Service nepotism in cosmopolitan transient social spaces

David Sarpong

Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, UK

Mairi Maclean

School of Management, University of Bath, UK

This paper examines service nepotism, the practice of bestowing gifts or benefits on customers by frontline service staff based on a perceived shared socio-collective identity. Adopting a micro-sociological approach, it explores the practice as played out in multi-cultural transient service encounters. Given the dearth of existing research and low visibility of service nepotism operating 'under the radar', the paper assumes an exploratory qualitative research approach to capture service nepotism through 'microstoria': the sharing of stories by marginal actors, as recounted by West African migrants working in the UK. These stories reveal similarity-to-self cueing, non-verbal communication, and the availability of discretionary authority as three salient logics in play. In a highly differentiated multi-ethnic society, service nepotism challenges a very specific customer-oriented bureaucratic ethos that demands impartiality. It also provides contexts for relatively powerless employees to rebalance their relationship with their organizations, thereby addressing a more pressing dysfunction within the market and society more generally.

Corresponding author: David Sarpong, Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, E-mail: David2.Sarpong@uwe.ac.uk

Introduction

The emotional and aesthetic labour associated with service work requires frontline service employees to formally grant customers 'sovereignty' according to organizational service norms (Bolton, 2001; 2005; Warhurst et al., 2000; Warhurst and Nickson, 2007). More importantly, it requires employees to treat all customers equally during service encounters. However, it is not uncommon to observe frontline employees contravening such expectations through verbal aggression (Grandey et al., 2004; McColl-Kennedy et al., 2011), proffering unauthorized gifts and discounts to customer 'conspirators' (Brady et al., 2012), sabotaging customers' service experience (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002), or simply enhancing the service experience of a category of customers in ways that challenge taken-for-granted Western expectations of fairness (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). Such behaviour may be uncritically bracketed together as organizational misbehaviour (Ackroyd et al., 1999; Barnes et al., 2012; Richards, 2008), or seen more critically as challenging a very specific customer-oriented bureaucratic ethos that demands what is perhaps the illusion of impartiality rather than its reality (Korczynski, 2004).

Despite scholarly and practitioner interest in the antecedents and consequences of such behaviours, particularly in service encounters (Harris and Ogbonna, 2002; Murphy, 1993; Reynolds and Harris, 2006), extant research has tended to ignore a range of frontline service staff behaviours that potentially contravene organizational policies, or alternatively seek to rebalance the relationship between customers, employees and organizations in ways that generally serve to address broader inequality and dysfunction within the market and society-at-large. This suggest the challenge lies with the phenomenon itself which frequently has low visibility, operating 'under the radar', and hence is difficult to pin down and apprehend. One such behaviour beginning to attract scholarly attention is service nepotism, which Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) describe as:

> Favouritism an employee grants to a customer during a service encounter by virtue of his or her relationship with the customer based on shared socio-collective commonalities and without qualified substantiation related to either the customer's economic value or organizational practices (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012: 242).

Contrary to the general view that such practices may be socially standardized in forms that differ according to social location, Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) argue the practice is not uncommon among alienated or marginalized minorities as they struggle to organize their lives, identities and relationships in transient social spaces, where perceived negative affectivity, prejudice and discrimination still abound (Bloch, 2013; Holgate, 2005; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007).

This paper assumes the perspective that service nepotism as practiced among 'marginalized' groups deserves attention, since it not only challenges an organizational bureaucratic ethos that demands impartiality (Korczynski, 2004), but more importantly provides contexts for relatively powerless employees to rebalance their relationship with their organizations, in such a way as to address a more pressing dysfunction within both the market and society. Its central purpose is to advance understanding of the nature and form of the practice in service encounters. In this regard, this paper and the empirical study on which it is based make two contributions. First, it positions the enactment of service nepotism as a key component in establishing identity ties by exploiting social relations and emotional resources during service encounters. Second, it contributes to the service literature by developing a micro-sociological view of daily service interactions between members of minority groups to understand how service nepotism enacted in transient cosmopolitan social spaces is linked to perceived socio-collective identities, and furthermore how it calls into question the presumed impartiality of a very specific customer-oriented organizational bureaucracy (Korczynski, 2004). In doing so, the paper provides an opportunity to enhance understanding of service nepotism and its attendant implications for impartiality in cosmopolitan transient social spaces. In pursuing these objectives, it draws on the everyday experiences of West African migrants employed as frontline service workers in the South West of the UK.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, the salient literature on nepotism and misbehaviour in service encounters is briefly reviewed. The micro-sociology of everyday interaction is then drawn upon to 'unpack' service nepotism as enacted in day-to-day service encounters, after which the research methodology employed in this paper is explained. Next, the findings from the empirical inquiry are presented. The paper concludes with a discussion of its findings and the implications of the research for theory and practice.

Service nepotism in the marketplace

Employee deviance or dysfunctional behaviour has long been part-and-parcel of organizational life. The management literature has extended understanding of the wider socio-historical and intellectual contexts within which misbehaviour may thrive (Ackroyd et al., 1999; Barnes et al., 2012). Nepotism, the granting of jobs or opportunities to family members and friends irrespective of intrinsic merit, is one such misbehaviour viewed as counterproductive to successful management (Boyd, 2010; Stewart, 2003). The sociology of work drawing on anthropological discourse on kin selection (Hamilton, 1964; Jones, 2000) has a relatively long tradition in theorizing nepotism in organizing (Jaskiewsicz et al., 2013). The psychology literature reports subtle nepotism among underrepresented groups (Cialdini, 2009; Mehra et al., 1998), and suggests that atavistic resemblance and incidental similarities such as initials or birthdays can induce people to offer unsubstantiated help to others (Burger et al., 2004), implying that 'nepotism' may exceed conventional understanding of the term. Nevertheless, such forms of nepotism, which do not fit within the realms of family relationships, romances and long-term friendships, have received little attention in the management literature. In particular, scant attention has been paid to antecedents such as social identities and weak social ties as a precursor of nepotism among individuals sharing a perceived socio-collective identity in transient service encounters (Rosenbaum et al., 2012; 2013).

