



# The customer in the sociology of work: different ways of going beyond the management–worker dyad

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## Abstract

Customers play a key part in the working experience of a significant proportion of the working class in contemporary service work. This e-special issue features articles selected from previous issues of *Work, Employment and Society* which have made significant contributions to our understanding of the role of the customer within the social relations of interactive service work. This introduction argues that the literature in this area is implicitly comprised of three approaches: an approach which sees worker–customer relations merely as an additional dimension; an approach which sees the customer’s role as having knock-on implications for a limited number of dimensions of work organization; and an approach which sees implications of the customer across the whole of work organization. The contributions of the e-special articles are brought out by positioning them within these approaches. This introduction ends with a consideration of strengths and weaknesses in the three approaches.

## Keywords

customers, service work, sociology of work, worker–customer relations

This e-special issue features eight articles from previous issues of *Work, Employment and Society* which have significantly extended our knowledge regarding the role of the customer within the social relations of service work. Korczynski (2009) estimated that 28 per cent of the UK labour force are in jobs which are below the level of senior professional and in which the central job requirement involves interacting with a customer. It is clear, therefore, that the customer plays a key part in the working experience of a significant proportion of the working class in the contemporary economy.

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The presence of the customer as an important actor within the social relations of service work has meant that the sociology of work's traditional focus upon the management–worker dyad has required adjustment.<sup>1</sup> Exactly what kind of adjustment is required is a topic that has triggered implicit rather than explicit debate. This introduction aims to make this discussion explicit and to position the articles within this e-special issue within the terrain of this debate. This will help bring out the specific ways that the e-special articles have added to our knowledge.

It is possible to discern three broad positions that sociologists have taken in the way that they have considered the role of the customer. The first is the position of minimum adjustment. Here, scholars acknowledge that worker–customer relations need to be considered, but only in the sense that they are an ‘add-on’ to the main texture of the organization of work, still centred around the management–worker dyad. The essence of this approach was articulated as long ago as 1946 by Whyte, who noted that ‘when workers and customers meet ... that relationship adds a new dimension to the pattern of human relations in industry’ (1946: 123). The second position implicitly adopted has been that the presence of the customer leads to a reconfiguration of a limited number of aspects of work organization. Sociologists have highlighted that we need new lenses and concepts to see these specific aspects of service work organization properly. The most celebrated example of this position is the sociology of emotional labour, started by Hochschild's *The Managed Heart* (1983). Here, we are moving beyond the idea that the customer's presence is merely a new dimension to be added on to our existing understandings. Instead, the argument is that the presence of the customer requires a re-thinking of our existing understandings of specific elements of work organization – in this case, the labour process. The third position is that the role of customer has such far-reaching implications that we need to consider the impact of the role of customer across the whole organization of work (not merely a limited number of aspects of it, as in the second position). Perhaps the clearest theoretically oriented example of this approach is Korczynski's (2002) concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy as a way of understanding the organization of service work.

Table 1 summarizes these three forms of conceptual adjustment that sociologists have made to take account of the role of the customer. This table lays out key strands of the existing service work literature against these three perspectives, and positions the eight articles in this e-special issue against them. This introduction is structured to consider each of these positions in greater depth, and brings out the important contributions, in each area, made by the articles selected for this special issue. There is little question that *Work, Employment and Society* has been a central journal for advancing knowledge in this important area. It is noteworthy that in the August 2010 special issue of *Work and Occupations* on the customer–worker–management triangle, Lopez's editorial emphasized the key contributions that have been made by many articles published in this journal. Indeed, there are twice as many references to *Work, Employment and Society* articles in Lopez's editorial than to articles from any other single journal.

