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Employee representations of customer harassment and its causes in self-reported tales – enlightening spotlights on dark matters?

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Abstract

In this paper we explore the potential qualities of the processing and sharing of instances of verbal and behavioural harassment experienced by employees in their interactions with customers. The data originates from a study of an internet forum where employees from customer-oriented job functions share their experiences of troublesome interactions with customers. 1859 tales and 2932 responses have been analysed using content analysis and descriptive statistics. The study focused on mapping 1) the character of the incidents experienced, 2) the employees' perceptions and representations of possible causes of the incidents, 3) the content and character of the solutions presented, 4) the emotions displayed, and 5) the received responses. In this article we limit our focus to the findings relating to the character of the experienced incidents and the representation of possible causes of the incidents and use these findings to discuss the potential qualities of the experience processing. We argue that the experience processing displays both positive and negative qualities. Among the positive qualities are; a potential for authenticity stemming from the events being self-experienced, continuity, equal access, reflexivity and diminishing of self-blame. Among the negative qualities are; some conditioning by gender socialization, traces of narrowmindedness and individualization founded in attribution biases, some problematic stereotyping and rare instances of self-blame.

Keywords

Workplace harassment, Customer rage, Employee experiences, Communities of coping

1 Introduction: Major themes and neglected themes in the study of harassment of employees originating from customer interactions

Research on workplace related aggression and verbal and behavioural harassment has received a fair bit of interest since the 1980s but has typically focused on supervisors or co-workers as the instigators (Ben-Zur & Yagil, 2005). However, confrontations with aggressive customers are also a part of many people's working life (Whyte, 1946; Korczynski, 2002). In fact, some make the claim that aggression from customers is more likely to occur than aggression from co-workers (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002). Hence, the verbal and behavioural harassment originating from customer interactions has also attracted the attention of some researchers. This research has typically been motivated by either an interest in understanding and preventing the causes of customers' mischief or an interest in the consequences for employee wellbeing; two themes which also constitute the major research themes normally associated with this heading.

Interest in understanding and preventing the causes of customers' mischief is often pursued under the labels *aberrant* or *dysfunctional customer behaviour*, *customer anger* and *customer rage*. Classifications of different kinds of dysfunctional customers and dysfunctional customer behaviours have been developed by several researchers. One example is Lovelock (1994, 2001) who presents a typology which distinguishes between six different types of dysfunctional customers: *thieves, rule breakers, belligerents, vandals, family feuders,* and *deadbeat*s. A second and third example is Zemke & Anderson (1990), who distinguishes between; *abusive egocentrics, insulting whiners, hysterical shouters, dictators,* and *free-loaders* and Bitner et al. (1994), who distinguishes between four types of dysfunctional customer behaviours; *drunkenness, verbal and physical abuse, breaking company policies,* and *lack of cooperation.*

Examples of works which focus on identifying the antecedents to customer rage include Fullerton & Punj (1993), whose model of aberrant consumer behaviour distinguishes between dispositional factors relating to the customer (*psychological factors, demographic factors and social/group influences*), contextual factors (*physical environment, the types of products/services offered, the level of deterrence, public image of the firm, etc.*) and interaction effects (Fullerton & Punj, 1993). Another example is Grove et al. (Grove et al., 1997), who points to factors like unjust treatment, unsatisfied needs, disrespect or a patronizing attitude from staff as factors which can trigger customer rage. Grove et al. also refer to work of Belk (Belk,1975) who points to dimensions such as physical surroundings, including space and temperature and social surroundings including other customers as well as antecedent stages and expectations. More sophisticated research which focuses on other and more dynamic factors can also be found. Devinatz, Leidner and Williams all point out that excessive constraints on worker discretion in service environments can contribute to customer abuse by fuelling stereotypes of workers as lacking intellectual abilities (Devinatz, 1999; Leidner, 1993; Williams, 2006).

Examples of works which focus on the consequences for employee wellbeing include Boyd who points to an increase in depression and stress (Boyd, 2002) and Bedi & Scat and Grandey et al. who point to emotional burnout and emotional dissonance as possible outcomes (Bedi & Schat, 2007; Grandey et al., 2004). A fourth example is Harris & Reynolds, who point to both 1) long-term psychological effects, including sustained feelings of degradation and stress disorders, 2) short-term emotional effects, including emotional impacts, in the form of short-term emotional distress, such as fear, stress, frustration, anger, hatred, 3) behavioural effects, including decreased motivation and morale, and finally 4) physical effects, including tangible damage to employees and/or their possessions (Harris & Reynolds, 2003).

Although the research in the causes of customers' mischief and the research in the consequences for employee wellbeing both can be said to be important research paths in their own rights, other and far less travelled research trails are possible. One such trail, which according to Korczynski is both important and somewhat neglected, is research which focuses on the employees´ experience processing and experience sharing of their encounters with verbal and behavioural harassment from customers (Korczynski, 2003). Examples of such research is Korczynski (2003) who focuses on how local communities of coping devoted to process the experiences of customer harassment can empower the employees, also in terms of resisting the behavioural prescriptions put forward by management. Another example is Baranik et al. (2017), who investigate how interpretations of problematic customer events and the sharing or not sharing of these experiences generate different behavioural outcomes for the individual worker (Baranik et al. 2017).