Recent advances within the consumer culture literature have redirected attention towards theorizing how employee-customer interaction might foster extra-familial relationships that precede the enactment of nepotistic actions (Cova and Cova, 2001; Maffesoli, 1996). Emphasizing the marketplace as a locus for the emergence of transient relationships among non-familial actors, this literature argues that the marketplace as a consumption setting provides a platform for participants to interact and construct narratives about their personal connections, identities and affiliations which facilitate preferential acts among themselves. Given the potential significance of such relationships and their possible outcomes in the marketplace, Rosenbaum and Walsh (2012) propose the term 'service nepotism' to describe how service providers enter into episodic relationships to bestow relational benefits on similar customers founded on a shared socio-collective identity. Note that

employees dispensing approved discounts or simply exhibiting friendliness to customers are not engaging in service nepotism. Rather, service nepotism concerns providing benefits for no reason beyond a perceived socio-collective identity with a customer. Frequently practiced among distinct, marginalized minority groups (Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012), service nepotism in transient social spaces may serve as a juncture where consumer 'tribes' engage in solidarity rituals (Goffman, 1967; Goulding et al., 2013; Heath, 2004), celebrate their distinct identity and forge ephemeral bonds (Wetherel et al., 2007; Murray, 2002). Unlike other types of dysfunctional behaviour like service 'sweethearting', where gifts are bestowed on customer conspirators (Brady et al., 2012) or philanthropic emotion work where frontline workers exceed service norms to express empathy or affinity with the service user (Bolton, 2001; 2005; O'Donohue and Turley, 2006), employees cue potential shared commonalities like ethnicity or sexual orientation before deciding to bestow benefits on customers. Relational benefits may include discounted prices, friendship and community, customized service knowledge, and gifts (Gwinner et al., 1998).

Outlining the theoretical thrust of service nepotism, these commentators (e.g. Sarpong and Maclean, 2015; Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007) argue that group markers rather than familial connections serve as antecedents to the forging of brief relationships between employees and customers during service encounters. Nevertheless, bestowing gifts on customers simply because they belong to a particular group undermines general Western ideals of impartiality as people deemed to be marginalized become themselves agents of marginalization, conferring benefits on customers without organizational approval. On the other hand the actions of such employees, themselves often on the receiving end of societal unfairness, may be interpreted as part of their efforts to rebalance their relationship with the organization and, beyond this, wider society. Hence, **we** argue that service nepotism highlights a more complicated relationship which exists between the organization, customers and employees themselves, which it helps to recalibrate.

The literature on service nepotism tells us little about the conditions under which it is likely to be more prevalent (Jaskiewsicz et al., 2013; Rosenbaum and Walsh, 2012). Little is known about its form and patterns because service nepotism has been largely ignored, rather than confronted by service scholars and organizations. In particular, what remains under-addressed is how the practice comes to be identified, labelled and judged within organizational discourse. The objective in this study is therefore to explore the logics and subtleties of service nepotism in practice. In this regard, the main research question driving this study is: how is service nepotism as played out in the multi-ethnic marketplace linked to shared collective identities? Since service nepotism is 'something' that people with shared 'background assumptions' routinely enact in service encounters, Garfinkel's (1964; 1967) studies of routine everyday activities and the micro-sociology of daily interaction as

developed by Goffman (1959; 1961; 1967) provide a useful theoretical centre of gravity to delineate the patterns of service encounters as enacted in cosmopolitan transient social spaces. The following section charts the micro-sociological approach to service nepotism taken in this paper, specifying its underlying logics that guide the empirical inquiry.

A micro-sociological approach to service nepotism

Pervasive interest in how apparently insignificant daily activities shape behaviour has led to the recent turn to theorizing taken-for-granted activities that give form to social life. Drawing on the 'concerted activities of daily life' (Garfinkel, 1964; 1967: vii) and everyday interaction rituals that comprise the 'small behaviours' enacted between individuals during 'co-presence' (Goffman, 1967: 1; 1971), the micro-sociological approach adopted here examines how marginalized groups in day-to-day interactions cue 'others', transmit taken-for-granted values and identities in transient social spaces, and make them relevant to their actions in service encounters. This emphasis on interactions is justified since service nepotism is neither a process nor 'something' that people who share a perceived socio-collective identity have. Rather, it is 'something' they do in ephemeral service encounters, serving as the juncture where their 'doings' and 'sayings' meet and interconnect in actual, real-life situations.

'Seen, but unnoticed' (Garfinkel, 1964: 226) in transient social spaces, the activities that come together to form the nexus of service nepotism include employees routinely offering unsolicited help, bestowing gifts and other benefits on similar-to-self customers without reference to their economic value or organizational practices. The temporal interrelatedness of these activities (Schatzki, 1996) serves as the context within which other activities underpinning service nepotism come into representation. Indeed, such activities are not to be understood as mere 'building blocks' of this phenomenon, or enacted for the sake of providing good customer service; rather, their enactment is aimed at pursuing egoistical goals, founded on the assumption that participants share a socio-collective identity, and dependent on actors' intelligence and aptitude to identify and respond to relational cues (Goffman, 1971).

Predominantly enacted by individuals with shared 'background assumptions' (Garfinkel, 1964) during service encounters, it is argued here that the phenomenon whether prevalent in society or limited to particular social groups (Manning, 1992) relies on embodied knowledge and linguistic and non-linguistic interactions that establish common understanding. This shared understanding provides the context in which arrangements exist for the transformation of the social in ways that create possibilities to allocate unwarranted resources. In this regard, service nepotism is flexible and relational in context (de Certeau, 1984), but also enacted sometimes with very little reflection, often profoundly independent of participants' conscious thought processes. Service nepotism is defined in

5

this study as relational actions and routine activities enacted in transient social spaces to enhance the experience of certain participants based on a real or imaginary socio-collective identity without reference to either the customer's intrinsic economic value or organizational practice.