## **Worker–customer relations as an additional dimension**

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a number of important streams of research into aspects of worker–customer relations. Sociologists have made an important

**Table 1.** Three approaches to examining the role of the customer in interactive service work.

Conceptual adjustment to take account of customer	Key strands of existing literature	Contributions of e-special issue articles
Minimum position – worker–customer relations constitute simply an additional dimension in work relations	Whyte (1946); Warhurst et al. (2009); emphasis on the material labour process in service work	Dark side of customer actions to workers is highlighted (Boyd, 2002; Guerrier and Adib, 2000); wider theorizing of the customer highlights the positive as well as negative implications for workers from the presence of customer (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005)
Customer's presence has knock-on implications in a limited number of aspects of work organization	Hochschild (1983) and scholarship on emotional labour; debate on the customer as panopticon	Customers' roles in systems of control analysed (Fuller and Smith, 1991; Korczynski et al., 2000; Gamble, 2007)
Need to consider implications of the customer across the whole work organization	Korczynski's (2002) concept of the customer-oriented bureaucracy	Contextual textures of role of customers in overall work organization examined (Filby, 1992; Ungerson, 1999)

contribution by showing the 'dark side' of customers (Gabriel and Lang, 2006), and the implications that this dark side can have for the workers who have to serve customers. Within this stream of research, Boyd's (2002) article in this e-special issue played a pioneering role in examining customer abuse and violence towards service workers. She gives a survey-informed examination of the extent, impact and causes of customer violence to service workers in the travel sector. This was a pivotal study that helped generate further research in this important area (Bishop et al., 2005; Yagil, 2008). Another element in the dark side of worker–customer relations is the issue of sexual harassment of service workers by customers. This e-special issue includes Guerrier and Adib's (2000) study of sexual harassment of hotel workers by customers. The abstract of the article begins with a succinct statement of the need for research into the impact of the dark side of the customer:

While ... management's rhetoric encourages staff to provide the best possible service by satisfying customers' needs, front line staff find themselves bearing the brunt of any abusive and sexual behaviour from customers. (2000: 689)

Such research into customer sexual harassment of workers (e.g. Hughes and Tadic, 1998) helped considerably in raising this as an important policy issue. This led to the 2008 law in the UK aimed at protecting staff from harassment from customers, through the stipulation that it is the employer's responsibility to ensure that staff are not harassed by customers. As yet, there is little research to show whether this law has had any substantial impact in practice. Guerrier and Adib's nuanced qualitative research into how workers react to customer sexual harassment suggests that the practices of harassment may be so

embedded in ‘customer-oriented’ organizational cultures that the impact of the law may well be relatively slight. The lived cultures on the hotel front line were that management signalled to workers that it was their job to deal with abusive or harassing customers in a way that did not offend customers. In this context, many workers, mostly female workers, became adept at using humour to mediate the tensions with the harassing customer, feeling unable to directly confront the inequities and disrespect that they faced.

While there is real merit in the research into the dark side of worker–customer relations, a wiser, fuller sociology of work needs also to consider ways in which the ‘additional dimension’ of customer relations can bring significant social rewards and create areas of meaning for service workers. Bolton and Houlihan’s (2005) article in this e-special issue makes a notable contribution here. They explicitly position their analysis as moving away from a mono-focus on the dark side of the worker–customer relations in order ‘to bring humanity back into an analysis of customer service [work]’ (2005: 685). They argue that a proper sociological analysis of worker–customer relations needs to be based on an understanding that customers are multi-faceted social actors: customers can play roles of the mythical sovereign, the functional transactant or the moral agent. Their data offer a picture of rich meaning and humanity in service interactions where the customer adopts the role of the moral agent. Their framework offers a potentially important area for further research – particularly the analysis of the social structuring of service production and consumption that led customers into being more likely to adopt one role rather than another. Korczynski’s (2009) analysis of the factors that lead to customers appearing as alienating figures to service workers offers some relevant areas to explore here.

## **The impact of the customer on a limited number of dimensions of work organization**

Control and the labour process are the two dimensions of work organization that have been most frequently seen as being significantly affected by the presence and role of the customer. As noted earlier, conceptual analysis of the labour process of service workers has been extended to consider emotional labour. There is such a rich stream of research in this area that the confines of space make it well-nigh impossible to do justice to the debates and research in this area within an e-special issue. Instead, articles have been selected to show the way in which the analysis of control has been extended to consider the role of the customer (also see Thompson and van den Broek, 2010). While some scholars saw customer observation as a form of panopticon control (Fernie and Metcalf, 1997), there appears to be a broad consensus among sociologists of work that the customer as panopticon metaphor does little to help careful analysis of the social relations of control in service work (Bain and Taylor, 2000). Thankfully, inside the pages of *Work, Employment and Society*, the analyses offered have been richer and more nuanced. Fuller and Smith’s (1991) piece effectively began the research in this area with their analysis of how managers were increasingly using customer reports within the control systems applied to interactive service work. Their analysis was prescient in pointing to the way in which the role of customers within control systems can lead to a more complex form of authority than obtains within the management–worker