In this article we seek to contribute to the studies of the employees' experience processing and experience sharing of their encounters with verbal and behavioural harassment from customers by examining this as it takes place on an internet site. The study stands out from previous research in two ways: Firstly, the study focuses on the experience processing and experience sharing as this takes place in a naturalistic setting, and secondly, the study attempts to openly explore and assess the potential qualities of this processing and sharing. This exploration and attempted assessment is done by using data generated from content analysis (Holsti, 2008). In the analysis we focus on determining the content and main characteristics of the content shared, including among other things the character of the experienced incidents, the perception of the possible causes of the incidents, the solutions envisioned or acted out,

the emotions displayed as well as the received comments/responses, that is, the support and/or correctives and supplements offered. With regard to a determination of the potential qualities, we started from a view of the experience processing and sharing as potentially good in itself as a means to de-personalize and demystify experiences and also as a means to oppose the self-blame associated with adopting a managerial view of customers as almost unlimited in their entitlements. However, we also saw a risk that the experience processing and sharing would not fulfil these hopes as well as a risk of the experience processing and sharing becoming a medium for the exchange of problematic prejudices. Hence, the choice of the question mark in the subtitle "enlightening spotlights on dark matters?"

2   The current study

2.1   Case-unit

The data used originate from a study of an internet forum where employees from different customer-oriented job-functions share their experiences of troublesome interactions with customers. The internet forum named www.haderkunder.dk, which translates into (we)hatecustomers, was founded in 2003 and is still a viable site although user activity has declined over the years. The site was started by a former support worker named Ulrick Brinck who initially described the site as a counterpoise to a series of customer-initiated hate sites targeting selected companies (Brinck, 2020). However, the rationale of www.haderkunder.dk was not to defend specific companies, but rather to allow employees to share their version of troublesome events (Brinck, 2020). In its first few years of living approx. 400 - 600 tales saw the light of day each year. Since then the number declined to 150 – 300 and then to 50 – 100 tales. Today the yearly number is even lower. After more than 15 years of continued existence the site now holds approx. 5700 contributions all including one or more tales and an even greater number of comments/responses to the tales. In addition to the tales the site also contains a chat-forum, a forum for debate, which also includes a number of tales and a long list of the many tiring questions that customers can ask.

2.2   Data

1859 tales and 2932 comments/responses have been analysed using content analysis. The sample of 1859 tales represents approx. 32% of the tales present on the site. The tales are all taken from the year 2003 to 2010. 1713 tales (92.1%) are reported by persons who identify themselves as employees, 43 (2.3%) by persons who identify themselves as managers and 103 tales (5.5%) are reported by persons who identify themselves as customers. 406 tales (21.8%) are reported by persons who identify themselves as women, 206 (11.5%) by persons who identify themselves as men, and 1239 tales (66.7%) do not contain information which allow for a determination of the gender of the person. The sectors represented are: sales represented with 1502 tales (80.8%), service represented with 176 tales (9.5%), transportation represented with 72 tales (3.9%), support/call centres represented with 19 tales (1.0%), restaurants and catering represented with 82 tales (4.4%), and craftsmen represented with 8 tales (0.4%). Some tales, 276 (14.8%), are accompanied by one or more tales (from 1 additional tale up to as many as 19). 1469 tales (79%) concern events that have taken place recently, and 335 (18%) concern events located in the past. 55 tales (3.0%) are accompanied by other tales, some of which are current and some are from the past. 1801 tales (96.9%) concern events experienced by the storyteller himself/herself, 51 tales (2.7%) concern events experienced or witnessed by another person than the storyteller himself/herself, and 7 tales (0.4%) are accompanied by other tales, some of which concern events experienced by the storyteller him/herself and some tales concern events experienced by another person than the storyteller him/herself.

2.3   Procedures

Initially a series of variables aiming at classifying the incidents reported in the tales, the perceived causes of the incidents, the solutions envisioned or acted out, the emotions displayed, and the support and/or correctives and supplements offered in the responses received were developed. Some variables and codes were developed without immersion into the tales (e.g. the type of explanation, which could include codes including or excluding dispositional, situational and interactional factors) whereas others were developed after such immersions. After compiling the variables in a code-scheme, a more systematic pilot study which tested the developed code categories was conducted. A revised version was then introduced to coders, who were made familiar with the code scheme through a code manual and a series of workshops in which coders were trained and received feedback of the scorings they had made between the workshops. During these workshops tales which scored in the category *miscellaneous* were examined for patterns

and new codes were sometimes developed in prolongation of this work. A completed version of a code scheme was finally made and applied on the total data material.

2.4   Measures

The study ended up focusing on mapping and exploring five major themes 1) *the character of the experienced incidents*, 2) *the employees' perception and representation of possible causes of the incident,* 3) *the content and character of the solutions envisioned or acted out*, 4) *the emotions displayed*, and 5) *received comments/responses; the support and/or correctives and supplements offered*. The first theme was chosen in order to determine the character of the experienced incidents, including among other things the type of incident and whether the incident was self-experienced. The second theme was chosen in order to determine the perception and representation of possible causes of the incident, including among other things whether dispositional, interactional or structural explanations were given and what specific dispositional, interactional or structural factors were mentioned. The third theme was chosen in order to determine the solutions envisioned or acted out, including among other things whether these were fictional or factual, compliant or confrontational, etc. and what the outcomes of these solutions were. The fourth theme was chosen in order to determine which negative emotions were displayed by the employee in the situations and whether these emotions were emotions associated with a superior relation to the customer: e.g. anger or pity or an inferior relation to the customer: e.g. fear or shame. The fifth theme was chosen in order to determine the nature of the received comments/responses, including among other things whether the response was supportive or dismissive and what correctives and supplements were offered with regard to the perception of causes or choice of solution. As mentioned earlier, in this article we limit our focus to the findings relating to the character of the experienced incidents and the representation of possible causes of the incidents and use these findings to discuss the potential qualities of the experience processing. A minor selection of the variables used to classify 1) *the character of the experienced incidents* and 2) *the employees' perception and representation of possible causes of the incidents* are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1: Selected variables relating to experienced incidents and perception of possible causes of the incidents

