THE DARKER SIDE OF PARADISE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY INTO FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE DEVIANTE BEHAVIOUR IN THE SERVICE ENCOUNTER

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ABSTRACT
This paper presents findings from an exploratory study into frontline employee deviance in the service encounter. The deviant behaviour varies along two dimensions: minor versus serious and whether the customer is targeted directly or indirectly. Four types of behaviours are emerging, two of which are similar to those identified in Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology and the other two aligned with workplace incivility and revenge. The attitude and behaviour of the customer is identified as having a major influence on the likelihood of the frontline employee engaging in deviant behaviour. The practical implications of these findings for service organizations is discussed as is the direction that future research will take in building a more comprehensive picture of deviant behaviour within the service context.

Key words: Interpersonal behaviour, emotions, conflict management

The setting was perfect. Candles flickering gently in the warm breeze, the wine chilled and the majestic mountain’s topped with a powder of the previous winter’s snow are mirrored in the still and tranquil lake. Customer: “This is not what I ordered. How stupid are you. I have asked
you three times and you still can’t get it bloody well right.” Employee: “If you don’t like it don’t talk to me. Don’t call me to your table again. In fact you can bloody well lump it.” The employee turns her back on the customer and marches back into the kitchen.

Paradise shattered! How would you have reacted to this customer if you were in this employee’s shoes? The reality is that the encounter between the frontline employee and customer can often be a negative and even distressing experience for both frontline employees and customers. Research on the service encounter has tended to focus on frontline employee behaviours that promote customer satisfaction (Browning, 2003; Schneider & Bowen, 1995; Bettencourt & Brown, 1997). Creating that ‘moment of magic’ for the customer is not only about frontline employees engaging in these more positive behaviours but also about understanding how and why employees can and do engage in deviant behaviour in the service encounter. The aim of this paper is to present the findings of an exploratory study which forms the first stage of a research programme into deviant behaviour in the service encounter. The objectives of this study were to identify the nature of frontline employee deviant behaviour in the service encounter and the factors that could influence employees to engage in such acts of deviance.

Employee deviance is a pervasive problem in the workplace and on the increase (Kidwell & Martin, 2005). The costs to an organization are not only in terms of revenue loss but loss of customer loyalty and a decrease in employee morale and commitment to the organization. Deviant behaviour in the service encounter can be particularly detrimental to a service organization as it is during this interaction with the frontline employee that customers form a positive or negative impression of the organization. More often or not this impression will influence not only customers’ satisfaction with the service but whether they will continue to use the services of the organization. Heskett, Sasser and Schlesinger (1997) maintain that the factor most often associated with high profits and rapid growth of service organizations is customer loyalty. The strongest relationships in the service profit chain are between employee loyalty and satisfaction and customer loyalty and satisfaction. Employees who feel supported and committed to their organization will focus on providing quality customer service. The service encounter is therefore at the heart of the service provided by an organization to the customer (Chapman & Lovell, 2006). This study explores whether the type of frontline employee deviance and the factors that influence such behaviour are shaped by the dynamics of this special form of human interaction. A discussion on the nature of the service encounter follows plus a review of current research on the types of workplace deviance and the antecedents of these acts of deviance.

The nature of the service encounter
Service consists of two components: the core service such as the jet boat ride or the meal at the restaurant and the relationship between the frontline employee and customer which is how the core service is delivered (Iacobucci & Ostrom, 1993). This relationship can range from a once off never to be repeated interaction between strangers (service encounter) to an ongoing relationship that it built over time and several interactions (service relationship) (Gutek, Cherry, Bhappu, Schneider & Woolf, 2000; Zabava Ford, 2001). The service encounter which is the focus of this study is by nature a special type of human interaction which is co created by employee and customer each playing defined roles (Czepiel, Solomon, Suprenant & Gutman, 1985). In fact frontline employees are engaging in a performance which requires them to control both their conscious communication and unconscious signs and cues (Doone & Ateljevic, 2005). This performance takes place in a space which Goffman (1959) refers to as front-of-house (FOH) while the back- of –house (BOH) is the space where employees can relax and take time out from the demands of performing (Boon, 2007). Frontline employees are paid to smile and create a welcoming and warm atmosphere irrespective of what they are really feeling, the pressure of the job or the way the customer is treating them. Hochschild (1983) refers to this ‘commercialisation’ of emotions as emotional labour where employees are required to regulate their emotions to provide a satisfying service experience for customers. Employees are required to express organizationally desired emotions according to an emotional script or set of ‘display rules’ (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993:89. For many employees, performing emotional labour may not be a problem. However for those frontline employees who are performing emotional labour over a long time, who have to deal with abusive customers, or who feel uncomfortable expressing the required emotions there could be negative consequences. These could include job dissatisfaction, emotional exhaustion, alienation, emotive dissonance and engaging in deviant behaviour (Mulki, Jaramillo & Locander, 2006; Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Hochschild, 1983). Employees can resort to withdrawal behaviours such as slowing down or performing their job in a mediocre way or even more aggressive behaviours such as inflicting physical discomfort on an abusive customer. Interventions to assist employees to cope with the negative consequences of emotional labour include selecting for individuals whose natural emotional and expressive style matches the requirements of the ‘display rules’ and training employees to manage their emotional responses when dealing with the customer. Organizations can provide employees with the resources and autonomy to respond appropriately to difficult and abusive customers and the opportunity to take a respite from the frontline to recharge their emotional batteries (Grandey & Brauburger, 2002; Noon & Blyton, 1997).

