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## The Mystery Customer: Continuing Absences in the Sociology of Service Work

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### ABSTRACT

This article charts the historical and contemporary absences in the sociology of service work. Although studies of service work have now become the empirical mainstream in the sociology of work, there have been few attempts to conceptualize broad patterns of worker–customer relations in service work. This neglect is to be regretted because whether the customer is an alienating figure for service workers constitutes a key unasked question in contemporary sociology of work. The article highlights three factors that are likely to have a key influence on workers' sense of alienation vis-a-vis the customer. It highlights divergent literature in each of these areas and hence ends with a call for research on this topic.

### KEY WORDS

alienation / customer / service work

The focus in this article is on front line service work, defined as work undertaken where the central job task involves interaction with a service-recipient and where the job status is below that of professional.<sup>1</sup> The article lays out the historical neglect of service work and shows that from the 1990s, service work began to occupy the centre stage in empirical sociology of work studies. It is argued that there are still important gaps in our sociological understanding of service work. The two key unasked questions of the contemporary consumer society are: is the customer an alienating figure for service workers? and what are the key factors affecting the service workers' subjective levels of alienation vis-a-vis the customer? These questions are central to our understanding of the service economy.

## Sociology and Service Work: From Historical Neglect to Contemporary Centre Stage

Service workers currently constitute a significant section of the UK workforce and have done so for many years. Adopting Macdonald and Merrill's (2009) methodology, I calculated that 28 per cent of the UK workforce in 2008 can be categorized as occupying service jobs where the central job task involves interaction with a service-recipient and where the job status is below that of professional.<sup>2</sup> Given that there have been many shifts in the UK official classifications of occupations, it is inherently problematic to attempt to create a historical picture of the growth of service jobs. Indicative data can be taken from the USA, however. Hochschild (1983: 234) estimated that in 1970, 22 per cent of the USA labour force were in service jobs involving emotional labour. Macdonald and Merrill (2009) calculated that in 2000, 29 per cent of the USA labour force were front line service workers, or members of the 'emotional proletariat'.

This growth in the number of service jobs from a significant base is not mirrored in the way service work has been addressed by work sociologists. Service work was marginalized and neglected in sociology up until the 1990s. Recently, however, sociologists of work have increasingly made it their key focus. A number of authors have noted that service work has been historically neglected within the sociology of work, particularly relative to the historical emphasis on manufacturing work (Herzenberg et al., 1998). While this historical neglect of service work is now generally accepted, the precise depth of this neglect has not been adequately detailed. The pattern of the reversal of fortune in the focus on service work can be seen by examining the bibliographies of key sociology of work textbooks, and by examining the contents of sociology of work journals. Regarding the first, I took Fox (1971), Watson (1987) and Edgell (2007) as the key textbooks to focus on. For each book, I examined the bibliographic references and counted the number of referenced items which related explicitly in the title to a) manufacturing work of some kind; b) front line service work of some kind. In Fox (1971) there were nearly seven references to manufacturing for every one reference to service work (6.75:1). In Watson, the ratio was 2.7:1. Within Edgell (2007), references to studies of manufacturing work still predominated over references to studies of service work, but the ratio was 1.75:1. Regarding journal contents, I examined the contents of *Work, Employment and Society*, the only specialist sociology of work journal in the UK, over two time periods, from its inception in 1987 to 1991, and from 2004 to 2008. In 1987–1991, articles were more likely to focus on manual and manufacturing occupations than on service occupations by a ratio of 3.4:1. By sharp contrast, in 2004–2008, service occupations were much more likely to be studied than manual and manufacturing occupations. The ratio between articles on manufacturing jobs and service jobs had reversed to 0.4:1.<sup>3</sup> The change in emphasis from manufacturing towards service work can also be seen by the way in which the key debates in the journal of the two time periods changed. In 1987–1991, the key debates centred around the

nature of 'flexible specialization' in manufacturing, while in 2004–2008, the main debates centred around the organization of call centre work and nursing work.

