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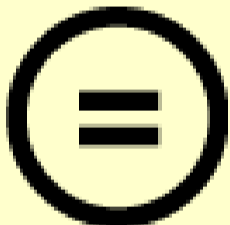
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**Violence On The Frontline: A Qualitative**  
**Study of How Service Workers Cope**

Victoria Bishop

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## PHD ABSTRACT

Drawing on extensive empirical evidence, taken from a regional Employment Service, this PhD explores in depth, how frontliners cope with the experience of customers' violence on the frontline. Analysis of empirical data led to the finding that frontliners cope in a number of ways which were both collective and individual. The coping mechanisms used were influenced by the different organisational constructions of customer violence.

This PhD has brought the emotional labour and the organisational violence literature together using insights from both to inform the other and aid understanding of not only organisational violence in general, but specifically the way that frontliners cope with the experience of customer violence. This is an aspect somewhat neglected in both the emotional labour literature and the organisational violence literature to differing extents. Although the emotional labour literature does examine ways that frontliners cope with the difficulties of customer service, it frequently fails to examine the interplay of the formal and informal organisation in influencing the means of coping used by frontliners and it has yet to consider the way that frontliners cope specifically with customer violence. The organisational violence literature tends to take the concept of violence as an unproblematic, objective term and ignores the fact that violence is a constructed subjective concept. I see this as problematic. The more interpretivist literature, which does recognise the polysemic nature of violence, only considers customer violence in passing. This literature completely fails to consider the part that the customer sovereignty plays in this violence, a significant omission, which I believe, has implications for our understanding of organisational violence.

A number of theoretical points from this study have wider implications that are applicable to more than just the regional Employment Service explored. It was found that the customer sovereignty ideology played an important role in not only the ways that frontliners cope, but also in customer violence in general. Customer sovereignty underpinned the invisibility of violence and the concern for customers' well-being over those of frontliners. Both these findings were applicable to other frontline organisations. This study also found that the customer service ideology contributed towards conditions which fostered customer violence.

This PhD also found that those with hierarchical power will be able, to some extent; to impose their construction of what is violent on those with less hierarchical power. However, this study emphasises the importance of human agency in arguing that those with less hierarchical power will still be able to contribute to creating organisational reality. Workers were not taken to be passive recipients of the dominant approach, but were helped shaped the construction of violence. This finding has implications for not only the construction of customer violence within organisations, but for the nature of power and the construction of organisational reality.

The invisibility of violence in frontline organisations has important public policy implications. This study argues for the use of outside regulation to challenge the invisibility of customer violence. In addition, this PhD argues that there is a need for some regulation to protect frontliners in face of the customer, who is revered above all else.

Another policy issue explored by this study is the use of the customer sovereignty ideology in the Employment Service. This research argues against the use of this ideology in this context and in other similar public sector organisations. It is not advocated that service recipients should be treated without respect or care but it does argue that they shouldn't be treated as 'customers' in line with the customer service ideology.

This study has outlined many areas that need further consideration. The relationship between the customer service ideology and customer violence is currently under-researched. More studies are needed examining this in different frontline settings, including both public and private sectors. Specifically, research is needed to consider the extent to which this ideology is used to justify customer violence and difficult frontline conditions in general.

In examining the ways that frontliners cope with the experience of customer violence; this study integrated both the emotional labour and organisational violence literature. It is hoped that in using insights from both to inform the other, together with my own empirical research, this PhD has deepened understanding of not only the coping devices used by frontliners, but also customer violence in general.

**Key Words:** Frontline Coping Mechanisms, Customer Violence, Customer Aggression, Customer Abuse, Service Work, Emotional Labour, Organisational Violence: Public Sector.



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

Amongst writers on organisational violence and aggression there is widespread agreement that violence in organisations is increasing. This idea is reflected in the growing research interest in this area (Flannery et al 1994, Rosenthal and Edwards 1992, Dickson et al 1993). Much of this interest has been centred on the violence of service recipients towards service providers. This particular area of interest comes as no surprise as the continued growth of the interactive service population has pushed 'customer'-worker relations to centre stage. This study aims to contribute to understandings of customer violence by exploring the ways that frontliners cope with this dark side of service work.

In this introductory chapter I first sketch the literature, briefly discussing its limitations, thus providing a rationale for my study. Secondly, I examine the objectives of this study and briefly outline my research questions. Following on from this I consider the term 'violence' focusing on how it is used within the context of this study. Finally, the structure and the content of the proceeding chapters are detailed.

## **1. Researching Customer Violence and Aggression**

This thesis seeks to integrate the organisational violence literature and the emotional labour literature through the use of insights from both to aid understanding of not only organisational violence in general, but specifically the way that frontliners cope with customer violence on the frontline. This is an aspect somewhat neglected in both the organisational violence literature and the emotional labour literature to differing extents.

The organisational violence literature tends to take the concept of violence as an unproblematic, objective term and ignores the fact that violence is a constructed subjective concept. The workplace is constructed as affected by the violence rather than being constructive of the violence. Hearn and Parkin (2001) point to the lack of studies which explore the theoretical or conceptual relationships of violence which link them to wider issues of power in the organisation.

Within the more interpretivist literature, which does recognise the polysemic nature of violence, authors tend to explore organisational violence through the use of generalisations at a macro level without exploring the construction of violence, in-depth, at a micro level. In doing so, writing in this area has a tendency to stress the importance of social structure to the detriment of human agency. This literature only considers customer violence in passing and the specific issue of coping with customer violence is conspicuous by its absence.

Although the emotional labour literature does examine ways that frontliners cope with the difficulties of customer service, it has yet to consider the ways that frontliners cope specifically with customer violence. Customer violence can be a painful, yet significant part of emotional labour and this is an important omission in this literature. Equally, this body of writing fails to recognise the role that differing organisational groups and their respective constructions of reality may play in the way that frontliners cope with violence.

## **2. Positioning the Study - Establishing Research Objectives**

This study's central objective is to increase understanding of the ways in which service workers cope with the experience of customer violence. The review of the literature so far highlights a number of theoretical, empirical and methodological gaps. In seeking to address these gaps, a number of key features are incorporated into the research design. This study seeks to integrate the organisational violence and emotional labour literature by drawing on insights from both areas of research. This is a contextualised study set within the Employment Service (ES), providing much needed empirical data on customer violence at a micro level. In contrast to the majority of studies on customer violence, this study takes an interpretivist approach, using qualitative methods to explore the theoretical, conceptual and social relationships of violence. The research agenda is emergent rather than imposed to allow theory to be grounded in the data and the intention is, as far as possible, to retain conceptual open-mindedness.



This study is based on a number of data sources including 49 semi-structured interviews and a collection of stories taken from frontliners, managers and union officials within the ES, fieldwork notes based on two months of participant observation and an analysis of formal company documentation.

In seeking to fulfil the central research objective, (discussed above) it is necessary to break it down into a series of research questions in order to isolate the key elements of this research. The research questions of this study are:

1. How is the concept of customer violence constructed within the organisation?
2. In what ways do frontliners within the ES cope with customer violence?
3. Why do they cope in these ways?

In seeking to answer these questions, this study has been able to identify several ways in which frontliners cope with customer violence. In analysing these coping mechanisms, new insights have been generated, which bring to the fore, amongst other things, the central role that the organisational construction of violence plays in the way that frontliners cope with violence. This is a dimension which is receiving scant attention in the literature. Through focusing on the specific contextual factors of the organisation at the micro level, research findings were generated that conversely were applicable across the wider context of frontline organisations in general. In particular, these findings identified the significant role that the customer service ideology plays in not only the way

that frontliners cope with customer violence, but customer violence itself. These are significant findings which will be discussed in more detail in chapters ten and eleven and which represent an original contribution to this field of knowledge.

### **3. Understanding Violence**

Although the way that I have used the term violence in this study is influenced by insights taken from the literature, it is mainly shaped by understandings taken from my research data. In short, it is based on how frontliners in my study perceive actions of violence. As explained earlier, this thesis considers violence as a subjective construct. As Sumner (1997) usefully points out, 'One man's aggression is another woman's mindless violence.....one country's civilisation is another's barbarism: one country's ethnic cleansing is another's war crime'. Thus, the difference between acceptable and unacceptable aggression or, more simply, what is constituted as violent behaviour, is not in the actual physical action but the meaning that we attribute to that action. The subjective nature of violence and the lack of clarity surrounding this concept has plagued researchers and has resulted in a multitude of definitions (for example, Lipscomb & Love, 1992; Cox & Leather, 1994; Rippon, 2000; Hearn & Parkin, 2001). O'Connell et al (2000) highlight this problem when they point out that what constitutes a violent act varies from person to person. Consequently, writers such as Arnetz (1996) do not actually define violence but leave it open to individual interpretation. Although this may solve the problem of defining the subjective, I feel that this is problematic because it risks a lapse into total relativism where anything or nothing can be defined as violence.



However, at the other extreme, it is often noted that many definitions of violence, especially in the more positivistic literature, see violence as an objective, self-evident term. There is also a tendency to focus exclusively on physical violence (Cately & Jones, 2002; Hearn & Parkin, 2001; Mayhew, 2002). For example, Strasburg (1978) defines violence as the 'illegal use of force against a person; Steinmatz (1986) describes violence as an act carried out with the intention of physically hurting another person and in criminal law, violence is defined along the lines of unjustified use of physical force. However, these definitions are restrictive as they do not allow for personal interpretation and also categorically exclude behaviour that many people would describe as violent, such as verbal aggression, damage to property and the threat of violence.

For the frontliners studied, customer violence was perceived as any customer behaviour that made them feel that their own safety was threatened. This behaviour did not have to actually involve physical harmful actions (although it often did) but just cause the frontliner to fear for their safety. The term aggression was also used by frontliners to describe behaviour that threatened their safety, so in this way it is similar to violence. However, aggression was never used to describe customers' physical actions. The use of both violence and aggression throughout this thesis reflects frontliners' understandings of these concepts. Although this thesis uses the term violence when referring to both physical and non-physical customer behaviour that threatens a frontliners' safety, the use of the word 'aggression' will only refer to non-physical customer actions that threatened service workers' safety.

It is important to point out that not all customer verbal abuse was understood as violent or aggressive. If a hostile customer upset a frontliners emotional well being but did not threaten their safety this was not considered as violent. The following set of quotes taken from frontliners in my study help illustrate behaviour that is described as violent by frontliners. The first three quotes describe customer behaviour that included physical actions, whereas the second three describe customer behaviour that did not include physical action.

*'I was attacked quite violently when I worked at Stuart Street. It was on the main, have you ever been to Stuart St? (I have yes). On the very first desk that you go into, not where the security guard sits, there's usually somebody from the department that sort of sits there. I was there, this was about 8 or 9 years ago, and a guy just sort of came in and shouted at the top of his voice, 'where are all the fucking jobs'. I was so taken back by this statement and I said, 'Look they're on the front'. And he said, 'Where are all the fucking jobs' and before I said anything he had actually picked up from the desk a welcome sign, funnily enough, and the next minute, bang over the head, bang over the shoulder. I sort of ran into another room and he followed me and a female member of staff tried to get him off me so he punched her in the face. Then he went into another main room and started picking up computers and smashing them on the floor, blah, blah, blah and then sort of ran out. Apparently from there he picked up a spade and went to a Laser Quest place and started threatening people there.*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)



*'When I've worked on signing point before and you have grief, I had a client climb on my desk once at 9.30 in the morning, he was off his head. Climbed onto my desk to come over at me, while I was working in Leicester because he was passed from the Benefits Agency to the Jobcentre about 10 times and he just got cheesed off and after experiencing a violent incident, you tend to look at people more, I think. If you are signing a lot you don't tend to keep looking at the individual that closely, you know you're not that aware of their manner or anything because you're just signing, if you're doing it, you know, for six hours a day. But I think after that particular sort of situation I was more aware of the people sitting in front of me and looking at them to see what sort of condition they were in, if you know what I mean.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2- 36- Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).*

*'Smashing windows up; smashing computers; jumping over the counter and hitting staff it was actually one of the Advisors here, he beat her brother up, he used to be a Team Leader here... inside the Job Centre, I think he used to work on the ground floor this going back about two or three years back, and he used to be a Team Leader, and he just jumped over and started hitting him... He tried to get him off but because he was so violent he couldn't do anything. I mean he smashed computers up, windows and everything - that's what I've heard.'*

*(Large City Job Centre 2- 41- Fontliner-Female-African).*

*'I've done 20 years and I can honestly say that it doesn't get any easier, no, I don't think it does at all. And I've never got to the stage where it doesn't affect me. You can feel frightened every*

*time because it's the unpredictability of the situation, when someone is blowing and shouting and violent, they are not behaving rationally or reasonably so therefore unpredictable and you're not quite sure what their next move is going to be.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'but really it really puts a lot of pressure on you and it's not very pleasant to get the aftermath of it as well, because in fact I've seen a client today, he's all pal-ly and everything now but when I sanctioned him x-amount of months ago he was like, 'If I see you on the streets I'm gonna do this, that and the other', he was very violent you know, and it's not very pleasant'.*

(Large City Job Centre 2-42-Frontliner-Female-British Asian).

*'But when there is a violent incident, you immediately feel your adrenalin going. You immediately have to assess and take control, that's what is expected of you, that is what is demanded of you. So you can feel the adrenalin pumping, then you are confronted by this man who's perhaps standing up over you, he's a lot taller than you, maybe using really offensive language which I mean I don't like anyway. It may be racist language or sexist language, all the things that provoke a response in you as an individual. And you've got to somehow assess what is happening instantaneously and then react; what exactly is the danger, do I need to get members of the public away from this person, has he used a substance, is he likely to throw something (because with computers there is an electrical danger). All those things you are summing up in seconds, not even seconds, but milliseconds'.*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1- 27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).



As discussed above, frontliners perceived customer aggression to be behaviour that threatened their sense of physical safety but did not include physical actions. The following quotes help illustrate this perception.

*'This customer was very, very aggressive I asked him to sit down and he wanted to sign on, then he still wouldn't move, you know he was disturbing another client and then he threatened me...*

*(Q. He threatened you?)*

*Yeah, he just said that he will see me outside, he says he'll sort me and he really meant, he was quite serious and he was very aggressive, and yeah.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre -2-38-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

*'I mean I had a chap the other week who was on heroin and he was getting very very aggressive and Larry came over and basically backed me up he started to try and explain it. He said the same as what I'd said but... he was getting very, very angry and shouting and it didn't matter how many times I was trying to tell him that he'd had his money stopped through New Deal and he had to go over the other side he was like, 'Ahh, it's you, you stopped my money!''*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)*

However, not all the direct quotes used in this study which are purported to be related to customer violence and aggression, cite the actual words 'violence' and 'aggression'. As long as the

narratives contained elements cited above (i.e. frontliners felt that their sense of safety was threatened) they have been considered violent or/and aggressive because they still reflect frontliners' general understandings of this concept. The quotes listed below are an example of this idea.

*'There was one when that guy jumped over the desks. Some geezer, I can't remember his name, but we were all talking about it, it was round the city like wild fire. Some gentleman was disgruntled, I don't know what about but he leapt over the desks, because obviously we've got a row of desks but he just jumped over the tops and he started throwing stuff around, chairs, computers and obviously that was really scary for both customers and staff alike because how the room was laid out was that some of the staff were trapped in a corner and they couldn't get passed him. And I think, fortunately the guy was not angry at staff...so he didn't attack the staff he just wanted to make a mess but that must have been so scary for people...'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

*'I've had one here, which was a Benefits Agency, where a bloke came over... Well the chap had got his hair off with the Benefits Agency over a payment something to do with a payment and he came over and went to hit James and I stood in front of him, but I didn't think, I just didn't think, I just stood up and said 'Will you get out this office now' and I think purely for the fact I was a female and I weren't a bloke...I heard him on the way up, he says, 'I'm glad you're a big bastard' at James so I knew he was after him cause of his size; so I just stood in front of him and he jumped down, I said, 'Just get out the office now!' and he ran out, and then phoned up about an hour later and apologized, yeah. But he'd*



*actually come up on the counter and everyone was like, 'God what you doing, you mad woman, you know you're only tiny!'. But I didn't think at the time, it was only afterwards I thought oh my God what have I just done, look well if he'd have had a knife, I'd have never stood a chance but my natural reaction is towards the staff, which I think we'd all be the same.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'when Manera had that guy and he was a bit funny with her I sat with my finger on my buzzer and my heart was going like that all the time and I thought, cause I thought he's going to start, and I thought his dad's going to be of no use, his dad would probably just say, 'Calm down'! And then, Peter and Tim were watching as well. Once you get an awkward one, if you look round, everyone is taking notice.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the quotes above, although the frontliners do not actually use either the term violent or aggressive, the customer behaviour above clearly *threatens* their sense of safety and so are considered violent in line with frontliners' general perceptions. The element of threat was something which I found was central to frontliners' understandings of the concept of violence. Customer violence in the ES was sometimes physical, as shown in the quotes above and this caused frontliners to feel that the possibility of it reoccurring was high. Therefore even when customer behaviour was not actually physical, the threat to customer safety was still often felt if frontliners perceived that there was the potential for behaviour to escalate into physical action. The threat against their safety was

felt to be a very real one and pervaded frontliners work lives. Hearn & Parkin (2001) summarise the importance of threat when they explain that once a violence has been carried out ‘an innocence has been lost’, whilst a ‘mere reference to that violence (verbally, by a look, or a slight movement or some other cue or other clue) may be enough to invoke and connote violence, and thus the modification of material behaviour’ (p. xii). Scott (1998) includes not only physical elements of violence, such as physical assault and abuse, but also the threat of physical abuse and assault. Equally, Leather et al (1990) stress that it is not just the actual violence which is stressful, but also the threat of violence. Brewis and Linstead (2000) emphasise that violence intimidates and invades our everyday consciousness by virtue of its possibility. The possibility of violence causes victims and potential victims to organise our lives around this possibility to become more self conscious and to learn to cope with its eventual eruption and lessen the damage of its impact. Violence which is embedded in organisational practices exerts a constant pressure on others to behave in particular ways. Brewis and Linstead (2000) compare this organisational violence to the example of the violence of a father/ husband and how his family organised their lives around his violence which they regarded as inevitable, although not predictable as to the form that it would take. They developed tactics for avoiding it, delaying it and trying to shut their ears to it. In this way the threat of violence becomes part of violence, something I found to be borne out by frontliners perceptions of this concept in my research. The following quotes highlight this notion of threat.



*'You know, I've been threatened with a knife and ... it knocks it out of you a bit, so I'm quite glad we've got a security guard. I suppose you don't always think about it happening but the threat does sort of hang over you. We generally had a lot of queues on the ground floor, and to a degree on the other floors as well, and that tends to intimidate you because if you've got a lot of people staring at you and waiting for what you're doing that puts a different reaction on the way you're dealing with clients which in turn puts a reaction on the way they're dealing with you.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

*'But that doesn't mean to say, it only needs one nasty incident and you can really shake people's, self confidence and from personal experience I never feel comfortable, you can feel the adrenalin rise straight away and you immediately think where's this gonna end?'*

(Small Village Job Centre-16-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

To summarise, within this study, the term customer violence is used in a way that is consistent with frontliners' understandings of this concept. Service workers perceived customer violence to be any customer behaviour that makes frontliners feel that their own safety is threatened. Thus this study uses this term in the same way.

#### **4 Summary and Structure**

This introductory chapter has outlined the rationale for and the research objectives of this study. The content and the structure of the proceeding ten chapters are as follows. Chapter two is contextual and explores the literature on the Employment Service, the organisation in which this study is set. Chapter three and four

review the literature on organisational violence, and emotional labour respectively, specifically focusing on the issue of coping with customer violence and emphasising the limitations in this area of study. Chapter five examines my research questions in more depth whilst chapter six focuses on my methodology, outlining the importance of qualitative methods and arguing the case for a grounded theory approach. Chapters seven to ten are data chapters. Chapter seven examines the coping methods used by frontliners which have been influenced by the formal organisational policies and procedures. Chapter eight analyses those coping strategies which stem from a more informal culture within the organisation. Chapter nine explores the differing constructions of organisational reality, that is why, when and how the different constructions of customer violence are expressed. Chapter ten considers the implications of the way that frontliners cope for the organisation. Chapter eleven is a concluding chapter which summarises the findings of the study and highlights their relevance to the literature. Subsequently, it considers the implications of the study's findings to wider contexts than that of the immediate organisation in which this research was carried out.

## **Chapter 2**

### **THE CONTEXT OF THE EMPLOYMENT SERVICE**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter aims to provide a review of the literature concerning the Employment Service (ES) in order to explain the context of my research. First, I present a broad, overall view of the literature on the welfare state. In this overview I do not aim to cover the vast array of literature, merely to provide a flavour of this context, emphasising areas relevant to the ES. For, although it is worth noting that there exist alternative views of the welfare state (such as neo-Marxist, feminist and anti-racist perspectives), this chapter does not review them, as they are not felt to be specifically relevant to this study. I do, however, outline recent political thinking behind changes to the welfare state. Following this, I offer a brief history of the ES to provide the reader with a framework within which to situate the subsequent discussions. Next, I explore the major, recent changes in the welfare state in more detail in the context of the ES. Finally, I explore the literature which examines the ES at the level of frontline interaction. It is important to note that this chapter only deals with the literature that is relevant to the period of my fieldwork which took place in 2001.



## **2. The Welfare State and Recent Thinking**

Within the last few decades, there has been widespread change throughout the welfare state. Arguably, this transformation has been in response to the rise of the New Right in the 1980s and their arguments for the necessity of change. The New Right criticised the welfare state for three major reasons: that it contributed to 'deindustrialisation'; that it had created 'disincentives'; and that it has created 'demoralisation'. These three d's linked economic, political and moral evaluations of the consequences of state welfare. They claimed to identify conditions that could only be remedied by reductions in public spending and a withdrawal from the states dominant role in social welfare (Clarke et al, 2000, Politt 1993).

