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Misbehaving customers: Understanding and managing customer injustice in service organizations

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Customers who treat frontline service employees unfairly are an expensive problem for companies. We know that other forms of mistreatment such as workplace incivility are costly for organizations, as Pearson and Porath show, and that in service workplaces customers can be viewed as a more common source of negative behaviors directed at employees compared with co-workers and supervisors. Frontline service employees can view customers as treating them unfairly if customers, for example, yell at them, or doubt their credibility. Understanding how customers can influence employee attitudes and behaviors is attracting increasing attention from managers and scholars. These encounters are especially problematic for managers, given the psychological and emotional toll unfair encounters have on the frontline workforce, increasing employee burnout, turnover intentions, and reducing performance. Clearly, misbehaving customers create a dilemma for managers who want the customer revenue, but, at the same time, jeopardize service quality by exposing employees to unfair treatment from customers.

Why do customers treat employees unfairly? Several factors contribute to this dynamic. First, organizational policies regarding customer service can inadvertently both empower and frustrate customers. A power imbalance can exist between customers and employees when managers adhere to “the customer is always right” policy, with companies exerting little effort to rein in customers. At the same time, employees, in their interactions with customers, are often required to follow organizational display rules that, as Dieffenorff and Richard demonstrate, guide employees about the emotional expressions they should exhibit to customers. These display rules can create a situation where an employee’s emotional responses fail to reflect what a customer

expects in an interaction, potentially contributing to unfair reactions from customers. Second, employees are frequent targets of customer frustration that can arise from customer perceptions of, or actual service failure. Third, some customers believe that their aggressive behavior can persuade employees to bend or violate company policies to fulfill customer requests. Taken together, these factors create a challenging environment for employees trying to deliver high quality customer service.

Organizational behavior scholars know a fair amount about the impact of interpersonal unfairness that originates within work organizations from co-workers and supervisors. We know much less, however, about how unfairness affects employees when it originates from organizational outsiders such as customers. Customer unfairness, in contrast to unfairness from within the organization, can be more problematic because employees are expected to deliver high-quality customer service at the very moment they are being berated and insulted by rude customers. Furthermore, customers are less likely in these short service encounters to have future interactions with the same employees, a potential deterrent to unfair customer behavior. Hence, the demands of customer unfairness on employees are especially high, and can be exacerbated by organizational policies and job design.

In this paper, we review research on customer injustice, also referred to as customer unfairness, to provide managers with insights about how to support the frontline service workforce. We define customer injustice as employee perceptions of unfair treatment from customers. We focus on understanding how employees react to unfair customers, and potential factors that can offset the negative consequences

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of these interactions for employees. In doing so, we address three central questions:

- What is customer injustice?
- What are the negative consequences of customer injustice for employees?
- What evidence-based strategies can managers implement to help support employees in dealing with difficult customers?

To better understand customer injustice, we, along with other researchers, have studied the frontline customer service workforce in hotels, call centers, restaurants and retail stores, analyzing both face-to-face and over-the-phone service interactions. For example, Rupp and her colleagues have undertaken lab studies simulating call centers, and studied bank tellers in Germany. Meanwhile, Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker studied how customers unfairly treated call center employees in Canada. Thus, much of what we know about customer injustice comes from frequent, short customer encounters.

WHAT IS CUSTOMER INJUSTICE?

Our definition of customer interactional injustice is based on Rupp and Spencer, who define customer interactional injustice as encompassing both *customer interpersonal injustice*, the degree to which customers treat employees with a lack of dignity and respect, and *customer informational injustice*, the degree to which customers express requests without clarity, candidness or truth. Both customer interpersonal and informational injustice complicate employee efforts to resolve customer requests.

Some examples of customer interactional injustice include verbal abuse (e.g., customers using condescending language; customers yelling at employees); unreasonable demands (e.g., customers making demands that the service worker could not fulfill, demands to violate company policy); and disrespectful acts (e.g., cutting employees off in mid-sentence, talking on a cell phone while interacting with an employee). Employees exposed to both customer interpersonal and informational injustice can experience negative emotions (e.g., anger) and engage in emotional labor.

Customer interactional injustice exists within a broader set of negative customer behaviors targeting employees, a sample of which we list below. We draw on Hershcovis to help distinguish between these negative customer behaviors. Customer interactional injustice differs from other negative customer behaviors based on whether or not the customer intends to harm the employee, the intensity of the customer behaviors, and the range of customer behaviors. Consistent across these various customer behaviors is that they have negative consequences for employees, and for organizations.

- Customer verbal aggression: verbal expressions of anger that violate social norms, and involve an intent to harm the target;
- Customer incivility: low intensity, interpersonal mistreatment where intent to harm the target is ambiguous;
- Customer dysfunctional behavior: customers engaging in counterproductive behaviors that deliberately disrupt service;

- Customer mistreatment: “low quality interpersonal treatment employees receive from their customers.”

Customer mistreatment differs from customer interactional injustice because employees can perceive mistreatment as fair or unfair. In some cases, employees sympathize with customers and agree that customers should be angry about an unnecessary charge or a service failure, whereas when, for example, customers are being interpersonally unfair, employees view the customer behavior as unjustified.

In some of our studies, we focus on customer interactional injustice. Customer interactional injustice is a particularly salient behavior to study in the service context because exposure to injustice can: (1) trigger strong reactions in unfairness targets, (2) invoke a “need” in the target to address injustice, (3) motivate the target to retaliate against the source of injustice, and (4) potentially activate biological and evolutionary mechanisms driving strong reactions to unfairness. In addition, other types of injustice (e.g., distributive, procedural, interpersonal and informational) originating from other sources (e.g., supervisors and coworkers) can occur in organizations. Considering these other types and sources of injustice alongside customer injustice enables us to untangle the effects of *customer* injustice from other types of unfairness that employees encounter at work.

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF CUSTOMER INJUSTICE?

An increasing body of research consistently demonstrates that customer injustice has detrimental consequences for customers, employees, and organizations.

Customer outcomes. Research undertaken by Skarlicki, van Jaarsveld, and Walker primarily examines the reactions of the service workforce to customer injustice that can directly impact customers. For example, we showed that employees who thought they were unfairly treated by customers retaliated by sabotaging customers. Customer service representatives who experienced interpersonal unfairness from customers were more likely to hang up on customers, disconnect a call on purpose, intentionally put customers on hold for long periods of time, and inform customers that they fixed something without actually doing so.

We also showed that whether employees decide to react to customer interpersonal unfairness by sabotaging customers depends on moral identity. Moral identity consists of internalization (the degree to which one’s moral traits are central to self concept) and symbolization (the degree to which reactions to moral issues are expressed publicly through an individual’s actions). The relationship between customer interpersonal unfairness and customer-directed sabotage was stronger for employees who reported higher levels of symbolization, and these moderation effects were weaker for employees who reported higher levels of internalization.

Employee performance. While customer-directed sabotage can undermine organizational goals to deliver high quality customer service, customer unfairness can also affect job performance. Although not the main focus of our study, we found that employees who engaged in customer-directed sabotage had lower performance ratings. Emerging evidence

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