How can we explain this pattern of neglect and sudden elevation to centre stage? Three key factors appear significant. The most important factor, arguably, is that up until the 1990s the main focus of interest for sociologists of work was the playing out of organized class conflict, particularly manifest in strikes and union membership. Sociologists of work, whether they wore that label explicitly or whether they called themselves industrial relations scholars, studied work primarily in terms of the factors informing and impeding the articulation of organized class conflict. In this, they were driven partly by the agenda of policy makers (e.g. Donovan Commission, 1968) and partly by a conflict-oriented theoretical approach. Notably, Ackers (2008) has argued convincingly that policy-oriented studies, often linked to Hugh Clegg, set the agenda for the sociology of work in the UK right through until the 1990s. Given that manual and manufacturing industries, e.g. mining and docks, tended to have higher levels of unionization and strikes than service industries, therefore, sociologists tended to focus on the former and neglect the latter. The second most important factor in sociologists' historical neglect of service work appears to have been the implicit marginalization of the work because it was predominantly done by women and because there appeared little theoretically relevant there to the male-dominated sociologist profession. Of course, the apparent lack of theoretical relevance was also informed by the marginalization of women's work. The recent increasing entry of women into the sociologist profession has served to work against this marginalization. Finally, there was pragmatism in the neglect of service work. In order to cover large numbers efficiently, research was undertaken in large workplaces, and manufacturing workplaces were much larger on average than service workplaces. Although manufacturing workplaces are still on average bigger than service workplaces, the rise of call centres as large centralized service workplaces has partially offset this issue.

### **Continuing Absences: The Mystery Customer**

While the rise in the number of sociological studies of service work is to be welcomed, there are still important gaps in our sociological knowledge of service work. Here, Korczynski and Macdonald (2009) have highlighted that while we may know much about individual service workplaces and occupations from detailed empirical studies, there have been notably few attempts to seek to generalize across service work, to theorize the nature of service work *per se*.

The most notable vacuum, however, comes in sociologists' failure to properly consider the nature of the worker–customer relationship. From Hochschild on, the service-recipient (customer from hereon), has featured consistently in walk-on parts in empirical studies of various service occupations. Similarly, some scholars have considered the relationship from the angle of conceptualiz-

ing the customer's role (e.g. Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Korczynski and Ott, 2004). But there has been no consideration of what the key abstract qualities of the worker–customer relationship might be across service work generally, and no systematic consideration of the important effects this relationship is likely to have on service workers' subjective experience of work. Here, two key sociological questions need to be addressed.

First, what is the nature of worker–customer relations in the contemporary consumer society? Specifically, the classical sociological question to address is whether worker–customer relations are alienated in nature.<sup>4</sup> If we are interested in the core sociology of work question of whether capitalism civilizes or dehumanizes workers (Hirschman, 1982), then the concept of alienation stands out as a crucial analytical tool. Although it was central to sociological enquiry for most of the history of sociology, in recent decades, alienation as a concept has fallen out of favour with sociologists of work largely because it has been tarnished by its association with two discredited approaches: firstly, with Blauner's (1964) thesis concerning process technology leading to a decline in (subjective) alienation; and secondly with attempts to develop a model of 'false consciousness' as a way to understand workers' apparent acceptance of the status quo in many cases. There are no necessary logical links between the concept and either the Blauner thesis or the model of false consciousness, however. Just because alienation has been used as a tool in flawed sociological analyses it does not mean that this should discredit the concept per se. The recent neglect of the concept of alienation is a misplaced one. Therefore, it is useful to consider how the classical approaches of Marx, Weber and Durkheim can frame an understanding of alienation *specifically* in worker–customer relations.

From a Marxist perspective where alienation is an objective, universal condition of the employment relationship within capitalism, the question requires little attention. Given the continued existence of capitalism, the worker's alienation vis-a-vis the customer can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of alienation of the worker from the products of his/her labour and alienation of the worker from other people, which were two of Marx's four aspects of alienation outlined in *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1964[1844]). The customer, as both an object of the service worker's labour, and as another person, stands in an objectively alienated relationship to the worker in consumer capitalism.