These ideas formed the basis for the New Right's three major aims: 'economy, efficiency and effectiveness. Efficiency and economy were linked to the broad economic aim of reducing money spent on the public service. The desire for value for money was originally a response to the instabilities of the 1970s (Politt, 1993). However, the continuing fixation on efficiency - that is, the ability to get more output with less input - was ultimately linked with managerialism and the values this espouses. Economy, efficiency and effectiveness became the new buzzwords, although in reality economy and efficiency were concentrated on far more than effectiveness (Flynn, 1997).

Government desire for efficiency and economy led to a tighter control of civil service spending at all levels, including macro, middle and micro (Politt, 1993). Many studies have viewed the

tighter spending of the 1980s and 1990s as dismantling core features of the welfare state (Cochrane et al 2001). These arguments have a tendency to examine public spending on welfare in a negative light, emphasising the refusal to increase public spending in face of the rising need resulting from higher unemployment. However, Politt (1993) argues that analysis of detailed figures show that the slowing growth rate of social expenditure began not with the Thatcherite but with the preceding Labour government. The amount spent on unemployment rose significantly due to the high unemployment of the mid-'70s onwards. However, the average real benefit paid to each individual declined (Politt 1993). The Conservative government also decreased the spread of payments by redefining who was unemployed and qualified for benefits. Since 1997, the 'New' Labour government has followed this trend.

Such recent major criticisms and claims about the welfare state have been hotly contested, with studies of the welfare state's economic and social consequences having raised serious doubts about the validity of New Right thinking (Cochrane et al, 2001). Nevertheless, one important outcome has been that the New Right has shifted the way in which the welfare state is thought about. This represents a cultural shift in which, instead of being seen as an investment (as previously), the welfare state has become to be seen as socially dangerous and unproductive (Cochrane et al, 2001). To combat this, the New Right stressed the importance of breaking up the State's monopoly over welfare provision to make room for the involvement of private and voluntary sectors, resulting in greater choice for the consumers.



These assumptions about the welfare state resulted in major change, which can be roughly categorised into three main areas: 1. the introduction of market forces; 2. the rise of managerialism; and 3. the relationship between the state and the service recipient. The New Labour government of 1997 was as energetic as its Conservative predecessors in its' pursuit of a new welfare system and these trends have largely been continued. It is to these developments that I now turn to and explore in greater detail. First, I will provide a broad overview of the trends within the public sector, before examining them closer within the context of the ES.

### **3. Market Forces and the Welfare State**

Many authors have emphasised the importance of the public sector shift to market-like mechanisms, using terms such as quasi-markets (Bartlett et al, 1994) 'new welfare pluralism' (Rao, 1996) or the 'new mixed economies' of welfare (Johnson, 1995). Most writers perceive the introduction of market forces into the welfare state as a bid to improve efficiency, choice and responsiveness (Barlett et al, 1994), although some view it as a way to remove accountability from the government (Flynn, 1997). Market forces within the welfare state have been extensively debated (Bartlett et al, 1994; Flynn, 1997) and both praised and criticised. The merits tend to be seen as productive and allocative efficiency. The criticisms stem from the idea that the market forces are an artificial creation and therefore the conditions necessary for efficiency cannot be established. Alongside the use of market forces, the public sector also borrowed management practices and ideologies from the private sector.

#### **4. The Rise of Managerialism**

The assumption that the private sector and its methods were infinitely superior to those of the public sector led to the use of management methods and the adoption of management ideologies (Flynn, 1997). Many writers have illustrated the move to a managerial state as a central element of change within the welfare state. According to this view, the structures, cultures and processes of the welfare state have been aligned around managerial power, ways of calculating and forms of control (Clarke & Newman, 1997, Newman, 1998). Other writers have focused on the use of managerial methods employing terms such as ‘managerialism’ or ‘New Public Management’. (Hood 1991 and 1995; Politt 1993, 1995; Clarke & Newman 1997; Walsh, 1995)

Politt (1993) defines managerialism as rooted in a general set of ideas about how people behave. The first element is that people always act rationally and in their own self-interest whether they work in either the private or public sector. They respond to various incentives and cannot be trusted to work in interests other than their own. This assumption contains a strong element of Taylorism. If this logic is followed then the consequences are that providers capture the services for themselves and the users are disempowered. Therefore, continuing with this logic, the power of providers has to be reduced using incentives to motivate employees to work in the favour of the government or the users.

The second part of managerialism is that competition is the main incentive to improve performance; fear of going out of business or losing a job is the main motivation for individuals (Politt 1993). In



this respect, monopoly in any form is undesirable, especially public monopolies that allow costs to stay high and quality low. Managers need an incentive to improve quality and keep cost low (Flynn, 1997).

The third aspect of managerialism is that managers should have the right to high discretionary powers in order to manage (Politt 1993). Any force which reduces that right, such as trade union rights or professional organisation, should be removed. The right to manage is seen as the right of managers to give orders and for them to be obeyed. It is not seen as the right to develop staff, encourage commitment, form teams and instil loyalty. It is an instrumental view of management implying hierarchy and authority (Flynn, 1997).

The fourth belief is that the private sector is innately superior to the public sector. If the public sector is gaining on the competition, it is perceived that the competition is organised in such a way that the public sector had gained an advantage, not that it is perceived to be superior (Flynn, 1997).

An essential element of managerialism is the decentralisation of hierarchy in order to allow managers freedom to manage. There is much writing which focuses on the de-centralising aspects that have occurred within the public sector. Much of this writing focuses on the use of contracts (Consadine, 2000; Harrison, 1993; Sako, 1992; Flynn, 1997) and performance related initiatives (Jackson, 1995) as part of the de-centralisation process. Some authors point to the tightening of centralised control as occurring alongside this process of de-centralisation (Hoggett, 1996). Although many writers emphasise performance targets as a



strategy of hands-off rather than hands-on control, Hoggett (1996) argues that this is not the case. He highlights the increased centralised control brought by these measures and argues that, despite several characteristics which would suggest a movement to post-bureaucratic control, these are in fact neo-Taylorist and a move towards formalisation and increased control.

The shift towards managerialism has been supported by the adoption of the terminology and ideology of the 'customer' (Clarke, 1997). This will now be discussed.

### **5. Relationship between the State and the Service Recipient**

Writers on the public sector who emphasise consumerism (Harrow & Shaw, 1992; Potter, 1994) argue that the idea of the customer has become a focus in the public sector, representing a shift towards service orientation (Wilcocks & Harrow, 1992). Some have emphasised the new position of choice whilst others have stressed that this is only an illusion (Flynn, 1997). The language of consumerism now permeates most major public sector documents (Harrow & Shaw, 1992). Harrow & Shaw (1992) point to the different connotations implied by the use of the term 'customer'. They give the example (amongst others) of the 'claimants' and 'clients' being perceived as dependants whereas the term 'customer' has connotations of the direct payer. The use of the term customer cannot really be attributed to any political regime; rather it is located with a much deeper set of societal values which revolve around the ideology of customer sovereignty (Du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Baudrillard, 1998; Korczynski, 2002). Writers such as Gabriel & Lang (1995) argue that consumerism has

become 'the unchallenged ideology of our times' (p.1). According to this ideology, the consumer is sovereign, evoking the idea of the royalty to be served who is 'god-like' and 'triumphant' (Gabriel & Lang, 1995: p.1). To summarise, it is clear that the customer has become a driving force within the public sector (Cohen, Musson & Duberly, 2000).

Much of the writing on the concept of the 'customer in welfare' has been critical, with writers emphasising the limited nature of consumer power in welfare. Politt (1993) points out that, at its most trivial, a customer care approach is limited to providing a welcoming attitude - for example, a smile and a welcoming reception area. Whilst this is pleasant, it makes little difference to the actual service.

Other writers are concerned with ideas that have been termed 'the Third Way' (usually by New Labour). This is a philosophy of citizenship that combines notions of rights and duties. It is often argued that such citizen rights provide a stronger base for welfare claims than consumer rights (see discussions in Butcher, 1995; Clarke & Newman, 1997; Clarke, 1998; Giddens, 1998 & 2000; Rao 1996). Equally, some writers stress how the state has diminished citizenship rights and made them more contingent. It is claimed that the state exercises more power over its citizens (or at least troublesome sections of them), while transferring responsibilities to them for their own well-being and good behaviour (Clarke et al, 2000). Dwyer's (1998) discussion of 'conditional citizenship' highlights the ways in which citizens are expected to perform 'responsibly' in order to be eligible for welfare benefits and services. Writers (such as Bauman, 1988; Dean & Melrose, 1998; Jones & Novak, 1999) explain the



disintegration of the welfare state as an attempt by the state to absolve itself of social responsibilities, whilst transferring them to other agencies such as private enterprise, voluntary bodies, new partnerships, individuals and families. For example, Bauman (1998) talks of how 'the new poor' have been rendered responsible for their predicament and become more socially and politically marginalised as the state withdraws support.

## **6. The Employment Service: A Brief History**

Before examining the three major changes outlined above within the context of the ES, I feel that it is useful to give a brief history of the ES in order to aid understanding of the context.

The first major post-war reforms of the then 'manpower policy' (Price, 2000) led to the creation of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). The MSC was created with the intention of modernising an inadequate industrial training system and a disdained network of local Unemployment Benefit Offices, which provided cash benefits for the unemployed and a free but primitive job-broking service. This led to the introduction of a new national network of high street 'Job Centres' which provided employment advice and assistance services for clients and employers. Training programmes were also devised to help young people leaving school without adequate qualifications (Price, 2000). Even at this early stage, some of the training and employment programmes were contracted out by the MSC. This process was accelerated with the mass unemployment of the 1980s and, consequently, the need for large-scale job creation (Finn, 2003).

After the Conservatives gained power for a further term in 1987, the MSC was abolished and a new Employment Service Executive Agency was created. This had the task of integrating the then separate Jobcentres and the Unemployment Benefits Agency. The training responsibilities of the MSC were now reassigned to a national network of private companies which took the form of 82 Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) in England and Wales and twenty two Local Enterprise Companies in Scotland. They were designed to give employers a dominant role in the local design and delivery of training and enterprise programmes.

TECs had financial control of the youth and adult training programmes and a maze of other smaller programmes and they were supposed to stimulate a 'massive' training effort amongst employers seen as vital for expanding the economy (HMSO, 1988: p.59). However, there were several serious criticisms of the TECs: firstly, the TECs directors became frustrated as they claimed that they were managing programmes for the unemployed rather than revolutionising in-work training (Bennett et al, 1994). They also became frustrated with the prescriptive nature of the government contracts which prevented them from redesigning and customising their local training programmes. The system of funding not only meant that they accumulated huge trading reserves but also encouraged the TECs to concentrate on the readily-available jobs and spend less time on more difficult placements (Finn, 2003).

Influenced by these criticisms, when 'New' Labour came to power in 1997 they abolished the TECs and replaced them with broader partnerships of the public sector based Learning and Skills Councils, which are responsible for the dissipation of funds for all post-compulsory education and training apart from universities.



These councils are different to the TECs in that they do not have the capacity to accumulate surpluses, but they are similar in that they deliver their programmes by contracting with a diverse range of public, private and voluntary organisations (Finn 2003).

The Labour government devised a series of 'New Deal' programmes which the Employment Service was to implement. This approach involved the creation of frontline New Deal personal advisors, contracting with a broad range of public, voluntary and private sector organisations for the delivery of new services and employment training options. Finn (2003) points out that the senior managers saw this as an opportunity to modernise and rebuild the Employment Service's credibility with the unemployed, employers and agencies (p. 5).

Although New Labour gave the ES the lead role in implementing the New Deal, it also invited large employment agencies to bid for contracts for certain New Deal programmes, starting with The New Deal for Young People and then expanding it out to other areas of the unemployed New Deal Schemes. In 2002, around ten percent of New Deal provision for the unemployed was delivered through the private sector (Finn, 2003).

Around six months after my fieldwork, the Job Centre and Benefits Agency were merged to form Job Centre Plus. Job Centre Plus inherited a partnership culture which has since been expanded to work with a broad range of service providers and agencies both at national and local levels including but not exclusively contract work. In 2002, Job Centre Plus was reported to have contracts with over 1000 private, voluntary and public sector organisations

(W&PSC, 2002) and, by 2003, it was estimated that this 'market' involved contracts worth about £1 billion per annum (Finn, 2003).

## **7. Major Trends Reflected within the Employment Service**

Earlier in section three, I outlined three major trends within the welfare state: 1. the Introduction of Market Forces; 2. the Rise of Managerialism; and 3. the Relationship between the state and the citizen. These have significant effects on the Employment Service and will now be discussed in more detail below.

### **The Introduction of Market Forces and the Employment Service**

Reforms in the Employment Service not only led to the adoption of private sector management methods and philosophies (Kirckpatrick & Martinez Lucio, 1995; Fairbrother 1994, 1996a and 1996b), but also to the contracting of private sector organisations to deliver various labour market programmes.

From its creation by the Conservatives, the ES sought to achieve annual efficiency savings through a combination of market testing, contracting out, cost reviews and other techniques such as business process re-engineering (Fletcher, 1997). This challenged traditional bureaucratic practices and absorbed the energies of senior ES managers. However, despite the Conservative inclination towards privatisation, the National Employment Service remained as a public agency. Finn (2003) argues that this was a testimony to the agency's high performance and achievement. Although private



sector techniques were used in the way in which the organisation operated, and the delivery of central aspects of the service were privatised, the Conservatives did retain the ES as a public sector agency.

Despite the election of a New Labour government in 1997, the use of private sector organisations continued. Although New Labour gave the ES the lead role in implementing welfare reform, it still attempted to harness expertise and efficiency gains through use of the private sector. In particular, it encouraged the involvement of large private employment agencies, which, despite having become major players in the low skills market, had little direct participation in the provision of programmes for the unemployed (Finn, 2003).

The first step in this direction was the call for private sector bids to run Labour's flagship programme, the New Deal for Young People, in two out of the 144 local delivery units. This number has slowly been increased, so that about ten per cent of New Deal provision for the unemployed is now delivered through the private sector (Finn, 2003).

The private recruitment industry, temporary work agencies and a diverse range of other organisations have expanded in order to both keep up with the changing labour market and to deliver the active labour market programmes that successive governments have introduced to combat unemployment (Thuy et al, 2001). From the discussion above, it is possible to see that the trend towards privatisation throughout the public sector has certainly been influential within the ES and is constantly gathering speed.

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principle of devolution to decision-takers nearest the action' and thus 'better service for people who rely on their services and better value for money for the taxpayer' (Portillo, 1993). Price (2000) argues that officials from the ES enjoy greater influence under the agency arrangement than under their previous status as a division of the department. This is due to greater authority to control programmes, free of direct intervention by departmental executives.

Management was further devolved within the ES through the development of the whole person concept, a notion which has been further developed by New Labour. This idea stemmed from a desire to increase the customer service orientation and aimed to simplify benefit collection for the service recipient (Price 2000). In line with the whole person concept, the Conservative government developed the 'one stop' concept, which involved a move from specialised to integrated teamwork where, theoretically, staff were supposed to be empowered and work with greater autonomy. Management layers were stripped out, creating devolved teams supervised by team leaders whose autonomy, though in fact limited, seemed quite radical in comparison with the days of the civil service culture (Foster and Hoggett, 1999). Foster & Hoggett (1999) argue that, at least with the Benefits Agency, local management autonomy produced variations in the organisation of work; and they stress the importance of exploring the local dimension.

Many of the changes in working practices and structure have, at least rhetorically, been aimed at achieving the empowerment of employees. However, despite this rhetoric, there have been numerous criticisms lobbied at the de-centralisation of

management. Hoggett (1996) argues that, in practice employee empowerment has led to work intensification, resulting in widespread stress. Foster & Hoggett (1999) sum this contradiction up nicely when they write about the Benefits Agency, an organisation that is similar to, and has inextricable links with, the ES: 'Empowerment for many managers was a double edged sword: greater discretion and autonomy in decision making were constantly reigned in by centrally controlled budgets' (p.32). Without being able to offer increased rewards to its staff either financially or by career progression, managers were constantly under pressure. Foster and Hoggett (1999) note that this threatened the collective good will that was the lynchpin which enabled the organisation to survive. This point emphasises the importance of informal and collective culture, a key element which is highlighted in my research.

The devolvement of management through the stripping of management layers has also been criticised due to the limitation of promotion opportunities for basic staff and their supervisors. Due to this, the new HRM practices had an ambivalent affect on employees, combining real improvements in the quality of the working environment with heightened exploitation (Hoggett, 1996).

Yet another criticism of de-centralisation is the question of whether autonomy was actually gained by the ES staff in the devolvement of management layers. Equally, the extent to which the government has handed over any real power to ES senior management is also open to question. Although in theory the formal, semi-independent status of the ES as a 'Next Steps' institution would seem to give much autonomy to senior



management, in practice the heavy use of explicit and detailed contracts and performance indicators has fostered a form of Whitehall micro management (Hoggett, 1996). Consadine (2000) points out that in the UK a sophisticated system of contracts used at both the top and the bottom of the ES has the effect of standardising the behaviours of both staff and clients. Contracts reorder the relationships which this formal de-coupling appears to have made more open-ended. Formal agreements are used as a central means to identify tasks, goals and costs. Public institutions such as the ES are understood as bundles of implicit, spoken and written contracts (Ormsby, 1998) and 'organisations can be regarded as stable networks of contracts which govern transactions, enabling co-ordination and control' (Ciborra, 1996: 132).

Similar to the role of contracts, performance management and monitoring are seen as another way that the centre can increase its control, whilst actually de-centralising. Each year the Executive Agency of the ES has to agree detailed budget and performance programmes with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Price 2000). These mandated government targets are sub-divided down to each district and then each Job Centre. These targets constitute performance criteria upon which all staffing and other resource decisions are made (Price, 2000). The increasing use of performance indicators within the ES, coupled with the strong influence of the Ideology of NPM New Public Management set the scene for the introduction of performance-related pay (PRP) (Foster and Hoggett 1999).

One of the aims of PRP was to quantify the volume of work being done by individuals and ultimately measure and improve their



efficiency. Figures produced by PRP could also be used to measure the relative productivity between the separate Job Centres (Price, 2000). This mechanical system was accompanied by a more personalised annual individual performance review. Foster & Hoggett (1999) explain that the use of PRP in the Benefits Agency exposed contradictions in management aims: 'On the one hand, staff were encouraged to work collectively, but on the other, they introduced the PRP on an individual basis' (p. 29).

Assessments of the introduction of PRP in the public service sector have on the whole been critical (Foster & Hoggett 1999). Many regard PRP as a mechanism used to bring about cultural change in public services, aimed at breaking down traditional occupational identities and undermining the public sector ethos (Mabey & Salaman, 1995; Rubery, 1996). Others have seen it as central in securing employee compliance to change, stressing that individual social relations are a necessary part of the symbolic shift to the adoption of HRM and TQM practices in the public sector (Fairbrother, 1996b; Kirckpatrick & Martinez Lucio, 1995; Gagnon, 1996).

Although many writers emphasise performance targets as a strategy of hands-off rather than hands-on control, Hoggett (1996) finds that this is not necessarily so. He highlights the increased centralised control brought by these measures and argues that, despite several characteristics which would suggest a movement to post-bureaucratic control, these are in fact neo-Taylorist and a move towards formalisation, and thus represent an increase in control.

## **The Relationship between Service Recipient and the Employment Service**

The broad trends which reflect the relationship between state and service recipient can be seen throughout the ES. Firstly, the service recipient is portrayed as a responsible citizen, reflecting the move towards the conditionality of benefits. Secondly, the service recipient is re-named as ‘customer’, a concept borrowed from the private sector ideology. Each will now be considered in turn.

Since the previous Conservative government, many of the policies directed and implemented in the ES and Benefits Agency have a spirit of conditionality at the core. From 1985 onwards, the driving force shifted from the labour market transparency model (concerned with matching people to vacancies) to a benefit control model (Price, 2000). This change has been termed the ‘stricter benefit regime’ (Finn, 2003; Price, 2000) and has continued as a focus of New Labour policies.

The spirit of conditionality was introduced to the unemployment benefits for the first time post-war, with the 1989 Security Act. Firstly, this meant that the unemployed had to ‘actively seek work’ in each week for which they claimed benefit (Price, 2000). This translated as taking all the appropriate steps such as applying for jobs, looking at vacancies in the jobcentre, in newspapers and magazines. ES officials were to check up on people’s activity at ‘Restart’ interviews and at other times. If the level of activity seemed inadequate, there would be a written warning and a further interview, after which the claim might be suspended and go into adjudication. Disallowance was only allowed for two weeks (Price 2000). Ministers argued that merely requiring claimants to be



‘available for work’ was not enough, since case law said that they did not have to look for it. Opposing critics argued that ministers were in effect reintroducing the hated ‘genuinely seeking work’ provision of the 1920s (Price, 2000).

The Conservatives later went on to take the conditionality of benefit further with the implementation of a policy of ‘Project Work’. This was the first post-war compulsory work programme where those who had been unemployed for more than two years had to undertake a spell of work on a benefit + £10 basis (Price 2000). This policy, often termed ‘workfairism’(Price, 2000) was quickly withdrawn, but the policy of conditionality remained, even with the arrival of a New Labour government.

New Labour introduced what it calls the ‘Third Way’. This has been articulated as a philosophy of citizenship that combines notions of rights and duties, most explicitly stated in Tony Blair’s (1995) *Spectator Lecture* on ‘The rights we enjoy, the duties we owe’. In light of this, Labour has adopted a more conditional approach to social security, retaining the Tories Job Seekers Allowance and promoting its New Deal, which stresses the obligations individuals owe in claiming their right to welfare (Dwyer, 1998). This is a policy break with the long-held conviction that benefit entitlement should be unconditional, replacing it with a much tougher and more market-orientated approach (King & Wickam-Jones, 1998).

