* very likely to recommend this bank to a friend. (reverse coded)	.727 / .500			
Word-of-mouth communication		.918 / .852	.919 / .856	.737 / .591
I encourage friends and relatives to do business with this bank.	.856 / .794			
I recommend this bank whenever anyone seeks my advice.	.907 / .831			
When the topic of banks comes up in conversation, I go out of my way to recommend this bank.	.830 / .703			
I have actually recommended this bank to my friends.	.840 / .740			

NOTE: Statistics are presented for each of the two samples, with the bank sample statistic before the slash and the dental sample statistic after the slash.
a. The χ^2 statistic is significant at the .01 level. CFI = Bentler's (1990) Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis ρ (Tucker and Lewis 1973). Composite reliability is based on the reliability index suggested by Fornell and Larcker (1981).
b. The items are 7-point Likert-type scales ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. The items listed are from the bank questionnaire; the dental questionnaire was reworded slightly by making appropriate replacements (e.g., "this bank" was replaced with "this dental office").
c. All factor loadings are significant in both samples. In particular, all *t*-values are at least 10.3 or greater ($p < .001$).

they knew best or interacted with the most. Overall service satisfaction was measured using 5 items, including the 3 positively worded items from Oliver's (1980) scale. The 3 loyalty intent items were adapted from Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman's (1996) behavioral intentions battery.

Finally, word-of-mouth communication was measured using 4 items developed for use in this survey. All items were rated on 7-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to increase ease of response.

RESULTS

Measurement Model Results

To measure the two dimensions of rapport, as well as the other constructs of interest, commonly accepted guidelines for measure development and purification (i.e., Babbie 1989; Churchill 1979; DeVellis 1991) were followed.

An assessment of the measures of each of the constructs was assessed by performing a confirmatory factor analysis using the CALIS procedure in SAS. The measurement model statistics that resulted are reported in Table 2. The results suggest an adequate fit of the model to the data in both the bank sample (TLI = .960; CFI = .965; χ^2 = 1331.5, df = 220)[2] and the dental sample (TLI = .918; CFI = .923; χ^2 = 921.3, df = 220). As reported in Table 2, the factor loadings for each item in each set are fairly high, with all but two loadings (for one item measuring satisfaction and one item measuring word-of-mouth communication, both in the dental sample) greater than .70 in both contexts. All indicator loadings are positive and significant ($p < .01$). The average variance-extracted values are greater than .70 for all but one of the measures (for word-of-mouth communication in the dental context, it is .591) and exceed the .50 cutoff recommended by Bagozzi and Yi (1988).

Table 2 also presents reliability estimates for each of the five constructs in both contexts using coefficient alpha and a measure of composite reliability based on the loadings of the measurement model (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Each set of items has coefficient alphas of at least .830 in both contexts, well above Nunnally's (1978) criterion of .70 for exploratory research. Composite reliabilities are all above .850 for each set of items in both contexts. Overall, the measurement model statistics suggest sufficient reliability for each set of items.

The correlations among the constructs are presented in Table 3. Although correlations between all pairs of constructs are significant, they are all at least two standard errors away from 1—providing evidence of discriminant validity (Anderson and Gerbing 1988). Of particular interest is the correlation between enjoyable interaction and personal connection. As expected, the correlation between these two rapport dimensions is high: .825 in the bank sample and .813 in the dental sample. However, the correlations in both samples are significantly different from 1 (and in each sample the correlation is actually more than 9 standard errors from unity), providing strong evidence of discriminant validity between these two dimensions of rapport.

Because measures of rapport are nearly nonexistent in the marketing literature, we were also interested in assessing the convergent validity of the two rapport dimensions.

TABLE 3
Correlations Among Latent Constructs

	Enjoyable Interaction	Personal Connection	Satisfaction	Loyalty Intent
Personal connection	.825/.813			
Satisfaction	.376/.421	.339/.317		
Loyalty intent	.339/.360	.303/.273	.943/.839	
Word-of-mouth communication	.406/.512	.430/.509	.801/.678	.781/.562

NOTE: Correlations are presented for each of the two samples, with the bank sample correlation given before the slash and the dental sample correlation after the slash.

Convergent validity traditionally is presented as the correlation of responses obtained from maximally different methods measuring the same construct (Peter 1981). Given the paucity of rapport measures in the marketing literature, we naturally were limited in our ability to identify appropriate alternative measures of rapport for use in a marketing context. However, an additional item, "I have a good rapport with this employee," was included in the questionnaire to assess convergent validity. In particular, we created an index by summing the items for each of the two rapport dimensions. We then examined the correlations between each index and the single-item rapport measure. As expected, the correlations are quite high and significant in both samples: For the enjoyable interaction dimension, the correlation with the rapport item is .930 in the bank sample and .941 in the dental sample, and for the personal connection dimension, the correlation is .738 in the bank sample and .748 in the dental sample. These correlations provide support for convergent validity of the two rapport measures.