The nature of workplace deviance
While there is no doubt that deviance does take place in organizations, the question is what form does this deviance take? In order to provide clarity on the nature of workplace deviance, Robinson and Greenberg (1998) identify five primary steps to the workplace deviance process and several key dimensions within these steps. Firstly, there is the perpetrator who can come from either inside or outside the organization. Secondly, the act can be either intentional or unintentional and thirdly, there is a target for this behaviour who can be an insider or outsider. Fourthly, the action itself can be aimed directly at the target or indirectly through a third party, be active, (inflicting harm) or passive. It can also take a physical or verbal form. Lastly, there are the consequences of the behaviour. These may mean a violation of norms and causing harm to individuals or the organization. The study into workplace deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1995) and related fields of antisocial behaviour (Giacolone & Greenberg, 1997), counterproductive behaviour (Sackett, 2002), dysfunctional behaviour and organizational misbehaviour (Vardi and Weitz, 2003) commonly characterise deviant behaviour as being perpetrated by insiders (the employees) to intentionally harm or potentially cause harm to individuals within the organization or to the organization itself (the targets) violating organizational or social norms.

Robinson and Bennett (1995:556) define deviance in the workplace as ‘voluntary behaviour that violates significant norms and in so doing threatens the well-being of an organization, its members or both’. Voluntary behaviour would mean that the employee is not motivated to conform and/or is motivated to act against accepted organizational norms. Organisational norms are defined by basic moral standards, traditional community standards and formal and informal organizational polices and rules (Bennett & Robinson, 2000). Their focus is therefore on intentional acts of deviance and specifically on organizational rather than societal norms. They identified two types of workplace deviance. Organisational deviance (OD) which is non personal and is directed at harming the organization and Interpersonal deviance (ID) which is interpersonal and harmful to individuals. Behaviours within each of these types of deviance range from relatively minor acts to more severe and serious acts. The crossing of these two dimensions, namely the target of the deviant act (individual or organization) and the severity of the act (minor to serious) results in four quadrants of deviant behaviour – political deviance, personal aggression, production deviance and property deviance. Each of these types of deviance will be discussed as will related types of deviance identified through other approaches to the study of deviant behaviour.

Organizational acts of deviance can be relatively minor acts targeted at harming the organization (production deviance) and seriously harmful acts targeted at the organization (property deviance). Production deviance involves employees doing the bare minimum and includes employees calling
in sick, being late and letting co workers carry the work load. Bennett and Naumann (2005) describes this form of deviance in terms of employees withholding effort. They propose that it can take the form of shirking, job neglect, social loafing and free riding where both individual and organizational performance can be reduced. As a more severe form of organizational deviance, property deviance involves employees engaging in acts of sabotage, stealing company property, accepting kickbacks and disclosing confidential company information (Robinson & Bennett, 1997; Giacalone, Riordan and Rosenfeld (1997) define sabotage as employees intentionally damaging company property, reputation, product or service while Greenberg (1997) conceptualizes employee theft as stealing from an organization not co workers and ranging from petty theft to taking items of considerable value.

Interpersonal acts of deviance can also be minor (political deviance) or serious acts of deviance (personal aggression). Political deviance is defined as acts that reflect ‘engagement in social interaction that puts individuals at a personal or political disadvantage’ (Robinson & Bennett, 1995:566) and covers behaviours such as gossiping, spreading rumours and management showing favouritism towards specific employees. Personal aggression covers hostile behaviours such as sexual harassment, threats to physically harm co workers and publicly belittling subordinates. These behaviours are also considered forms of interpersonal mistreatment with a distinction being made between more general mistreatment such as bullying and sexual mistreatment such as sexual harassment (Lim and Cortina, 2005). Neuman and Baron (1997) conceptualize workplace aggression as efforts by individuals to intentionally harm others either psychologically or physically. They distinguish between affective aggression with the ultimate aim to harm the target and instrumental aggression which involves harming the target to achieve an outcome of value to the perpetrator.