The Weberian approach to this question is mediated through Weber's use of the concept of an iron cage of rationality to express similar elements to Marx's concept of alienation (Giddens, 1973). The question, then, from a Weberian perspective becomes whether customer sovereignty has emerged as a new form of iron cage to bind workers within the consumer economy. Du Gay and Salaman's (1992) argument that 'the cult(ure) of the customer' has come to dominate contemporary organizational life is very close to a contemporary statement of this argument.

The Durkheimian approach to the question is mediated by his use of the concept of anomie over alienation. Just as Durkheim was more optimistic about the nature of the social relations of industrial capitalism, so a Durkheimian approach to contemporary worker–customer relations would lead to more opti-

mistic conclusions than a Marxist or Weberian approach. For Durkheim, organic solidarity emerged from workers seeing their positions of mutual interdependence within the division of labour. So, in contemporary service work, workers and customers can see their mutually interdependent roles. Indeed, when workers are asked to 'step into the customer's shoes' in customer service training sessions, this can be seen as promotion of a contemporary form of organic solidarity. However, Durkheim's optimism was not quite so straightforward. He envisaged the continuation of anomie so long as inequalities in society were not simply an outcome of the natural inequality of abilities within society. Given that inequalities in contemporary society continue to be clearly informed by far more than natural inequality of abilities, it follows, from a Durkheimian perspective, that anomie may still persist in worker–customer relations.

These classical approaches show different ways of framing the key question of whether the customer is experienced as an alienating figure in the service economy. Here, it is crucial to understand the *subjective* lived experience of service workers vis-a-vis the customer. Service workers' subjective sense of alienation vis-a-vis the customer stands as a key unexplored issue of contemporary sociology of work.<sup>5</sup> With nearly 30 per cent of the working population in service work positions below the level of professional, with a substantial majority of these service workers' working time spent interacting with customers, and with the customer assuming the role of a pivotal figure in contemporary society, the nature of worker–customer relations becomes a key element in the social relations of production, and in society more generally. There is a crucial empirical gap here, with major substantive implications for how we conceptualize the nature of the service economy, but there is also potentially something more. By explicitly bringing in the customer as a central, rather than a walk-on, figure in the sociology of work, we also open up possibilities for bridging existing divisions between the sociology of work and the sociology of consumption. For too long, the divisions among sociology specialist areas have reproduced the apparent societal dichotomy between work and consumption/leisure (Slater, 1998). Examining the mystery customer from the context of work represents a first and crucial step in breaking down these existing divisions. This step asks sociologists of work and sociologists of consumption to begin talking to each other rather than *past* each other.

This leads naturally to the second key question: What are the main factors affecting levels of subjective alienation in worker–customer relations?<sup>6</sup> Three dimensions of the worker–customer relationship stand out as important: the substantive emotional bearing of the worker to the customer; the relative power of the two parties; and the extent to which interactions between the same two parties are repeated. High levels of alienation vis-a-vis the customer are likely to be subjectively experienced by the worker when there is primarily an instrumental emotional bearing to the customer, when the customer is a dominant figure against the worker and when workers and customers interact in a series of one-off encounters. By contrast, low levels of alienation vis-a-vis the customer are likely to be experienced when there is primarily a caring, empathetic bearing to the customer, when the worker and the customer hold equal power,

**Table 1** Levels of workers' subjective sense of alienation vis-à-vis customers as affected by three dimensions of the worker-customer relationship

	<i>High alienation in worker-customer relations</i>	<i>Low alienation in worker-customer relations</i>
<b>Substantive emotional bearing of worker to customer</b>	Instrumental – driven by marketization	Caring – driven by socialization of caring roles
<b>Power relations</b>	High customer power – driven by discourse of customer as sovereign and imposition of tight feeling rules	Equal standing between worker and customer – driven by increasing informalization of social exchanges, and relaxation of feeling rules
<b>Degree of repetition of interactions between parties</b>	Encounters – driven by globalization	Relationships – driven by creation of post-Fordist niche markets

and when workers and customer interact in relationships featuring repeated meetings. While there are strong a priori grounds for making this argument (and these are expanded below), it is much more difficult to make a clear judgement on where to map contemporary service jobs against these dimensions. This is because, for each dimension, there are competing streams of literature which suggest divergent conclusions on where service jobs lie.