Types of incidents reported

Variable: Type of incident reported in tale – Codes: 1. Problematic customer behaviour involving the employee, 2. Observed problematic customer behaviour not-involving the employee, 3. Problematic behaviour conducted by other actors than customers, 4. Stories not involving problematic behaviour/stories of joy, 5. Stories of personal off days at work, 6. Confessions of bad behaviour in role as customer, 7. Stories containing incidents of funny customer behaviour, 8. Miscellaneous

Variable: Subtype of problematic customer behaviour involving the employee – Codes: 1. Customer commits fraud or theft, 2. Customer commits vandalism, 3. Customer commits unprovoked or non-transaction-related harassment, 4. Costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction, 5. Customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy, 6. Mysterious or deviant customer behaviour, 7. Unkempt or scruffy customers, 8. Miscellaneous.

Variable: Subtype of costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction – Codes: 1. Customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits, 2. Customer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service, 3. Customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error, 4. Customer makes an error, 5. Customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason.

Variable: Behaviour components entailed in costumer displays demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction – Codes: 1. Sexual harassment, 2. Physical violence, 3. Actual threats, 4. Verbal assault, 5. Apology, 6. Racism, 7. Miscellaneous.

Types of explanations

Variable: Explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Not relevant for tale, 2. No attempt of explanation takes place, 3. Attempt of explanation takes place.

Variable: Type of explanation – Codes: 1. Explanation including only dispositional factors, 2. Explanation including only dispositional and interaction-related factors, 3. Explanation including only dispositional factors and situational/structural factors, 4. Explanation including only interaction-related factors, 5. Explanation including only situational/structural factors and interaction- related factors, 6. Explanation including only situational/structural factors and 7. Explanation including dispositional, situational/structural factors and interaction-related factors.

Variable: Dispositional factors used in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Lack of understanding/Ignorance, 2. Employee is seen as the shop/company as such, 3. Personality traits/characteristics of individual, 4. Substance abuse, 5. Social status, 6. Age, 7. Cultural background, 8. Gender, 9. Miscellaneous.

Variable: Personality traits/characteristics of individual referred to in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Arrogant, 2. Xenophobic, 3. Prejudiced, 4. Sexist/chauvinist, 5. Low intelligence, 6. Aggressive, 7. Bigoted, 8. Manipulative, 9. Vicious, 10. Querulous, 11. Immature, 12 Self-absorbed, 13. Negative, 14. Pedantic, 15. Miscellaneous

Variable: Social status/trait referred to in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Lower class/poor, 2. Middle class, 3. Upper class/rich, 4) Profession or position-specific trait, 5) Being handicapped

Variable: Age referred to in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Child, 2. Youth, 3. Middle-aged, 4. Old.

Variable: Cultural background/ethnicity used in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Religious orientation, 2. Ethnic origin, 3. Other trait

Variable: Situational/structural factors used in explanation of behaviour – Codes: 1. Tendencies of modern life, 2. Customer's home situation, 3. Weather conditions, 4. Miscellaneous

Variable: Interaction-related factors used in explanation of behaviour – Codes/categories: 1. Interaction-related factors involving own mistakes, 2. Interaction-related factors not involving own mistakes

2.5   Analytic strategy

Data were analysed by descriptive statistics using the Statistical Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 25). The adopted significance level was $P>0.05$. No further statistical analysis was employed for the present part of the study. Instead descriptive statistical analysis was sometimes complemented with re-immersion in the qualitative data.

3   Findings

3.1   Types of incidents reported

As stated in the previous paragraph, the typical contributor on the forum is an employee (92.1%). The main part of the contributors works within sales (80.8%). The number of stories told is typically one (85.2%), but telling more than one story is not uncommon either. The greatest number of tales concerns present events that have taken place recently (79%), and most tales concern events experienced by the storyteller him/herself (96.9%). The main findings with regard to what types of incidents are reported in the employees' tales are displayed in table 2.

Table 2: Main types of incidents reported in tale

Incident reported in tale	Frequency	Percent
Problematic customer behaviour involving the employee	1541	82.9%
Stories containing incidents of funny customer behaviour	111	6.0%
Observed problematic customer behaviour not involving the employee	51	2.7%
Stories not involving problematic behaviour/stories of joy	45	2.4%
Problematic behaviour conducted by other actors than customers	12	0.6%
Stories of personal off days at work	8	0.4%
Confessions of bad behaviour in role as customer	4	0.2%
Miscellaneous	87	4.7%
Total	1859	100.00%