dyad, and in noting that ‘customer control may prompt various contradictions and resistances, ruptures in the organization of work that sociologists of work may want to investigate’ (1991: 12). The articles by Korczynski et al. (2000), and by Gamble (2007), included in this e-special issue, respond to this call. Korczynski et al. highlight the contradictions that are embedded in systems of control in call centres studied in Australia, Japan and the USA. They also extend our understanding of the role of customers in control by considering management’s use of *norms* of customer-orientation within control systems. Gamble’s study of multinational retail firms operating in China shows both customer information and norms relating to customer sovereignty playing important roles in the systems of control. His research and Korczynski et al.’s highlight how the battle between management and workers over the claim to be acting in ‘the name of the customer’ is an on-going one. As Gamble puts it, ‘as managers exercised discipline in the name of the customer, so workers sought benefits for themselves in the name of the customer’ (2007: 15).

### **The impact of the customer on the overall organization of work**

Whether the presence of the customer has significant impact across the whole of work organization is an issue of considerable debate. On the one hand, we have the argument presented by Pettinger (2006) and Warhurst et al. (2009) which emphasizes the underlying material labour undertaken by service workers (e.g. physically moving and processing goods and food). This implicitly suggests the continuing commonalities of service labour with manual labour. It also suggests that while customers may be part of the job, the implications of this are not wide-ranging. On the other hand, there have been some important studies which implicitly suggest that the role of the customer can pervade the entire organization of work. This e-special contains two articles which make important contributions to this debate. First is Filby’s (1992) classic study of betting shops. Although his study is written with a wider focus on the role of sexuality, in practice, the key element in the study is that of the sexuality played out between female cashiers and male betting customers. The study shows how customer expectations of sexuality can have key implications across a wide array of key dimensions of work organization. He notes how ‘such expectations ... impact ... on recruitment and authority, and peer relations in the organisation of work’ (1992: 22). To this list could be added skill, and the division of labour, for a key finding is that the skill levels enacted by female cashier staff were low because product (betting) knowledge was seen, by the male customers, as a foreign domain for the female staff, and one that got in the way of the playing out of submissive female sexuality. The important wider role of the customer for work organization is also implicitly present in Ungerson’s (1999) article which is included in this e-special issue. This is an analysis of the implications of the new form of welfare service organization, in which the client, in this case, the disabled person, is given monies by the state to directly hire a personal assistant to care for him/her. In this extreme case, with the increasingly distant role of the state as ‘employer’, the key role of the customer across the whole of the organization of work becomes hard to deny.

## Conclusion

The studies in this e-special issue clearly show that the role of the customer is an important one in the social relations of interactive service work. This importance has been brought out by researchers implicitly adopting one of three broad approaches. Having outlined the contours of the three broad approaches, it is appropriate to offer some judgements on the relative strengths of each approach. Here, it must be noted that I am not a disinterested party, as I have written extensively in support of the third position. Attempting to put my partisan position to one side, it is reasonable to make three points. First, it is important that researchers explicitly position themselves within one of these three approaches. Social science research progresses in a much stronger way when assumptions are made explicit and are thus opened up to clear consideration. Second, it would appear potentially dangerous to assume the first position – that worker–customer relations can be seen as a discrete add-on dimension – without a careful consideration of whether wider knock-on effects within work organization exist or not. For instance, if we take seriously the idea that service organizations, by being ‘customer-oriented’, may internalize customer prejudices within their structures (Korczynski, 2002), then the study of the dark side of the customer may not be adequately captured by considering just the dimension of worker–customer relations. Third, if there are significant dangers in a default adoption of the first position, the stage is well-set for an explicit and rich debate over which of the second and the third approaches is the stronger. Through such a debate, our understanding of the role of the customer within the social relations of service work will become much richer.

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## Note

- 1 Throughout this article, the term ‘customer’ is used to denote the service-recipient. It is recognized that the naming of the service-recipient is an important political issue. The term ‘customer’ is adopted here merely because the repeated use of the term, ‘service-recipient’, makes the text appear unnecessarily technical and unappealingly awkward to read.

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