Table 1 summarizes this argument, and notes the main divergent streams of literature along each dimension. The literatures summarized in the middle column point to a globalized, marketized, consumerist capitalism creating the context for the worker to experience the customer primarily as an alienating figure. The literature summarized in the right-hand column, by contrast, points to a post-Fordist capitalism informed by principles of caring and informality creating the context for meaningful and non-alienated worker–customer relations. This debate is an important contemporary way to re-ask the key sociology of work question of how far capitalism civilizes or dehumanizes workers (Hirschman, 1982). Below I examine each dimension and the relevant literatures in detail.

### Substantive Emotional Bearing of Worker to Customer

The service worker's subjective sense of alienation in relation to customers will be heavily influenced by the substantive nature of the emotional bearing enacted by the worker to the customer. Here, we can think of a continuum from a purely instrumental approach to customers leading to a high subjective sense of alienation regarding the customer, to a caring approach to customers leading to low levels of alienation. This can be usefully illustrated with examples from extant research on relevant service occupations.



We can think of commission-driven sales work as a form of work where the enactment of an instrumental approach to customers tends to be promoted. Oakes' (1990) brilliant study of sales work highlights how a sales idiom, in part, underpins sales work such that the customer becomes less a person than a carrier of money which the sales worker wants to access:

The ultimate concern of sales is not the product or service offered for sale – it's about the prospect's money. The purpose of sales is to get as much of it as possible. The prospect is a means to this end, an instrument of the sales process ...the agent performs a radical reduction in which all the interests and values of life are translated into an idiom of commerce and reconceptualised in commercial terms. (p. 37)

Butterfield's (1985) chilling autobiographical account of working in Amway, a direct sales organization, shows instrumentality to the customer in practice in sales work and argues directly for its alienating effects:

All my experience is simplified into the goal of making it to the next pin level [i.e. next hierarchical level of selling accomplished] and all human contacts are reduced to the four categories of prospect, distributor, customer, and loser. The manipulation and trickery are justified by the belief that prospects will benefit ...In each case, friendship was limited to only what I could use to accomplish my goal ... In the end, 'prospecting' was more alienating than loneliness. (pp. 66–8)

By contrast, there are service occupations in which a caring approach to the customer is promoted and, here, workers' subjective sense of alienation vis-a-vis the customer will be lower. These are service jobs where there is often a deep level of humanity enacted by workers towards service-recipients (Bolton and Houlihan, 2007). From research, we can see many health care roles as ones where workers tend to display care and empathetic emotions towards service-recipients, implying low levels of alienation vis-a-vis the service-recipient:

A couple of years ago there was one lady in particular who was a ... stroke patient and when she finally walked out the door I knew it was through us busting our guts and her really trying and that was one of the happiest days of my life. (Nurse in Wicks, 1998: 84)

Molly [a care home worker] follows a loose script, first reading to these ['unresponsive'] rural women from a book about farm life, then sitting with each woman in turn, stroking or combing her hair and speaking to them individually about the passage she's just read. She asks them questions about their lives ... continuing to talk to them even if they don't show any sign that they've heard. The first patient doesn't stir from her apparent slumber leaving me wondering whether this exercise makes any sense. However, the second patient, Charlotte, surprises us both: Her stare slowly focuses and she nods. 'We had a garden' she whispers. Molly asks her if she canned her own vegetables. 'Oh yes' Charlotte says softly. 'Every year. We canned everything. Lots of work.' Her eyes are gleaming. Molly is thrilled. Later, as we're heading back to the activities office, she is nearly overcome with emotion. She wipes away a tear, see me notice, and reddens. 'Sorry about this ... It's just that today was such a huge breakthrough with Charlotte. She's never opened up to me like that before.' (Lopez, 2006: 134)

As illustrated here by the examples of sales and health care work, different service jobs have different emotional repertoires linked to them. It becomes crucial then to understand how far there is a tendency towards commission-driven sales jobs where instrumentalism is likely to be enacted or a tendency to caring jobs where empathy and care are more likely to be enacted by workers to customers. A crucial factor here may be whether the worker–customer encounters occur within a market-based relationship, where the service worker is employed by a firm aiming to create a profit, or whether they occur within the public provision of a service, where the worker is employed by a state or voluntary sector body. We could expect a greater tendency towards narrow instrumental emotional bearings in the former than in the latter. Beyond this important market-social provision distinction, there are literatures which suggest that wider tendencies to *both* instrumentalism and caring may be occurring.