As can be seen from Table 2, the type of incident reported most is *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee*. As we will look deeper into the content of this category, it will later suffice to give examples of the other types of incidents reported in the tales. The second most common category of tales is *stories containing incidents of funny customer behaviour.* This category includes incidents where employees report incidents of customer behaviour, which are not interpreted as offensive or problematic behaviour by the storyteller. Examples span from customers who refuse benefits or cheat themselves due to scepticism - over children saying playful things or acting in playful ways - to

adult customers showing embarrassment while purchasing an adult movie. The third most common category of tales reported is *observed problematic customer behaviour not involving the employee*. Examples of this category of tales typically include employees watching a customer´s behaviour towards another customer or a customer´s interaction with physical objects without this leading to an involvement of the employee. The fourth most common category of tales reported is *stories not involving problematic behaviour/stories of joy*. This category includes stories which do not report any negative incidents and stories which report of positive customer behaviour. A typical example is reports of a customer expressing thanks or gratitude during an interaction or a customer showing patience and tolerance towards an employee who makes a mistake. The fact that positive stories are shared underlines that customers are seen as a positive and important part of the meaning of work for workers with customer contact as pointed out by Hudson and Sullivan (Hudson & Sullivan, 1997). The fifth most common category of tales reported is *problematic behaviour conducted by other actors than customers*. Examples of this category include problematic behaviour conducted by co-workers, managers or suppliers/business partners. Finally, we also find *stories of personal off days at work*, *confessions of bad behaviour in role as customer* and *miscellaneous* which includes a variety of contributions, which do not contain tales, but other things. E.g. general appeals to customers. The table allows us to conclude that the site primarily contains tales of problematic customer behaviour involving the employee, although other things including positive stories and things which are not even stories can be found. As can be seen from Table 3, both the diversity and the massive dominance of tales of problematic customer behaviour involving the employee also seem to be a consistent feature from year to year in the years examined.

Table 3: Incident reported in tale – Distribution in selected years

Incidents reported/year	2003	2005	2007	2009
Problematic customer behaviour involving the employee	89%	78%	88.5%	75.4%
Stories containing incidents of funny customer behaviour	2.5%	8.9%	0.7%	7.7%
Observed problematic customer behaviour not involving the employee	2.0%	2.6%	7.4%	2.8%
Stories not involving problematic behaviour/stories of joy	1.0%	3.1%	2.0%	2.8%
Problematic behaviour conducted by other actors than customers	0.8%	0.0%	0.7%	0.0%
Stories of personal off days at work	0.0%	0.0%	0.7%	0.7%
Confessions of bad behaviour in role as customer	0.0%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
Miscellaneous	4.7%	6.8%	0.0%	10.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Cross tabulations of gender, sector and position and main types of incident reported were conducted but showed no significant differences.

Table 4: Subtype of problematic customer behaviour involving the employee

Subtypes	Frequency	Percent
Costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction	1143	74.2%
Mysterious or deviant customer behaviour	106	6.9%
Customer commits unprovoked or non-transaction-related harassment	103	6.7%
Customer commits fraud or theft	62	4%
Unkempt or scruffy customers	34	2.2%
Customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy	25	1.6%
Customer commits vandalism	13	0.8%
Miscellaneous	55	3.6%
Total	1541	100%

As Table 4 shows, the most common subtypes of *problematic costumer behaviour involving the employee* is *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction*. As we will also look deeper into the content of this category later, it will suffice to give examples of the other types of incidents. The second most common subtype is *mysterious or deviant customer behaviour*. This category of incidents includes behaviour which the employee considers to be abnormal or cannot make sense of. Examples include customers who are not verbally comprehensible, intoxicated customers or customers who show compulsive behaviour. The third most common subtype is *customer commits unprovoked or non-transaction-related harassment*. Examples of this category include anything

from sudden verbal attacks to physical acts. E.g. pushing milk cartons being loaded from the backside of a refrigerated display back to the loader. The fourth most common subtype is *customer commits fraud or theft*, followed by *unkempt or scruffy customers*, *customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy* and *customer commits vandalism*. Thus, we find that the most dominant form of tales regards the ordinary incidents of thoughtless and demanding behaviour. Cross tabulations of gender, sector and subtypes of *problematic costumer behaviour involving the employee* were conducted but showed no significant differences.

Table 5: Subtypes of costumer displays thoughtless/demanding behaviour in connection to normal transaction

Subtypes	Frequency	Percent
Customer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service	429	37.5%
Customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason	241	21.1%
Customer makes an error	227	19.9%
Customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits	154	13.4%
Customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error	92	8.0%
Total	1143	100%

As Table 5 shows the most common subtype of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction* is *customer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service*. Examples from this category include customers who think they can return goods purchased years in advance or expect warranties to cover damage to goods which is purposely inflicted or a result of gross negligence. The second most common subtype is *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason*. Examples include both verbal and physical acts which suddenly take place during normal interactions, e.g. sudden outbursts of rage. The third most common subtype is *customer makes an error*. Examples include such different incidents as customers who stack their goods too high on the checkout counter, customers who stumble into shelves and customers who try to return goods bought in a different store. The fourth most common subtype is *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits*. Examples typically include customers who try to get lower prices by bargaining or insist on being serviced after the shop has closed. Finally, there are also instances of *customer overreacts in connection to shop/service error.* Examples of this category include a variety of aggressive customer behaviours originating from faulty service. E.g. delayed or under-prepared foods, faulty information given, etc.

A cross tabulation of gender and subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction* shows a weak significance (P = 0,046) regarding a difference in the incidents reported by women and men respectively. The main finding is that women report incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* and *customer overreacts in connection to shop/service error* almost twice as often as men. It is not possible to tell whether the causes of this result relate to actual differences in the customer behaviour the different sexes are confronted with, a difference in what one chooses to report or a gender determined bias in the interpretation or classification of behaviour when reporting it to others or a combination of all of these factors. A cross tabulation of sector and subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction* showed no significant differences.