Structural Model Results

As Figure 1 indicates, in the structural model enjoyable interaction and personal connection are specified as exogenous variables, and satisfaction, loyalty intent, and word-of-mouth communication are specified as endogenous variables. Table 4 contains the overall goodness-of-fit indices and the standardized parameter estimates for the hypothesized model. As shown in the table, support is found for a relationship between the two rapport dimensions and the three outcome variables. The goodness-of-fit indices suggest a suitable fit of the model to the data in both the bank sample (TLI = .866; CFI = .882; χ^2 = 3996.6, df = 223) and the dental sample (TLI = .863; CFI = .880; χ^2 = 1407.7, df = 223). All but two of the standardized path coefficients between the two rapport dimensions and the three outcome variables are positive and significant (see Figure 2). The two nonsignificant paths,

TABLE 4
Structural Model Results

Structural Model Statistic	Overall Model Fit	
	Bank Sample	Dental Sample
χ^2	3996.6	1407.7
df	223	223
CFI	.882	.880
TLI	.866	.863

	Standardized Path Estimates and t Values			
	Bank Sample		Dental Sample	
Path	Standardized Path Estimate	t-Value	Standardized Path Estimate	t-Value
Enjoyable interaction → satisfaction	.284	5.37	.541	6.04
Enjoyable interaction → loyalty intent	.262	4.69	.489	5.33
Enjoyable interaction → word-of-mouth communication	.172	3.24	.356	3.89
Personal connection → satisfaction	.127	2.37	−.123	−1.37 (ns)
Personal connection → loyalty intent	.105	1.87	−.131	−1.42 (ns)
Personal connection → word-of-mouth communication	.301	5.57	.214	2.32

	Variance Explained for Endogenous Variables	
	Bank Sample	Dental Sample
R^2—Satisfaction	.157	.199
R^2—Loyalty intent	.125	.152
R^2—Word-of-mouth communication	.206	.297

NOTE: The χ^2 statistics are significant at the .01 level. CFI = Bentler's (1990) Comparative Fit Index; TLI = Tucker-Lewis ρ (Tucker and Lewis 1973). Except where noted by ns (nonsignificant), t-values with an absolute value of 1.65 or greater are significant at the .05 level, and t-values of 1.96 or greater are significant at the .01 level.

both in the dental sample, are the personal connection–satisfaction path and the personal connection–loyalty intent path. We will discuss these nonsignificant paths in further detail in the Discussion section.

An examination of the amount of variance explained in each of the three outcome variables appears in Table 4. The variance explained (measured in terms of R^2) in each of three variables ranges from approximately 12% to 30%: for satisfaction, the variance explained is .157 in the bank sample and .199 in the dental sample; for loyalty intent, the variance explained is .125 in the bank sample and .152 in the dental sample; and for word-of-mouth communication, the variance explained is .206 in the bank sample and .297 in the dental sample.

DISCUSSION

Although the importance of customer-employee relationships is often talked about in services contexts, these discussions typically lack specificity. The purpose of this study was to focus on rapport as a particular component of customer-employee relationships. Boshoff (1999) notes that what does not get measured does not get managed. We believe that the absence of studies empirically assessing specific components of relationships, like rapport, has restricted our understanding of how relationships influence valuable outcomes for service businesses and limited our ability to provide specific advice to service managers.

Given the nature of the qualitative study, we do not claim to have investigated the entire conceptual domain of the rapport construct. However, our findings suggest that enjoyable interaction and personal connection are two dimensions worthy of inclusion in future studies in service contexts. Findings from our examination of these two rapport components provide empirical support for their importance to service managers. Three aspects of our findings are worthy of further discussion. First, the various conceptualizations of rapport from a variety of literatures do not provide specific insight as to which of its components are most relevant in service relationships. However, our depth-interview findings suggest that two components of rapport, enjoyable interaction and personal connection, are perceived by both customers and employees as being