On the one hand, there is a literature suggesting the growth of marketization in which greater emphasis is placed on pro-active accomplishment of sales by front line workers. In many economies, particularly the Anglo-Saxon ones of the USA, UK and Australia, marketization has been a key element affecting organizations and organizational life in the last two decades (Cappelli, 1999). It is no accident that Regini et al.'s (1999) international overview of changes in work organization in the financial services industry is entitled *From Tellers to Sellers*. This book shows that in bank after bank, in country after country, management has sought to introduce a 'sales culture', often identifying individual sales targets for staff, and sometimes making commission or bonus payments contingent on those targets being met. On the other hand, there is also a literature which notes the strong growth in caring jobs as arising from women's greater participation in the labour force, from the break-up of the co-located extended family and from the ageing of the population (Fine, 2007).

### Power Relations between the Parties

The power relations between worker and customer are likely to have a key impact on the workers' subjective sense of alienation vis-a-vis the customer. Where the customer has a much higher degree of power in the relationship, then the worker is more likely to experience a high level of alienation. Indeed, this was a key element in Hochschild's (1983) argument that emotional labour was a fundamentally alienating process. She argued that while emotion work in private life is non-alienating because it is undertaken in a terrain of equality, in the workplace, emotional labour is alienating because it occurs under the tyranny of the sovereign customer standing above the worker:

In private life we are free to question the going rate of exchange and free to negotiate a new one. If we are not satisfied, we can leave; many friendships and marriages die of inequality. But in the public world of work, it is often part of an individual's job to accept uneven exchanges, to be treated with disrespect or anger by a client ... Where the customer is king, unequal exchanges are normal. (pp. 85–6)

Of course, it is the employer who imposes the feeling rule that the customer stands so far above the worker. This may be explicit as in the flight industry case researched by Taylor and Tyler (2001):

They [managers] expect us to put up with a lot more from customers ... if someone is having a go ... you're just expected to put up with it ... It's seen as normal behaviour ... one supervisor said to me ... 'just because it's not your sense of humour, it doesn't mean you have to get offended by someone else's'. (p. 72)

Or the feeling rule may be more subtly constructed, as in the case of job centre workers expected to put up with everyday violent intimidation from customers (Bishop et al., 2005), through social processes such as the culpabilization of the victims of violence, which have their origins in an ideology of customer sovereignty.

Although Hochschild put forward the dominance of the sovereign customer over the worker as axiomatic, there are important studies of service work which suggest that workers can also hold important bases of power in the relationship with customers. Bolton and Houlihan (2005: 698), for instance, observe that:

It might be argued that within the service encounter the customer is in a more powerful position ... however, the voices in this article clearly show how customer sovereignty is, by and large, mythical.

Certainly, an important basis of worker power vis-a-vis the customer is suggested by Lipsky's (1983) thesis that the number and content of rules, policies and procedures create such ambiguity in welfare workers' jobs that the decisions taken by these workers in how to deal with customers mean that these front line workers are actually as much policy *makers* as policy enactors. Further, the view of the simple dominance of the customer in the worker-customer relationship is hard to square with the frequent admonition by managers to service workers that they should be proactive in taking control of the interaction with the customers. Where there is greater equality in the power between worker and customer then the worker's subjective sense of alienation is likely to be lower.