The Garfinkelian approach adopted here differs from that assumed by others who have used his writing to examine the sociology of work. While Timming (2010) and Linstead (1997) draw on Garfinkel's 'background assumptions' as a lens through which to view inter-relations between employees across different cultural contexts, this paper goes beyond the elucidation of practice-structure linkages to examine 'socially standardized' everyday employee-consumer relationships and the activities that contribute to their stable features. Consequently, the reproduction of service nepotism in transient social spaces is theorized by emphasizing not only reflexive awareness (Goffman, 1961; 1967; Maclean et al., 2012a), but also internalized habits, dispositions (Bourdieu, 1990; Wacquant, 2004) and discernible coordinated patterns of actions enacted during employee-customer interactions within 'natural settings' (Goffman, 1967: 1).

Research methods

The research participants were West African migrants domiciled in the UK, the service encounters of West African migrant employees representing an interesting empirical research site through which to examine the incidence of service nepotism. This group of migrants was chosen because they constitute one of the growing, distinct and marginalized minority groups living in the urban, developed world that may experience unfair treatment in the marketplace (Wilson, 2007). Although ethnically diverse, West Africans share general similarities regarding dress, literature, cuisine, music, religious syncretism and colonial histories that are not shared extensively with groups outside their region. Leblanc (2002) argues that these cultural similarities are instrumental in constructing a 'sense of cohesion' among West Africans, especially in the context of migration, and hence are frequently reproduced in transnational networks. The study was conducted in Bristol, 16% (69,200) of whose population belongs to a black or minority ethnic group (Bristol City Council, 2013). Two popular African Charismatic churches in Greater Bristol were selected as sites to recruit research participants, on the grounds that these regularly attract large numbers of West African migrants to their congregations (with a combined average of 100 people attending church weekly). While incentives for participation were not offered, over 50 people expressed interest by completing a short questionnaire detailing their employment and availability for interview. The following purposeful sampling criteria were devised to select interviewees (Patton, 2002). First, participants needed to be first-generation West African migrants living and working in Greater Bristol. Second, participants had to be employed in a service-related industry. Third, their jobs must involve direct interaction with

customers on a daily basis. Fourth, participants needed to be in roles affording some degree of discretion where they could exercise judgement in altering a service provision without reference to superiors. In all, 21 individuals originating from three West African countries (Ghana, Nigeria and Sierra-Leone) who were gainfully employed in diverse service industries ranging from health care to retail met the sampling criteria. Only three research participants were employed in supervisory roles affording them a higher level of discretionary authority relative to the rest. Aged between 25 and 56, they reported an average of eight years living in the UK. Data for the study were collected through qualitative semi-structured interviews, conducted over six months in 2013.

Table1 Interviewee biographical sketch

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Occupation	Years domiciled in UK
1. Akora	Male	26	Auto mechanic	14
2. Alima	Female	27	Hairdresser	15
3. Bangoura	Male	34	Home Support worker	12
4. Bansa	Male	38	Lecturer	06
5. Bobby	Male	44	Retail Assistant	09
6. Cecilia	Female	42	Retail Assistant	08
7. Diana	Female	40	Retail Supervisor	12
8. Emeka	Male	42	Healthcare Assistant	07
9. Eno	Female	50	Registered Nurse	13
10. Epstein	Male	39	Healthcare Assistant	04
11. Gladys	Female	29	Catering Assistant	01
12. Harry	Male	34	Building Handyman	06
13. Joyce	Female	29	Hairdresser	09
14. Lordina	Female	35	Social Worker	15
15. Mavis	Female	56	Retail Assistant	16
16. Nina	Female	25	Fast-food Waitress	05
17. Tony	Male	38	Teacher	06
18. Said	Male	56	Retail Assistant	20
19. Santo	Male	38	Security Guard	09
20. Violet	Female	26	Call centre Assistant	02
21. Zara	Female	41	Receptionist	05

Given that service nepotism is conceptualized here as common in transient social spaces, a qualitative exploratory research approach was deemed appropriate to advance understanding of its enactment among ethnic employees in service encounters. The research was approached through the reflective lens of '*microstorias*', a narrative turn in contemporary social theory that privileges the use of

authentic contemporaneous storylines to illuminate social life (Boje, 2001; Imas et al., 2012; Maclean et al., 2016). Microstoria are readily available stories related by marginalized individuals located outside the frame of attention of traditional research programmes, whose views may be harnessed to open up and theorize social orders and relationships on multiple levels (Muirs, 1991). One of the researchers was born and raised in West Africa and therefore had embedded social ties with participants, such that there was an immediate connection. By virtue of this intimate association, the microstoria approach encouraged research participants to express their thoughts and feelings more freely without fear of reprisal. Thus, 'marginalized actors' found their voices, and spoke openly about perceptions of their lived experiences in the multi-ethnic marketplace (Hollinshead and Maclean, 2007: 1563). All interviews were digitally recorded, each lasting approximately two hours. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and interviewees accorded pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality. Participants were invited to relate their encounters with customers with whom they shared a common ethnicity within their situated practice. Interviewees were invited to explain why they were keen to provide (un)favourable experiences to those customers to glean their thoughts on aspects of their own behaviour during particular service encounters. This helped us to generate reflective data on their experiences by isolating the kind of relational actions that were meaningful to them (Alvesson, 2003).