A field of research that has emerged in the study of the more minor interpersonal types of deviance is workplace incivility defined by Anderson and Pearson (1999:457) as ‘low intensity behaviour with ambiguous intent to harm the target, in violation of workplace norms for mutual respect’. The behaviours include being rude and impolite to others and may or may not reflect an intent to harm. Anderson and Pearson (1999) proposed that incivility is an interactive event that can escalate or spiral through a process of exchange between parties into more severe forms of aggression.

The research discussed up to this point has focused on the negative effects of workplace deviance. There is a school of thought that deviance can also play a constructive role in organizations. Warren, 2003 proposes destructive deviance violates both globally held beliefs and values (hyernorms) and organizational standards (group norms) while constructive deviance violates
group norms not hypernorms. Galperin (2003:158) defines constructive deviance as ‘voluntary behaviour that violates significant organizational norms and is so doing contributes to the well – being of an organization, its members, or both’. He proposes that constructive deviance can reflect innovative and challenging behaviours that are directed at the organization and interpersonal behaviours targeted at individuals that may include not following the supervisor’s instructions or reporting theft by co workers. Constructive deviance aims at enhancing the well being of the organization even if it means violating organizational norms or damaging interpersonal relationships.

**Antecedents to workplace deviance**

An important question to raise if organizations are to better manage the growing occurrence of workplace deviance is why employees engage in such acts of deviance? Research focuses on two areas - the personal or individual factors and the organizational or work related factors that could influence workplace deviance. This section of the paper will discuss this research and conclude with a discussion of why employees may not necessarily engage in deviant behaviour despite some of the factors being present.

Personal factors include employees’ demographic characteristics such as gender and age, their personality traits and their reaction to frustration and perceived injustice. Martinko, Gundlach and Douglas (2002) suggest six personal factors that have been linked to deviant behaviour: gender, locus of control, attribution/explanation style, core self-evaluations, integrity and neuroticism. Males seem more likely to express overt aggression than females and individuals with more external locus of control are more likely to engage in deviant behaviours such as abusing clients. An attribution style where individuals attribute failures to external stable and intentional causes is related to workplace aggression as are core self concepts such as a low sense of self efficacy and esteem and high levels of neuroticism. A low level of integrity has also been linked to low productivity, stealing and violence. Examination of the Big Five personality factors have also linked low levels of Conscientiousness and Agreeableness to deviant behaviour (Salgado, 2002). Research by Berry, Ones & Sackett, (2007) found that Agreeableness correlated more strongly with Interpersonal Deviance while Conscientiousness correlated more strongly with Organizational Deviance. Robinson and Greenberg (1998:13) point out however that no clear picture emerges of a ‘deviant personality type’ and that personality traits seem to only account for a small percentage of the variance in predicting deviant behaviour. Grover (1997) suggests that it is fruitful to take an interactionist perspective on personality which explains behaviour resulting from an interaction of personality differences and work situation variables. He found that people with low levels of moral development were more likely to lie as a function of role conflict. It
seems also that personality traits can moderate the relationship between perceptions of situations and whether an employee behaves deviantly. Employees with high levels of Agreeableness do not engage in deviant acts despite negative perceptions of justice and organizational support (Penney, Spector & Fox, 2003; Colbert, Mount, Harter, Witt & Barrick, 2004).

There has however been a considerable amount of research that indicates that employees’ perception that they are being treated unfairly at work leads to them stealing (Greenberg, 1997, 2002), engaging in sabotage (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), lying (Grover, 1997) and revenge (Tripp & Bies, 1997). Significant associations have also been found between experienced frustration and withdrawal behaviour, aggression, hostility, theft and sabotage (Spector, 1997).