FIGURE 2
Summary of Structural Model Results
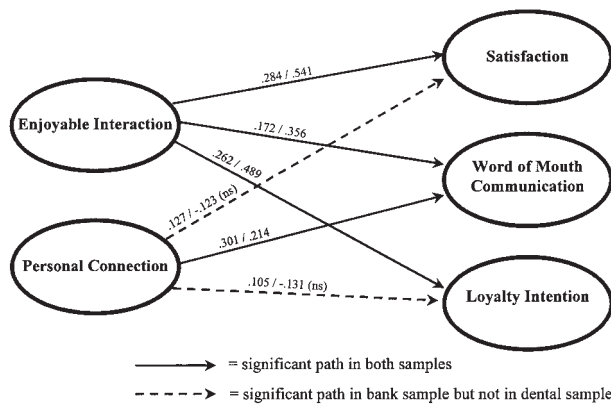
NOTE: All estimates are standardized. Path coefficients are included from each of the two samples, with the bank sample coefficient before the slash and the dental sample coefficient after the slash.

important in the development of relationships in service contexts.

Second, our analysis of the survey data from two different contexts finds empirical support for the two dimensions of rapport identified in the depth interviews. Our measure of the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport captures evaluative elements of the interaction by focusing on an assessment of the enjoyment perceived in the encounter. The other dimension of rapport included in this study, personal connection, captures a sense of a bond forming between the employee and the customer. Although the reliability and validity of any measure cannot be unequivocally established in a single study, we believe our research represents a significant step in creating a measure of important rapport dimensions suitable for use in marketing contexts.

Third, our results in the bank context indicate that both rapport components are significantly related to customer satisfaction, customer loyalty intent, and the likelihood of positive customer communication about the firm. In the dental context, the enjoyable interaction component is significantly related to all three outcome variables, and the personal connection component is significantly related to word-of-mouth communication. Across both contexts, the percentage of variance explained for each of these constructs is higher than one might expect (all but one had R^2 values greater than .15). This certainly suggests that customer-employee rapport should merit additional attention by both researchers and practitioners.

In contrast to the results from analysis of the bank data and our predictions, the paths between personal connection and both satisfaction and loyalty intent were nonsignificant in the dental sample. One interpretation is that, at least in this context, there is no relationship between a customer connecting with a service employee and his or her satisfaction with the service and intention to remain loyal to that provider. These results were not what we expected; in fact, we would have predicted that, if anything, the relationship between personal connection and these two constructs might have been stronger in the dental context where, it would seem, a personal connection could be easier to establish. Alternatively, perhaps the relative infrequency of service encounters in the dental context plays an influential role. In particular, unless there are exceptional service needs, the average dental patient is not likely to visit the dentist more than two or three times a year. Perhaps a personal connection between the customer and an employee is not present, or differs in degree, in comparison to services like banking that typically involve more frequent contact. In any case, the conflicting results between the two contexts suggest the need for additional research in this area. For example, future research could further explore the personal connection dimension of rapport to determine if its influence varies significantly across service contexts.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Rapport at Various Stages of a Business Relationship

The current study did not delineate between long- and short-term customer-employee relationships; however, this may be an interesting area for further investigation. More specifically, future studies could examine whether the two dimensions of rapport are more salient at various stages of the relationship. For example, we might expect to see the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport dominate in an initial service encounter, whereas the personal connection dimension may require a more extensive interaction (or series of interactions) in order to develop. Indeed, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) argue that, over time, positivity drops in relative importance compared to other aspects of rapport. As such, it may be insightful to measure rapport at various stages of the customer-employee relationship. Such research could help determine (a) if the two dimensions—enjoyable interaction and personal connection—vary in their contribution to rapport at various stages of the relationship and (b) whether rapport building would benefit from longer or more frequent service encounters.

Rapport in Various Service Settings

Our understanding of rapport leads us to believe that it has the potential to be influential in a variety of service interactions. It would appear to be particularly influential in situations where the customer has repeated interactions with the same person (called service relationships by Gutek et al. 1999). In those service exchanges where repeated contact with the same employee can occur (e.g., with physicians, investment counselors, or travel agents), the presence of rapport between the customer and the provider would be expected to help cultivate the service relationship. However, we also suggest that rapport may be established in a single service encounter between a customer and an employee who previously have never interacted. Even in these situations (e.g., amusement park, bus terminal ticket office, guided museum tour), we believe rapport between the customer and the employee may influence the customer's overall satisfaction with the service experience. One area for future research would be to explore the relationship between rapport and the length of the encounter. For example, are extended service encounters (Price, Arnould, and Tierney 1995) more appropriate for development of rapport? Is there a minimum amount of interaction time needed in the encounter before rapport develops to the point that it has a measurable influence on the service experience?