The analysis of the interview data focused on what Moisander et al. (2009: 337) term the 'socially instituted discursive practices or cultural practices through which people produce meaning, make sense of their everyday life'. The narrative analyses seek to capture informants' lived experiences drawing exclusively on the everyday stories they tell (Frost, 2009; Hollinshead and Maclean, 2007). In this regard, stories extracted from the data which were considered worth pursuing further were those that exhibited spatial and temporal orders, but most importantly, whose narrative emplotments signified some (un)purposely enacted relational actions *in situ* with the potential to affect the service experience of like customers. Labov's (2006) sociolinguistic model, which allows closer examination of the causal sequence of narrated events, was used to explore and identify the temporal orders that comprised their stories.

The model as shown in Table 2 consists of an *abstract* providing an initial statement that sets the scene for reporting the narrative sequence. An *orientation* clause furnishing detailed information on the identities of participants denoted their initial actions and behaviour, the time and sometimes the place and context within which the story unfolded. The *complicating action* imparts information on specific actions taken by actors. *Evaluation* identifies those elements of the narrative that provide information concerning the effects of actors' decisions or actions. Finally, there is a *resolution* which

draws the narrative to a conclusion, the consequences of which could be further evaluated in terms of the overall feelings of the protagonists and cultural contingency of the narrative as a whole.

Table 2 Example of structural analysis of narrative based on Labov's (2006) model

---

Abstract: Not long ago, the shop was less busy, and I was about to go on my break.

Orientation: ….A heavily pregnant African girl came into to shop. I looked at the load she was carrying and realized she was going to struggle to get it home.

Complicating Action: I asked where she lived, and it wasn't very far away, so I gave her a lift with my car.

Evaluation: I don't think my manager would have been happy with me giving her a lift. I don't think it's allowed, but what can I do? She is my sister!

Resolution: It can be very nice helping a fellow African, isn't it? She was so thankful.

Before presenting our findings, it is helpful to reflect on the methodological limitations of the research. First, its reliance on semi-structured interviews meant it was not possible to demonstrate how service nepotism could be observed outside language (Eustace, 2012). Thus, there is a risk of not accounting for practices *in situ* that may influence the enactment of actions comprising service nepotism. Also, while microstoria provided an opportunity for 'the "voices of the field" to tell their own stories' (Czarniawska, 1998: 47 cited in Maclean et al., 2012b: 18), the potential impact of egocentric biases, memory loss or enhancement cannot be definitively ruled out as respondents narrated past events and 'preferred versions' of their life experiences (Kornberger and Brown, 2007: 500; Smith and Bolton, 1998). Finally, care should be taken in generalizing the findings as all research participants were first generation migrants who, by virtue of their previous socialization, could be markedly different from their second-generation offspring regarding their degree of acculturation and taken-for-granted views on employee (mis)behaviour.

Research findings

The analysis of the narratives uncovered patterns of actions and agentic dispositions on the part of interviewees that provide insight into the routine enactment of service nepotism in encounters involving actors with 'common cognitions' or shared 'background assumptions' (Timming, 2010). These manifested themselves in three durationally indivisible activities which together provided the salient logics that gave form to service nepotism in practice. The first is similarity-to-self cueing in the moment. The second is non-verbal communication and shared dispositions of like customers which

facilitate the (re)construction of meanings. The third is the leveraging of discretionary authority in devising projected courses of nepotistic actions. The fine details of the findings are presented below.

Similarity-to-self cueing in the moment

The emergence of service nepotism often begins with what may be referred to as *similarity-to-self cueing* in the course of service encounters. Similarity-to-self cueing refers to the recollection and recognition of physical markers and other shared identity commonalities. Representing a distinct ethnic group, most participants said customers who shared their socio-collective identity frequently caught their attention such that they cued them for potential commonality and shared markers even before interacting with them.

> Even before you start to serve an [African] customer, you start to think in your head, aha, where is this guy from? He should be a Nigerian or Ghanaian, you start looking for signs. [Gladys, Catering Assistant]

Such cueing enabled the employee to position the 'like customer' in a cultural context (Harré and Moghadden, 1999) and exceed the limits of her role to forge a transient relationship during the encounter. The group markers frequently cued may be real or imaginary, and included language, accent, physical marks and mode of dressing which often indicate common descent. The actual starting-point eludes systematization, but the immanent emergence of similarity-to-self cueing is often triggered by an (un)conscious glance or deliberate gaze just before or during the service encounter (Goffman, 1967). Here, Mavis described how ethnicity can be decoded, drawing on her own physical features as a reference point:

> Generally, most Africans are dark in complexion. However those from West Africa tend to be a lot darker and have flat noses, especially Ghanaians, Malians and those from Burkina Faso. [Mavis, Retail Assistant]

Similarly, another participant noted:

> Just by their accent, you can tell whether they are from Ghana, Nigeria, Liberia or any of the Francophones. If they are Sierra Leoneans we end up having a short conversation about what's going on in the country. [Bobby, Retail Assistant]

A prototype of such similarity cueing in the moment is 'gaydar', the gendered cues employed by homosexuals in highlighting and categorizing the sexual orientation of the 'other' (Lyons et al., 2014). The key insight is that a customer's general identity marker(s) may prompt an employee to recall a shared identity commonality. The intensity of the connection or shared attachment causes the employee temporarily to transition from her role as service provider to forge an instantaneous, albeit transient, friendship with the like customer.

> Sometimes, you can't easily tell from their names but immediately they open their mouths you know from their intonation, aha, he's from Ghana, Nigeria, etc. That is when you begin

to slow down, and start to pay detailed attention to the subtleties of their problems. [Lordina, Social Worker]

The final determination of similarity-to-self-cueing as evident in the narratives recounted by participants is arguably a function of a series of interlocking contextual actions, individual interpretation and contingent co-operation on the part of the customer which sets the stage for the formation of a transient employee-customer bond.