Organizational factors cover variables such as organizational culture, policies and systems, human resource management (HRM) practices and leadership style. Organizational culture influences behaviour at all levels in an organization and it is the actions of managers that shapes the norms of behaviour within the organization (Dunn and Schweitzer, 2005). Yagil (2001) found that frontline employees are more likely to force customers to comply if the service culture is weak. Where the passion for service is strong and actively reinforced by management, employees felt less inclined to engage in hard tactics with customers. An organizational culture with a weak passion for service lacks customer focus and is characterised by unsupportive management and company policies and procedures that make it difficult for customer contact staff to carry out their job (Schneider and Bowen, 1995). When employees perceive the selection practices, performance management procedures and pay systems as inequitable and unfair they are also more likely to not engage in service oriented behaviour and engage in withdrawal behaviours and steal or sabotage company property (Browning, 2003; Robinson & Greenberg, 1998; Kidwell & Martin, 2005). The design and conditions of the job and the context of the work group can also influence the behaviour of employees. Bennett and Naumann (2005) suggest that employees will withhold effort when the job is designed in such a way that employees rely on each other to complete tasks, are unable to identify the contribution they are making to the completion of the task and are not recognized for their individual job performance. Grover (2005) found that role conflict influences people to lie. Perceived autonomy and discretion to make decisions about their work has also been linked to employees defying organizational expectations for acceptable conduct and engaging in acts of interpersonal deviance (Bennett, 1998; Vardi and Weitz, 2003; Penney et al 2003). Constraints within the workplace such as insufficient job information, no assistance from supervisors and co workers and time pressures can also lead employees to engage in both interpersonal and organizational deviance (Penney et al, 2003). It is evident that both personal
and organizational factors can influence deviant behaviour and that deviant behaviour could be viewed as an outcome of a relationship between organizational and personal factors (Colbert et al 2004). This study will explore the specific factors that could influence deviant behaviour in the service encounter and which if any are reported by participants as having more influence than others.

In conclusion while we recognize that personal and organizational factors discussed up to this point can increase the likelihood that employees will act deviantly, it does not necessarily mean that all employees will do so. Robinson and Bennett (1997) stress that certain constraints or controls might prohibit the employee from exhibiting such behaviour. External constraints such as practical availability of an action, the likelihood of being caught and punished and peer sanctions might moderate the relationship between the ‘provocation’ and the behaviour (Robinson & Bennett, 1997:17) Internal constraints such as an employee’s level of organizational commitment, social and moral beliefs can also regulate behaviour.
METHODOLOGY

Sample
A total of thirty five service managers and frontline employees were interviewed from four
adventure tourism and two hospitality organizations. Forty three percent were aged between 21
and 30 years, 54% had been in their current jobs under 2 years while 49% had worked in the
service sector (hospitality, tourism or retail) for more than 6 years. (Refer to Table 1
below). Service managers were business owners, senior executives and team leaders while
frontline employees occupied a variety of jobs including receptionist, waiting staff, drivers, cable
operators, beach controllers and retail assistants.

Table 1: Employee and customer sample demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employee sample</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
<th>Customer sample</th>
<th>Number (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Industry sector: Tourism</td>
<td>24 (69%)</td>
<td>Gender: Male</td>
<td>9 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>11 (31%)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>9 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male</td>
<td>17 (49%)</td>
<td>Ethnicity: NZ European</td>
<td>13 (72%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18 (51%)</td>
<td>Maori</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity: NZ European</td>
<td>17 (48%)</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>Age: 16 - 20</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>16 (46%)</td>
<td>21- 30</td>
<td>6 (33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 21- 30</td>
<td>15 (43%)</td>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>4 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>11 (31%)</td>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>3 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-60</td>
<td>6 (17%)</td>
<td>60+</td>
<td>2 (11%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in current job: &lt;2yrs</td>
<td>19 (54%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 5 yrs</td>
<td>12 (34%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10yrs</td>
<td>1 (3%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10yrs</td>
<td>3 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in service sector: &lt;2yrs</td>
<td>8 (23%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – 5yrs</td>
<td>10 (29%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10yrs</td>
<td>7 (20%)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10yrs</td>
<td>10 (29%)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The service organizations were approached through an informal group of business
owners/directors and the local business association of a resort in the South Island of New
Zealand. The employee headcount of the participating organizations ranged from 10 –140
employees including both full time and seasonal staff. One of the hospitality organizations is a
unit of a national chain of hotels. The customer sample consisted of eighteen management
students and staff from the School of Business at a New Zealand university (Refer to Table 1).
plus customers who had completed customer feedback forms and sent emails 6 months to two
years prior to the research to the participating organizations.

Procedure
The service managers and frontline employees were asked in a semi-structured interview to
describe a situation where they observed a frontline employee behaving in a negative way
towards a customer. The participants were asked to report on others behaviour in order to reduce their sensitivity to reporting their own deviant behaviour (Scott, 2003). Tull and Hawkins (1984) believe that answers obtained through the third person technique often reveal more than is revealed by a response from a direct question. The limitation of this technique is that it may reveal more about the underlying attitudes of the respondent. Negative behaviour was described as behaviour that would not contribute to a customer’s perception of service quality. Robinson and Bennett (1995) suggest that a colloquial rather than a more theoretical definition is easier for the participants to understand. The situation needed to have taken place during the past three years in their current or a previous organization in the hospitality or tourism industries. It is easier to remember the details of more recent events and the details were important in this study. They were asked why they thought the employee behaved in this way. Was it related to organizational factors, the situation itself, the customer or the personal characteristics or circumstances of the frontline employee? The critical incident technique used to collect data in this research, is particularly useful where limited documentation exists of specific categories and also provides a rich source of information from the perspective of the participants (Bitner, Booms & Tetreault,1990:Bennett & Robinson,2003). Participants were also asked to describe what they considered as deviant behaviour in the service encounter and the reasons they believed front line employees engaged in such behaviour. At the beginning of the interview the employees were asked to provide details on their gender, age range, job title and the length of time they had worked both in current job and in the service sector.