Table 6 shows the behaviour components entailed in *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction.* As can be seen from the table, the most common behaviour components are *verbal assault* (77.2%). *Actual threats* and *physical violence* are found too, but on a much smaller scale (9.8 % in total). Behaviour which includes acts of *sexual harassment* or *racism* is equally common (1.0% compared to 0.9%) and is reported almost the same number of times as *apologies* from customers (0.9%).

Table 6: Behaviour components entailed in costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction

Components of behaviour mentioned	Frequency	% of cases
Verbal assault	882	77.2%
Actual threats	72	6.3%
Physical violence	40	3.5%
Sexual harassment	12	1.0%
Racism	11	0.9%
Apology	10	0.9%
None of the above	166	14.5%

A cross tabulation of behaviour components and subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction* showed significant differences in relation to a few behaviour

components. With regard to *verbal assault* no significant differences were found. In fact, verbal assault actually seems almost evenly associated with all subtypes of customer behaviour. With regard to *actual threats* one can notice that these are more frequently associated with instances of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* than other instances (10.4% compared to an average of 6.3%) (P = 0.05). A possible explanation could be that we tend to retort to threats if we are confronted or rejected in our attempts to get extra benefits with manipulative acts or other shady means and do so in order to save our threatened self-perception as dignified individuals. With regard to *physical violence* it can be noted that physical violence is more commonly associated with instances of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* than other instances (7.6% compared to an average of 3.5%) (P=0.04). Here, a possible explanation could be that we are more likely to resort to violence when we perceive that we are being treated unfairly.

A cross tabulation of gender and behaviour components reported shows that instances of physical violence are more frequently reported in tales from women (3.4% compared to 1.9% among men). The same goes for actual threats (5.4% compared to 1.9% among men) and sexual harassment (2.2% compared to 0.9% among men). However, Chi-square tests could not be performed for the above cross tabulations due to a low number of cases. A possible explanation of the difference might be that customers perceive women as less risky targets than men. A cross tabulation of sector and behaviour components reported showed no significant differences.

3.2   Types of explanations

Explanations of incidents are not examined in 243 cases, because these cases are contributions that do not entail tales of problematic behaviour. In the remaining 1616 cases examined, explanations are given in 1320 tales (81.7%), whereas no explanation is given in 296 tales (18.3%). Thus, at first glance we can conclude that the storytellers generally present explanations of the problematic behaviour they are confronted with when telling others about this behaviour.

Cross tabulations of attempt of explanation and the different main types of incidents reported and the different subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* showed no significant differences. A cross tabulation of attempt of explanation and the different subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction* shows a weak significance (P=0.03). The main finding is that incidents of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* are not explained in the same degree as other incidents (27.2% compared to an average 16.2%). A possible explanation here is that the employee feels that he/she has already explained the behaviour by pointing out the error made and overlooks the need for an additional explanation of the overreaction. A cross tabulation of attempt of explanation and gender showed no significant differences. Neither in general nor in relation to the different types of incidents.

Table 7: Types of explanation

Included factors	Frequency	Percent
Explanation including only dispositional factors	1133	85.8%
Explanation including only dispositional and interaction-related factors	80	6.1%
Explanation including only dispositional factors and situational/structural factors	46	3.5%
Explanation including only interaction-related factors	22	1.7%
Explanation including only situational/structural factors	18	1.4%
Explanation including dispositional, situational/structural factors and interaction-related factors	16	1.2%
Explanation including only situational/structural factors and interaction- related factors	6	0.5%
Total	1321	100%

Table 7 shows the different types of explanations given by the employees. As can be seen in the table, explanations including only dispositional factors are clearly dominant representing a full 85.8% of the cases.

A cross tabulation of the type of explanation given by the employee and the different types of incidents reported showed no significant differences. However, if one chooses to disregard the very small number of cases, an observation regarding a lower use of explanations which only includes dispositional factors when reporting stories of *personal off-days at work or confessions of bad behaviour in role as customer* can be made (50% and 66.7% compared to an average of 85.8%). This could stem from a general human tendency to look away from dispositional factors and into situational factors when explaining one´s own problematic behaviour (Heider,1958; Larson, 1977). Cross tabulations of the type of explanation given by the employee and subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* and *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction* showed no significant differences.

With regard to explanations in which situational/structural factors are credited with a role, these amount to 86 cases (6.6%). The dominant situational/structural factor mentioned is *tendencies of modern life* (52.4%). Examples include being busy or being stressed. A cross tabulation of explanations in which situational/structural factors are used and gender showed no significant differences. Explanations in which interaction-related factors are credited with a role amount to 124 cases (9.5%). The dominant interaction-related factor mentioned is *interaction-related factors not involving own mistakes* (69.2%).

A cross tabulation of explanations in which interaction-related factors are mentioned and gender showed that 7 women pointed to *interaction-related factors involving own mistakes* compared to only 1 man. This result can perhaps be seen as a result of a socialization to gender stereotypes according to which men are less prone to admit mistakes. However, a valid Chi-square test could not be performed due to a low number of cases.

Table 8. Dispositional factors mentioned in explanation

Factors mentioned	Frequency	Percent of cases
Personality traits	818	64.2%
Lack of understanding/ignorance	597	46.8%
Age	179	14.0%
Substance abuse	74	5.8%
Cultural background	60	4.7%
Social status	54	4.2%
Gender	49	3.8%
Employee is seen as the shop/company as such	12	0.9%
Miscellaneous	79	6.2%
Total	1922	

As can be seen in Table 8, the most common dispositional factors mentioned in explanation are by far personality traits and lack of understanding/ignorance or the two in combination. Other factors mentioned include; *age, substance abuse, cultural background, social status* and *gender*. A cross tabulation of dispositional factors mentioned in explanation and main type of incidents reported showed some differences. However, valid Chi-square tests could not be performed due to a low number of cases in several cells.