To allow for an understanding of the more complex nature of power relations between worker and customer we have to see that there are multiple bases of power in this relationship, in some of which there may be tendencies pushing the dominance of the customer, and in some of which there may be tendencies pulling the relationship towards a position of equality. An ideology of customer sovereignty, the tight imposition of feeling rules, and the use of customer feedback in control systems are key bases pushing towards customer dominance. Factors pushing greater power to the worker are high technical skills and discretion in decision-making, the bureaucratic necessity for workers to take control of interactions with customers in order to ensure service delivery efficiency, and the self-employment status of some workers. These factors can be thought of as tendencies within the key material and ideological bases of power. In addition, there are important social bases of power – specifically the relative status levels of the people occupying the worker and customer roles, in

terms of gender, ethnicity, age and habitus-markers of class. This is crucial to consider in service jobs where white males tend to make up only a small part of the workforce but may constitute a significant proportion of customers.

The task of plotting the nature of power relations between workers and customers in the contemporary economy is made problematic by the fact that there are streams of literature which suggest that the tendencies towards customer dominance and towards greater equality may *both* be occurring. On the one hand, we have authors pointing to the continuing rise of discourses of customer sovereignty at the societal level, as well as specifically among management (Du Gay, 1996); to the rise of mystery customers and the use of customers in control systems (Fuller and Smith, 1991); and to tight levels of feeling rules imposed by management on many emotional labourers, particularly in call centres. On the other hand, Elias' arguments about the increasing informalization of rules of social exchange at the societal level suggest a terrain of greater equality between worker and customer than suggested by an assumption of customer sovereignty (see Wouters, 1989). Similarly, there is a strand of research which highlights that, for service work, there are important limitations in how far tight feeling rules can actually be implemented in practice (Korczynski, 2002; Paules, 1991). Further, tight feeling rules are likely to be questioned by the rising importance of competition between service firms based on service quality, suggesting the competitive necessity for management to partially de-bureaucratize service work to allow for service workers to be able to deal with potential variability among customers (DuPuy, 1999).

### Degree of Repeated Interactions

Another key factor affecting the level of alienation in the worker–customer relationship is the degree to which interactions between two specific parties are one-off in nature (encounters) or are repeated (relationships). Gutek (1995) summarizes the encounter/relationship difference, pointing out that in encounters each service interaction is complete in itself, and front line workers are interchangeable in the eyes of both the customers and the workers. Relationships, by contrast, happen in the context of an ongoing series of transactions in which a particular front line worker and particular customer become known to each other and continued interaction is expected in the future. Gutek argues that organizing service interactions in terms of encounters leads to a dehumanization of the worker–customer relationship. Here, it is notable that in Taylor and Bain's (1999) oft-repeated description of the nature of call centre work, an implicit picture is drawn of alienation tied to the series of encounters with faceless customers:

Work consists of an uninterrupted and endless sequence of similar conversations with customers she never meets. She has to concentrate hard on what is being said, jump from page to page on a screen, making sure that the details entered are accurate, and that she has said the right things in a pleasant manner. The conversation ends and as she tidies up the loose ends there is another voice in her headset. (p. 115)

By contrast, interactions as relationships are more likely to allow for the development of social embeddedness in the relations between worker and customer.<sup>7</sup> A worker and a customer who have a socially embedded relationship will relate to each other as social beings beyond the narrow definition of roles prescribed by the labels 'worker' and 'customer'. The customer will be subjectively experienced by the worker less as a 'customer' with a narrow economic rationale, and more as a fully rounded person with a wide range of social roles. A socially embedded relationship will be one where subjective alienation levels are low. Consider, for instance, Studs Terkel's reporting of a scene in a store featuring socially embedded relationships. In his collection of conversations with American people in *American Dreams: Lost and Found* (1999), he describes Gaynell Begley:

She is behind the counter at the store. There is a steady stream of customers; small children, old people, husky young men off the road repair gang... She addresses each by name. There are constant soft, jocular exchanges. 'A transaction here is not entirely economic. It's a matter of friendship and socializin' for a minute. That's as important to me as getting that quarter.'