However, while there was a prevailing spirit of conditionality, the government has so far limited the compulsory element in conditional welfare to punishing the unemployed who refuse New Deal opportunities. One of the options offered has to be accepted



for the claimant to remain on benefit (Powell, 1999). It is often argued that the New Deal is punitive in that it does not offer a fifth option of not taking any of the preferred choices. This is a decisive break with Labour's past policies and has laid the policy open to accusations of workfairism. Gray (1998) underlines the fact that the sanction of loss of benefit for refusing work has been continued in the New Deal. Meager (1998: 39) indicates that 'scheme participation as a condition for benefit' is the prime feature of 'workfare approaches'. When initially devised, the Labour Party was quick to deny that the new proposal amounted to workfare. However, rather than benefit entitlement being unconditional, the core of social democratic citizenship, New Labour claimed that rights must be balanced by responsibilities (Deacon, 1997a). By 1999, the penalties for those who refused welfare for work were increased (King & Wickham-Jones, 1998). Benefit claimants would have to attend interviews, would have to seek paid employment and have to take any offers of paid work. The 1999 Welfare Reform and Pensions Bill outlined stricter conditions for the receipt of benefits, especially for disabled people and lone benefits (Price 2000).

In respect to this, it is important to point out that it is the frontliners that actually interface with the customer and that it is they who have to implement the conditionality of benefit, by informing the service recipient that they will not be getting their benefit money. It is also the frontliners who have to take the consequences of this, which may include an upset, angry, aggressive and even violent customer. In fact the use of the term 'customer' has only been a recently introduced to the ES. This is a concept borrowed from private sector ideology and is a reflection of the attempt to promote a 'customer culture' (Foster & Hoggett, 1999). Although the use of

the customer within the ES is an interesting and significant area of study, there has not been much written on the subject. Exceptions include Foster and Hoggett (1999) and Rosenthal & Peccei (2003) (this is discussed further on in this chapter).

Although the early introduction of the one-stop/whole person concept was an attempt to tailor the service to make life easier for the benefit recipient, the customer service mentality has increased significantly since the election of New Labour. David Blunkett, secretary of state for Education and Employment from 1997-2001, initiated a review of the values of the service. The service produced a statement of values, which emphasised the customer service ethos within the ES. These statements included:

‘We will put customers first in all we do’.

‘We will treat jobseekers fairly, while applying the conditions for payment of JSA’.

‘We will create a welcoming, accessible and comfortable environment in Jobcentres and other ES offices.’.

‘We will make our services more readily available to jobseekers and employers’.

(Blunkett, 1997 :315).

The increasing integration of benefit provision has been carried out with the idea of ease of use for the ‘customer’ in mind. The one-stop concept has led to an integration of the benefit providers. Examples include the initial creation of the DSS, the merging of unemployment benefits into job seekers allowance, and the merging of the Benefits Agency and the ES into Job Centre Plus (Price, 2000). Kirkpatrick and Martinez Lucio (1995) argue that certain rhetoric, such as the terms ‘customer service’ and ‘quality’, are used to legitimise and promote political intervention and



specific modes of management control and working practices. They argue that the 'one-stop' concept was an example of this.

Although the use of the customer within the ES is both significant and interesting little has been written on the subject. Exceptions include Foster and Hoggett (1999) and Rosenthal & Peccei (2003). Foster & Hoggett (1999) argue that the introduction of the use of the term 'customer' instead of 'claimant' within the Benefits Agency was largely met with cynicism. Their study, though set within the Benefits Agency, can be considered as relevant to this review in so far as the Benefits Agency is linked with, and is similar to the ES. Foster & Hoggett (1999) highlight the differences between benefit customers and those in the private sector when they argue that the claimant / customer has no choice and possesses no power of sanction. They draw on data to illustrate the fact that staff do not subscribe to this idea of the 'customer'. In fact, in their data, the increased 'customer service' focus of the ES especially is highlighted when a frontliner explains of working in a benefit agency: 'I'm used to the customer culture because I used to work in a Job Centre, but I'm cynical about the change in language. It often confuses claimants' (p.24). This begs the question of whether frontliners within the ES subscribe to the new use of 'customer' and in fact what effect the introduction of this rhetoric has on their working lives. Equally, this throws up the issue that although the recipients are named 'customers', they still differ from the idea of customer in the private sector. This highlights the contradiction that may occur between political and organisational goals. The role of policing and benefit control (Price, 2000) on the one hand clashes with the idea of customer service, and ease and convenience for the customer on the other (Foster & Hoggett, 1999).



Rosenthal & Peccei (2003) explored the idea of customer within the ES and found that this concept was full of ambiguity and contradiction. They also found that the ‘myth’ of customer sovereignty within the ES appears to reside more at the level of policy and senior management than on the frontline itself (Rosenthal & Peccei, 2003). The concept of customer within the ES is relevant to my research as it necessarily affects the nature of the frontline interaction and thus will impact on how frontliners feel about and cope with their work.

### **8. The Street-Level Bureaucrat: Down on the Frontline**

There is considerable literature that deals with the behaviour of lower level agency staff (Lipsky 1976 and 1980; Prottas, 1979; Brintall, 1981). As would be expected, there is only a small part of this literature which deals specifically with the frontline interaction of ES staff. It is to this small area of writings that I now turn.

Blau (1955) and Prottas (1979) explore the service interaction between ES frontliners and service recipients in detail in Canada and the USA. These writings can be situated within a general body of writings on the behaviour of the lower level of public agency staff, which have been termed ‘street-level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1976; Prottas, 1979; Brintall, 1981). Lipsky defines street-level bureaucrats as ‘those men and women who, in their face to face encounters with citizens, ‘represent’ government to the people’ (p.196). Specifically, he asserts that ‘a street-level bureaucrat is defined as a public employee whose work is characterised by the following three conditions’:

1. He is called upon to interact constantly with citizens in the regular course of his job.
2. Although he works within a bureaucratic structure, his independence on the job is fairly extensive. One component of this independence is discretion in making decisions; but independence is not limited to discretion. The attitude and general approach of the street-level bureaucrat toward the citizen may affect the individual significantly. These considerations are broader than the term discretion suggests.
3. The potential impact on citizens with whom he deals is fairly extensive.

(Lipsky 1978, p 196).

As noted above, Blau (1955) and Prottas (1974) are part of the literature that deals with 'street level bureaucrats' in the exploration of the service interaction in the ES in Canada and the USA. Prottas examines the power relations and argues that both sides have a certain amount of power within the interaction. He finds that the service worker has power over the client in that they are the point of information for the client and can categorise them for benefits (or not) accordingly. He explains that the rules within the ES are such that frontliners can manoeuvre around them to a certain extent and so have a discretionary amount of autonomy and power. Indeed, a common theme throughout this literature is the high level of personal discretion that exists within the frontline. It is frequently argued that this independence allows staff to make public policy, in the sense that they affect what actually happens to the recipients, rather than what the official policy makers intended to happen (Lipsky, 1978; Brintall, 1981; Wunsch et al, 1981; Prottas, 1979). Equally, as pointed out by Lipsky, clients of public services are largely non-voluntary which further adds to the frontliners' power in this setting. He highlights that clients cannot choose the public services to which they are subjected; they must



accept the police force, schools and courts. If they are poor, this list will more than likely extend to the welfare programmes, public housing and other benefit programmes. Lipsky further explains that street-level bureaucracies often supply essential services that clients cannot obtain elsewhere, either because they cannot afford them or because the bureaucrats have a monopoly on the service. Finally, Lipsky mentions that although potential clients in a sense volunteer for welfare, their participation in the welfare system is hardly voluntary if they have no alternatives. He points out that the alternative to applying for the welfare system may be not to eat, which is hardly an alternative at all.

However, Prottas (1974), in his study, asserts that the client also has a certain amount of leverage. He contends that for the client the meeting with the employee is fairly infrequent and so therefore they can stand a fair amount of tension on this occasion. In contrast, the employee does it day in, day out, and so cannot stand such tension all the time. Prottas asserts that this will lead to the frontliner compromising to fulfil the demands of clients in order to reduce conflict and get through the day. He stresses that we are all very dependent on the observation of certain social norms in our interpersonal encounters. Violation of these rituals can be threatening and distasteful. He argues that the client can involve psychological costs as well as benefits which can make the interaction negative or positive for the frontliner. It may be noted that Prottas explored this relationship before the implementation of customer service ideals within the ES. However, it is likely that this element will only further add to the client's leverage in the way Prottas describes.



Alongside the client, Prottas emphasises the difficult situation in which the frontliner works. He argues that numerous rules combined with difficult clients means that the service workers face an environment which often asks more of him/her than he/she has resources with which to respond. He explains that there is often conflict involved when dealing with a client. The client wishes to see that his/her understanding of the case prevails, whereas the street-level bureaucrat wishes to obtain the bureaucratically relevant information in a minimal amount of time. This situation is further complicated by the fact that clients find it difficult to provide information in a bureaucratically correct form. The nature of the ES frontliners work means that they are not engaged in dry as dust administration, but in affecting the hopes and fears, the emotions and self-respect of millions of citizens (Gibbs, 1910). Maconachie (1993) argues that although ES frontliners in Australia used to focus on bureaucratic skills, after recent changes, personal attributes such as empathy have become a requirement of the job and not a personality capacity. This is similar to an argument asserted by Hochschild's (1983) which is discussed in chapter four. This may be reflective of a move towards a more customer-focused service.

A further difficulty added to the frontliners' situation is the contradiction that is inherent in the frontliners' role. On the one hand, the frontliner is supposed to police the benefit to make sure that the recipient is genuinely available for work. On the other hand, they are supposed to apply the customer service ethic and 'create a welcoming and accessible comfortable environment in Job Centres and other ES offices' (David Blunkett, 1997, 'Statement of ES Values'). Given this working context, it is no surprise that frontliners often suffer negative consequences from

their work. There is much literature on the effect of unemployment on the well-being of both UK and overseas occupational groups (Allatt & Yeandle, 1992; Fryer & Payne, 1986; Leanna & Feldman, 1992; Winefield, 1995), however, there is not much literature on the well-being of staff members that work with the unemployed (much less how they cope with the stress). More than 18 years ago, Kelvin & Jarett (1985) acknowledged this lack of focus on the frontliners who delivered employment service relative to the individuals who were recipients of the service. Patton & Goddard (2003) have more recently acknowledged this finding and highlight the fact that this is still the case, despite the billions of pounds spent annually on programmes to help the unemployed. The few studies that have been conducted (e.g Goddard et al 2000; Dockery & Stromback, 2001) have found high levels of emotional exhaustion and high incidents of psychological distress in workers, although samples were taken from workers in Australia and not the UK.

Dockery & Stromback (2001) conducted a study on ES service workers in the Australian ES, three years after its privatisation. They found that frontliners suffered high levels of burnout (in comparison to other surveys of Australian workers, such as Graetz, 1993). These results were also consistent with the results taken from a national sample of employment service workers who were surveyed in 1999 (Goddard et al, 2000). Taken together, these results leave little doubt that servicing large caseloads of unemployed individuals can be, for many individuals, a very stressful and psychologically distressing activity. They found that for approximately half of the frontliners surveyed, significant work-related pathologies are likely to arise. Their results were similar to results from workers who are employed in 'stressful



occupations such as community based health workers' (Prosser et al, 1996).

Given the distress suffered by service workers, methods of coping have become increasingly important. There is little written on the ways that frontliners cope, a surprising omission given the context of their work. Two important exceptions to this are the studies carried out by Prottas (1979) and Blau (1995). In his book, 'People Processing', Prottas argues that frontliners will need to find ways of coping with the difficult situations in which they work. He briefly explores the ways that frontliners *can* cope, although he does not explore the methods of coping in-depth. He argues that frontliners categorise clients according to their preferences in order to make the job easier. This is similar to a finding of Blau (1995), who argues that frontliners create informal typologies of clients as a method of coping on the job.

Prottas (1979) also highlights pre-emptive measures of coping with the work, such as giving dates for clients to return which were earlier than they needed, meaning that they could be more lenient when clients failed to meet their deadline. This was also connected to a feeling of power, of being able to sneak somebody through to be interviewed that really should not get through and help them get a job, or being able to decide whether they will wait days or weeks.

In his study of the bureaucracy of the ES in the US, Blau (1955) argues that relaxing, short informal talks with colleagues helped to relieve the stress brought about by conflicts with clients. Some supervisors recognised that these informal chats were a way of relieving stress and actually improved the efficiency of work. Most private discussions in the office dealt with clients. One interviewer



accurately characterised the two topics that were most popular: 'Either it's a funny incident, something an applicant said or did that's supposed to be hilarious or else it's 'look what that applicant did to me' (P.75). Complaining about or ridiculing clients whose actions had irritated the interviewer released aggressive feeling in a harmless fashion. This helped prevent the aggression provoked by a client being placed on subsequent clients.

Although Blau has largely focused on the negative effect of frontliner ridicule of clients, he does acknowledge that this can be a way of coping which serves to absolve the frontliner of guilt. He claims that the telling of jokes was a way of removing group tension and guilt surrounding benefit recipients.

Lipsky (1976) examines coping strategies for the street-level bureaucrat in general. He argues that when confronted with such a complex environment of uncertainty, individuals will develop bureaucratic mechanisms to make the task easier. He looks at how individuals cope with three major problems:

1. When available resources are inadequate.
2. When work proceeds in circumstances where there exists clear physical and or psychological threat and /or the bureaucrat's authority is regularly challenged.
3. When expectations about job performance are ambiguous and or contradictory and include attainable idealised dimensions. (Lipsky, 1976: 198).

Lipsky shows how routinization of tasks, simplifications and other bureaucratic mechanisms help frontliners cope. This literature review is largely concerned with the second problem Lipsky highlights: work in circumstances where there exists a clear

physical or psychological threat. Lipsky (1980 and 1976) points to a number of coping mechanisms that can deal with these difficult aspects of the work. Firstly, he argues that mechanisms are developed that reduce potential threat by minimising bureaucratic involvement. He uses the example of policemen being tutored in how to distinguish cases that should be settled on the spot with minimal police intervention. Alternatively, street-level bureaucrats may totally avoid involvement through avoidance strategies. For example, police don't report incidents in ghetto neighbourhoods where the victim won't prosecute; as violence becomes a way of life, to report such an incident would result in a loss of time and thus reduce police efficiency in other areas. Lipsky also explores how simplifications are used to manage the threat of violence. He explains that policemen will assume that when a suspect moves he is reaching for a weapon because this simplification helps reduce the potential physical threat. Lipsky further asserts that street-level bureaucrats will exaggerate the threat and danger so that they can invoke stress reduction mechanisms more often (although these acts may actually bring on the actions that they feared). Since bureaucrats' superiors will have greater knowledge of the dangers accompanying the job, exaggerating publicly will also reduce the imposition of official sanctions. In addition, bureaucrats feel that the difficulties of their job will be appreciated more by the public generally and their clients specifically, to the extent that any failures can be attributed as stemming from lack of tools, resources, etc., rather than themselves. Lipsky suggests this is akin to teachers publicising about inadequate resources.

Lipsky also emphasises an important point about the constructed nature of the threat of violence. He asserts that 'the psychological reality of the threat may bear little relationship to the statistical



probability of it occurring' (p.204). For example, a teacher who is stabbed in a hallway will evoke concern from all teachers about order, regardless of the statistical insignificance of the event. The notion of threat was something which I found to be prevalent in frontliners understandings of violence (for further details see chapter one).

Acknowledging the negative side of the ES work is undoubtedly important; even so, it is crucial not to forget that much pleasure can also be gained from this type of work. Blau (1955) argues that, despite the conflict that the interactions with the public cause, these nevertheless constituted the major source of satisfaction. In an extract from his data, it is explained: 'After a while, when you have learned everything about the occupations, you're primarily interested in the people. Every person is different: that keeps it interesting' (p. 83). When asked, 'when do you get a special kick out of your job?' interviewees uniformly supplied instances involving assistance to their clientele.

Blau asserts that it was not so much the nature of the work itself, as the social reward of the clients' appreciation that interviewees found most gratifying. The exercise of discretion in dealing with clients appears to be a condition for work satisfaction of this kind. It helped the interviewer have a more interesting job and gave them a feeling of power. Blau emphasises that helping clients was a satisfying experience for officials regardless of their attitudes towards the service recipients. Interviewees who identified with these poor, unskilled workers welcomed the opportunity of assisting them in their economic struggle. However, interviewees who were condescending toward their uneducated applicants obtained satisfaction from what they felt was their relative



superiority of status. Whiddon & Martin (1989) support this argument in their paper on organisational democracy. Here, they assert that the greater discretion an American Employment Official has, the greater their work satisfaction will be.

The literature on the pleasures of the ES frontliners' work supports the literature which deals with the pleasure of emotional labour in service work (see Chapter 4). This also emphasises discretion as a condition for work satisfaction.

## **9. Conclusion**

This chapter has aimed to provide a broad, overall view of the welfare state before exploring the literature on the Employment Service in more detail. Recent widespread changes within the welfare state in general, and the ES specifically, were categorised into three main areas: 1. the introduction of market forces; 2. the rise of managerialism; and 3. the relationship between the state and the citizen. These three major changes all reflect the introduction of private sector ideologies into the public sector. Of particular interest to this study is the introduction of the concept of the 'customer' and the emphasis on service. The use of the customer service ideology will significantly affect the nature of frontline work and the ways in which frontliners cope with the perceived violent behaviour from the service recipient.

This chapter has also examined literature which focuses on the street-level interaction between frontliners and service recipients. It has considered power relations, the difficulties of the work context, ways of coping and the pleasure gained from interaction. Several

points pertinent to my research have arisen. Firstly, the negative aspects of the work context push the importance of coping strategies to centre stage. Secondly, although the difficulty of the interaction is acknowledged, the concept of violence and aggression in these encounters is conspicuous by their absence. Thirdly, the coping strategies discussed are decades old (which is a problem in such a changing context), or else they are not explored in any great depth. My research aims to help remedy these deficiencies.

## **Chapter 3.**

### **ORGANISATIONAL VIOLENCE**

#### **1. Introduction**

There is a growing body of literature on violence in the workplace. The majority of this literature particularly focuses on increasing aggression at work and the health and safety issues incurred. In this literature, the concept of 'violence' is frequently taken as an objective, unproblematic term that refers to an unacceptable level of aggression. Different definitions are debated, but it is essentially seen as an objective concept that can be defined unproblematically. However, what this literature fails to consider is that what is deemed acceptable and unacceptable and thus violent is subjective. As Sumner (1997) usefully points out:

'One man's aggression is another woman's mindless violence... one country's civilisation is another's barbarism: one country's ethnic cleansing is another's war crime'.

Thus, the difference between acceptable and unacceptable aggression, or more simply what is constituted as violent behaviour, resides not in the actual physical action, but the meaning that is attributed to that action. I have chosen, therefore, to take an interpretivist stance in arguing that the concept of violence as an objective and fixed concept is problematic and that violence is in fact something that is socially and culturally defined.



I will begin this review by briefly outlining the more positivistic literature available on violence in the service industries. Following on from this, I will consider the perception frequently privileged in this literature that dealing with violence is the responsibility of the individual. This leads into a discussion of the differing perceptions on the victims of violence, which draws upon both the positivistic and more interpretive literature. I continue by exploring the interpretivist literature in general, before finally concluding with a summary of the literature as a whole and an examination of the implications for my research.

## **2. Violence in the Service Industries**

Academic literature on violence in the service industries - specifically, aggressive behaviour against the provider of the service by the receiver of the service is mainly concerned with four areas: 1. the healthcare professions; 2. education; 3. the police force and corrective services; and 4. social work. Although there is some research on workplaces outside of these, it is mainly these four areas on which the literature concentrates. A central argument within this literature is that the level of violence is increasing and this is usually illustrated using numerical quantities. This is to be expected, as the majority of studies are quantitative and positivistic in nature, relying on the idea of 'objective' numerical measuring and analysing. Considering the subjective nature of violence, I would consider these numerical approaches to be epistemologically unsound. Another problem of this literature is that there appears to be very little effort to study individual cases in order to generate a deeper understanding of aggressive customer

behaviour within the service industry. Instead, it remains on the surface, quantitatively counting up 'hostile' incidents. Bearing these criticisms in mind, I will very briefly explore the literature on violence in the service industries, concentrating on the four major areas outlined above.

### **Violence in the Health Care Professions**

This body of literature has mushroomed over the last ten years, as is reflected in the assertion by Rippon (2000) that 'only in the past decade has the topic started to receive serious attention, and then only in the most serious cases of physical assault' (p.454). Indeed, it has mostly focused on aggression towards nurses. As with much of the literature on violence within the service industry, violence in healthcare is frequently reported as being on the increase (Lipscomb & Love, 1992; Flannery et al, 1994; Rosenthal and Edwards, 1992; Dickson et al, 1993; Winstanley and Whittington, 2002, 2004). Flannery et al (1994) argue that, in some cases, rates of injuries to nursing personnel from patient assaults exceed injuries for workers in construction, which is usually considered to be the most dangerous occupation.