Non-verbal communication and disposition of 'like customers'

Rather than homophily alone setting the context for the enactment of nepotistic actions during encounters, non-verbal communications and the disposition of like customers as perceived by employees provided a foundation for the formation of an *ad hoc* friendship preceding the enactment of nepotistic actions. Akora elaborated this point:

> If you're an African and you talk to me nicely and you're polite, I will also look after you well. If you come in and you are rude, or I feel like you want to misbehave, I'll do your work for you quick and charge you the normal price. If you're nice, I'll definitely give you a discount and make sure you get the best of everything. [Akora, Auto Mechanic]

Here, Akora's interpretation of his experience with like customers may be seen to guide his social behaviour (Baumeister and Newman, 1994). The upshot was the cognitive cueing and interpretation of a customer's disposition as either pro-social (charming, courteous, respectful, polite) or antisocial (rude, arrogant, bullish, aggressive). Such dispositional ascriptions were driven by employees' personal moral qualities and life courses. Nevertheless, some participants conceded they sometimes had no rational basis for positioning a like customer during a service encounter; rather, their perception of a customer's disposition sometimes depended on their own mood (despondent or upbeat) or even situational stressors like fatigue (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). Violet elucidated how embodied attributes not only appeal to the senses of service employees (Warhurst and Nickson, 2007), but also reflect their identities:

> It's got to do with the attitude and the behaviour of the person. Africans are brought up to be polite to themselves and other people. But I've come into contact with some from my tribe who are very snobbish. If I'm already having a bad day, I will not even acknowledge them. I will keep a straight face, serve them quickly, and move on. I don't waste my time on bad-mannered Africans. [Violet, Receptionist]

Violet's behaviour could be categorized as the outcome of some kind of emotional labour (Bolton, 2005; Warhurst et al., 2000). The key insight here is that after forging a solidarity tie with the client due to a perceived shared socio-collective identity, Violet begins to attend to his or her disposition 'within the contingencies of the moment' (Emirbayer and Mische, 1998: 963). The customer's perceived body language coupled with the Violet's cognitive cues and mood precipitate her formed

opinion of the customer's disposition as pro-social or otherwise. Pro-social behaviours may quickly trigger the building of trust during service encounters (Sirdeshmuk et al., 2002). This proved to be the case when Bangoura encountered a homeless African he deemed 'calm and gentle':

> If an African comes here for assistance and shows me she is serious and humble, then I will personally make sure I sort them out. I recently dealt with one guy who doesn't speak English but was very calm and gentle. I personally went to the council more than seven times to deal with his housing problem. I seldom do that. You see, I even applied for furniture and completed his benefit forms for him. [Bangoura, Homeless Home Support Worker]

The extent of relational benefits an employee may bestow on a like customer is often dependent on the degree of discretionary authority vested in the employee. Thus, the narrative evidence suggests the availability of discretionary authority is what shapes the allocation of relational benefits on like customers. The next section explains how research participants frequently leveraged their discretionary authority to engage in service nepotism in their situated practices.

Leveraging discretionary authority

Discretion exercised by frontline service personnel can be described as the scope of options that empower employees to transgress established service boundaries to (re)configure potential service offerings into productive outcomes for the organization and its service users (Kleindienst and Hutzschenreuter, 2013). Best understood as spanning a continuum, discretion is a service dimension which eludes managerial control, upon which employees draw in performing their tasks, especially when faced with ambiguity during service delivery. Thus, the narrative evidence suggested that the degree of employee latitude afforded by management influences employees' propensity to engage in service nepotism, especially when the differential treatment of customers is not easily detectable, or when the penalties for nepotistic actions are considered low (Kelley et al., 1996). As Akora clarified:

> We make good money in selling new tyres. My colleagues will say to the poor African guy, "Man, because of where the puncture is, we can't fix it for you" (because they want to sell them a new tyre). When the work comes to me, and I realize the guy is a genuine customer, I'll say, "don't worry, I'll do it, it's fixable, I'll fix it for you so that you can save yourself some money". [Akora, Auto Mechanic]

Said likewise explained how he used his discretion to help a Nigerian couple redeem a valid but damaged discount voucher:

> Unfortunately, the man had kept the voucher in his wallet for such a long time so the barcode and digits had faded. The scanner could not pick up the barcode so they needed to pay the full amount. But I decided to help my 'brother'. I helped them redeem the value and treated it under goodwill. I even gave them an additional 10% off because there was a scratch at the bottom of one of the shoes. [Said, Retail Assistant]

While many of the stories recounted by participants reveal frequent leveraging of their discretionary authorities to enhance the service experience of like customers, the (mis)use of

discretion as a nepotistic tool was likewise found in participants' accounts, especially those working in organizations with few penalties for inappropriate behaviour (Kelley et al., 1996). The phenomenon resonates with the concept of 'domain shift' coined by Sennett (2009: 127) to describe 'how the principle guiding one's practice can be applied to quite another activity'. In organizing the findings, the term 'domain shift' is adopted to refer to the way in which discretion could be creatively leveraged to impair or even sabotage the service experience of like customers. Thus, while research participants frequently used their discretion to enhance like customer service experience, they sometimes 'switch[ed] their cognitive gears' (Louis and Sutton, 1991) to employ the same discretion to 'punish' like customers for what they perceived as petty transgressions.