Again, there are literatures which suggest divergent trends here. The clearest trend identified in the literature which implies service work as a series of one-off encounters is that of the disembedding of social relations in time and space concomitant with technologically mediated globalization (Giddens, 1991). For service work, this is most obvious in the rise of call centre work in place of locale-based face-to-face service work. At its most extreme, this trend has led to the call centre work being relocated overseas, particularly to India. However, a different picture is suggested by the literature on the rise of niche markets linked to the development of post-Fordist economies. For service work, the rise of niche markets may suggest the re-embedding of service arenas around not just locales, but around shared cultures and sub-cultures. In such arenas, interactions between workers and customers are likely to be in the form of on-going relationships, strengthened by the potential for worker and customer to share the same culture or sub-culture. Crang's (1994) study of restaurant work is an illuminating example of this. In the niche restaurant in which he undertook ethnographic research, Crang found ongoing relationships between workers and customers centring on a view of oneself as 'fun-loving, informal and sociable':

Even as I sold them, it never felt to me as if I was being alienated from my emotions, my manners, or my leisure practise. I always felt that 'I' was still there: I genuinely liked people who tipped me; I genuinely wanted to help; I genuinely had fun. (p. 698)

Further, for enduring locale-based service work where research points to the importance of ongoing relationships between workers and customers, we need look no further than the traditional British pub (Seymour and Sandiford, 2005).

The above discussion has focussed on three factors that are likely to have a significant influence on the degree to which service workers experience customers as alienating figures. The way they are likely to be significant has been explicated within each sub-section. This is an exploratory discussion and can-

not seek to be definitive at this stage of our knowledge. An enquiring research agenda must consider further potentially important factors that may influence the degree to which the customer is experienced as alienating. For instance, issues of whether the encounter involves a direct cash exchange, whether the encounter is face to face or is technologically mediated, and the location of any face-to-face exchange (whether in the workers' or customers' homes, or in a workplace) may all be important factors. Further, the development of theorizing of body work (Wolkowitz, 2006) may come to be significant here. Although body work, involving the worker manipulating the body of the customer in some way, as in hairdressing and much care work, may not, per se, have clear implications for the experience of the customer as alienating, it may be that the development of analytical sub-categories of body work can allow a view of more clear-cut implications in this area.

## Conclusion

Up until the 1990s, service work suffered systematic neglect by sociologists of work. The precipitous decline in manufacturing employment and in strikes from the 1980s onwards led to a fundamental refocusing of their centre of attention by sociologists of work. Within this new focus on service work, however, little systematic has been articulated about the nature of the worker–customer relationship. The customer remains a mystery. Yet for around 30 per cent of the working population, customers constitute a central aspect of the social relations of production. The fundamental sociological question to consider is how far service workers experience customers as alienating figures. This is the key unasked question of the contemporary service economy. To adequately understand the service economy, we need systematic knowledge on whether workers think of service-recipients as 'people' to 'care for' (Williams, 1987: 106), or as 'bastards', 'pigs' and 'peasants' to lie to and manipulate (Mars and Nicod, 1984). This is an important way to enter the enduring debates over the civilizing and dehumanizing tendencies of manifestations of capitalism.

The logical second question which flows from this concerns the key factors that will affect levels of alienation in worker–customer relations. The article has argued that levels of subjective alienation vis-a-vis the customer are likely to be centrally influenced by the substantive emotional bearing of the worker, the nature of power relations between worker and customer, and the degree to which interactions are one-off or repeated. Research is needed into how far workers experience customers as alienating and into the factors that push levels of alienation in one direction or another.<sup>8</sup> The key overall question is whether the sovereign, disembedded consumer casts a long alienating shadow over the experience of service work, or whether post-Fordist niche markets and social provision allow the creation of more socially meaningful, embedded and egalitarian relations between worker and customer.

The focus of this article has been at a level of analysis aiming to seek generalizations across all of service work per se, because it is precisely at this level

of analysis that there are important gaps in our knowledge. By asking for a re-focus of research attention on this level of analysis, it is not meant to deny that there are many important research questions that require a different, more micro focus, on specific service workplaces or occupations.