Providing healthcare, then, is increasingly described as a dangerous occupation, and it may involve homicide, hostage taking, physical and sexual abuse, nonverbal intimidation and verbal threats. Many studies have focused on occupational factors which seemingly increase the risk of hostile behaviour. Providers of healthcare for the seriously mentally ill, for example, are frequently described to be the most at risk (Carmel & Hunter, 1989; Cooper & Mendonca, 1991; Diez & Rada, 1982; Dublin,



Wilson & Mercer, 1988; Hanson & Balk, 1992; Harris & Rice, 1986; Jones, 1985; Lanza, 1983; Lee, et al 1989; Levy & Hartocollis, 1976; Thackery & Bobbitt, 1990; Jenkins et al, 1998). A number have examined nurse's relationships with patient aggression (Caldwell, 1992; Lanza, 1983; Poster & Ryan, 1989; Lynch et al, 2003). Several studies (such as Aiken, 1984; Lanza, 1983; Andersen, 2003) studied patient behaviour prior to violent incidents, and raised the question if certain characteristics of nurses (behavioural and otherwise) increased the likelihood that they will suffer violence. Lanza also studied patients' characteristics as possible predictors of assault and examined the nature of any assaults.

Despite the fact that the bulk of this literature has tended to focus on nurses, there has also been research on both doctors and dentists and aggression in service work (Hobbs & Keane, 1996; Winstanley & Wittington, 2004; Tang, 2003). For doctors, the literature has been reviewed by Hobbs & Keane (1996) who concluded that the risk of suffering physical violent injury as a doctor remains low. Experience of aggressive behaviour and abuse, however, was more common. One survey of general medical practitioners found that over 60 % of them had experienced abuse or aggression by patients or their relatives over a 12-month period, with almost 20% reporting some sort of abuse at least once a month, the problem appearing to be worse in inner cities. A recent British Dental Association survey looked at violence and abuse in general dental practice over a three-year period (British Dental Association, 1997). This found that overall, 80% of practice personnel (dentist or auxiliary) had experienced some type of aggression at work. Auxiliary personnel were twice as likely to experience verbal assaults as dentists.



## **Violence in Education**

The argument that aggressive customer behaviour is increasing in the service industries is clearly visible in the literature on violence in education. Studies such as Brickman (1976) and Orpinas and Horne (2004) report that schools and colleges are becoming increasingly violent affecting students and teachers at all levels. The other key theme running throughout the literature on aggression in education is that it is discipline and not major violence that is the biggest problem. The National Association of Head Teachers (Thompson, 1990) conducted a poll of its members and found that 16% thought discipline to be an increasing problem, 28% thought it more frequent, 18 % said that pupils had attacked teachers in their schools, 3% reported that parents had been violent to teachers, 25% had received verbal abuse from children and 8 % from their parents. Houghton et al (1988) also claim that violent behaviour itself is not the main problem in schools, but that it is high frequency non-violent behaviour that is the problem.

## **Violence in the Police Force and Corrective Services**

Even though violence is perceived as an expected event in policing, it is still described as increasing in line with the other literature in this area (Breakwell, 1989; Houghton et al, 1988; Scalora, 2003). This trend is frequently coupled with the idea that the stressful effects of aggression lead policemen to leave the police force. For example, a study by Yarney (1988) found that each year police shoot over 400 civilian criminals and over 100

officers' die in the line of duty. He argued that on average 70% of officers involved in shootings leave the force within 5 years.

Such literature, similar to that on Health Care, also focuses on occupational factors which will increase the likelihood of violence. For example, Lester (1987) examined data on the murder rates of police officers in the 37 largest cities in the United States between 1970-1978. Police were more often murdered in cities where homicides, robberies and aggravated assaults involved firearms. Police are most at risk during robberies, not during domestic disputes. Use of deadly force has been shown to have serious impact on police survivors and witnesses (Anderson and Bauer, 1987; Yarney, 1988).

### **Violence in the Social Services**

In common with the majority of literature on violence in service industries, aggression in the social services is frequently perceived as on the increase (Rowlett, 1986; Strathclyde, 1986; Littlechild, 1995). Likewise, writing in this area highlights factors that are perceived as increasing the probability of violence. Rowlett (1986) argues that residential workers were more at risk than fieldworkers, as 66% of reported assaults were on residential staff. His survey also showed that as many as 5% of assaults were committed by established clients whom the social worker had known for some time; a further 10% were members of a client's family.

### **3. Individualising the Responsibility for Violence**

In the mainstay of the more positivistic literature, the onus for dealing with violence is frequently constructed as the individual service provider's responsibility. It is taken as a given that it is up to the individual to cope. Newton et al (1995) apply this idea of individualisation of responsibility to the notion of stress. They assert that by individualising the concept of stress it is less likely that the organisation and the social situation will be seen as the cause of stress. This same idea can be applied to the concept of coping with violence. In many workplaces, and in a large majority of the positivistic literature on workplace aggression, it is assumed and implied that it is the individual's responsibility to deal with the stress brought about by hostile behaviour in their jobs (as opposed to recognising the structural features which precipitate violence). For example, advice from a trade magazine for security management advises: 'The employee's own state of mind rather than the customers can give rise to hostility. Employees must be trained to recognise their own emotional state and control it.' Examples taken from the literature on violence from the four major areas already discussed (health, education, police and social Services) help illuminate the frequent individualisation of dealing with aggressive behaviour.

In healthcare, several studies have emphasised the importance of individual stress management to reduce the negative emotional impact of working with aggression and violence. Research suggests that healthcare providers are more likely to employ counselling to deal with the psychological effects of patient aggression than other employee groups (Dawson et al, 1988,



Flannery et al 1994, Michelle & Bray 1990). In education, the traditional counselling approach has also been recommended for teachers and students in the aftermath of violence (Collinson et al, 1987; Klingman, 1988; Thompson, 1990). Within writing on the police force, individual stress management techniques are also frequently proposed, (Abernathy, 1992, Sewell 1993)

Pre-incident training is also a coping method which is generally advocated in these public sector organisations and which has consequently been identified in the organisational violence literature (Blair, 1991; Dublin et al, 1988; Diez & Rada, 1982; Soloff et al, 1985; Tardiff, 1984; Tardiff & Sweillam, 1982). Although these interventions appear to focus on the customer, and thus would suggest that responsibility for dealing with aggressive behaviour would no longer be the responsibility of the frontliner, this is frequently not the case. The majority of these interventions are based on the premise of recognising the customers that are most likely to be violent and treating them carefully accordingly. Here, the onus is still on the frontliner, both to identify hostile customers and to handle them in what is seen as a suitable way.

All the examples above describe interventions with which to aid the individual dealing with aggressive behaviour and the stress that it brings. This implies that failure to deal with stress is seen as solely the individual's weakness. Here, we see how meaning is created socially and then taken as an objective 'natural' reality: powerful groups privilege their version of events over others. If taken one step further, the logical conclusion of the individualisation of the responsibility of coping with violence is that the aggressive incidents are constructed as the victim's fault.

This is an idea which is reflected in the academic literature and will now be explored.

#### **4. Social Perceptions of Victims of Violence**

Rowlett (1986) demonstrated that the assaulted often think that it is some failing in their professional skills which has made them incapable of defusing a hostile situation or attack. She explains that this idea is often encouraged by the rhetoric of employers and trainers, who suggest that once you have been on a training course in handling violence, all will be well. Guilt is sometimes generated after the practitioner is attacked more than once. In fact, it seems to be the case that some people are assaulted relatively frequently. Many who are so attacked may end up thinking that it is something about themselves which incites attack; in their eyes, they reasonably conclude that perhaps their attitude or ineptitude, and therefore guilt, seems appropriate (Rowlett, 1986). This idea that violence can somehow be blamed on the victim ties in with research on the perception of victims of aggression at a more macro, societal level.

Extensive research has been conducted into how violence against different groups is perceived by society. There has been much written on the aggressive behaviour against women committed by men (such as Wood & Roche, 2001; Berns 2001 and 1999; Chasteen, 2001; Bohner, 2001; Adams et al, 1995); violence against homosexuals (such as Richardson & May, 1999; Henley et al, 2002; Ristock, 2001); and violence against certain ethnic groups (such as Wilson, 2001; Billig, 2001; Scheufele & Brosius, 2001). To take one example, Richardson & May (1999) argue that



violence to a person is both gendered and sexualised. They assert that victim characteristics, behaviour and place of attack influence interpretative frameworks with regard to how violent behaviour is seen in that instance. In particular, they argue that there is a constant dichotomy between victimisation and culpability and that social characteristics, behaviour and place influence this. To take their first point about social characteristics, they give the instance that if violence is committed against a gay man (defined as being a social characteristic) who is showing affection to another gay man in a public space, he is less likely to be seen as an innocent victim. It is much more likely that he will be perceived as culpable in some way than if he was a heterosexual man giving affection to a woman. Equally, the aggressive behaviour itself in this first instance is more likely to be seen as intelligible and understandable than in the latter case. Applied to specifically organisational spaces such as the Employment Service, this raises the question about whether social characteristics, such as age, sex, race and job position, will play a part in the extent to which frontliners are seen as a culpable or an innocent victim.

Richardson & May (1999) further argue that behaviour affects the status of the victim. People seen as acting 'unwisely' and 'precariously' according to certain social rules are regarded as more deserving and hence culpable than someone behaving in what is considered as a safe manner. For example, a woman walking through a poor area, at night, with a short skirt is seen as more deserving of violence than a conservatively clothed male walking through the same area at the same time. This idea of culpable behaviour can be seen at the more micro level in Rowletts's (1986) research into social workers. She contends that there is a stereotype which is held by the caring professions about



those who fall prey to attack. She showed that social workers shared the belief that colleagues who were attacked were provocative, inexperienced, authoritarian, incompetent, demanding, inflexible and incapable of detecting the signs of aggression in a situation. Similar stereotypes were produced by nurses and teachers about the members of their professions who were assaulted. These stereotypes attribute blame to the victims, who were pictured as different to their colleagues. Breakwell (1989) maintains that even if people do not accept these stereotypes for themselves, they are often willing to apply it implicitly to other people. However, she asserts that people who do accept a stereotype, often then reason that they themselves are responsible for their own fate. In this way, self-awareness will breed self-blame.

Finally, Richardson & May (1999) argue that the place of violence is important. Society deems certain 'public' spaces to be more dangerous than 'private' spaces, and thus individuals frequenting these spaces are considered as more deserving of violence. Violence in one's own home, for example, creates more of an outrage than violent behaviour in the street and recipients of violence in the home are thus less likely to be constructed as culpable and more likely to be construed as an innocent victim. At the level of organisations, some occupations are seen as more dangerous than others and an individual working in these occupations should 'expect' hostile behaviour when they fill a post. Overall, the points raised by Richardson & May (1999) beg the question of how all these factors (social characteristics, behaviour and place) affect the victim status accorded frontliners in the Employment Service.

Rowlett (1986) suggests that the stereotyping of victims of violence as guilty is in part a manifestation of two biases that are fundamental to the way people explain what happens in the world. The first bias concerns what are called 'actor-observer' differences in attribution. If you do something and are asked to explain it, you are most likely to generate some explanation in terms of situational constraints or circumstances. If you watch someone do something and are then asked to explain why he or she did it, you are mostly likely to produce an explanation in terms of the person's characteristics (their motives, their personality, their background, etc). This is the actor-observer difference in its simplest form. When applied to the interpretation of a violent incident, the bias in interpretation will lead to observers' explanations in terms of characteristics of the assailant and the victim, rather than in terms of the situation or the broader societal framework (Rowlett 1986). The second bias concerns the 'just world hypothesis'. In explaining events, people seem to suppose that people deserve what they get. At some level there seems to be a notion that celestial retribution is at work (for example, a person who is mugged might be considered 'in wrong place at the wrong time').

Rowlett further suggests that the stereotyping of victims is maintained because, in attributing blame to the victim, the victim is perceived to be in control of the aggression. Violent behaviour is then not a random or uncontrollable event, but is due to professional inadequacies. This is very reassuring in that you can expect to remain safe as long as you are not inadequate. In this way, the stereotype actually protects the majority of practitioners from the idea that anyone can be a victim. People are motivated to accept the stereotype without challenge, for to fail to do so would call into question their own passport to safety (Rowlett, 1986).



However, this idea fails to take into account the interests of the more dominant groups in the organisation and the advantages they have in propagating and privileging this viewpoint. It raises the question of what role dominant groups in the Employment Service play in deciding the victim status of employees who have experienced a violent incident.

As discussed above, much of the research has shown how subjective the experience of violence can be. Different groups constructed by society not only experience the actual aggression differently, but also the perception of their experience will vary. However, there is only a very limited amount of interpretivist literature that deals with how violence and the threat of violence are experienced within the workplace. It is to this small body of writing that I now turn.

## **5. Researching Violence in Organisations**

Within the more interpretivist literature, several key points emerge from debates on the construction and enactment of organisational violence. First, emphasis is placed on the construction of aggressive behaviour through social and organisational structures. Feminist researchers in particular have highlighted the structural dimension of violence through extensive work on sexual harassment in work settings (Mackinnon, 1979; Sedley & Benn, 1982). Likewise, in his paper on men, gender relations, violence and organisations, Hearn (1994) suggests that aggression is an inevitable by-product of many contemporary social and organisational structures – though it is frequently unacknowledged.



Hearn & Parkin (2001) rightly explain that not only do definitions and analyses affect what is considered as violent in the field of the social sciences, but that this also applies to each organisation and their specific definitions of what is and what is not violent behaviour. They highlight the role of organisational processes in producing and re-producing the construction of aggression.

In their explanation of sexuality in organisations, they highlight the role of violence and point out that violence becomes more profound in denying the victim the right to define it and oppose it as an injustice.

Second, in this literature, the typical representation of violence as an individual phenomenon is examined and questioned. Hearn (1994) argues that powerful organisational actors often justify hostile behaviour by placing the guilt or responsibility on the victim's head. The reasons for this are complex, but Hearn partly attributes it to the ways in which violence poses a contradiction to the dominant ideologies of many organisations and is therefore excluded from official discourse. Brewis and Linstead (2000) explain that where the violence is a by product of official social or organisational structure, the powerful often explicitly justify their abuse by placing guilt and responsibility on the victims head. This idea of the individualisation of aggression is likewise echoed and explored in Newton et al's (1995) examination of the concept of stress. They argue that society's notion of stress does not allow the 'stressed' subject to see the thing that causes the stress as a legitimate grievance, but instead they are told to change themselves and their coping mechanisms. They further assert that stress is defined in too narrow a way, as it is not just about the individual but can reflect power relations. However, by defining it

as an individual problem it follows that the solution will lie with the individual as well. Drawing on a Marxist perspective, a picture emerges of an individual who is desperately concerned to remain stress fit, a good copier who can, whatever the pressures, deliver the last drop of her labour to her employer (Newton et al, 1995). Handy (1995) extends this argument of the individualisation of stress by claiming that it actually denies the 'primacy of shared experiences' and reduces organisational issues affecting the collective to a question of individual differences in stress appraisal and coping ability. She contends that this does not imply that individual differences are irrelevant, but that the current preoccupation with individual appraisal and coping inevitably obscures the manifold commonalities between members of a given social group. She continues by asserting that studies researching stress need to acknowledge this collective perspective - including the collective coping strategies used. These strategies may help to reproduce the environments which many employees already experience as stressful (Handy, 1995). My study applies this idea to the subject of workplace violence in researching both the frontliner's individual and collective experience of violence and aggression and the methods used to cope.

Cately & Jones (2002) examine representations of violence, briefly mentioning organisations. They emphasise that individualised definitions of physical violence are recognised at the expense of other alternative definitions. This is an argument taken up by Hearn and Parkin (2001) when they claim that a focus on the more extreme acts of physical violence allows other forms of violent and aggressive behaviour to go unnoticed. Mayhew (2002) adds that the influence of organisational culture may mean that only 'major' attacks are reported whilst more 'minor' incidents are tolerated and



ignored by staff for fear of being blamed for these. This tendency to reduce violence to physical violence ties in with research that notes that men often describe aggressive behaviour in relative isolation from its context and social life more generally (Jukes, 1993; Hearn, 1998). Hearn & Parkin (2001) argue that violence is defined as separate to organisational 'normal life' in a bid to obscure the connection between aggression and organisations. They propose the use of a concept, known as 'organisational violations', which includes any action that the individual finds violating.

The third point emerging from this literature is that organisations do not acknowledge violence. Linstead (1997) cites theorists such as Julia Kristeva (1982) to argue that men are caught up in this organisational denial which is a product of organisational and societal capitalism. Brewis and Linstead (2000) echo this point when they assert that victims are denied the right to define it as violence and therefore are also denied the right to oppose it. The idea of organisational denial can be seen in Newton et al's (1995) work on stress. It is suggested that stress is normalised and naturalised and that there is a promotion of the idea that in today's hectic life it is normal to feel stressed. The same theory can be applied to aggression: organisational situations lead people to expect and accept certain hostile behaviours as normal, that is, not violent. Hearn (1994) also subscribes to the idea that organisations deny aggressive incidents through male domination of organisations. He argues that violence becomes 'reduced' to the material task and the culture of the organisation - that it can be possessed, reconstructed, ignored and joked about like any other organisational currency. Hearn & Parkin (2001) explain that:



‘an important but as yet undeveloped, area of politics and policy is the embeddedness of violation in the mundane practices of organisation and organisations... What is often called organisational culture is often itself a site of, and shorthand for mundane organisation violations’ (p.149).

Hearn & Parkin highlight the lack of legislation to deal with these mundane violations and the need for the development of such measures. They explain that they are interested in ‘the speaking of the unspoken forces, the making of the invisible, visible and the less known, more fully known’ (p.xi). Hearn (1994) explains that such organisational structures provide ways of managing, masking and obscuring the pervasiveness of violence. He argues for the examination of different organisations, with the purpose of studying the extent that aggression is recognised. Both argue that hostile behaviour may be recognised by outsiders, but that it may not be problematised as such for the organisations studied. Boyd (2002) also echoes this call for increased legislation in her study of customer violence in the railway and airline industries, in which she asserts that lack of investment in violence prevention strategies and general cost cutting strategies exacerbate customer violence. She points out that whilst trade unions in both the airline and train industries have succeeded in raising the profile of customer violence, this would be strengthened if appropriate legislation were in place.

Given that it is most likely for the views of the more powerful organisational actors to hold sway, it follows that their definitions of violence will likewise prevail. Newton et al (1995) explore the stressed subject as a politicised one, and much of this idea can be applied to the portrayal of organisational violence. They argue that, at worst (amongst numerous other possibilities listed), it can

appear as if the facilitation of the privatisation of emotion and distress at work is a representation which appears far closer to the views of management groups than that of organised labour. Hearn & Parkin (2001) emphasise this important theme of organisational hierarchical power when they explain that, as management is dominated by men, men's opportunities to dominate women and violate women are greater than those of women, as is their ability to silence complaints. This fits in with a growing number of studies of powerful male cultures (French, 1995; Brooks-Gordon, 1995) and highlights the importance of considering violence within wider power structures. Newton et al (1995) highlight the importance of this in regards to stress when they acknowledge that discourse on stress is tied to broader power relations such as capital, power relations, family relations and gender relations. Handy (1995) emphasises that the way that stress is defined, works to the organisation's advantage by obscuring the different political allegiances, goals and power bases of competing groups within the organisation. Consistent with this view, but in relation to violence, Hearn & Parkin (2001) argue that organisational processes help reproduce what constitutes as aggressive behaviour through practices of naming and managing, such as policy documentation, grievance procedures and implementation. They highlight the need for research into organisations to ascertain exactly how organisational concepts of violence are constructed. In fact, the above discussion of the major four points illustrates not only the important role that organisational context plays in workplace violence, but also the failing of the literature in this area. This thesis has taken account of this flaw and hopes to go some way towards addressing this gap through its research question: How is the concept of customer violence constructed within the organisation?



However, whilst emphasising the importance of social structures, it is important to acknowledge that power is not unidimensional and that human agency has a role to play. Unfortunately, many of the writers in this area (Hearn & Parkin, 2001; Cately & Jones, 2002; Linstead, 1997; Hearn, 1998) fail to acknowledge this. Perhaps this is understandable when researching organisations because, as Fineman (1995) explains,

Even though the individual is actively involved in the reproduction of social structures, there may be very little that they can do to materially affect them either because they are tacit and taken-for-granted features of organisational life...or because the individual is relatively powerless to affect them'. (Fineman 1995: 127).

Although human agency is arguably essential to organisational reproduction, the agency may be 'severely constrained by the existing forms of social structure' (Fineman, 1995: 127). Bearing this in mind, my thesis aims to give credence to human agency whilst simultaneously acknowledging the significant part that social structures play in constructing organisational violence.

Although there are few interpretive studies concerned with organisational violence, there are even fewer that are concerned with the coping strategies used to deal with it. However, the Tavistock programme's work on organisational analysis does touch upon this area with their research on the survivors of violence and prisoners of war. Menzies's (1970) analysis of deeply distressing tasks and events led him to focus on collective defence mechanisms, most often through the use and reinforcement of organisational rules, procedures and formalities as the routine organisational mode co-exists with the severely distressing and its

avoidance. In her research on sexuality, Sanders (2004) explores the strategies created by prostitutes to manage occupational hazards, including violence. She found that prostitutes used humour as a coping mechanism to deal with some of the unpleasant aspects of their work including violence. She argues that sex workers use jokes to show beginners the ropes – particularly safety precautions. In this way she argues that humour is used to diffuse the risk and possibility of harm occurring by making light of the threat of violence and robbery. She argues that by re-framing serious incidents, victim hood is denied and they redefine themselves as victims. Pogrbn and Poole (1988) identify four different types of humour amongst police workers: jocular aggression; audience degradation, diffusion of danger or tragedy and normative neutralisation. Sanders (2000) points out that like sex work, police work also deals with bodily contact and perilous conditions. She argues that the use of humour may be common in the more extreme professions that require intense physical and emotional labour that potentially threatens well being. Hearn & Parkin (2001) do not explore coping strategies for organisational aggression but they do point out that the greater the violence and the more immediate the contact with violence, the greater the likely range of coping strategies used by staff. When examining the discourse on stress, Handy (1995) particularly emphasises the need for research that recognises ‘the collective adaptation to the work environment’, which involves the ‘dynamic unfolding of collective coping strategies which may help to reproduce the environments which many employees already experience as stressful’ (p.90). I believe this sentiment can be echoed when exploring coping with organisational violence.