> I've had a few African people coming in here who are simply arrogant. You expect them to be nice to you, but these people will try to slang and talk to you as if you are stupid. On a few occasions, I try to pay them back in a 'nice' way, especially when they come through the drive-through service. I will pack their food as normal, but make sure I don't put any ketchup or even tissues in the bag. Once, I decided to give one arrogant guy a lot of coins as change. He asked if I could give him a note, but I said "No!" I could see from his face he wasn't very happy, but I thought it was a nice way to make him know *I* was the one in charge of the till. [Nina, Waitress]

In a related extract, Diana recounted how she handles 'difficult' African customers who visit her clothes shop:

> Sometime, you get some of our 'people' carrying loads of similar items into the cubicles. They will spend so much time trying on each of them. You end up having a long queue of customers waiting to use the cubicles. I will simply go in there, talk to them in a voice that they will understand, and they will come out quickly. I'm being very honest with you, if those women, trying four, five, six clothes were whites, then, I don't think I would go in there to tell them to stop because they may not 'understand' me. The next thing they may say is that I'm being biased, and things could escalate. [Diana, 40, Retail Supervisor]

Note that the two participants here (mis)used their discretion to alter the service provision for like customers, simply because they (mis)judged their dispositions and behaviour as antisocial. In the first example, Nina's unauthorized actions allowed her to re-assert her superiority over the customer, who, she felt, had displayed little courtesy, surreptitiously challenging the customer's imputed sovereignty by re-inserting agency into the encounter (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Korczynski and Evans, 2013). Goffman (1967: 6) argues that 'participation in any contact with others is a commitment'. Despite her relatively lowly status as a waitress, Nina seized the opportunity to 'pay back' the customer for his perceived rudeness. In this way, she was able to 'save face' in the manner highlighted by Goffman, reasserting herself to rebalance the relationship between the two and thus even up the scores. Such nepotistic sabotage is likely to occur when the discretionary authority of service personnel is high, or when service organizations have few or no prescribed sanctions for such dysfunctional actions.

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper highlights the prevalence of service nepotism in transient social spaces which normally operates unobserved, 'seen, but unnoticed' (Garfinkel, 1964). At its core, the research suggests that the coming to presence of the situated activities and actions that constitute service nepotism in practice is fluid and does not follow predictable patterns of durationally divisible or successive acts. Rather, the logical connectedness between such actions can only be deciphered through a close analysis of praxiological instantiations with reference to the 'sayings' and 'doings' of actors played out during often fleeting service encounters. Goffman (1967: 2) suggests that such sequences of behaviour are worthy of study as 'a subject matter in their own right', such 'commonplace everyday activities' concealing more artfulness than is initially apparent (Garfinkel, 1967: 1). Enacted during service encounters, particularly those involving relatively powerless agents deemed to be of low status, employees enact service nepotism to challenge a very specific customer-oriented bureaucratic ethos that demands impartiality (Korczynski and Evans, 2013), or its illusion, and that such behaviour may reflect an attempt to rebalance their relationship with the organization, or in a more complicated variation between the organization, the customers and themselves. Such agents recognize one another in service encounters with customers sharing perceived common socio-collective identities; causing them to fine-tune their behaviour in ways that may involve preferential treatment or the reassertion of their own moral superiority. As Garfinkel (1967: 35) observes, the 'natural facts of life' are perceived by individuals as 'moral facts of life'. The reassertion of moral superiority by employees in a subordinate position over customers whose behaviour is found wanting arguably restores the 'natural' moral order for individuals who otherwise lack power in organizational life.

Contributing to the literature on service behaviours, particularly the nascent literature on service nepotism, this study shows how service nepotism emerges among distinct collective groups. More importantly, it extends understanding of employee-customer behaviours that may serve as an anticipatory invitation to engage in service nepotism in service encounters. As the first study to empirically explore service nepotism among West African migrants, a distinct but growing minority group living in the urban, developed world, the research shows how underrepresented, marginalized groups exploit their collective identities to subvert engineered equality and the legitimacy of a customer-oriented bureaucracy that requires impartiality. Given that little is known about this, and given the particularities of the subgroup involved, it is difficult to extrapolate from the findings. However, in a highly differentiated multi-ethnic society, the likelihood is that the rituals of routine service encounters both vary by sub-group and also share commonalities, suggesting that minor power struggles around status and recognition, played out in the moment and unseen, may be

14

common in routine service encounters (Bolton and Houlihan, 2005; Korczynski and Evans, 2013). The findings have implications for practice, revealing that efforts by organizations to enhance the service experience of all customers, on an equal basis, may be more complex than might at first appear. The existence of service nepotism implies there may be some unrecognized risk behind engineered service equality and organizational efforts to instruct specific employees to deal with particular customers because they ostensibly share a common identity (Noon, 2007). The latitude afforded to organizations in identifying and dealing with service nepotism in practice may be limited. Clearly, any attempt to develop operational guidelines that seek to curtail nepotistic actions of employees within their situated practice may be counterproductive, being open to exploitation in the manner of nepotistic sabotage explored above. If it is right to assume that service nepotism may be rife in everyday cosmopolitan transient spaces, then it remains an enduring challenge to customer-oriented bureaucracies and general egalitarian ideals. From this perspective, future research may examine the practice among other minority groups (e.g. ethnic Indians or Chinese) to ascertain whether additional insights can be generated. Such studies might examine whether levels of acculturation caused by time spent living in industrialized societies could potentially influence the propensity to engage in service nepotism.

In summary, this paper has provided nuanced insights into the salient logics that shape service nepotism in practice in culturally diverse organizational contexts. It suggests that the lower visibility of service nepotism in increasingly multi-ethnic marketplaces means its interactive effects and implications on service experience may surpass the control of service providers even as they seek to promote fairness in customers' service experiences. Clearly, the challenge posed by service nepotism to service scholars and practitioners is real and complex; a puzzle to contemplate in the increasingly differentiated cosmopolitan society of the present and future.

References

Alvesson M (2003) Beyond neopositivists, romantics and localists: a reflexive approach to interviews in organisational research. *Academy of Management Review* 28(1): 13–33.

Ackroyd S and Thompson P (1999) *Organizational Misbehaviour*. London: Sage.

Ashforth BE and Humphrey RH (1993) Emotional labour in service roles: the influence of identity. *Academy of Management Review* 18(1): 88-115.