Customers were asked to write a description of an incident of a frontline employee engaging in deviant behaviour in a service encounter in the hospitality or tourism industry and to provide reasons why they believed the frontline employee engage in such behaviour. They were also asked to list behaviours they would consider deviant in the service encounter and why they believed these behaviours occurred. They also provided demographic details related to their gender, age and nationality.

The unit of analysis was the specific deviant behaviour incident and the list of deviant behaviours and influencing factors provided by both the employees and customers. The deviant behaviours and factors influencing the behaviour were captured onto a spreadsheet by a research assistant and reviewed by the researcher against the actual transcripts and written scenarios to ensure all the behaviours and factors had been recorded. A grounded theory approach was taken by the researcher where the data was compared to theory in the area of workplace deviance leading to the initial proposal of the types of frontline employee deviant behaviour and factors that influence such behaviour in the service encounter.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide us with the beginning of an understanding as to the nature of frontline employee deviant behaviour within the service encounter and the factors that could influence the incidence of this type of behaviour.

The nature of deviant behaviour in the service encounter

The deviant behaviour engaged in by frontline employees seems to target the customer and not the organization. The impact of the deviant acts would most likely be felt by the organization through loss of the customer’s patronage and loyalty to the organization. This finding is not surprising considering the interpersonal nature of the service encounter, and confirms Jelenik’s (2005) contention that Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology of organizational deviance does not adequately account for the boundary-spanning nature of frontline employees’ work i.e. the interaction with the customer. He suggests that deviance should be viewed along three dimensions: organizational, interpersonal and frontline deviance. The first two directed at the organization and co-workers and frontline deviance at customers and friends. Diagram 1 below presents an adaptation of Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) typology taking into consideration the particular nature of the service encounter and related theories of workplace deviance that could explain the findings of this study. There seems to be two dimensions which describe deviant behaviour in the service encounter. The first dimension is similar to that proposed by Robinson and Bennett (1997) which is that deviant acts vary in terms of their seriousness and harmfulness to the target in this case the customer. The second dimension is how the behaviour is targeted at the customer. It seems that the deviant behaviours can either be targeted directly at the customer or indirectly at times through an intermediary or by attacking something of value to the customer (Neuman and Baron, 1997). The behaviours directed at the customer tended to be overt in nature while those which had a more indirect impact on the customer tended to be covert in nature.

As with Robinson and Bennett (1995) these dimensions define four quadrants. Quadrant one contains minor behaviours that indirectly target the customer i.e. avoid contact and interaction with the customer. They could be aligned with Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) label of production deviance but with a more specific focus on the withdrawal of customer service behaviours accomplished through the withholding of action (Bennett & Naumann, 2005). The covert nature of these behaviours makes it difficult for customers to manage the interchange. The second quadrant containing minor deviant behaviours targeted directly at the customer is more consistent with Anderson and Pearson’s (1999) workplace incivility than Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) broader label of political deviance.
Diagram 1: Frontline employee deviant behaviour in the service encounter. Adapted from Robinson and Bennett (1995).

1. **Withdrawal of service**¹
   - Providing no or minimal service to the customer
   - Providing only the minimum information
   - Ignoring the customer
   - Not acknowledging the customer

2. **Incivility**²
   - Rude, sarcastic and patronizing
   - Abrupt and snaps at the customer
   - Cuts conversation short, interrupts
   - Does not smile
   - No eye contact

3. **Revenge**³
   - Stealing from the customer
   - Acts of sabotage against the customer
   - Taking bribes from suppliers to make recommendations to customers
   - Labeling the customer
   - Swearing about the customer

4. **Personal aggression**
   - Belittling the customer
   - Verbally abusing the customer
   - Using confrontational body language
   - Lying to the customer
   - Physically assaulting the customer

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1. Acknowledgements to Tom Tripp for suggested this label
3. Tripp and Bies (1997)

While gossiping about and labeling and blaming customers was reported this did not take place within the service encounter but in the back office out of the earshot of the customer.