In summary, work thus far on coping strategies has been very limited and there is great scope for further development. It is a weakness this thesis aims to help remedy. All of my research questions set out to enhance our understanding of the way that frontliners cope with customer violence. They are: 1. How is the concept of customer violence constructed within the organisation? 2. In what ways do frontliners within the ES cope with customer violence? 3. Why do they cope in these ways?

There is also a dearth of research that explores organisational members' collective experience of organisational violence. Indeed, Hearn & Parkin (2001) completely ignore this aspect when they comment that organisational violence is unusual in that it is experienced predominantly as an individual and not as part of a collective. However, with regards to stress, Newton et al (1995) acknowledge the collective aspect and, within this study, Handy particularly emphasises the need for research which recognises employees' collective experience of stress. Again, this sentiment can be directly applied to the study of organisational violence.

Lack of writings on the exploration of the nature of customer service work and its impact on customer violence is also a huge deficiency of the organisational violence literature. Hearn & Parkin (2001) briefly highlight the link between customer service and customer violence when they argue that there is growing evidence of an increase of hostility from temporary members of organisations, such as customers or clients and so on. They mention in passing that the emphasis on customer service may increase public expectations, which when not met may lead to frustration, anger and violence. Boyd (2002) also briefly explores the idea of customer service and customer aggression in her paper

on customer violence in the airline and railway industry. She argues that low cost and profit-centred management policies exacerbate customer violence. One of the examples that she discusses is the idea that, through centring on cost, the organisation cannot meet the high levels of service promised by the marketing department. She explains that this failure to meet generated expectations intensifies customer aggression. However, she centres on the frontliners' inability to meet the high standards due to cost cutting, to the detriment of examining the effect of the whole of the customer service ideology on service work and customer aggression in general. Although neither the above studies (Hearn & Parkin 2001; Boyd, 2002) explore this concept in any depth, it is to their credit that they even mention the customer service, however briefly, as the relationship between customer violence and the customer sovereignty ideology is something which is not considered in the rest of the literature. In fact, it can be argued that the customer sovereignty ideology plays a major role within frontline work and deeply affects the way that the customer is perceived (see Chapter Four). It is therefore reasonable to assume that it may well affect the way that customers' aggressive behaviour is perceived, experienced and dealt with. Indeed, with the increasing adoption of this concept within the workplace, this is a glaring omission in organisational violence research.

## **6. Concluding Comments**

A significant problem with a large part of the literature dealing with violence within the service industries is that it treats violence as an objective, unproblematic term that can be correctly defined. The workplace is constructed as affected by the violence rather than being constructive of that violence. However, this is not the



case regarding relatively few interpretative studies in this area and the literature focusing on violence in a wider context, such as aggressive behaviour towards women, homosexuals and certain ethnic groups. This thesis favours an interpretivist approach, which will have far-reaching implications for the study of violence within the service industry. Firstly, it is important to be aware that dominant and powerful groups within the organisation will attempt to privilege their views of what constitutes aggressive behaviour over less dominant groups. These views will lead to certain actions which will be favourable to these powerful groups. Secondly, the interplay of the differing perceptions of violence will affect the victim status that is accorded to the frontliner. The extent to which frontliners are found culpable or innocent will affect how they experience and thus cope with aggressive incidents.

Within the more interpretive studies on organisational violence, the wider power issues are also acknowledged, however, there are some significant omissions. Organisational violence is explored through the use of generalisations at a macro level and without exploring the construction of aggression in-depth at an organisational level. Such writers tend to call for future research in the area, and whilst they do allude to the social construction of violent behaviour in organisations, they do not examine how or why this happens. It is hoped that this thesis will go some way to fill this gap, investigating the construction of violence at a micro level and considering its implications. Finally, it may be noted that one main symptom of the lack of studies at a micro level is the lack of exploration of the nature of customer service work and its impact on customer violence. This failure is a huge deficiency of writings in this area and one which this thesis aims to help rectify.





## **Chapter 4**

### **COPING WITH EMOTIONAL LABOUR**

#### **1. Introduction**

This thesis aims to look at coping mechanisms that frontliners use to deal with violent customers. Working with customers has frequently been termed by academics as a form of 'emotional labour'. Arguably, this should encompass both negative as well as positive aspects. The literature on coping with the negative aspects of emotional labour, which is often but not always connected with the customer, is of greater relevance to my study and will be reviewed accordingly. However, before this, the concept of emotional labour needs to be explained and considered with a summary of the literature in this area. This chapter then reviews the literature which focuses on the ways that frontliners cope with the negative aspects of emotional labour, in particular difficult customers.

#### **2. The Concept of Emotional Labour**

Emotional labour is a concept first identified by Hochschild in her seminal (1983) study of flight attendants and debt collectors, *The Managed Heart*. She not only wrote about the physical labour involved in the work of flight attendants and debt collectors, but also about the emotions that management expected them to display. Hochschild argues that, alongside jobs that necessitate either physical or mental labour, there are jobs which necessitate 'emotional labour'. The term 'emotional labour' has since been used to

describe frontliners' management of feelings and behavioural displays associated with feelings that occur in interactions with the customer (Korczynski, 2002). Workers are required by their work to display emotions that comply with certain expressions, norms or rules of the organisation in order to achieve a desired state of mind in the customer (Deery, 2000: 2). In this context, employees are expected to appear in a certain emotional state (such as happy and friendly) in spite of what might be differing private feelings (Erickson & Wharton, 1997: 188).

Hochschild (1983) draws on Marxism to argue that this form of labour is purchased for a price by employers and its precise performance can be specified by a set of rules. In other words, emotion becomes a commodity to be bought. Examples of emotional labour would include supermarket check out operators who, in addition to handling goods, have to smile at the customer, gain eye contact and provide a friendly greeting or farewell (Noon & Blyton, 1997). In contrast, the debt collector is supposed to 'create alarm' in the debtors from whom they are trying to collect money (Hochschild, 1983: 146).

As discussed above, a central tenet of Hochschild's (1983) work is the commodification of emotion. In this, she distinguishes between 'emotion work' and 'emotional labour'. In the former, feeling is managed in order to sustain an outward appearance and produce particular states of mind in oneself or other people, which will lead to personal gain in some form. In the latter, feelings are managed in order to serve the interests of an employer, in exchange for a wage. The fundamental difference between emotion work (in our private lives) and emotional labour (in the commercial sector) is that in our private lives we choose to perform it for personal reasons, whereas in the commercial sphere we choose to do it in exchange for money. Hochschild argues that in one's private life, the 'individual navigation of the emotional waters ... has the purpose of welfare and



pleasure' (p.119). When this navigation takes place in the public domain, 'a profit motive slips in' and it becomes 'processed, standardised and subjected to hierarchical control' (p.153). This is what Hochschild means by the commodification of emotion. This is similar to the alienation identified by Marx in that the worker becomes alienated from an aspect of the self- either the physical body or the feelings that are used. Thus in the same way that Marx argued that the body had become an instrument of labour belonging to a capitalist producer emotions become owned by the organisation instead of the self- 'When the product – the thing to be engineered, mass produced and subjected to speed up and slowdown is a smile, a mood, a feeling or a relationship it comes to belong more to the organisation and less to the self' (p.198). Hochschild argues that this commodification of emotion has deeply harmful consequences for the frontliners performing emotional labour.

Many writers from the new service management school suggest that the emotional acting which is performed on the frontline is little different from the management of emotions undertaken in everyday life. They thus implicitly deny the negative consequences of emotional labour (Korczynski, 2002). However, Hochschild gives three major contextual factors why this is not the case. Firstly, she cites the 'profit motive' (Hochschild, 1983: 19) and argues that frontliners do not carry out emotional labour for personal gain in their private life but do so in exchange for a wage. Secondly, emotional labour on the frontline takes place within an asymmetrical relationship with the customer, as opposed to the relationships in a worker's private and personal lives, where there tends to be a greater equality. For example, it is frequently cited on the frontline that 'the customer is always right'. This is well illustrated by Taylor & Tyler (2000: 84) who quote a trainer speaking to call centre workers: 'He [the customer] can really talk to you how he wants. Your job is to deal with it ... just take a few deep breathes and let the irritation cool down'. Thirdly, Hochschild alludes to management's imposition of systematic 'feeling rules' on service workers. In the private

sphere, feelings are displayed because they stem from a deep private bond or social role which are experienced. However, on the frontline workers are expected to display feelings that conform to certain feeling rules that are laid down by management. For example, Ritzer (2000: 88-89) points out that in many fast food organisations not only are the everyday, routine interactions signposted, but that even unusual requests or behaviours are sub-scripted - and in such a way as to look like the interaction is spontaneous.

Another element central to Hochschild's work is her argument that when carrying out emotional labour we either *surface* act or *deep* act. Surface acting involves pretending 'to feel what we do not feel ourselves' (p.33). It involves behavioural compliance with the display rules (non-verbal and verbal) without any attempt to internalise these rules, and therefore emotions are feigned. Feelings displayed (for example, a facial expression) feel faked and not part of the person's real feeling. In this way frontliners create meanings which they do not really feel, using various personal expressions and signs of emotion in order to create the meaning and thus reality that management wants.

Deep acting involves deceiving one's self as much as others. It requires an attempt to internalise and experience the emotions that one is required to portray. In deep acting, conscious mental work (such as pretending deeply) induces the actual feeling in the person. Hochschild illustrates this idea with an examination of the training programmes for flight attendants. She asserts that flight attendants attempted to engender deep acting and that 'by taking over the levers of feeling production, by pretending deeply ... alter themselves' (p.33). Here, we see that it is not just the outward signs and expressions that need to be altered in order to create the meaning required by management, but the actual triggers and feelings behind these emotions. Management has imposed themselves not just on the outward personal expressions of emotions, but also on the very internal emotions themselves.



According to Hochschild, there is harm in both these methods of acting. She points out that through surface acting, although the frontliner is much less likely to suffer burn out, they may feel inauthentic, 'just an actor, not sincere' (p.187). Alternatively, the worker may surface act but not blame herself for this, yet Hochschild argues that this is still harmful because there is some risk of estrangement from acting altogether and some cynicism about it. Frontliners may see themselves as 'illusion makers' (p.187). However, Hochschild (1983) claims that the alternative, deep acting, is far more harmful. By deep acting, frontliners identify with the job to such an extent that it will become very difficult to de-personalise inappropriate behavior directed towards them. Hochschild suggests that this will lead to burn out, which is when the frontliner experiences emotional numbness, becomes detached from their own feelings and stops caring. She contends that in the long term the worker may grow accustomed to this numbness and dimming of inner signals. This is particularly harmful as 'when we lose access to feeling, we lose a central means of interpreting the world around us' (p.188). Here, Hochschild is suggesting that management has imposed their version of organisational reality upon the frontliner who has internalised it to such an extent that they can no longer interpret their own feelings for themselves. To summarise, surface acting results in alienation from one's true self and deep acting results in altering one's true self (Hochschild, 1983: 186-88; Boyd, 2003). The negative consequences of emotional labour, emphasised by Hochschild, highlight the importance of coping mechanisms used by frontliners to endure this type of frontline work.

### **3. Emotional Labour and Customer Sovereignty**

Emotional labour is used in organisations in order to make the customer feel important, thus the use of emotional labour stems from the belief that 'the

customer is king'. The idea of customer sovereignty encompasses the idea that the customer is of utmost importance whose needs should consequently be well served. There are two meanings attached to the concept of sovereignty. The first is linked to the pre-modern idea of the absolute power of a ruler, such as a king. This type of sovereignty is relational (Hoffman, 1998), that is, it is possible to see that the sovereign is superior through his/her relations with others. For example, the frontliner might treat the customer as superior, thus promoting the myth of customer sovereignty. A useful example of this is given by Zeithaml and Bitner (1996: 212), who report that Ritz-Carlton management identified that it was a customer priority to be 'treated with respect', and translated this into a requirement that the frontliners' appearance be immaculate. Notably, customers were not subject to the same requirements.

The second meaning linked to the concept of sovereignty is a modern one and stems from the work of various philosophers, such as Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) (Korczynski 2004). This meaning reflects the idea that individuals are autonomous and private owners of themselves and property. This suggests that, as an autonomous individual we have choice, a concept frequently expounded and exalted in western society. Indeed, such is the strength and importance of this discourse of consumer choice and freedom that Bauman has argued that 'in our society, individual freedom is constituted as first and foremost, freedom of the consumer' (1988: 23). Both pre-modern and modern senses of sovereignty are present within management's promotion of the idea that 'the customer is king' which is widespread in many contemporary capitalist economies (Edwards, 2000; Macdonald & Sirianni, 1996).

The organisation of frontline work will therefore be underpinned by dual logics - both the need for efficient provision of the service and also one



which allows the customer to feel in control, as sovereign. Korczynski (2002) labels this the 'customer-orientated bureaucracy'. Benson (1986) acknowledges the contradictory nature of frontline work when he points out that frontliners need to be both 'deferential and authoritative' (p.159). This enables them to direct the consumers' behaviour whilst giving the impression that the consumer is in charge (Korczynski, 2002; Leidner, 1993). It is often argued that the 'enchanted myth of sovereignty' is used to manage the contradictory logics because it allows the customer to feel in control whilst still directing the behaviour according to the constraints of production.

As outlined above, a central element of customer sovereignty is its ability to enchant customers. This idea draws on Ritzer's (1999 and 2000) argument that the concept of enchantment enables us to understand contemporary economies because it emphasises the pleasurable nature of consumption, which involves an element of fantasy and suspension of belief. Although individual customers may know, at some level, that their sovereignty is a façade, customers still go along with this idea, illustrating the myth's power to enchant and the modern 'ability to create an illusion which is known to be false, but is felt to be true' (Campbell, 1987: 78). A good example of this is Williams's (1982) analysis of the early French department stores. He argued that these stores were created as arenas of enchantment where customers were invited to live out their fantasies; they were addressed as 'Sir' or 'Madame', situating them within the enthralling concept of the superior sovereign.

Korczynski (2002) argues that the renaming of service recipients as 'customers' in a range of settings is mostly based on management's desire to promote the enchanted myth of sovereignty. Examples include the renaming of railway passengers, health care patients, university students and benefit claimants as 'customers'. This labelling evokes different

connotations for the service recipient (Korczynski, 2002). Whereas the passenger, patient or claimant exists as secondary to the organisation on which they rely, the idea of 'customer' evokes ideas of sovereignty for whom the service is run. Thus, the language of the customer is part of the perpetuation of the enchanting myth of sovereignty (Korczynski, 2002). The use of customer specifically within the ES is explored in chapter two.

Consumption, however, is a fragile process (Edwards 2000) and it is often argued that disillusionment occurs precisely because the bureaucratic side of the service highlights the customers' lack of any real sovereignty (Ritzer, 1999; Korczynski, 2002; Leidner, 1993). Korczynski (2002) points out that

'enchantment may easily turn to disillusionment in the moments when the individual's lack of sovereignty becomes starkly apparent' (p.63).

Leidner (1993) echoes this sentiment when she asserts that customers are most likely to be impolite to frontliners when the routines of bureaucracy impinge upon the service interaction. Similarly, Prottas (1979) argues that a major cause of disenchantment may be the realisation that in lieu of being the sovereign he/she is just another case to be processed. This quick change from enchantment to disillusionment may well lead to customer anger, abuse and even violence. Because of this, Zeitaml & Bitner (1996) argue that marketing's constant rising of expectations through competition and advertising has self-defeating consequences. This is echoed within the violence literature by Hearn & Parkin (2001) and Boyd (2002). As pointed out in the previous chapter, Hearn & Parkin (2001) mention in passing that the emphasis on customer service may increase public expectations, which, when not met, may lead to frustration, anger and violence. Boyd (2002) also briefly explores the idea of customer service and customer violence in her paper on customer violence in the airline and railway industry. She argues that low cost and profit-centred management policies exacerbate customer



violence. One of the examples that she discusses is the idea that, through centring on cost, the organisation cannot meet the high levels of service promised by the marketing department. She explains that this failure to meet generated expectations intensifies customer violence. A weakness of her argument, though, is through her focus on the frontliner's inability to meet the high standards due to cost cutting she omits to examine the effect of the customer service ideology on service work and customer violence in general. Despite Boyd's (2002) failure to consider the impact of customer service ideology upon customer violence, her insightful paper is the only piece of writing to even mention the idea of customer violence alongside the concept of emotional labour (albeit from a health and safety point of view). She asserts that the growing incidence of customer violence in the airline and railway industries intensifies the demands made on employees' emotional labour. She furthers this idea by arguing that emotional labour should be considered in terms of volume and intensity in a similar fashion to that of physical labour. She also suggests that these high demands on emotional labour are detrimental to employee health. If such arguments ring true then the frontliners coping mechanisms become more important than ever.

#### **4. Criticisms of Hochschild's Work**

Hochschild's work has established itself as a major advance in our understanding of emotion in organisations. In the last twenty years, little has been written concerning the subject of emotions and organisation that does not refer to the *Managed Heart* (Bolton & Boyd, 2003). There are many different definitions of the concept of emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983; Noon & Blyton, 1997; Wharton, 1993; Taylor, 1998) but these are really variations on a theme which all contain the key idea of the management of behavioural displays and feelings in dealing with the customer. Many analyses of emotional labour in frontline work continue to use Hochschild's framework with little modification or else accept the main tenets of

Hochschild's work whilst also developing or adding on certain points (Ogbonna & Wilkinson, 1988 and 1990; Taylor, 1998; Stenross & Kleinman, 1989; Smith, 1992).

There are, however, three far-reaching criticisms of Hochschild's work. Firstly, it is often pointed out that Hochschild focuses on the pain of emotional labour to the detriment of the pleasures that may also be experienced (Korczynski, 2002; Tolich, 1993). Tolich (1993) highlights the fact that Hochschild's argument doesn't acknowledge that customers can be a source of pleasure as well as a source of pain. She argues that supermarket workers not only use management's prescribed emotions (which are alienating) but also perform emotional labour that is not management led, but executed by choice. This, she points out, was not alienating but in fact liberating. Korczynski (2002) supports this when he argues that Hochschild's emphasis on pain and the harmful effects of emotional labour is inadequate, for it sees harm in all emotional labour. Furthermore, he argues that in parts of her data, flight attendants speak of enjoying working with people, something which is similar to many other findings of frontline work where frontliners state that they enjoy working with 'people' rather than 'customers'. Wouters (1989: 112) summarises this nicely when she states 'Hochschild's concentration on the cost of emotional labour had distorted her empirical results' (Wouters, 1989: 112).

Secondly, it is frequently argued that Hochschild's argument is overtly deterministic and leaves no room for human agency. When acts of private emotion fall 'under the sway' of large organisations, social engineering and the profit motive (Hochschild, 1983:19), this negates the possibility that employees may exert 'an active and controlling force' in relationships (Paules, 1991: 265) - with both management and customers (Bolton & Boyd, 2003). A result of this failing is that Hochschild does not acknowledge private emotions that may occur in the public sphere. Although Hochschild



makes a distinction between commercial and social feeling rules, she does not make any distinction concerning feeling rules in the workplace that are not commercially motivated (Bolton & Boyd, 2003). A second result of Hochschild's overtly determinist view is that she does not allow space for the existence of organisational misbehaviour (Ackroyd & Thompson, 1999) or the existence of an 'unmanaged' part of the organisation (Gabriel, 1995). Bolton & Boyd (2003) eloquently highlight this shortcoming when they ask of Hochschild's work:

Where is any sense of satisfaction, enjoyment and reward that can be gained from various forms of emotion work? Where are the innuendo, humour and imperfect customer service? Where *are* the cabin crews in her study?  
(Bolton and Boyd 2003: 104).

Korczynski (2002) points out a third major flaw in Hochschild's argument. He highlights the fact that she works on both the 'objective' level of the alienation of capitalism and the 'subjective level of the experience of emotional labour by frontliners, yet fails to recognise this distinction as qualitatively different'. She uses a Marxist, absolutist argument on alienation to imply that the subjective experience of emotional labour will necessarily be harmful. This is a basic weakness in her argument (Korczynski, 2002).

## **5. Controlling Emotional Labour**

According to the literature, emotional labour is controlled and monitored through direct means such as feeling rules and indirect means such as covert monitoring, training days and reference to labour market constraints. Each of these methods will now be considered in turn.

In many frontline settings detailed rules have been established by management specifying which emotions they want to be displayed and which they want to be suppressed. These display rules are backed up by

sanctions and, less frequently, rewards in an attempt to secure full compliance with their ideals (Korczynski, 2002). Hochschild (1983) argues that common societal expectations exist concerning the appropriate emotional reactions of individuals in their private lives and that, through the commodification of the heart, this is also the case in service work. These expectations give rise to feeling rules or norms that are set down by management who specify the range, intensity, duration and object of emotions that should be experienced. These can vary in so far as the specifics are detailed. In her study of supermarket workers, Tolich (1993) describes the general and specific feeling instructions given to clerks. An example of the former is 'be friendly with customers' and an example of the latter is 'read the customers name off the check and use the name when thanking the customer' (Tolich 1993). Through feeling rules flight attendants are expected to feel cheerful and friendly, funeral directors are expected to feel sombre and reserved and nurses are expected to feel empathetic and supportive (Hochschild, 1983).

Hochschild (1983) argues that the imposition of these feeling rules also contributes to the negative consequences of frontline work. Workers who have more autonomy in expressing their emotions will be affected less negatively than those workers who work with tighter and more detailed feeling rules, and thus have less freedom in deciding when to smile, how to smile, or even if to smile. Hochschild argues that the harm of emotional labour 'could be reduced ... if workers could feel a greater sense of control over conditions of their work lives' (p.187). This would enable frontliners more freedom to express meaning and interpret events in the way that they think is right.