Barnes A and Taksa L (2012) *Rethinking Misbehaviour and Resistance in Organizations*. Bingley, UK: Emerald.

Baumeister RF and Newman LS (1994) How stories make sense of personal experiences: motives that shape autobiographical narratives. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 20: 676-690.

Bloch A (2013) The labour market experiences and strategies of young undocumented migrants. *Work, Employment & Society* 27(2): 272–287.

Boje DM (2001) *Narrative Methods For Organizational and Communication Research*. London: Sage.

Bolton, SC (2001) Changing faces: nurses as emotional jugglers. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 23(1): 85-100.

Bolton, S (2005) *Emotion Management in the Workplace*. London: Palgrave.

Bolton S and Houlihan M (2005) The (mis)representation of customer service. *Work, Employment & Society*, 19(4): 685–703.

Bourdieu P (1990) *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

Boyd C (2010) The debate over the prohibition of romance in the workplace. *Journal of Business Ethics* 9(2): 325–338.

Brady MK Voorhees CM and Brusco MJ (2012) Service sweethearting: Its antecedents and customer consequences, *Journal of Marketing*, 19(20): 81-98.

Bristol City Council (2013) Some facts about Bristol's population. Available (consulted 04 July 2013) at: http://www.bristol.gov.uk/page/population-bristol.

Burger JM Messian N Patel S Del Prado A and Anderson C (2004) What a coincidence! The effects of incidental similarity on compliance. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30(1): 35-43.

Cialdini RB. (2009) *Influence: Science and Practice (5th ed.),* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Cova B and Cova V (2001) Tribal aspects of postmodern consumption research: the case of French in-line roller skaters. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 1(1): 67–76.

Czarniawski B (1998) *Narratives in Social Science Research*. London: Sage.

De Certeau M (1984) *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley CA: University of California Press.

DeWitt T and Brady MK (2003) Rethinking service recovery strategies: the effect of rapport on responses to service failure. *Journal of Service Research* 6(2): 193–207.

Emirbayer M and Mische A (1998) What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology* 103(4): 962-1023.

Eustace E (2012) Speaking allowed? Workplace regulation of regional dialect. *Work, Employment & Society* 26(2): 331-348.

Frost N (2009) "Do you know what I mean?": The use of a pluralistic narrative analysis approach in the interpretation of an interview. *Qualitative Research* 9(1): 9–29.

Garfinkel H (1964) Studies on the routines of everyday activities. *Social Problems* 11(3): 225-250.

Garfinkel H (1967) *Studies in ethnomedodology*. Cambridge: Polity.

Goffman E (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Goffman E (1961) *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*. Oxford: Bobbs-Merill.

Goffman E (1967) *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-face Behaviour*. New York: Pantheon.

Goffman E (1971) *Strategic interaction, conduct and communication*. Philadelphia: University of Philadephia Press.

Goulding C Shankar A and Canniford R (2013) Learning to be tribal: facilitating the formation of consumer tribes. *European Journal of Marketing* 47(5/6): 813–832.

Grandey AA Julies HK and Michael RF (2004) Verbal abuse from outsiders versus insiders: comparing frequency, impact on emotional exhaustion, and the role of emotional labour. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* 12: 63-79.

Gwinner K Gremler D and Bitner M (1998) Relational benefits in services industries: the customer's perspective. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* 26(2): 101–114.

Hambrick DC and Abrahamson E (1995) Assessing managerial discretion across industries: a multimethod approach. *Academy of Management Journal* 38(50): 1427–1466.

Hamilton W (1964) The genetic evolution of social behaviour, parts 1 &2. *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7: 1–51.

Harré R and Moghadden F (1999) *The Self and Others: Positioning Individuals and Groups in Personal, Political and Cultural Contexts*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

Harris LC Ogbonna E (2002) Exploring service sabotage: the antecedents, types, and consequences of frontline, deviant, anti-service behaviours. *Journal of Service Research* 4(3): 163-183.

Heath S (2004) Peer-shared households, quasi-communes and neo-tribes. *Current Sociology* 52(2): 161–179.

Holgate J (2005) Organizing migrant workers: a case study of working conditions and unionization in a London sandwich factory. *Work, Employment & Society* 19(3): 463–480.

Hollinshead G and Maclean M (2007) Transition and organizational dissonance in Serbia. *Human Relations*, 60(10): 1551–1574.

Imas JM Wilson N and Weston A (2012) Barefoot entrepreneurs. *Organization* 19(50): 563–585.

Jaskiewsicz P Uhlenbruck K Balkin DB and Reay T (2013) Is nepotism good or bad? Types of nepotism and implications for knowledge management. *Family Business Review* 26(2): 121–139.

Jones D (2000) Group nepotism and human kinship. *Current Anthropological Research* 41(50): 779–809.

Kelley SW (1993) Discretion and the service employee. *Journal of Retailing* 69(1): 104–126.

Kelley SW Longfellow T and Malehorn J (1996) Organizational determinants of service employees' exercise of routine, creative, and deviant discretion. *Journal of Retailing* 72(2): 135–157.

Kleindienst I and Hutzschenreuter T (2013) (How) does discretion change over time? A contribution toward a dynamic view of managerial discretion. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 29(3): 264–281.

Korczynski M (2004) Back-office service work: bureaucracy challenged? *Work, Employment & Society* 18(1): 97-114.

Korczynski M and Evans C (2013) Customer abuse to service workers: an analysis of its social creation within the service economy. *Work, Employment & Society* 25(5): 768–784.

Kornberger M and Brown AD (2007) 'Ethics' as a discursive resource for identity work. *Human Relations* 60(3): 497-518.

Labov W (1997) Some further steps in narrative analysis. *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 7: 395–415.

Labov W (2006) Narrative pre-construction. *Narrative Inquiry* 16(1): 37-45.