Rude and discourteous behaviours were mentioned frequently by employees and customers in this study. It would seem from the examples provided by participants in the study that these acts of incivility were more likely to be intentional rather than accidental. The third quadrant contains serious behaviours which indirectly target the customer and are covert in nature. They took place outside the service encounter but are the result of the frontline employee’s experience of the customer in the service encounter. While these behaviours could be considered a form of Property Deviance (Robinson & Bennett, 1997:9) they seem more consistent with revenge behaviours as employees seek to cause discomfort or to punish the difficult, argumentative and abusive customers who have harmed them (Aquino, Tripp and Bies, 2001). Labeling and swearing about customers in BOH could be considered a venting form of revenge response where employees let off steam to co workers about the customer (Tripp and Bies, 1997). Spitting in the customers’ food and setting the customer’s alarm clock to disturb them in the early hours of the morning.
could be considered an explosive act of revenge where the employee takes action against the customer (Tripp and Bies, 1997). The fourth quadrant contains behaviours in line with Robinson and Bennett’s (1995) label of personal aggression and are overt behaviours directed at the customer and can cause serious harm to the customer. These serious behaviours can be verbal (for example lying or swearing at the customer) or non-verbal (for example physically abusive or using confrontational body language). Sometimes the verbal or non-verbal behaviours could contradict each other. Several service managers reported observing frontline employees using aggressive and confrontational body language while still being verbally polite to customers. The deviant behaviour seemed to be seeping out despite the best efforts of the employee to provide good customer service or maybe that is a way to act deviantly without falling foul of management. The confrontational body language could also be indicative of the strain of engaging in emotional labour.

There was also evidence of frontline employees engaging in forms of constructive deviance. Frontline employees providing minimal service to a demanding customer in busy times might be their way of providing better service to all the customers and in fact is probably seen by other customers as expedient and providing them the opportunity of being served. The organization may also benefit in the respect that all customers are being attended to efficiently and timeously. Another example was a frontline employee being verbally and physically confrontational with a drunken customer who is abusing other customers and acting against company policy. This type of behavior might be perceived as deviant by the customer but as service orientated behaviour or constructive deviance in the eyes of the frontline employee, other customers and the organization itself.

Factors that influence deviant behaviour in the service encounter

Deviant behaviour in the service encounter seems to be influenced by a range of organizational and personal factors and in addition the attitude and behaviour of the customer. Diagram 2 provides examples of the themes emerging related to each of these factors. The main influencing factor identified by both service managers and frontline employees was the attitude and behaviour of customers. A superior attitude, being rude and argumentative, making unrealistic demands and being both physically and verbally aggressive all seem to spark off deviant behaviour from the frontline employees. While ‘blaming’ the customer may be explained through the individual’s tendency to attribute responsibility for their unacceptable behaviour to an external source, research by Rupp and Spencer (in press), Yagil (2001) and Menon and Dube (2004) also found that customer behaviour does impact on the effort of frontline employees and their ability to adhere to organizationally sanctioned display rules.
Diagram 2: Factors influencing frontline employee deviant behaviour in the service encounter.

**Organization factors**
- No explicit service values
- Deviant management behaviour
- Insufficient organizational and supervisory support
- Inflexible customer policies
- Ineffective HRM systems
- No authority to make decisions
- Difficult and mundane working conditions

**Customer factors**
- Nationality
- Condescending and superior attitude towards the frontline employee
- Uncooperative, rude, aggressive and abusive behaviour towards the frontline employee

**Personal factors**
- Nationality
- Limited experience in service work
- Personal circumstances

The findings of this study indicate that employees will reciprocate the customer’s behavior towards them. The more severe the customer’s behavior the more likely it seems that the frontline employee engages in more serious and harmful behavior. This reciprocal behavior could be explained through the phenomenon of emotional contagion where an individual’s emotional state is affected by the feedback from the other party in the interaction and over time the two parties can converge emotionally. Dallimore, Sparks and Butcher’s (2007) found that frontline employees were likely to imitate the anger of the customers by responding with more negative than positive non-verbal expressions. It could also be explained as possible acts of employee revenge. Frontline employees could be retaliating against customers for being abused. The abuse could be when customers are aggressive or even just inept. The situation itself also seems to exacerbate the situation resulting in a more severe reaction from the frontline employees’ reaction. If it is a very busy period, for example check out time at the hotel, or there had been a series of difficult customers before this encounter, then this particular customer might just be the last straw and the frontline employee might react severely.
Another factor about customers that seems to initiate frontline employee deviant behaviour is the customer’s nationality. It seems certain nationalities are considered difficult and abusive and several examples were provided in the interviews where customers were on the receiving end of unpleasant behaviour from employees just because they belong to a specific national group. Employees seem to be responding to a customer on the basis of their group membership. This stereotyping behaviour could lead to active discrimination against certain customers which could have implications for service organizations. Finally, in relation to the customer, employees in this study reported that there is a fine line between acting assertively and deviantly towards the customer. Often they would use assertive behaviour to deal with a difficult and abusive customer particularly when the customer was disturbing or annoying other customers or breaking safety rules. This again raises the issue of behaviour which is perceived as deviant by the customer may in fact be seen as constructive deviance by the employee and other parties such as other customers and management.