There has been much support for the above point (Morris & Feldman, 1996; Ashforth & Tomiuk, 2000; Troyer et al, 2000; Wharton, 1993; Frenkel et al, 1998; Smith, 1992;). Wharton (1993) did a study of 600 banking and health



service workers in the US. A key finding of this was that the frontline workers performing emotional labour were less likely to experience emotional exhaustion if they had greater autonomy over how they carried out their work. Smith (1992) undertook a study of nurses and argued that, a critical factor in influencing how far student nurses experienced emotional labour in a negative way was the degree of hierarchy within the nurse management structure. When the 'individuality' of student nurses was recognised rather than repressed then emotional labour could be experienced in a predominantly positive way. This is echoed by Tolich (1993), who claimed that when frontliners had to carry out emotional labour with strictly imposed feeling rules, they experienced greater pain and tension than where frontliners followed feeling rules autonomously decided by them. Thus, it is clear that formal organisational policies can significantly affect how the frontliners experience emotional labour. Whilst I concede that frontliners' own individual interpretations and actions will always exist on the frontline, I would also add that there are other ways of control other than direct specification of behaviours. It is to this indirect form of control that we now turn, exploring both covert supervision and training.

Many studies of emotional labour highlight particular supervisory practices which are covertly conducted. For example, Tolich (1983) refers to covert supervision within the supermarket involving spotters, either company spotters or customers as spotters. Both types of spotters increase the probability that poor customer service would eventuate in frontliner write ups and possibly dismissal. Whereas the company spotters were similar to mystery shoppers who would check the customer service, customers were used by management as spotters through encouraging them to complain when things were not as they wanted them. For example, there was always a customer's bill of rights prominently displayed and customers were encouraged to tell management if these were violated. Tolich further describes how supermarket clerks who failed to perform one of the

customers service tasks listed on the register were required 'if caught by the customers to provide them with a gift of a dozen eggs' (p.367). This is similar to the example given by Hochschild (1983), who explains that supermarket checkout clerks were required to give the customer a dollar (from a number pinned on their jackets) if they didn't give a friendly greeting and a sincere thank you. Other examples of similar types of covert supervision are 'ghost riders' in airlines (Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Taylor & Tyler, 2000), and undercover supervisors secreted around the workplace in places such as Disneyland (Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989). These enable management to check the behaviour of the workers while remaining unobserved themselves. This elicits the question of whether indirect control within the job centre is used and, if so, how it affects the frontliners' experience of emotional labour.

Another form of indirect control detailed in the literature is training. Hochschild (1983) argues that selection and training have particularly important roles in imbedding certain feeling rules into the recruits. Selection criteria, for example, included both non-verbal and verbal aspects. Not only were physical attributes and overall appearance taken into account in the selection process for flight attendants, but so too was the ability to 'project a warm personality' and display enthusiasm, friendliness and sociability (p.97); in other words, people that fitted in with management ideals were chosen. Whilst the selection process enables management to find people who are predisposed to perform certain types of emotional labour, Hochschild emphasises that training sessions are the place where the service workers are given more precise instruction on how to perform their role. As well training in the technical aspects of the job (such as what to do in an emergency), it instructs on the emotional aspects of the work - for example, the importance of smiling and an accommodating and friendly manner (Hochschild, 1983). The cabin crew is supposed to generate a genuine smile from the inside, as opposed to a false one. This idea of feeling the emotions displayed within



and not just acting them out on the surface has particularly negative consequences (see section 2.). Here, management uses training as an opportunity to describe how the organisation should function and impose their version of organisational reality as the correct one.

Nickson et al (2000) also emphasise the importance of training in inducing frontliners to accept the feeling rules. Indeed, one tentative finding of their research is that workers accept the management of aesthetics because in training they are encouraged to identify with the customer and see the customer's point of view. This is similar to the mystery shopper where the customer is again used as a form of control. Korczynski (2002) argues that cultivation of identification with the customer is often engendered by management through training and is a central way for management to generate emotional labour committed to the customer. Identification with the customer can also be viewed as a way for frontliners to cope with the strain of emotional labour (see section 6). This forces the question of how indirect controls such as mystery shopper programmes within the job centres studied affect the frontliners and the way in which they choose to deal with aggressive customers on the frontline.

## **6. The Dark Side of Emotional Labour: Violent and Aggressive Customers**

It may be one thing for service workers to smile at appreciative, friendly customers, but quite another to keep up the emotional display required by management under the pressure of an offensive customer, (or even a violent or aggressive customer in organisations such as the Employment Service). However, management still requires the 'feeling rules' to be upheld in line with its interpretations of customer sovereignty. Frontline workers are taught to suppress their own feelings in the face of awkward customers and to continue to display emotion that is desirable according to management's

feeling rules. This is brought out well by Taylor & Tyler (2000: 84) who quote a trainer addressing call centre workers: 'if a man's having a go at you... don't get ruffled ... he can really talk to you how he wants. Your job is to deal with it'. Hochschild (1983) illustrates this point with the example of a cabin crew who were taught to reconceptualise irate and angry customers as people who needed sympathy and understanding. Underlying this training is the requirement for attendants to respond positively to such passengers, reflecting the idea that these passengers are revenue and could be repeat business. As Hochschild succinctly puts it, frontliners are required to think 'sales' (1983: 108), no matter how awkward the passenger is being. As discussed previously, Hochschild further argues that having to uphold feeling rules, regardless of how the frontliner really feels about the situation, has negative consequences for the frontline worker and will cause them harm. Korczynski (2002) argues that it is when customers became irate and abusive that subservience to customers is most keenly felt. Here, frontliners are still required to uphold the perception of customer as sovereign, despite their differing perceptions of the abusive customer themselves. The more subservient the frontliner is expected to be, the more difficult this relationship will be for the frontliner. The physician and the college professor in their dealings with 'clients' have the edge of authority to tip the interactional control balance in their favour. In contrast, for most unskilled or semi-skilled service workers, the interactional edge is in the hands of the customers (Rothman, 1987: 169). This idea of subservience and the pain it causes raises questions about how frontliners cope with this pain. In the Employment Service, due to the nature of the work, the frontliners have to deal with a lot of irate, even violent customers and they will have to deal with the anguish this causes. It is these coping mechanisms that this thesis aims to explore.

Through outlining the general literature on the concept of emotional labour, the potentially painful nature of service work has been highlighted,



emphasising the need to understand the way in which frontliners cope with this sort of work, which the following section will explore.

## 7. Coping Mechanisms

The literature on the way that frontliners cope with emotional labour is somewhat sketchy, only occasionally citing actual examples of a coping mechanism and then only briefly touched upon as opposed to explored in-depth (with the exception of the typologies explained by Mennerick, 1974). Equally, the interplay between the mechanisms and policies encouraged by the formal organisation and the informal ways of coping devised by frontliners are barely touched on at all. We are only ever left with the occasional fleeting glimpse.

As it is argued that emotional labour frequently results in negative consequences for the frontliner, the organisation that requires it will need to use policies to enable frontliners to cope with the pressures it brings (Korczynski, 2002: 150). In this study I will refer to the coping mechanisms that are encouraged by the 'official' organisation as 'formal' coping mechanisms. These are methods which are recommended and imposed upon frontliners about how they should cope with the difficulties arising from interacting with the customer. These formal methods follow on from the dominant organisational viewpoint of what reality does and should look like within the organisation. Not all organisations overtly provide such mechanisms, although most imply which coping mechanisms they would prefer to be used through their dominant version of reality that is imposed on the frontliners.

However, despite the fact that the more powerful groups in the organisation will privilege their perceptions above all others, alternative versions are still present and will still compete, collide and impact upon how frontliners

perceive organisational reality. Thus, the ways of coping that frontliners choose will not necessarily be those laid down by the organisation; frontliners will devise their own individual, personal, informally contrived coping mechanisms. These will compete with and impact upon the coping methods preferred by the organisation. In the following review I will talk about these mechanisms under the label of 'informal' coping methods. However, it is important to note here that, some techniques listed as formal may on occasion happen informally within the workplace and some informal mechanisms may in some organisations be actively encouraged and therefore become related to the formal organisation.

First, this review will deal with formal coping mechanisms, including downtime for frontline staff, calming techniques, cognitive restructuring, establishment of workplace rituals and identification with the customer. Secondly, this review will turn to informal ways of coping divided into three areas: methods that help the frontliners deal with all customers, mechanisms that help the frontliners deal with difficult customers and ways of coping that involve how frontliners actually think about the customers.

## **8. Formal Coping Mechanisms**

In general, the literature on formal coping mechanisms tends to be positivist and written from a unitarist point of view. There is much literature on HRM interventions aimed at supporting employees with the difficulties of work in general, but only a small proportion of this deals with HRM interventions for coping with emotional labour or service work.

There are several formal coping methods detailed in the literature, including:  
1. Creating downtime for frontline staff; 2. Developing calming mechanisms;



and 3. Encouraging 'cognitive restructuring' among frontline staff. I will examine each of these in turn.

### *Creating Downtime*

Creating downtime is based on the idea that the stress of emotional labour will be easier to bear if staff are given time away from the emotional demands of frontline work (Morris & Feldman, 1996). James (1989) argues that just as with physical labour, after a period of emotional labour, an alternative or rest is necessary. Mann (1999) outlines how management can create 'downtime' for workers, not only with time away from the job per se, but away from the demands of frontline work. Mann (1999) asserts that just as there are regulations about how much physical labour workers are allowed to be engaged in without a rest, so too there ought to be laws and regulations about how much emotional labour workers can be involved in without a break. This idea is echoed in Boyd's (2003) argument that 'just as physical labour is concerned in terms of volume and intensity so should emotional labour' (p.151). Mann (1999) describes downtime as 'a break or time-out from the emotional demands of the job' (p.132). This does not necessarily mean a rest altogether, but just a break from the emotional requirements of the job, for example, carrying out duties that do not directly involve the customer. The main point about downtime is that it is a period away from emotional labour. A break from emotional labour provides a space of time where feeling need not be feigned and real feelings can be expressed. She argues that 'true' downtime is 'solo downtime' (p.135) and that each worker should get at least ten minutes on their own away from colleagues to benefit. This can be achieved through work organisation such as shift rotation, multi-skilling, programme rescheduling, and 'real feeling' schedules.

A shift rotation system is where workers will rotate during a shift, from high to low people contact work with colleagues. Mann (1999) argues that this is cost effective to employers, as there is much less employee burnout and thus less absenteeism and turnover. In addition, she highlights the advantage that people talking to the customers are much more likely to be fresh. In order to achieve this, though, employees will need to be multi-skilled in order to carry out high as well as low customer contact job skills. The idea of shift rotation is similar to programme scheduling. This is where the employee is able to structure her or his own day and consciously decides to build downtime into their working day. Mann (1999) also advocates the use of 'real feeling schedules' (p.135) as a form of downtime. These provide permission for colleagues to be entirely honest about their feelings at a given time and place. She uses the example of 'real feeling diaries', in which workers can anonymously write down how they truly feel about difficult incidents and thus let out pent up emotion (p.135). Mann does acknowledge, however, that, for some downtime may be problematic. She cites the examples of people who do not have control over their work they perform at any given time, people whose entire job role involves contact with the public and those who have unsympathetic employers that will not allow the incorporation of downtime into their jobs.

A different approach to providing downtime is the managerial sanctioning of 'off-stage' areas. Managers may informally or formally sanction such areas. An example of formal sanctioning would be 'venting' sessions for call centre workers advocated by Barlow & Maul (1999). This is where frontliners are able to express the tensions they feel through fairly informal spoken communication but in a controlled way. On the frontline they are expected to behave according to management ideals of customer sovereignty through the use of emotional labour. These venting sessions, therefore, are a chance for frontliners to express their own perceptions of the customer and the organisation. This idea is similar to Mann's (1999) 'real feeling



schedules' discussed above. Offstage areas may thus be 'unofficially' sanctioned although not officially acknowledged. An example of this would be to allow 'employees to drop their corporate mask, free from the scrutiny of supervisors or customers', in areas such as 'rest rooms, galleys, corridors and other offstage areas' (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 1991; Martin, 1992). The idea is that frontliners would be able to behave freely according to how they made sense of and understood the organisation, instead of feeling obligated to try to fulfil management expectations. Ogbonna & Wilkinson provide a good example of this idea of retiring to 'offstage' areas in order for frontliners to 'let off steam'.

### *Calming Mechanisms*

Mann (1999) also recommends calming techniques as a coping mechanism. The idea behind this is to calm away pent up emotion. Amongst these techniques she lists taking deep breaths and various relaxation techniques such as the 'quickie' which involves clenching and unclenching the muscles in your hands, arms, legs and buttocks, accompanied by deep breathing. Another relaxation technique described is the 'coffee break relaxation technique' which involves revisiting a difficult scenario experienced at work through visualisation and imaging that the pent up emotion inside is diminishing, whilst clenching and unclenching various muscles and breathing deeply. The final coping method under calming techniques is the 'deep relaxation technique'. Here, she suggests listening to a cassette which helps relax all the bodily muscles one by one. Hochschild (1983) also details calming techniques such as deep breathing used in the training of flight attendants (p.25). Another calming technique recommended by Mann (1999) is visualisation. This technique involves going through a painful or stressful event in your mind, but in the visualisation scenario you '*say exactly what you feel... as forceful, rude and abusive as you like*' (p.143). This

intervention is based on a respite from trying to fulfil the dominant perception of what organisational behaviour should be and allows the frontliner to act freely (even if it is only in their own minds). Another coping method which is based on a similar idea is that of keeping an emotional diary of all those incidents of emotional labour that have caused most stress. Mann (1999) advises writing down the emotions felt, those expressed, the consequences and what would have happened if emotion work had not been used. Both of these two techniques draw upon the idea of fantasy and wish fulfilment, which may be compared to the telling of stories (see section 8.1.4).

### *Cognitive Restructuring*

Cognitive restructuring involves frontline workers altering and restructuring the way that they view their own emotional work. Mann (1999) recommends that workers reflect on their own work as an act and take pleasure in their abilities to skilfully act. This method recognises that the reality that frontliners are forced to uphold is not necessarily the version that they subscribe to themselves. Through acknowledging that it is an act, the frontliners may find it easier to act out one version of reality despite believing in another. This coping style contains elements of the idea of 'surface acting' described by Hochschild (1983). Another coping mechanism involving cognitive restructuring is consideration of an incident from a different viewpoint. For example, in Hochschild's study, she found that flight attendants were encouraged to view irritating and irate customers as people who have problems which make them act in this way: 'The passenger demanding constant attention could be conceived as a victim of fear of flying. A drunk could be reconceived as like a child' (Hochschild, 1983: 25). Similarly, frontliners are also encouraged to reconsider a situation from the customers' perspective. Although not strictly acknowledged as a formal



method of coping by the organisation, identification with the customer is nevertheless frequently encouraged by the organisation. Nickson et al (2000) found that in many cases management encouraged front-line workers to become cultivated as *consumers* in the belief that this would impact upon their approach to appearance and style as service *workers*. Hochschild (1983) describes how flight attendants were constantly reminded to focus on what the customer was thinking and feeling (p.113), thus, again, being encouraged to identify with the customer. Coping using some form of cognitive restructuring requires the frontliners to alter their perceptions in order to fulfil the dominant organisational ideals of customer sovereignty more easily. For example, if a frontliner shifts their viewpoint to one which identifies with the customer and their needs, this will make it easier for them to service a difficult customer with high demands.

### **Formal Coping Mechanisms and the Individualisation of Stress**

Insights from Newton et al's (1995) discussion of the discourse on stress management can be applied to the methods of coping approved by the formal organisation. Newton et al argue that stress is portrayed as an individualised, historical and apolitical notion. They assert that by constructing stress as an individualised concept the stressed subject is much more likely to look to him or herself as the cause and much less likely to recognise social and collective causes: 'Since stress is a product of the individual, the solutions to the stress 'problem' are also reliant on individual rather than social/collective intervention' (Newton et al, 1995: 7). Thus, by constructing their own version of reality, the organisation reduces their own responsibility for the stress of the employees and the responsibility to deal with the stress lies with the frontliner. This idea can be applied to the stress resulting from emotional labour. A quote from Hochschild (1983) perfectly illustrates this point:

From the beginning of training, managing feeling was taken as the problem. The causes of anger were not acknowledged as part of the problem. Nor were the overall conditions of work: the crew size, the virtual exclusion of blacks and men, the required accommodation to sexism, the lack of investigation into the considerable medical problems of flight attendants and the company's rigid antiunion position. These were treated as unalterable facts of life. The only question to be seriously discussed was 'How do you rid yourself of anger?' (Hochschild 1983: 113)

This idea of individualisation of stress can also be applied to the individualisation of the responsibility for violence discussed in the previous chapter. In the majority of the literature on violence it is assumed and implied that it is the individual's responsibility to deal with anxiety brought about by their jobs, as opposed to recognising the structural features which precipitate violence. However, the literature on emotional labour differs in this respect - that is the collective causes of frontliner anxiety are recognised.

### **9. Informal Coping Mechanisms**

Informal coping methods may be in alliance with, directly against or completely indifferent to the ideals privileged by management. Taylor & Tyler (2000) support this idea when they argue, like many others, that management cannot completely control the behaviour of the frontliners. They argue that service workers will find their own ways of coping other than the formal approach provided. It is worth noting though that the formal organisational methods will impact in some way on the informal mechanisms devised by the frontliners.

It may be further noted that the literature on these mechanisms is more sociologically inclined and tends to be more phenomenological in nature than the majority of the literature on violence. However, it often fails to



actually list any particular ways of coping, and when it does manage this it rarely explores them in much depth. The literature on the informal coping methods can be categorised into three areas: 1. Methods that help the frontliners deal with all customers; 2. Techniques that help frontliners deal with individual customers which they find specifically difficult; and 3. Methods that involve the way that the frontliners actually think about the customers.

### *Mechanisms that Help the Frontliners Deal with All Customers*

These are techniques which frontliners use to help deal with the public en masse and not just difficult customers. From the literature, the ways of coping detailed are: 1. Acting out stereotypes; 2. Self-Monitoring; 3. Collective coping mechanisms; and 4. The use of humour. Although this last way of coping is not specifically alluded to in the literature as a way of dealing with difficult customers, it is cited as a way to manage stressful situations in organisations in general.

### *Psychological Distancing*

A general mechanism for coping with the demands of emotional labour frequently used by frontliners is to psychologically distance themselves. This is variously referred to in several studies as ‘switching off’, ‘switching to automatic’ or ‘going robot’ (Noon & Blyton, 1997), ‘automatic pilot’, ‘can’t feel a thing’, ‘lapse into a dream’, ‘go into a trance’ or otherwise ‘check out’ while still on duty (Van Mannen & Kunda, 1989). This concept follows the suggestion that frontliners continue to keep the outward appearance of certain emotions, and thus seem to uphold the management ideal of customer service, whilst at the same time inwardly escape this

version of reality by not committing to the emotions displayed. This links in with the idea of 'surface acting' espoused by Hochschild (1983) (see section 4.2). Hochschild argues that flight attendants who psychologically distanced themselves from their jobs, or even who took their jobs less seriously, are expected to suffer less negative consequences from performing emotional labour than those more involved in their job. Nevertheless, she still argues that there is harm in this way of dealing with emotional labour.

Another method of psychological distancing described in the literature is the acting out of stereotypes. Using the findings from their study of flight attendants, Taylor & Tyler (2000) argue that frontliners cope with the pressures of emotional labour by acting out their work role exactly as it is stereotyped and not relating it to their real selves. For example, lesbian flight attendants acted as expected in stereotypically heterosexual work roles and thus kept their real identity separate from the job. As one respondent explained, *'It's good to be able to put on an act all the time. I do it to protect myself from it. Keep myself immune to it.'* (Taylor & Tyler, 2000: 90) Several male flight attendants were also found to play up to the stereotype of 'cabin crew queer'. Some gay employees were able to cope with their job by literally parodying their roles and the rules which govern them. In this way, frontliners are using acting skills, as they are encouraged to do in formal coping mechanisms (see section 7.4). However, instead of complying with management wishes, this coping mechanism runs counter to management ideals which frequently require the frontliner to put their own personality into the job.

### ***Collective Coping Mechanisms***

There is much written on the idea of collective coping mechanisms. So far the emphasis has been on the frontliner, devising and using coping



techniques as an individual. However, research into frontline jobs has shown that frontliners cope socially and communally as well as individually. Fineman (1993: 21) observes that 'field social workers ... would regularly seek solace from one another in informal gatherings at work'. Frontliners' interpretation of organisational reality does not happen in isolation, but is constantly affected by and reflected in their surroundings. These frameworks of meaning are socially constructed and thus sense-making will be affected by social interaction with other individuals. Meaning-making is a collective process and thus individuals will devise ways of coping both individually and collectively.

Korczynski (2002) labels frontliners' collective coping methods as 'communities of coping' and he argues that they are '*spontaneous, informal and crucial to survival on the job*' (Korczynski, 2002). This also finds expression in a multitude of other writers (such as Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Norbeck, 1985; Menzies, 1959; Satyamurti, 1981; Handy, 1990; Benson, 1978; Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Sutton, 1991; Smith, 1999; Zemke & Schnaff, 1989). Benner & Wrubel (1989) and Norbeck (1985) illustrate the value of nurses collectively coping with the emotional strains of their work. Benson (1978) has pointed out the importance of the 'clerking sisterhood' in providing friendship and support among retail workers, whereas Smith (1999) describes the need for communities of coping at the Samaritans crisis helpline. Bailey & McCollough (2000) found that the reasons respondents gave for talking with co-workers about incidents of difficult customers included 'feeling better from just talking about it', 'getting it all out', 'getting confirmation that others experience such challenges' and 'being able to tell someone how they felt' (p.65). Korczynski (2000) notes the spontaneous sharing of painful experiences among call centre workers and Sutton (1991) claims that when the debt collectors punched the air, cursed, hit the desk or the like, it was a signal for the sharing of experiences. This ties in with the idea of offstage areas previously discussed. These areas are

important because they are, in part, social areas. The social interaction is a key factor that makes these offstage areas important (Korczynski, 2002).