Even within the same service, there can be various levels of interactions and opportunities for cultivating rapport between customers and employees. To illustrate, on an airline flight a stewardess serving 12 first-class passengers is provided with many more opportunities to interact with those customers than are two other stewardesses on the same flight who may be serving 80 coach customers. Similarly, a personal banker may have more occasions to interact with a client for an extended period of time than does a bank teller who may be concerned about quickly wrapping up a transaction so that he or she can serve the next person in line. Indeed, in settings like these, management may want to limit the degree to which rapport is cultivated in order to focus on other aspects of service delivery (such as speed and efficiency). Another consideration for service firms is the potential consequence of developing rapport with some customers, and not others, in situations where multiple customers are present. Indeed, one reason to neglect rapport would be if there is the potential for jealousy or resentment to develop when a customer observes that rapport exists between the provider and another customer. If the provider has not yet developed rapport with the first customer, that individual may feel alienated or not well treated. Thus, one area for future research would be to investigate the consequences of neglecting rapport in service companies. In particular, is there a dark side to rapport?

Are there situations in which the firm would be better off neglecting, or even discouraging, the cultivation of rapport between employees and customers?

Facilitating Rapport in Service Exchanges

The study of interpersonal service relationships in general, and rapport specifically, would benefit from a better understanding of the factors that promote the development of interpersonal elements in a service encounter. That is, what environmental or contextual factors contribute to the development of rapport in a service setting? What specific actions can employees take to encourage rapport development in their customer interactions? An analysis of the studies reported in Table 1 suggests that employee rapport-building strategies can be grouped into four types: (a) customer imitation, (b) employee courteousness, (c) attentive interaction, and (d) finding common ground. An important contribution to our understanding of these strategies could be made by exploring under what circumstances each strategy is most effective at building rapport. For example, does context, servicescape, or similarity of gender have an impact on the development of rapport, and more specifically, does it moderate the effectiveness of the type of rapport-building strategy being used? Perhaps existing service typologies (e.g., Bowen 1990; Lovelock 1983) could be expanded to gain insight into when rapport will have the biggest impact on outcomes favorable to the firm.

Investigating Rapport From a Dyadic Perspective

The results of this study should be evaluated with the understanding that we focused exclusively on the customer's perception of rapport in a relationship with a service provider employee. However, we acknowledge that rapport exists only in an interaction between individuals (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal 1990). Indeed, Bernieri et al. (1996) argue that rapport is unique in that the construct "does not reside within a single individual" (p. 114). Although we believe that the customer's perspective is of primary importance, we recognize the limitation of looking at only one side of a dyadic construct. We are not alone in this regard; in our review of the rapport literature, we found only two studies—Bernieri et al. (1996) and Efstation, Patton, and Kardash (1990)—that examine rapport from both perspectives of the dyad. Rapport may need to be measured from both halves of the dyad to assess more accurately the amount of rapport in a relationship. Similarly, looking at both perspectives may allow for a comparison of what each party believes are the best rapport-building strategies.

Rapport Without a Personal Connection

We believe that rapport can be an important element in customer-employee interactions even when customers do not desire a personal connection with service providers. Goodwin (1996) suggests that, for some types of services, customers prefer not to engage in exchanges with relational consequences. In fact, some customers may perceive customer-provider relationship building as intrusive (Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin 1994); Gutek et al. (1999) refer to those who tend to avoid service relationships as encounter people. However, we believe that in most exchanges customers still desire an enjoyable interaction with the service employee. For example, it is unlikely that many fast-food-restaurant customers desire relational exchanges in their dealings with front-counter employees. Simply put, the time commitment required in relationship building is inconsistent with most consumers' goals for this type of service setting—a quickly served meal. And, due to employee turnover and varying work schedules, a customer may encounter a different employee each time he or she visits the restaurant, making the formation of relationships more difficult. However, the enjoyable interaction dimension of rapport can be achieved by (a) relating to the customer's needs, (b) caring about the customer's service outcome, and/or (c) using humor to place the customer at ease, without any appreciable lengthening of the transaction and without the need for multiple interactions with the same employee. This discussion suggests two research questions: Do consumers classify an enjoyable interaction without a personal connection as rapport? Does rapport still have a significant impact on the customer's experience if the personal connection element is not present?