A cross tabulation of dispositional factors mentioned in explanation and subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* showed significant differences. Some of the differences found are that *lack of understanding/ignorance* was referred to less frequently when reporting incidents of *customers commits vandalism* (0.0% compared to an average of 37.6%), *unkempt or scruffy customers* (8.8% compared to an average of 37.6%), *customer commits fraud or theft* (9.7% compared to an average of 37.6%), and instances of *customer commits unprovoked or non-transaction-related harassment* (12.6% compared to an average of 37.6%) (P = 0.00). Some of these findings can perhaps be explained by noticing that acts of theft and vandalism are normally intended or calculated actions which do not stem from lack of understanding. Personality traits were referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction* (54.9% compared to an average of 51.0%). In all other incidents the frequency of referrals to traits is lower than average with incidents of *customer commits fraud or theft* as the lowest (20.6% compared to an average of 51.0%) (P = 0.00). This difference might therefore more reasonably be explained by considering the nature of the other subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* rather than the nature of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction*. Age is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *unkempt or scruffy customers* (26.5% compared to an average of 11%) and incidents of *customers commits vandalism* (23.1% compared to an average of 11%) and (P=0.03). A closer examination of the cases reporting incidents of *unkempt or scruffy customers* shows that 8 out the 9 cases link unkemptness and scruffiness with old age. A closer examination of the cases reporting incidents of *customers commits vandalism* shows that two out of the three cases link vandalism with being a child. Substance abuse is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *unkempt or scruffy customers* (27.3% compared to an average of 5.4%). However, a valid Chi-square test could not be performed for this cross tabulation due to a low number of cases in several cells. An exploration of a selection of cases shows that this difference can be due to the potential side effects of long-term substance abuse and/or the lack of control of bodily functions potentially associated with consuming large quantities of alcohol.

Cross tabulations with subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* showed no significant findings regarding the use of social status, cultural background, and gender as explanatory factors. However, this picture changes when we make a cross tabulation of dispositional factors mentioned in explanation and subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction*. This cross tabulation shows that social status is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to*

manipulate employee to give extra benefits (7.8% compared to an average of 3.4%) (P = 0.03). A closer examination of cases shows that none of the references to social status which figure here refer to people being poor. Instead three of the sixteen cases point to people being upper class/rich and thirteen out of sixteen point to profession-specific traits. Cultural background is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* and incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* (both are 5.8% compared to an average of 3.6%) and less frequent when reporting incidents of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* (0% compared to an average of 3.6%) (P = 0.03). A closer examination of the cases reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits customers* shows that eight out the nine cases in question link *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits customers* with ethnic origin. Incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* are also linked with ethnic origin in thirteen out of fourteen cases. One can speculate if the absence of explanatory references to cultural background found in connection with reports of incidents of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* might indicate a lesser disposition for the reproduction of cultural stereotypes when engaging in explanations of problematic behaviour of which concrete errors have served as "triggers", than the disposition witnessed in other cases. Gender is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* and incidents of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* (6.2% and 5.4% compared to an average of 3.0%) and less frequent when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* and *incidents of customer makes an error* (Both are 1.3% compared to an average of 3.0%) (P = 0.004). Explanations of these differences are not easy to give. Nor does a closer examination of the cases in questions reveal any specific patterns. Also, personal traits are referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* (65.6% compared to an average of 55.1%) (P = 0.04). A possible explanation of this difference could be that forced interactions in which one part feels he/she knows the hidden motive(s) of the forcing part stimulate the activation of a narrow explanatory repertoire focusing on personality traits. Finally, lack of understanding/ignorance is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer makes an error* and cust*omer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service* (52.9% and 49.4% compared to an average of 42.8%) and less frequent when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* (27.9% compared to an average of 42.8%) (P = 0.00). These differences are easy to understand when considering the general nature of the three types of incidents. Finally, a cross tabulation of dispositional factors mentioned in explanation and gender showed no significant differences.

Table 9 - Personality traits/characteristics of individual referred to in explanation of behaviour

Traits/characteristics of individual	Frequency	Percent of cases
Arrogance	248	30.3%
Self-absorbed	183	22.4%
Low intelligence	151	18.5%
Aggressive	147	18.0%
Manipulative	112	13.7%
Querulous	80	9.8%
Negative	71	8.7%
Vicious	68	8.3%
Bigoted	63	7.7%
Pedantic	60	7.3%
Immature	32	3.9%
Prejudiced	23	2.8%
Sexist/chauvinist	16	2.0%
Xenophobic	13	1.6%
Miscellaneous	87	10.6%
Total	1354	

As can be seen from Table 9, the five traits most used to explain behaviour is *arrogance* followed by being *self-absorbed*, having *low intelligence*, being *aggressive* and *manipulative*.