At the organizational level inadequate leadership reflected in a lack of explicit service values and managers engaging in deviant behaviour themselves seems to make the occurrence of deviant behaviour more likely. Shared organizational values play an important role in establishing the norms for acceptable behaviour within an organization as does the behaviour of the leaders themselves. Insufficient organizational support for employees and customers such as ineffective and inflexible operating procedures and policies and insufficient communication to customers, seem to increase both the employee’s and the customer’s frustration. Customers’ tend to respond to this frustration by being rude and aggressive towards the employee so ‘sparking’ deviant behaviour from the frontline employees. The cycle of deviance begins and often escalates particularly if the organizational systems and procedures do not allow the situation to be resolved expediently. Employees report that having the power to resolve situations on the spot without involving management allows them to behave in a more helpful way towards the customer even in the most difficult of situations. This supports Bennett’s (1998) proposal that providing employees with greater legitimate control over their work environment makes them less inclined to resort to undesirable strategies such as deviant behaviour to manage their situation and as.

Customers also highlighted the fact that ‘poor’ selection decisions and inadequate training play a role in frontline employees not being fully prepared to deal with difficult customer encounters. Both employees and customers highlighted the importance of the right personality in influencing service orientated behaviour. While no particular personality traits were highlighted as contributing to deviant behaviour, it was felt that some people just do not suit a service job. Dealing with difficult customers requires more than engaging in basic conflict handling skills.
requires employees to have the emotional competence to deal with the heightened emotions of the customer plus manage their own emotional response to the situation (Hartel, Gough and Hartel, 2006).

Personal factors that emerged as contributing to employees engaging in deviant behaviour were the nationality of the employee, limited experience in service work and the personal circumstances of the employee. Employees in this study reported that employees from some nationality groups could come across as abrupt and rude towards the customer and could be inflexible and unaccommodating to the unique needs of the customer. Limited experience in service work also seems to contribute to employees not having adequate strategies to deal with difficult customers. Training, mentoring and support from supervisors and co workers are interventions that could assist inexperienced frontline employees. Finally the personal circumstances of the employee was mentioned frequently by both the service managers and employees who were interviewed in this study. Difficult personal circumstances range from just too much partying the night before to relationship break ups and financial difficulties. This has implications for management in terms of being aware of these circumstances and responding accordingly to reduce the impact on the quality of service provided to the customer.

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study provides an emerging understanding of the types of frontline employee deviant behaviour towards to the customer. While there is a similarity in the types of deviance identified by this study to the typology proposed by Robinson and Bennett (1995) these acts of deviance are influenced by the nature of the service encounter itself. The behaviour is targeted only at the customer both directly and indirectly and the behaviours are primarily interpersonal in nature. Deviant behaviour can also take place outside the service encounter as a result of the frontline employee’s experience of the customer attitude and behaviour. The concepts of incivility (Anderson & Pearson, 1999) and revenge (Tripp & Bies, 1997) seem describe two of the types of deviant behaviour more accurately. Results of this study also indicate that frontline employee deviant behavior can also be constructive benefiting other customers and the organization itself.

In terms of why frontline employees may engage in deviant behaviour, the attitude and behaviour of the customer emerges as a key influencing factor with the behaviour of the employee often matching and reciprocating that of the customer. Closer examination of why employees engage in deviant acts towards the customer raises the question whether the deviant behaviour could be consider primarily as frontline employees taking revenge on the customers. A weak service culture, inadequate leadership bordering on deviance itself, ineffective HRM practices plus the
personal circumstances of the employee are factors that need to be considered when understanding why frontline employees can behave deviantly towards the customer. These findings have important implications for how service organizations manage the customer’s service experience and the working conditions of the frontline employee.