### *Stories as a Coping Mechanism*

Although the literature on organisational stories does not make any mention of the term emotional labour, it does identify stories as a way to cope with difficult work situations, including difficult customers, and thus is relevant to this review. Stories can be seen as part of the collective coping mechanisms that frontliners use to cope, (Exactly what I consider a story to be is outlined in my methodology chapter).

Stories can be seen as part of the collective way of coping, adopted by frontliners. The literature details many functions of stories, mostly as a form of control: through generating commitment (Wilkins & Martin, 1979; Ouchi & Johnson, 1978); through the promotion and sustention of dominant organisational ideologies, ways of introducing change or of gaining political advantage, or aiding learning (Boje, 1991). Conversely, stories capacity to persuade, explain and console (Gabriel, 2000) can also be a way of resisting organisational control (Douglas, 1975). This review is concerned with aiding storytellers to cope with organisational life. Various writers have seen stories as helping organisational members cope in different ways and thus this review will outline each of these in turn.

Many writers claim that stories are a way of providing the storyteller with some measure of control in an unpredictable situation. Boje (1991), for example, argues that stories are used to impose order on erratic events. This idea is mirrored by Tangherlini (2000) who argues that through storytelling paramedics confer order on what are essentially unordered events. She explains that retrospective retelling allows paramedics to gain power over



events that were often out of their control when they were happening. Weick (1985) claims that stories act as maps helping people to make sense of unfamiliar situations by linking them to familiar ones. This makes the unexpected expectable, hence manageable and enables some sort of control. In the Employment Service, customers are a large unpredictable part of frontliners' jobs where they lack total control. Thus, stories may be used by frontliners to build the illusion of control over such an unpredictable job factor.

It is often argued that stories may articulate what cannot be expressed through straightforward talk due to constraints such as organisational policies and cultural expectations, and therefore constitute a form of wish fulfilment. Gabriel (1995) argues that within every organisation there is an 'unmanaged' part where people, both individually and collectively, engage in all kinds of unsupervised, spontaneous activity. Gabriel terms this 'the unmanaged organisation... a kind of organisational dream world dominated by desires, anxieties and emotions' (p.478). The principle force in unmanaged organization is fantasy and its landmarks include various folkloric elements such as jokes, gossip, nicknames, graffiti and, above all, stories. All too often fantasy in organisations is seen as either a form of escapism reinforcing conformity or as a form of opposition which may lead to full-scale resistance. Gabriel argues that both of these interpretations steer fantasy and its products back to the control-resistance dialectic and the privileged domain of the managed organisation. Instead, he argues that fantasy and the unmanaged organisation offers a third way, which amounts to neither conformity nor rebellion but to a symbolic refashioning of official organisational practices in the interest of pleasure, which allows emotion to temporarily reassert itself over rationality and uncontrol over control (Gabriel, 2000). Perhaps the frontliners in the Employment Service use stories to express feelings about difficult customers that they otherwise

could not communicate and so use the realm of fantasy to voice that which they wish were true.

Gabriel (2000) argues that the reason that wish fulfilment is often carried out through stories is because the storytellers are unfulfilled and unsatisfied in the managed organisation. He further asserts that this often stems from a desire to cope with suffering of some kind:

‘making sense of our experience may involve not only interpreting events through a symbolic matrix, but offering wishful rationalisations and self-deceptions in an attempt to deal with psychic injuries’ (Gabriel: .91).

Other writers (such as Coser, 1959; Tangherlini, 2000; Martin et al, 1983) also argue that one of the major functions of stories is an expression of misfortune and a release of emotion. Tangherlini (2000) found that paramedics needed to maintain a psychological distance from the grisly sights that met them during medical emergencies and stories served as this psychological outlet for the emotions engendered from encountering human suffering on a daily basis. Martin et al (1983) argue that stories act as a release valve from the pressure of discomfiting situations which cannot be changed directly.

Tanhgerlini’s (2000) study of paramedics also found that stories can serve as an outlet for the frustration caused by ungrateful patients. In order to combat the negativity of ungrateful patients (surprisingly, a ‘normal’ response), stories were also told about unusually grateful patients. Employment Service frontliners may use stories as a way of dealing with aggressive and ungrateful customers. Equally, they may tell stories about grateful customers in an attempt to use the positive to deal with the negative (see section 8.2).



## *The Use of Humour*

Workplace humour and joking relationships have been recognised as significant kinds of organisational behaviour since the 1950s (Bradney, 1957; Sykes, 1966; Wilson, 1979; Ackroyd and Thompson 1999). A fair amount of this literature also recognises humour as a way to cope with organisational life (Roy, 1958; Linstead, 1985; Collinson, 1992; Talbot & Lumden, 2000). It is with this function of stories that this thesis is concerned, and which this section will now explore.

It may be first noted that, despite the multitude of literature on humour as a way of coping with the work situation, little has, however, been written about humour as a means to cope with violence. An exception to this is Sanders (2000) who explores the ways the ways that prostitutes coped with occupational hazards, including violence. She found that humour was used as a coping mechanism to deal with many of the different aspects of their work, including violence. She argues that 6 different types of humour were used as a coping strategy in the sex industry; private jokes, coded jokes, personal disclosure, resisting harassment and verbal aggression, humour as a form of communication, humour as conflict and group membership. She argues that humour is used firstly as a business strategy where impression management and body work (Tyler and Abbott 1998) enable individuals to conform to aesthetic ideal of the 'prostitute'. Secondly she argues that humour is used to shape the emotions aroused by selling sex, manage client interaction and establish support networks and colleagues. They are also a vehicle for defining group membership, dissent and divisions. Humour here contributes to a range of defence mechanisms that are necessary to protect personal and emotional well being. Other exceptions include Collinson (1992), who, although acknowledges that male factory workers may use humour to manage dangerous or high pressurised work, does not elaborate on this point. Similarly, Pitt (1979: p.36) describes humour from the miners

he studied as an important element in pushing back ‘the darkness and the pressing nearness of danger and death’. However, due to the scarcity of the literature in this area, it would benefit from future research.

In contrast, many writers argue that humour is often used as a way to cope with stressful situations in organisations (Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Barsoux, 1993; Bradney, 1957; Wooten, 1997; Nezu et al, 1987; Talbot & Lumen, 2000). For example, Bradney (1957) shows that, in one London department store, joking helped staff cope with the pressures and anxieties induced by a sales incentive scheme. It is argued by some writers that when used effectively humour can prevent burnout and help build resilience to stress (Wooten, 1996), thus reducing its impact (Nezu et al, 1988). Indeed, Talbot & Lunden (2000) argue that when the nurses they researched used humour as a way of coping in response to stressful situations, they reported lower levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation, with an accompanying higher sense of personal accomplishment. However, Healy & McKay (2000) argue that there is inconsistent evidence to suggest that humour has a buffering effect against stress and, in their study in particular, they did not find this to be the case.

Some writers highlight the use of humour as a way of coping by providing workers with a means of support. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999), for example, point out that mockery often turns its sights on management, thus promoting greater solidarity between workers, whereas Sanders (2004) draws on Goffman (1956) to argue that humour helps contribute to group solidarity amongst the prostitutes. She points out that humour is used to create a sense of belonging, to unite group membership and to boost individual self esteem. Other writers (such as Bolton, 2001; Bolton & Boyd, 2003; Duncan & Feisal, 1989; Barsoux, 1993) argue that humour is a means of offering friendship as well as support.



Humour is also viewed as a coping mechanism through its capacity to challenge existing ideologies and ideas. Linstead (1985) highlights the idea that humour is often viewed simply as inconsequential play and need not be taken into account in subsequent serious action, but it 'allows messages and formulations to be risked within its framework which would otherwise not be acceptable or possible' (p.761). Humour, for instance, is used to explore 'the possibility of the retrospective definition of actions as either 'serious or non-serious', 'real' or 'joking''. This imparts an ambiguity to such negotiations which can be exploited (p.761). For example, use of the phrase 'I was only joking' (p.743) is a typical response when a gesture has run into difficulties on a serious level. In this way the ambiguous nature of humour can be exploited as a protective device (Linstead, 1985). Douglas (1975) suggests that jokes often work well because they mimic or express contradictions in the social structure in which they arise. She claims that 'if there is no joke in the social structure, then no joke can appear' (1975: 110). She argues that:

A joke is a play upon form. It brings into relation disparate elements in such a way that one accepted pattern is challenged by the appearance of another in some way hidden in the first...any recognisable joke falls into this joke pattern which needs two elements, the juxtaposition of control against that which is controlled, the juxtaposition being that the latter triumphs. Needless to say, a successful subversion of one form by another ends the joke, for it changes the balance of power (p.96).

Linstead (1985) points out that in temporarily changing the balance of power, humour expresses and contains resistance. He argues that for the researcher, a rich but paradoxical characteristic of humour is its ability to resist the dominant formulation and also to accommodate it. Overall, he points out that to characterise humour as totally subversive is to omit its apparent incapacity to change organisations or social institutions; on the other hand, to dismiss it as a mere frivolity underestimates its enormous symbolic power. Other writers (such as Douglas, 1975; Ackroyd and

Thompson, 1999) are much less cautious when it comes to labelling humour as outrightly subversive. Douglas (1975), for example, draws on Bergson and Freud to argue that jokes are an attack on control and organisation. For her, all jokes have a subversive effect on a dominant structure of ideas, and represent a triumph of informality over formality. She asserts that when analysing humour we should look for the accompanying 'joke in social structure'. Ackroyd and Thompson (1999) point out that, rather than a marginal phenomenon of limited significance, the use of humour in organisations turns out to be an extremely important diagnostic device. Since organisations are full of paradoxes and contradictions, jokes can play and resonate on these and thus be subversive and an act of resistance. They argue that interest should thus be focused on humour and joking as an overlooked stream of radicalism. However, Cohen & Taylor (1976) argue that humour is not a prelude to social change but a means of distancing people from their circumstances by regarding them with less seriousness. Thus, instead of perceiving humour as subversive, they see it as a way to preserve the status quo. From this brief exploration of the literature on humour, it is clear that humour is frequently highlighted as a means to cope with the general difficulties of organisational life. However, the use of humour to deal with potentially violent situations within organisations is inadequately addressed.

### ***Mechanisms that Help Frontliners Deal with Difficult Customers***

As has been discussed above, many frontliners use general, informal mechanisms to deal with the client group as a whole. However, frontliners often find certain clients more difficult to deal with than others, such as abusive (and in my study violent) customers, and thus will employ certain methods to deal with these clients. The literature gives the following examples: 1. Compensation and Punishment; 2. Limiting Information Available; 3. Avoidance; 4. Discourteousness; 5. Venting; 6. Referral; 7.



Anger Displacement Techniques; and 8. Covert Activity. Each will be considered in turn.

Bailey & McCollough's (2000) findings indicated that frontliners use a method called 'compensation and punishment'. They found that some frontliners treated their difficult customers particularly nicely in order to compensate for the negative emotions encountered: *'I treat them extra nice to try to make them think about how they are acting'*. (p.60). However, this was not always the case and not all respondents reported being extra nice to difficult customers, but in fact reserving this for the more pleasurable ones: *'I try not to treat them (difficult customers) any less well than the average patron. I simply will go further out of my way for an exceptionally polite one'* (p.61). At the other end of the scale, Bailey & McCollough (2000) argue that generally respondents often punished difficult customers: *'The ruder and more demanding a customer is, the less we do for him. We are tired of assholes getting all the privileges.'* (p.62).

Taylor & Tyler (2000) argue that one coping mechanism frontliners use when dealing with rude customers is the act of both limiting the information actually given and deliberately withholding other relevant service information. This frequently involves talking to customers in a 'distant' or disinterested manner and only supplying information when specifically asking for it (Taylor & Tyler, 2000). They quote a betting shop worker to illustrate this point:

*'If I don't like someone ...it's difficult to explain but I will be efficient with them, giving them what they want and no more, but I will not be really friendly...I sometimes have a really monotone voice sounding a bit cold...I will not laugh at their jokes for example'* (Taylor and Tyler: 89).

Some of Bailey & McCollough's (2000) respondents used the method of dealing with difficult customers as soon as possible and thus getting them

out as quickly as they could. This is termed by them 'expediting'. On the one hand, such sentiments seemed to reflect a desire to shield other customers from the abusive customer. However, they were also aware that the faster that they dealt with the customer, the faster the unpleasant encounter would end: *'I am polite to them, but try to satisfy their demands as quickly as possible. Very politely, but quickly'*. (p.62)

Another way of coping described by Bailey & McCollough (2000) is identified as 'avoidance'. This is when the frontliner avoids having to deal with the difficult customer, and can include removing themselves in the middle of a difficult interaction or indeed not serving new customers at all. The idea of this is to take a break from the customers. This way of coping is often coupled with emotional management techniques such as taking a deep breath and so on. Some find other non-customer orientated tasks to perform, while others go on a break or even escape to the rest room. While avoidance might seem similar to the punishment mechanism of ignoring the customer, it differs in that the service agent completely removes himself or herself from the service encounter. This links in with the idea of offstage areas (see section 7.1) where the frontliner goes to be away from the customer and is able to drop the mask: *'I would go to the associate lounge or rest area, get some water or a soda and try to shake it off. Taking a break can be a big help'* (p.63)

Bailey & McCollough (2000) further argue that if frontliners were not able to take or change their attitude in some way then discourteousness was likely to follow in subsequent dealings with the difficult customer. Thus, they identify discourteousness itself as a form of coping. Although this may be seen as a departure from emotional labour itself, this 'slip' where real feelings are shown, can be a way of coping with the emotional labour carried out the rest of the time: *'Probably be in a bad mood for the rest of the day. Still do my job but wouldn't be as friendly as other days.'* (p.64) However,



Bailey & McCollough (2000) did add that, although answers often indicated that frontliners were discourteous to difficult customers they did try hard not to let it affect the other encounters (or so they said).

Sometimes difficult customers are coped with using the practice of 'referral' (Bailey & McCollough, 2000). This method involves referring the difficult customer or calling the manager. Often this way of coping was employed when the associate's own coping mechanism failed. A quote from Bailey & McCollough (2000) illustrates this point: *'If there is a major problem, I will pass the buck to a manager or immediate supervisor.'* (p.65) This again can be seen as a collective way of coping. However, this raises the question of whether this is viewed as inferior to other coping mechanisms (it was done, after all, after other ways of coping failed) and, again, this highlights the potential effects that organising policies may have on informal coping methods.

Anger displacement techniques are another method of coping that is cited in the literature. Mann (1999) subscribes to the use of anger displacement techniques as a way to cope with emotional labour. Anger is expressed but deflected away from the person that provoked the negative feeling. She gives the example of using obscene gestures during a telephone conversation that the caller can't see, or taking unexpressed feelings out on a stress ball. Sutton's (1991) study of debt collectors noted that after calls with abusive debtors collectors frequently punched their desks and cursed. This is an example of anger displacement techniques. Hochschild (1983) describes how flight attendants suggested their own displacement methods: 'I chew on ice, just crunch my anger away', 'I flush the toilet repeatedly', 'I think about doing something mean like pouring Ex-Lax into his coffee'. She then explains how flight attendants were trained in other coping interventions in order to avoid these techniques.

Other methods for coping with rude customers include engaging in covert activity which goes against the 'service ideal', whilst at the same time maintaining the mask of emotional display that is required by management ideals. Examples of this include the waiter who tampers with the customers' food in some way, or the sales assistant who manages to look in all directions except at the customer who is demanding their attention (Noon & Blyton, 1997). Van Maanen & Kunda (1989: 67) found that Disneyland ride operators deploy a number of covert activities in response to their situation and particularly in response to offensive customers. Common remedies include the 'seatbelt squeeze', a small token of appreciation given to a deviant customer consisting of the rapid crunching of a seatbelt such that the passenger is doubled up at the point of departure and left gasping for the duration of the ride. Then there is the 'break toss' whereby operators jump on the outside of a norm violator's car, unhitching the safety belt then slamming the breaks on and bringing the vehicle to an almost instantaneous stop while the driver flies to the hood of the car (or beyond). Other ploys listed that are of a similar nature were the 'seatbelt slap' and the 'hatch-cover ploy'. Van Maanen & Kunda (1989) argue that all of these unofficial procedures are learned on the job, and although used sparingly they are used. Although this method of coping is directly opposing the customer service ideals laid down by management, it is important to note that it is not an open challenge to them. These manoeuvres could all be passed off as accidents and are not official defiance. They are a way of allowing the frontliner to cope with the difficult customers whilst looking like operating within the rules. Equally, they are also used sparingly, suggesting that the rules are followed the rest of the time.

### **Coping Mechanisms that Involve Changing Frontliner's Perception of the Customers**



In these coping mechanisms, the frontliners' use their cognitive processes to enable them to perceive the customers in a different way and thus deal with the customer more easily. The literature provides several examples of this type of coping mechanism: 1. Psychological Distancing; 2. Creating Typologies; and 3. Using the Positive to Cope with the Negative. These will each be explored.

### *Creating Typologies*

Mennerick (1974) argues that one way in which service workers frequently attempt to bring greater order to their work situation, and to cope with the stress in the worker-client relationship, is by employing social typologies of their clients (see Guskin & Guskin, 1970: 31 and Schur, 1971: 41, for a discussion of the use of stereotypes as a means of helping individuals order their expectations and interactions). Mennerick (1974) argues that groups create social types by selecting out exaggerated modes of behaviour that are relevant to group interests and are displayed by group members or by outsiders with whom group members interact (Klapp, 1958: 674). The frontliner does not know the personality of the client, but they perceive them in a certain way and then use this constructed reality to fill a gap. Mennerick argues that these social types allow workers and clients to fill the gap between merely knowing each other's formal status and behaviour roughly expected of them to being acquainted intimately with them. In other words, service workers use typologies in order to bring order into their work.

The typology in itself, though, is not a coping mechanism; rather, it is a preliminary to the actual resolution of stress. First, the service worker confronts their clients and, often on the basis of previous experience, workers anticipate potential stress or conflict in their interaction. Given the potential for conflict, workers then utilise client typologies. They classify the

clients according to varying degrees of specificity, depending upon the ways in which clients with distinct characteristics can be expected to affect workers activities. When new clients who can be placed into one or more of the relevant types enter the work scene, service workers are alerted to the kinds of problems that those particular types of clients are likely to cause. Thus, service workers are able to anticipate problems and can employ the necessary methods or tactics to cope more readily with them.

Mennerick (1974) argues that frontliners classify clients depending on how close they are to their 'ideal' client. This means that, in theory, clients are placed on a continuum, with the ideal at one end and the farthest from ideal at the other. However, Mennerick points out that, in practice, this means that clientele tend to be part of the simple dichotomy of good and bad clients. Indeed, there are several potential problems that should be pointed out. Firstly, any ambiguous cues from a client with whom the worker is interacting mean that workers are unable to type clients correctly because the relevant cues are not clearly communicated. This will make it difficult for the frontliner to categorise the client and could lead to mistyping of clients. Having categorised them incorrectly, the workers then confront the dilemma of invoking coping mechanisms that might be inappropriate to the client type. Clients who present cues that enable them to belong to more than one type cause further problems and are usually dealt with by choosing what seems the dominant type. Another related problem is that of client characteristics changing over time. Thus, the categorisation successfully used in the past may become antiquated, although the typing process might be flexible enough to allow workers to re-evaluate and re-type clients as client characteristics change.

Tolich (1993) illustrates the development of typologies in his study of supermarket cashiers. In it, almost every clerk described troublesome customers who could fit into three main categories: the habitual complainers,



the comparison pricers and the picky complainers. This supports the argument made by Lipsky (1976 and 1980) that street-level bureaucrats simplify their work in order to make life easier. Amongst other bureaucratic simplifications, this may involve categorising certain clients and treating them accordingly (Lipsky, 1980) (see chapter two).

### *Using the Positive to Cope with the Negative*

In their study of 55 service agents, Bailey & McCollough (2000) found that some respondents seemed to practice a very sophisticated form of emotional management in which they deliberately sought to use positive encounters with subsequent customers to restore a positive mood. In some cases, both employees and customers worked together to co-produce a positive emotional encounter in an effort to restore the affective mood. This fits in with Hughes et al's (1958) argument that workers locate 'the psychological arrangements and devices by which men make their work tolerable, or even glorious to themselves and others' (p.48). Tolich (1993) draws on Hughes's argument to claim that supermarket clerks make their work more tolerable through the 'my clerk' and 'my customer' relations that they develop with regulars. He explains that, whilst the level of intimacy should not be overstated, these relationships are imbued by clerks with emotional significance and help them to deal with the negative aspects of emotional labour. Here, we see that again the positive encounters are used to deal with the negative. This begs the question of if and how frontliners use the positive to cope with the negative to try to make their work honourable and tolerable to themselves.

This idea of using positive to cope with negative ties in with methods of coping endorsed by the formal organisation. In Korczynski's (2002) study of call centre workers, he stressed that management promoted the idea that it is

worth putting up with some pain in order to receive the rewards that emotional labour can provide. He gives the example of management reading out letters of praise from customers in front of an audience of customer service representatives and applauding the members of staff praised. Workers were keen to join in the applause in recognition of the work of a colleague and the recipients were proud to receive the praise. Although a cynical view may highlight that workers will not value this kind of management ploy, Korczynski (2002) suggests the contrary, that the frontliners do value this type of praise.