Leblanc MN (2002) Processes of identification among French-speaking West African migrants in Montreal. *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 34(3) 121-141.

Linstead S (1997) The social anthropology of management. *British Journal of Management* 8(1): 85-98.

Louis MR and Sutton RI (1991) Switching cognitive gears: from habits of mind to active thinking. *Human Relations* 44(1): 55–76.

Lyons M Lynch A Brewer G and Bruno D (2014) Detection of sexual orientation ('gaydar') by homosexual and heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 43: 345-352.

Maclean M Harvey C and Chia R (2012a) Reflexive practice and the making of elite business careers. *Management Learning* 43(4): 385–404.

Maclean M Harvey C and Chia R (2012b) Sensemaking, storytelling and the legitimization of elite business careers. *Human Relations* 65(1): 17–40.

Maclean M Harvey C and Clegg S R (2016) Conceptualizing historical organization studies. *Academy of Management Review*, forthcoming.

Manning P (1992) *Erving Goffman and Modern Sociology*. Cambridge, Polity.

McColl-Kennedy JR Beverley AS Duan TN (2011) Customer's angry voice: targeting employees or the organization? *Journal of Business Research* 64: 707-713.

Mehra A Kilduff M and Brass DJ (1998) At the margins: a distinctiveness approach to the social identity and social networks of underrepresented groups. *Academy of Management Journal* 41(4): 441−452.

Moisander J Valtonen A and Hirsto H (2009) Personal interviews in cultural consumer research− Post-structuralist challenges. *Consumption Markets and Culture* 12(4): 329−348.

Muir E (1991) Introduction: Observing Trifles. In: Muir E and Ruggiero G (eds.) *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, vii–xxviii.

Murphy KR (1993) *Honesty in the Workplace.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Murray JB (2002) The politics of consumption: A re-inquiry on Thompson and Haytko's (1997) 'Speaking of fashion'. *Journal of Consumer Research* 29(3): 427−440.

Noon M (2007) The fatal flaws of diversity and the business case for ethnic minorities. *Work, Employment & Society* 21(4): 773−784.

O'Donohoe S and Turley D (2006) Compassion at the counter: service providers and bereaved consumers. *Human Relations*, 59(10): 1429-1448.

Patton MQ (2002) *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reynolds KL and Harris LC (2006) Deviant customer behaviour: an exploration of frontline employee tactics. *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 14(2): 95-111.

Richards J (2008) The many approaches to organizational misbehaviour. *Employee Relations* 30(6): 653-678.

Rosenbaum MS and Montoya DY (2007) Am I welcome here? Exploring how ethnic consumers assess their place identity. *Journal of Business Research* 60(3): 206−214.

Rosenbaum MS Moraru I and Labrecque LI (2013) A multicultural service sensitivity exercise for marketing students. *Journal of Marketing Education* 35(1): 1−13.

Rosenbaum MS and Walsh G (2012) Service nepotism in the marketplace. *British Journal of Management* 23(2): 241−256.

Rosenbaum MS Walsh G and Wozniak R (2012) Family allowances as reverse retail discrimination. *International Journal of Retail and Distribution Management* 40(5): 342−359.

Sarpong D and Maclean M (2015) Service nepotism in the multi-ethnic marketplace: means and motivations. *International Marketing Review* 32 (2): 160−180.

Schatzki T (1996) *Social practices: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social*. Cambridge: CUP.

Sennett R (2009) *The Craftsman.* New York: Penguin.

Silvestro R Fitzgerald L and Johnston R (1992) Towards the classification of service processes. *International Journal of Service Industry Management* 3(3): 62−75.

Sirdeshmuk D Singh J and Sabol B (2002) Consumer trust, value, and loyalty in relational . *Journal of Marketing* 66(1): 15–27.

Smith AK and Bolton RN (1998) An experimental investigation of customer reactions to service failure and recovery encounters: paradox or peril? *Journal of Service Research* 1(1): 65–81.

Timming AR (2010) Dissonant cognitions in European works councils: a comparative ethnomethodological approach. *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 32(4) 521-535.

Walsh G (2009) Disadvantaged consumers' experiences of marketplace discrimination in customer services. *Journal of Marketing Management* 25(1/2): 143–169.

Wacquant L (2004) Following Pierre Bourdieu into the field. *Ethnography* 5(4): 387-414.

Warhurst C and Nickson D (2007) Employee experience of aesthetic labour in retail and hospitality. *Work, Employment & Society* 21(1): 103-120.

Warhurst C Nickson D Witz A Marie Cullen A (2000) Aesthetic labour in interactive service work: some case study evidence from the 'new' Glasgow. *Service Industries Journal* 20(3): 1-18.

Wetherell M Laflèche M and Berkeley R (2007) *Identity, Ethnic Diversity and Community Cohesion*. London: Sage.

Wilson RT (2007) Acculturation and discrimination in the global market place. *Journal of International Consumer Marketing* 20(1): 67–78.

David Sarpong is Senior Lecturer in Strategy and International Business at the Bristol Business School, University of the West of England. His research interests revolve around strategic management, organizational foresight, Heideggerian approach to 'practice', and microhistoria. His research has been published in journals such as *Technovation, Technological Forecasting and Social Change, International Marketing Review, Journal of Business Research, Scandinavian Journal of Management, European Management Journal and Futures*. He is the Co-Chair of the Strategy Special Interest Group (SIG), British Academy of Management.

Mairi Maclean is Professor of International Business in the School of Management, University of Bath. Her research interests include international business elites and elite power from a Bourdieusian perspective, entrepreneurial philanthropy and social inequalities, and historical organization studies. Her work has been funded by the ESRC, Leverhulme Trust and Reed Charity. Recent publications include contributions to the *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Studies*, *Organizational Research Methods* and *Human Relations*.