**Practical implications for service organizations**

Service organizations need to take a two pronged approach when managing frontline employees. Firstly, select the right type of person and provide training to deal with even the most negative of situations. While there is limited support for the concept of a deviant personality (Robinson & Greenberg, 1998), organizations can actively select for personality traits and attitudes that lead to service oriented rather than deviant behaviour (Browning, 2003). Training provided to frontline employees also needs to move beyond teaching basic customer service skills to developing employees to deal with very difficult and abusive customers and the emotions inherent in such interactions (Menon & Dube, 2004; Grandey & Bruburger, 2002). Secondly, engender a climate that upholds clear service values and appropriate ethical behaviour from both the leadership and employees. Managers need to provide both morale and resource support for employees. Yoon, Seo and Yoon (2004) found that organizational support and supervisory support contribute significantly to employees providing quality service. Organizations need to review policies and procedures that lead to the perception of injustice amongst employees (Berry et al., 2007) and that restrict employees from resolving customer’s problems expediently. Employees need to also be provided with the opportunity to vent the frustrations they are experiencing in the service encounter. This requires organizations to provide forums for employees to talk through their frustrations and management needs to hear their concerns and suggestions to deal with difficult customer situations. Organizations might also consider job rotation for staff in frequent contact with difficult customers and creative techniques such as using jokes and cartoons to keep employees in a positive state of mind (Dallimore et al., 2007). It is important for management to create and sustain a positive emotional climate at both the individual employee and workgroup level as this does impact on the job satisfaction of the employee (Hartel, Gough & Hartel, 2006).

Service organizations need to also manage customer expectations and behaviour more effectively. Frontline employees need to be supported with clear communication to customers on the policies, procedures and what customers can expect for their money. Coye (2004) maintains that organizations need to not only create a desire on the part of the customer for the service but also insure that the customer has clear expectations of what the organization can deliver.
Strategies for service delivery and recovery also need to focus on respecting the dignity and unique needs of customers in order to reduce the likelihood of customer deviant behaviour. Sparks (2003) proposes that customers’ satisfaction of service events is determined to a large extent by how much the customer feels valued and customer who feel devalued and mistreated are more likely to act in a deviant manner. Ultimately service organizations need to recognize that customers play a key role in determining the outcome of the service interaction. It is therefore important to provide clarity on the role they play in the delivery of the service and to educate and providing them with information so they can participate constructively in the service process. (Schneider & Bowen, 1995; Menon & Dube 2004)

Limitations and future research
The many limitations to this exploratory study suggest caution be taken when generalising the findings reported here. The small size of employee sample accessed from one geographic location and only two service industries does limit the ability to generalize the results across service industries. However having six different organizations across hospitality and tourism participate in the research did provide access to different organizational sites. While the sample was small it did represent a mix of gender, age, experience level and nationality. The range of experience in service work could have impacted on the respondents experience to difficult customer behaviour. However the findings reported were those that emerged consistently across the whole sample. Future research could interrogate more closely the impact of these demographic characteristics on the reported data. It would also have been preferable to have had a larger sample of customers which were more representative of the customer profile of the participating organizations. The customer feedback forms and emails obtained from the participating organizations did provide access to this type of customer. Secondly, requiring respondents to report on others behaviour and factors that they believed might influence that behaviour may have caused a bias in the results. In particular, there is the possibility of attribution errors occurring when respondents identified personal factors that influenced the frontline employee’s behaviour. This may account for the type of data captured for this factor in this study. However only the variables mentioned the most consistently across both employee and customer samples have been reported. Future research could use more objective measures for these personal factors that require frontline employees or others such as peers, customers or supervisors to report on the presence of these factors. Bennett and Robinson (2003) propose that other report has the advantage of reducing common method bias and eliciting more honest and accurate assessment of behaviour. Frontline employees could also be asked to choose to report directly on their own or others deviant behaviour in the interviews – a method used by Scott (2003) or to write descriptions of their own deviant
behaviour in a survey – a method used by Robinson and Bennett (1995). They found that respondents were forthcoming about their own deviant behaviour when answering anonymous surveys.

Despite these limitations the findings have potential significance for service organizations in their efforts to remain competitive by delivering ongoing quality service to their customers. A programme of future research is planned that will build on the themes identified in this study. Further interviews and written scenarios from both frontline employees and customers are planned from different locations and different industries such as retail and banking. A second phase of the research programme will involve a survey to explore specific relationships between the antecedent factors identified in the qualitative study and the types of deviant behaviour of frontline employees and variables that could reduce the impact of these factors on frontline behaviour. Of particular interest would be which customer behaviours could lead to various employee responses and the likelihood that variables such as a supportive service culture, the emotional competence of the employee, the emotional climate of the workgroup and the opportunity to vent their emotions would reduce the likelihood of employees engaging in deviant behaviour towards the customer.

This paper contributes to our understanding of deviant behaviour within the service context by providing insight into the nature of frontline employee deviance and the factors that could contribute to such behaviour. It also could be an important catalyst for more detailed and comprehensive research in an area that has as yet not been extensively studied in management and which has significant implications for service organizations.

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REFERENCES