Reconnecting worker–customer relations back into the worker–customer–management triangle, a further important question emerges: What is the nature of the relationship between service workers’ sense of the customer as alienating and the overall sense of alienation in their jobs? In service jobs in which a large amount of time is spent interacting with customers, it may be that workers’ relations with customers have a major impact on the overall levels of alienation experienced in employment. This means that where high levels of alienation are experienced vis-a-vis the customer, then high levels of overall alienation are likely also to be experienced by service workers. The key task for research then becomes attempting to unravel the implications of this for understanding class conflict in a service society. In many service jobs, workers may intuit the customer as the primary alienating figure within their jobs. This may reorder the ways in which class conflict around the labour process is played out. Specifically, spontaneous, individualized conflict may be played out against the customer as the party who is experienced as the prime alienating figure rather than against the more distant management figure who plays such a central role in structuring the worker–customer relationship. The Disney theme-park workers who fasten the belts of annoying customers too tightly on rides (Van Maanen, 1991), and the waitresses who refuse to serve customers who do not tip (Paules, 1991), then, may be exemplars of a wider reconfiguration of the meaning of labour process conflict. Such crucial issues can only be unearthed by a sociology that starts to take worker–customer relations seriously.

## Notes

- 1 Note that this approach divides the workforce primarily according to the presence and absence of the customer in the labour process. Thus it differs from previous attempts to examine the development of the service sector in the economy. That approach, focussing on the final product delivered at a sector level, was pioneered by the Clark-Fisher model outlining the increasing growth of the service, or tertiary, sector of the economy, as compared to the extractive and manufacturing sectors (see also Kuznets, 1966). That approach has been informed by a research question concerning the nature of macro sectors of the economy. More generally, sociologists who focus on the nature of the labour process in post-industrialism tend not to take on board the sectoral way of disaggregating (Block, 1990; Hage and Powers, 1992). Different research questions lead to different ways of disaggregating.
- 2 Based on the April–June, 2008, UK Labour Force Survey, 61 occupations were categorized as service work occupations at the level of four digit classification. Although there are some differences in occupational classifications between the UK and the USA, I followed the approach of Macdonald and Merrill (2009) as closely as possible. Further details are available from the author.



- 3 The stronger contemporary emphasis on service work over manufacturing in the journal compared to the textbook can be explained by the fact that textbooks, by their nature, have to cover more historical layers of sociological knowledge than do journal articles.
- 4 This question also suggests the importance of considering alienation from the customer's viewpoint. Problems of space prevent a detailed consideration of this issue here, however.
- 5 The concept of the subjective sense of alienation experienced by workers was first articulated by Seeman (1959). If sociologists of work are concerned with *verstehen*, with understanding the meaning and subjective experiences of workers, then the concept of alienation commends itself above such atheoretical concepts as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress, which are the staples of contemporary analyses of the subjective experiences of workers.
- 6 The focus in this article on alienation within worker–customer relations is meant to complement rather than substitute or marginalize the analysis of alienation of the worker in the employment relationship more generally. Indeed, the conclusion discussion re-embeds alienation vis-a-vis the customer into a consideration of overall alienation.
- 7 It is also possible that greater frequency of interaction can allow for the development of more personalized forms of dislike between worker and customer. It is notable, however, that research has not uncovered this as a significant process.
- 8 The discussion suggested complexities in the nature of power relations and in the forms of emotional bearing held by workers to customers. These complexities imply considerable research challenges to be faced in responding to this call for research. The problem of space prevents an adequate engagement with this issue here.

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## Marek Korczynski

Has, in his research, attempted to frame a sociological understanding of the nature of service work. He has put forward the concept of customer-oriented bureaucracy as a theoretical tool to analyse the essential contradictions underpinning the nature of service work. He has also argued that consumption in service work is framed by management's promotion of an enchanting myth of sovereignty to customers. All this has important implications for how workers self-organize, and he has argued that service workers tend to form informal, but dense and important, communities of coping. His 2002 book, *Human Resource Management in Service Work*, brings together many of these arguments. They are also reprised in the 2009 collection, *Service Work: Critical Perspectives*, which he edited with Cameron Macdonald. His other book in this area is the co-authored, *On the Front Line*, published in 1999 by Cornell University Press.

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