A cross tabulation of the use of these five traits/characteristics in explaining behaviour and the main type of incidents reported showed no significant findings. A cross tabulations with subtypes of *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee* showed significant differences for four of the five traits/characteristics. Arrogance is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection to a normal transaction* (18.1% compared to an average of 15.7%) and less frequent when reporting incidents of *unkempt or scruffy customers* and *customer commits fraud or theft* (0.0% and 4.8% compared to an average of 15.7%)

(P=0.00). Again, these differences are easy to understand when considering the general nature of the three types of incidents. Being self-absorbed is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer commits vandalism* (15.4% compared to an average of 11.4%) and less frequently when reporting incidents of *customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy* and incidents of *customer commits fraud or theft* (0.0% and 3.2% compared to an average of 11.4%) (P=0.00). Low intelligence is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy* and *mysterious or deviant customer behaviour* (24.0% and 16% compared to an average of 9.4%) (P=0.001). A closer examination of the two types of incidents shows that linkages made with low intelligence differ. In the reported incidents of customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy, the predicate low intelligence is often used to designate lack of empathy or situational awareness, but not intelligence as such. In the reported incidents of *mysterious or deviant customer behaviour,* the predicate low intelligence is used in a greater variety of meanings spanning from intelligence as such – over being insensitive - to a disposition to act in potentially self-harming or self-destructive ways. Being aggressive is not referred to when reporting incidents of *customer uses inappropriate humour or conducts inappropriate acts of sympathy* or incidents of *unkempt or scruffy customers* (0.0% and 0.0% compared to an average of 9.3%) (P=0.001). These differences can be reasonably explained by first considering the non-aggressive motive(s) behind the first kind of behaviour and secondly by reminding one-self that the behaviour which is being explained in the second type of incidents is to appear *unkempt or scruffy* and not the potential behaviour associated with such an appearance. For the last trait/characteristic *being manipulative* a valid Chi-square test could not be performed due to a low number of cases in several cells.

Cross tabulations of the five traits with subtypes of *costumer displays thoughtless and/or demanding behaviour in connection with a normal transaction* showed significant differences for four out of the five traits. Being self-absorbed is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service* and *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* (17.7% and 16.2% compared to an average of 13.9%) (P=0.018). Again, these differences are easy to understand when considering the general nature of the two types of incidents. Low intelligence is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer makes an error* (15.9% compared to an average of 8.7%) and less frequently when reporting incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* or *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* (Both are 5.4% compared to an average of 8.7%) (P=0.001). These differences are easy to understand when considering the general nature of the two types of incidents. Being aggressive is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer shows rude behaviour without specific reason* or incidents of *customer overreacts in connection with shop/service error* (15.4% and 15.2% compared to an average of 10.8%) and less frequently when reporting incidents of *customer has unrealistic expectations towards price or service* (6.5% compared to an average of 10.8%) (P=0.003). These differences are also easy to understand when considering the general nature of the three types of incidents. Finally, being manipulative is referred to more frequently when reporting incidents of *customer attempts to manipulate employee to give extra benefits* (30.5% compared to an average of 7.3%) (P = 0.00). This difference is easy to understand when considering the general nature of the incident. Cross tabulations of the use of the five traits when explaining behaviour and gender showed no significant differences.

4   Discussion and conclusion

After having completed the first step of the analysis of www.haderkunder.dk which maps the different types of incidents reported in the tales as well as the employees' perception and representation of possible causes of the incidents, we now turn our attention to a discussion of the potential qualities of the experience processing and sharing which takes place. In the discussion, we will aim at identifying potential indicators of positive qualities as well as negative ones.

As seen in the analysis, the great majority of tales found in the forum regards incidents of problematic customer behaviour experienced by the storyteller himself/herself. Likewise, we found that the most dominant form of problematic customer behaviour regarded ordinary incidents of thoughtless and demanding customer behaviour. Finally, we found this dominance to be a consistent feature in the years examined. Starting from these findings, it is possible to argue that these can in fact be said to be indicators of a series of positive qualities. The finding that the great majority of tales allegedly are self-experienced can be argued to provide a potential for an authenticity that would not have been possible if the main part of the tales were either reports of other people's experiences or a sharing of urban myths. A potential for authenticity is also supported by the finding that the great majority of tales reports the daily hassles with customers showing thoughtless and demanding behaviour. Also, the finding that a stable core regarding the type of incidents reported exists in the years examined can be seen as an indicator of focus and dedication among the contributors which prevents the common experience processing and sharing from regressing or developing into something completely different - e.g. a dating site.

The analysis also showed that only minor differences between what is reported from the different sexes, sectors, and positions existed. This finding suggests that the contributors in general allow themselves to tell tales of the same types of experiences regardless of gender, sector or positions and can be argued to indicate another positive quality, which we in lack of better options can label equal access to the expression of experiences. However, elements of self-censorship possibly relating to gender-socialization could be found in embryonic form in differences in the explanation seeking of the two genders, in which women were found to be more prone than men to put forward explanations including *interaction-related factors involving own mistakes*.

In our analysis of the employees' perception and representation of possible causes of the incidents experienced, we found that the storytellers generally presented explanations of the problematic behaviour they were confronted with. Furthermore, we found that explanations including only dispositional factors were clearly dominant and that the most common dispositional factors mentioned in explanation were by far personality traits and lack of understanding/ignorance or the two in combination. Finally, we found that a great number of different traits was referred to in their explanations, but also that significant differences existed when cross tabulations of subtypes of incidents and traits referred to were made. Again, one can argue that several indicators of positive as well as negative quality in the experience processing can be suggested from these findings. When confronted with negative behaviour humans generally seek an explanation for the incident. The purpose of – and motives behind - explanation-seeking are manifold and include general sense-making, attribution of responsibility, overcoming unpleasant emotional states associated with the experience and prediction of future behaviour (Shaver, 2016) Therefore, the finding that tales are generally associated with attempts of explanation can also be seen as indicating that genuine experience processing takes place.