Rapport in Various Cultures

One limitation of this study is that it includes only U.S. respondents. It is quite possible that rapport manifests itself differently and to various degrees in other cultures. For example, Winsted (1997) found significant cross-cultural differences in the role of conversation in the service encounter. In particular, Winsted determined that various employee behaviors that predict satisfaction in the United States are not nearly as helpful in explaining satisfaction in Japan. Similarly, Gwinner, Gremler, and Bitner (1998) speculate that relational benefits received in the customer–service provider relationship differ significantly across cultures. Our own personal experiences in traveling suggest that rapport between service employees and customers may be more prevalent in some countries (e.g., the Netherlands, Italy, and Kenya) than in others, particularly those not as inclined to engage in extensive personal inter-

action in the service encounter (e.g., Germany, Switzerland, and Japan). Further exploration of the role that rapport can or should play in the service delivery process in various cultures is needed.

Rapport Between Customers

For many services, particularly those requiring customers to interact with other customers, the rapport established between customers may positively influence the overall service experience. Grove and Fisk (1997) found that satisfaction in the service encounter often results from "a warm feeling" created in situations in which other customers were hospitable or amiable. Although hard to quantify, positive social interactions with other customers can add value to one's overall service experience. For example, customers may form friendships with others, help other customers to understand the rules of conduct, encourage each other during the service delivery process, serve as mentors to other less experienced customers, enhance the experience by creating excitement, or stimulate audience participation (Grove and Fisk 1997; Lovelock 1996; Zeithaml and Bitner 1996). Indeed, other customers may have a more profound impact than service personnel on a customer's perception of the organization's service quality (Adelman, Ahuvia, and Goodwin 1994; Lehtinen and Lehtinen 1991).

However, other customers can also negatively affect the service experience. Research has shown that other customers may trigger a dissatisfactory service encounter (Bitner, Booms, and Tetreault 1990). For example, other customers may participate in disruptive behavior that influences a customer's perceptions of the service provider (Grove and Fisk 1997). In such situations, the lack of rapport between customers may contribute to the negative influence other customers can have on one's experience. Future research should explore strategies that firms might use to create a sense of rapport between customers. If rapport can be established or encouraged between customers in a service environment, we believe that the likelihood of other customers having a positive influence on one's service experience would increase and, similarly, that the likelihood of other customers having a negative influence on one's experience would decrease.

Rapport Implications for Technology-Driven Services

This study examined rapport in two service contexts with a high level of interpersonal contact. However, as more services are delivered via technology, thereby excluding human interaction, the threat to interpersonal rap-

port (as conceived in this study) is severe. Self-service technologies such as pay-at-the-pump gasoline, in-room hotel checkout, and home banking eliminate opportunities for customer-employee interactions and, thus, rapport building (Meuter and Bitner 1998). When considering the two rapport dimensions we examined, it would appear to be difficult for customers to have an enjoyable interaction with a service employee or feel there is a personal connection when there are no employees involved in the encounter. Perhaps in services delivered through technology, we must relax the notion of rapport being between humans. That is, might it be possible to have rapport between a customer and some technology interface (e.g., computer screen, touch-sensitive menu, keypad)? Indeed, in a recent study, Crook and Booth (1997) found rapport can be built in a non-face-to-face context: electronic mail.

Although service technology is growing at a rapid pace, these advancements are not always universally embraced. Dabholkar (1994) contends that the degree to which customers prefer a technological interface over a person-to-person encounter will depend on their technological self-efficacy and their need for human interaction. This implies that, although some customers will embrace technological advancements in service delivery, others may prefer more traditional face-to-face encounters. As such, although the nature of rapport may evolve to new forms to include technology-driven service delivery, the traditional notion of a connected, enjoyable interaction between people will continue to be important in some consumer segments.

CONCLUSION

The idea of the importance of developing strong interpersonal relationships between service employees and customers has been growing in the marketing literature. However, this guidance may be too broad to provide service managers with practical advice for managing service encounters. The study reported here examines two dimensions of rapport as a specific element of the customer-employee relationship. The results provide support for the benefits that may accrue to firms when their employees cultivate rapport with customers in service encounters.

NOTES

1. The customer respondents were 10 men and 11 women with a wide range of ages (29 to 78) from a variety of occupations (e.g., nurse, software engineer, salesman, homemaker) who purchase and use a variety of services. Additionally, 20 service employees were interviewed, including 10 male and 10 female employees with a wide range of ages (25 to 68), occupations (e.g., banking, medical services, automobile repair), and authority within their organizations (e.g., frontline employee, assis-

tant manager, company vice president). Employee respondents were selected from service providers in the same metropolitan area as the customer sample and included services frequently discussed by the customer respondents.

2. TLI refers to the Tucker-Lewis ρ (Tucker and Lewis 1973). CFI refers to the Comparative Fit Index of Bentler (1990). The χ^2 statistics are significant at the .01 level.

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