The finding that explanations including only dispositional factors were clearly dominant both indicates negative and positive qualities. At first glance one can argue that the massive use of references to dispositional factors when explaining problematic experiences can serve as an indicator of negative quality, which can be labelled as narrow-mindedness or a problematic tendency to individualization in the experience processing. However, some reservations must be made. A first reservation is that the preference for pointing to dispositional factors when explaining other people's actions is partly due to general attribution biases (Heider,1958; Larson, 1977). Another important reservation is to acknowledge that dispositional explanations – and even ones in which we model the other part(ies) in rough caricature - can help us overcome the unpleasant emotions which follow from being confronted with problematic behaviour. Also, one could argue that such ways of overcoming unpleasant emotions become even more legitimate when acknowledging that the behaviour is forced upon the employee in an asymmetrical situation in which he/she cannot act freely or escape easily. However, we also need to remind ourselves that the purpose of explanations in the long run is not just to overcome unpleasant emotions but also to predict behaviour in the future. Here, a greater inclusion of structural and situational factors as well as effects of interactions might enrich our ability to predict behaviour in the future. With regard to the potential positive quality indicated by the small number of explanations which included structural and situational factors and interactional effects, this must in our view primarily reside in the near absence of unjustified self-blame. However, cases which contain traces of problematic self-blame do also exist.

The finding that personality traits/characteristics are generally used ten to fifteen times more frequently than references to gender, cultural background and age and the finding that the use of references to traits vary somewhat according to the situation reported can be seen as an indication of a certain degree of reflexivity. However, problematic examples of narrow-minded explanations with undertones of either racism, sexism or ageism also do exist.

In conclusion, we thus argue that the experience processing does show some positive qualities, but also that some problematic issues can be detected. These qualities are summed up in table 10.

Table 10: Potential qualities of the experience processing

Potential positive qualities	Indicators	Sources
First-hand experiences with associated potential for authenticity	Most stories regard own experiences of everyday hassles	Table 2 & 4
Dedication and continuity	Thematic continuity over time	Table 3
Equal access	No major differences in what is reported by representatives from different sectors, positions and genders	Cross tabulations performed in conjunction of Table I2, 4, 5 & 6
Active experience processing	Explanations are often sought for /given	Table 7
Reflexivity	Variation in explanations	Table 8 & 9
Diminishing of self-blame	Problematic self-blame is rare*	Table 7
Potential negative qualities	**Indicators**	**Sources**

Some conditioning by gender socialization	Fewer instances of self-blame among men	Cross tabulation performed in conjunction of Table 7
Narrowmindedness and individualization	Massive use of references to dispositional factors	Table 7
Problematic stereotyping	Instances of racism, sexism or ageism can be found	Case examinations performed in conjunction of cross tabulations
*Self-blame	A few instances of problematic self-blame do exist.	Case examinations performed in conjunction of cross tabulations

The next step in the present study is to look into 1) the content and character of the solutions envisioned or acted out, 2) the emotions displayed, and 3) the received comments/ responses; the support and/or correctives and supplements offered in order to say more about the potential qualities of the experience processing and sharing. With regard to the analysis of the content and character of the solutions envisioned or acted out we intend to focus on their content (conformity, opposition, etc), their character as acted out or fictional, individual or collaborative etc. and the outcomes of the solutions chosen. With regard to the responses we will focus on the character of the response as either positive, neutral or negative and on the content of the response including correctives and supplements to the explanations and solutions presented. Finally, we will also look into the emotions displayed by the storytellers and the validation and/or the emotional displacements suggested in the response. By completion of the study we hope to have contributed to our understanding of how experience processing and experience sharing take place in self-reported tales. We also hope to have pointed out and exemplified both negative and positive qualities of this experience processing and sharing.

5 Limitations

The limitations of this study relate to the methodological uncertainties which accompany most attempts to quantify complex qualitative aspects of texts which do not use double coding. Making exact scores can sometimes be difficult, which can be illustrated by two examples. The first example regards the determination of the type of event and the second example regards the determination of whether or not a given mention of characteristics of situations or persons should be regarded as a mere description or an actual explanatory component. With regard to the determination of the type of event, many cases are simple and straightforward. However, some of the events described also have a dynamic character and start out as one type of event which then evolves into another type. One example is cases when a problematic behaviour towards an employee changes and turns into an argument between the customer and another customer. Here it was decided always to focus at the initial character of the incident - in this case *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee*. However, using the initial characteristics of a situation to determine the character of the incident could not be made a standard as many cases would then rightfully be cases of *observed problematic customer behaviour not involving the employee*. Here a subsequent involvement of the employee would mean a classification of the case as *problematic customer behaviour involving the employee*. With regard to the determination of whether or not a given mention of characteristics of situations or persons should be regarded as a mere description or an explanatory component differences between cases which are easy to code and those which are not were visible from the start. Some cases are straightforward and state the explanatory status of a component mentioned explicitly. Other cases are more complex because it is difficult to determine if a description of a situation or customer serves as a mere description or as part of the explanation of the problematic behaviour. Rather than introducing further or graded distinctions between 1) *description potentially serving as explanation* and *2) description serving as explanation* or to introduce double coding it was left to the coders to decide whether to reasonably exclude or include the description as a part of the explanation and to discuss problematic cases with other scorers.

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