## **10. Discussion of Informal Coping Mechanisms**

All of the informal methods detailed above either fit within the privileged idea of customer sovereignty, which is at the root cause of emotional labour, or are undetectable by management, such as cognitive processes, or at least not detected very easily. This is probably because service workers want to be seen to be upholding organisational ideals whilst still indulging their own beliefs and interpretations. In fact, it seems that the most visible and detectable, if still not easily detectable ways of coping, (compensation and punishment, limiting information available, avoidance of the customer, discourteousness, anger displacement techniques and covert activity) are those that are for dealing with particularly difficult customers. Is this because these customers are more likely to push frontliners to their limits and hinder their ability to uphold management ideals? The literature on collective coping implies that they are used all the time to deal with all customers. However, on closer inspection it may become apparent that it really is used for coping with particularly difficult customers only.



This section, therefore, raises several questions about which coping methods frontliners in the Employment Service choose to use: firstly, in what ways do frontliners within the ES cope with customer violence? Why do they cope in these ways? These questions will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **11. Conclusion**

In conclusion, with the increased emphasis on customer service and customer sovereignty in contemporary organisations, frontliners will increasingly need to carry out emotional labour and uphold such management ideals even in the face of difficult and violent customers. Thus, this study of the ways in which frontliners cope with this is a significant and important area.

Providing customer service to abusive customers has frequently been acknowledged as a potentially painful experience for frontliners (Hochschild, 1983; Taylor, 1998; Smith, 1992; Korczynski, 2000). The need to find ways to cope with this has also been recognised (Hochschild, 1983; Mann, 1999; James, 1989; Van Maanen & Kunda, 1989; Korczynski 2002 and 2003). However, the emotional labour literature tends to detail the way that frontliners cope with customer service in general without specifically examining the way that frontliners cope with customer violence. Customer violence can be an unpleasant yet significant part of emotional labour. Therefore, the ways that frontliners cope with this aspect should be an important issue in this literature. This thesis aims to help rectify this oversight.



## **Chapter 5**

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The review of the literatures relevant to customer violence highlights a number of theoretical, empirical and methodological shortcomings in the research that has been carried out thus far. In response to these, this study's central research objective is to increase understanding of the important issue of coping mechanisms used by service workers to deal with customer violence. In seeking to fulfil this objective it is necessary to break it down into a series of research questions in order to isolate key elements of this research and to respond to the deficiencies within the literature. The research questions of this thesis are:

1. How is the concept of customer violence constructed within the organisation?
2. In what ways do frontliners within the ES cope with customer violence?
3. Why do they cope in these ways?

These questions will now be discussed through an examination of the major weaknesses of the literature.

A deficiency of the literatures relevant to this study is the failure to consider the role of both agency and structure with regards to the construction of the concept of customer violence. Consistent with a

constructionist approach, this thesis sees meaning making as a social process. Following on from this idea, dominant and powerful groups within the organisation will attempt to privilege their views of what constitutes as violent behaviour over less dominant groups. These views will lead to certain actions which will be favourable to these powerful groups and may, in turn, influence the way in which customer violence is dealt with and the way that the frontliners cope with it. Despite the fact that certain viewpoints will be privileged, alternative versions will still be present and will still compete, collide and impact on how frontliners perceive organisational reality and thus how they cope with it. Power is not unidimensional; the way frontliners cope with violence will be a product of the interaction of both structure and human agency (see my methodology chapter). Having established the importance of both agency and structure in understanding the way that frontliners cope with violence, it becomes clear that the lack of writing on this is a significant weakness of the pertinent literature. Concerning the ES, for example, only Lipsky (1980), albeit briefly, considers how frontliners deal with the customer aggression drawing upon both contextual and individual factors.

Within the majority of literature on organisational violence, which is positivistic, the idea that the concept of violence is a socially constructed one is not explicitly acknowledged and violence is seen as an objective notion. The role of agency in 'customer violence' is recognised to the detriment of possible social structural causes of customer violence. The concept of violence is individualised, along with the responsibility to deal with the anxiety caused, and the structural features that may precipitate violence thus are overlooked. Conversely, the more interpretivist literature on organisational violence recognises the wider power



issues of organisational violence (including its social construction) although it does this at the expense of individual agency. Violence is explored through the use of generalisations at a macro level, without exploring the construction of violence in-depth at any organisational level. Instead, writers tend to call for future research in the area and, whilst they do allude to the social construction of violent behaviour in organisations, they do not examine how or why this happens.

In exploring customer service work in general, the emotional labour literature draws on insights taken from both the organisational social structures and the dynamic of human agency. However, in examining the way in which frontliners cope with service work, authors either explore 'official' coping interventions explicitly laid down by management or else focus on frontliners' own informal ways of coping that are otherwise viewed as subversive. There is no consideration of how the differing organisational groups and interests interact or how the interplay of both structure and agency affect the ways that frontliners cope with service work. As previously noted, how frontliners specifically cope with violent customers is not examined at all.

Having identified the failings of all different areas of the literature to consider both structure and agency and the interplay of organisational interests in the construction of organisational violence, my first research question is an attempt to help address this shortcoming:

1. How is the concept of customer violence constructed within the organisation?

In general within the literature, the negative aspects of service work are recognised and examined to differing extents. For example, concerning the Employment Service (ES), a picture is painted of frontliners' work as being one of complex rules and difficult clients, meaning that service workers face an environment which asks more of them than they have the resources with which to respond (Prottas, 1979; Lipsky, 1976). Writers (such as Manconachie, 1993; Wilcocks and Harrow, 1992; Harrow and Shaw, 1992; Potter, 1994) describe the recent shift in public sector work as necessitating more service-orientated skills alongside the more traditionally required bureaucratic practices. This notion helps illustrate the increasingly contradictory nature of ES frontliner's work. Service workers are expected to police benefit, whilst at the same time working with a service-orientated ethic. Much of the literature on the Australian ES points to the high level of emotional exhaustion and psychological distress of frontliners incurred by ES work.

The positivistic literature on organisational violence also portrays service work as an increasingly risky and dangerous profession and tends to focus on the public sector, such as providing healthcare, education, law enforcement, and social services. Furthermore, these writings construct the workplace as affected by the violence rather than being constructive of the violence. Although the social construction of violence is recognised within the more interpretivist literature on organisational violence, it still fails to consider frontline work and customer violence in any depth. Indeed, customer violence is not mentioned at all by the majority of literature in this area. Two notable exceptions are Boyd (2002) and Hearn and Parkin (2001) who, although they do not cover this area in any depth, to their credit mention customer service work,



which is left untouched by other interpretivist writings on organisational violence.

Within the emotional labour literature, service work is largely depicted in terms of the stress of managing emotions in order to fit in with the demands of the sovereign customer, although the more pleasurable side of the service interaction is also discussed. First written about by Hochschild (1983), the harmful consequences of emotional labour, such as burnout, detachment from feelings, and cynicism, are now frequently discussed by many other writers. Boyd (2002) asserts that emotional labour may be especially hard, and frontliners may experience it particularly negatively when the service worker is required to deal with difficult and violent customers. Similarly, Korczynski (2002) points out that it is when customers become irate and abusive that subservience to customers is most keenly felt.

Overall, then, the literature explores the potentially difficult nature of service work. In particular, the main body of positivistic research on organisational violence emphasises an especially dark side of this work: violent customers, something which is largely overlooked in the other writings. The picture painted - by all the literature - implicitly suggests the need for frontliners to develop mechanisms to cope with all the negative aspects of their work. As the emotional labour literature stresses that service work may be especially difficult when dealing with irate customers, it may well be the case that emotional labour will become even more painful with violent customers. This may mean that the methods used by frontliners to cope with these particular situations may be especially important. Notably, each literature deals with the issue of frontliners coping to differing degrees.

Within the writings on the ES, there is little written on the ways that frontliners cope - a surprising omission given the context of their work. Two important exceptions to this are the studies carried out by Prottas (1979) and Blau (1955). In general, the coping strategies discussed are few and far between, and they are all from research which is decades old - a problem in such a changing context. Likewise, although the difficulty of interaction is acknowledged, the concept of violence in these encounters is conspicuous by their absence, meaning that coping strategies specifically focused on coping with aggressive and violent customers are not discussed (with the exception of Lipsky's (1976) brief discussion of physical and psychological threat).

The majority of organisational violence literature focuses on frontliners coping methods from a health and safety point of view. This translates into recommendations for ways of coping with physically violent incidents only (such as counselling and victim debriefing) without researching how service workers actually do cope on the frontline. The smaller, more interpretivist literature explores organisational violence through the use of generalisations at a macro level, without exploring the construction of customer violence in depth at an organisational level. A symptom of this failing is the lack of studies which explore customer service work - and thus customer violence and frontliner coping mechanisms.

Concerning emotional labour, the literature on coping strategies is somewhat sketchy and only occasionally actually cites and describes specific examples of methods of coping used by frontliners. Even where studies actually do mention exact coping methods (for example, Mennerick, 1974; Van Maanen and Kunda,



1989; Bailey and McCollough, 2000), they only illustrate how frontliners cope with customer service in general, without examining the way that frontliners cope specifically with customer violence. Customer aggression and physical violence can be a painful yet significant part of emotional labour and the ways that frontliners cope with this aspect specifically is an important omission in our understanding of service work.

The various areas of the literature discussed here have recognised the negative side of service work and thus identified the importance of frontliner coping strategies. Having established their inadequacy of engaging with customer violence and the way that service workers cope with this aspect, the reasoning behind my next two research questions should now be clear – as a way to precisely address this oversight in the literature. The questions are:

2. In what ways do frontliners within the ES cope with customer violence?

3. Why do they cope in this way?

Continued growth of the interactive service population has pushed customer-worker relations to centre stage. However, a weakness of the literature is its failure to consider how the nature of customer service work affects customer violence in general and, more specifically, the role it plays in influencing the way that frontliners cope with this violence.

An important weakness of the ES literature is that it fails to explore customer violence in any depth. Consequently, it does not consider how the nature of service work affects the ways that frontliners

cope with the issue of customer violence. This is surprising given the recent introduction of the term 'customer' instead of 'claimant' and its accompanying service ethic.

The lack of exploration of the nature of customer service work and its impact on customer violence is a huge deficiency of the organisational violence writings. The more objectivist literature does not examine this issue because it individualises the concept of violence at the expense of other structural understandings. Within the interpretivist literature, the role that the customer service ideology plays in customer violence is also largely overlooked. Exceptions to this are Hearn and Parkin (2001) and Boyd (2002), who fleetingly consider this issue.

In contrast, the emotional labour literature focuses extensively on the nature of service work and how this affects frontliner and customer behaviour. In particular, it examines how the 'enchanted myth of customer sovereignty' may induce customers to become frustrated and angry. However, in examining this, it stops short of considering its role in actual violent customers. This is a significant omission as the customer sovereignty ideology plays a major role within frontline work and deeply affects the way that the customer is perceived. It is therefore reasonable to assume that it may well affect the way that customer's violent behaviour is perceived, experienced and dealt with. Indeed, with the increasing adoption of this concept within the workplace, the failure to consider the way that this affects customer violence is a glaring omission throughout all the literature. This thesis aims to fill this gap through its exploration of the third research question, which it is hoped will generate findings which extend beyond the scope of the ES. This area is therefore also covered by the final question:



### 3. Why do they cope in these ways?

It is hoped that in answering these research questions it will be possible to gain a deeper understanding of the way that frontliners cope with customer violence. This is an important area of study, not least because the continued growth of the interactive service population has pushed 'customer'-worker relations to centre stage. This study aims to contribute to understandings of customer violence by exploring the ways that service workers cope with this dark side of service work.

## **Chapter 6**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **1. Introduction**

This purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed description of the methodological approach adopted in this thesis in pursuit of an answer to the primary research question – how do ES frontliners cope with violence? This chapter is split into eight sections. The first examines the ontological and epistemological assumptions which underpin the study. The following section explores qualitative methodology and appropriateness for my research. Moving on, I consider reliability and flexibility in qualitative research. Next, I describe both my research and approach and the research process. I then describe my methods of data collection before turning to my data analysis techniques.

I have selected a qualitative methodology for two major reasons. 1. My assumptions about the nature of reality and knowledge (ontological and epistemological assumptions) 2. The appropriateness of a qualitative approach to my research topic. First, I will outline my philosophical assumptions, exploring qualitative methodology and how it is relevant for my study.



## **2. Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions**

Technically, ontology is concerned with the nature of reality, whilst epistemology is concerned with the study of what constitutes valid knowledge. However, the literature suggests that there is a fusing between ontology, epistemology and research method and that each has implications for the others. This is reflected in the fact that different authors use terms and labels differently (Bryman, 2001, Crotty 1998, Synom and Cassell, 1998 Denscombe 2002). This thesis reflects this through its use of the labels of interpretivism and constructivism as interchangeable. Interpretivism broadly underpins this thesis. More specifically, within the realm of interpretivism, this thesis takes a social constructionist stance.

The broad label of social constructionism stems from many different approaches (such as ‘critical psychology’, ‘discourse analysis’, deconstruction’ and post-structionism) and it covers many different (and sometimes opposing) perspectives and ideas. Like interpretevism, the label of social constructionism is used differently by different authors What some consider as social constructionism others do not and vice-versa. Therefore in the following section I will outline precisely the way which I am using social constructionism in this study.

This study specifically draws upon key principles outlined by Vivian Burr (1995) which she argues underpin social constructionism. Firstly, she advocates a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. She argues against objective notions of reality which are knowable (with the correct instruments) and

argues in favour of questioning conventional understandings and examining the processes by which such understandings come to be seen as 'natural' or 'true'. For example, the vast majority of the literature on violence in organisations takes the concept of violence as a given: either an event or an action is violent or it is not. This 'truth' seems self-evident and therefore is not questioned. However, by taking a critical stance it soon becomes obvious that the definition of whether something is violent is a subjective opinion and should not be taken for granted as an objective state. This study needs to look past the taken-for-granted assumptions of violence within the ES and begin to explore it as a subjective social phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

However, if we take this argument that the truth is subjectively constructed and nothing more, the logical conclusion will be extreme relativism; the idea that every different perspective of what constitutes as the truth, is as valid as each other. This forces the question of how can we justify advocating one world view over another and one way of organising social life over another? For example, in accounts of domestic violence, the perpetrator often denies violence or blames the victim. If we apply extreme relativism to this research, then this account will be as valid and as 'true' as the victim's, thus allowing no recourse for the victim, should they so wish it. Parker (1998) explains this well when he argues that subscribers to this perspective care nothing for the social implications of their arguments and equally that they imagine that everything in the world and human nature can be made and remade at will. With this in mind, how do we argue for

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<sup>1</sup> This idea that reality is subjective is not only specific to social constructionism but to constructivism in general. Constructionism, if regarded as both an ontological and an epistemological position is based on the belief that reality is subjective and internal, rather than objective and externally imposed. This view describes knowledge as interpretive, constructed and in a constant state of revision (Bryman 2001).



anything? This idea represents a 'moral nihilism' where we cannot pronounce judgment on anyone. Following this logic, we cannot argue for or against the oppressor or the oppressed, or indeed for or against anything (Parker 1998).

At this point, it is worth pointing out that it is often argued (by writers such as Burr 1995, 1998, Edwards, Ashmore and Potter 1995) that in fact, within the social sciences, very few argue for moral nihilism and that it is just a theoretical position at the end of a continuum of social constructionist and relativist ideas. With that in mind, where am I positioned on this continuum? I have decided to follow the lead of many writers in this area (such as Parker 1998, Burr 1998, Willig 1998) and take a pragmatic approach and argue for the importance of values and of making moral and political judgments (Burr 1998). However, with this view, we must inevitably make and defend our judgments from within our own culturally and historically located value systems (Burr 1998). Critics of this pragmatic view argue that these judgements are likely to be in the advocator's interests, disguising themselves as 'social conscience'. However, Burr rightly points out 'pragmatists are no more hedonistic or self-serving than other theorists. There seems no good reason to suppose that pragmatism is more likely to lend itself to iniquitous practices than any other theory or philosophy' (Burr 1998: 25).

The second basic principle of social constructionism outlined by Burr is that our understandings of the world must not be seen as static or inevitable but as historically and culturally situated. Social constructionism does not argue that organisations exist only in our minds and that to make something true one need only think it. Rather, it is argued that we make sense of the world using

concepts, language and frames of reference which originate from the social world, of which we are part and of which itself, is culturally and historically situated. Weick (1995) eloquently explains that we interpret our reality by 'applying meanings, terms, and concepts to what we observe and experience, taking these from the languages, stocks of knowledge, and ongoing interpretations of others to whom we relate. In this way, human beings 'socially construct' their realities' (Watson, 2002).

It is possible to see the importance of contextual factors, in relation to the understanding of the concept of violence. Sumner (1997) argues that:

'yesterdays terrorist often becomes tomorrow's leader: the slum culture's 'delinquent' turns out to be less reprehensible than the corrupt politician and the 'deviance' of many, when put under the spotlight of research, reappears as an editorial selection from a choice of a thousand normalities' (Sumner 1997).

Thirdly, Burr (1995) argues that knowledge is constituted and sustained by social processes. If we reject the notion that reality exists as an objective entity which we can come to know, then the questions arise as to how knowledge is created. Social constructionism claims that people make sense of the world through creating and recreating versions of reality as a result of social processes and interactions. Social constructivism differs from constructionism in general, through its emphasis on the importance of shared meanings and social structures as opposed to focusing on an individual's own internal subjective frame of reference which direct their interpretation of the world and their individual action. Here, sense-making is largely seen as a unique



process making all interpretations as equally valid. From a social constructionist perspective, social reality is 'a network of assumptions and intersubjectively shared meanings' (Burrell and Morgan 1979: 28-31).

Most Humanist approaches do not recognise the contextual factors which make up social structures and the role they play in influencing the individual. Here individuals are depicted as a free thinking and free acting and are in control of their own destiny. Social constructionism, by contrast, frequently focuses on the world as constituted by those social structures and social processes. This leads us to the question of where does the individual fit into this? Many social constructionists (such as Harre, 1998, Potter, 1992), reject the idea of agency and argue that accounts are constructed from social resources and interpretive repertoires (Potter and Wetherall, 1987). They do argue however that agency is 'real in its effects' and that in a society which is structured around the notion of agency and individuality, social and psychological reality will be constructed accordingly. This study does not take that position but is more sympathetic to social constructionists such as Willig (2001) who argues that the individual human actor makes moral and political judgments. She argues that although social reality does not pre-date discursive practice, meaning that the world does get constructed through these, she still argues that human beings are capable of making judgments about which constructions are oppressive and in need of challenging through deconstruction and discourse analysis. Although this study, (in line with others such as Crotty 1998, Denscombe 2002) subscribes to the idea that individuals make sense of reality individually, as well as socially, this study largely focuses on the social aspect of the construction of reality. This

study seeks to understand the role played by social structures within the ES in the way that frontliners cope with violence. This thesis hopes to uncover the shared meanings which underpin the way that frontliners cope with violence. It sets out to examine how organisational dynamics (such as group interplay) affect the way that ES frontliners cope.

Burr's fourth and final point is that, as knowledge and social action go together, particular versions of reality lead to particular forms of action and away from others. Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, it follows that subsequent action will work in the interests of groups that are more powerful and against those in weaker, more precarious positions. For example, as Sumner (1997) argues violence can be described as either an offence or a punishment. Enforcing the law in many cultures is a legitimate form of state aggression whereas challenging state officials or policy is frequently seen as an illegitimate violation of the peace. Thus, different versions of reality lead to different actions accordingly. This study considers the role played by organisational dynamics on the construction of violence within the ES.

As noted earlier social constructionism specifically, (and constructivism in general) subscribes to the idea that reality is not objective, but subjective. In taking an interpretivist stance, this subjectivity will necessarily run throughout this thesis. The researcher will be subjectively interpreting participants' accounts using her version of concepts, theories and literature (Bryman 2001). Just as participants give their accounts according to their subjective frame of reference, the researcher will only be able to interpret these accounts from her own subjective perspective. As



Gill and Johnson explain: 'Interpretations cannot escape background preconceptions embedded in the language and life of their authors' (Gill and Johnson 1997: 144). Therefore, in this study, my philosophical assumptions, my preconceptions of violence in organisations and the literature referred to will all have an impact on the data collection and analysis. My own subjective frame of reference will affect what I consider relevant or irrelevant and how I make sense of the data and my choice of methodology.

### **3. Qualitative Methodology and Appropriateness for my Research**

As explained above, I selected a qualitative methodology because of my philosophical assumptions and because of the nature of my research. After discussing my philosophical assumptions (above) I now turn to the appropriateness of a qualitative approach to my research topic.

Firstly, qualitative methods are suitable for research that is exploratory in nature. The research seeks to elicit what is important to the individual as well as their interpretations of their environment in which they work, through in-depth investigations of their milieu (Bryman 1988). The nature of my study is exploratory in nature. The aim of this research is to understand how and why frontlines cope with violence, examining a relatively under-researcher area. Most existing research either focuses on how frontliners cope with emotional labour, or else it examines organisational violence at a more macro level, quickly passing over customer violence. In contrast, my study explores how frontliners cope with customer violence.

Secondly, the flexibility of the qualitative approach fits well with the inductive character of my research. As noted by Cassell and Symon (1994) qualitative research tends to start out as loosely structured within a framework of ideas, allowing questions to evolve as research progresses. Cassell and Symon (1994) maintain that qualitative methods allow the researcher 'to formulate new hypotheses and alter the old ones as the research progresses, in the light of emerging insights' (p.7). Throughout the process of collecting and analysing data, the importance of different issues anticipated at the outset may change as the focus becomes clearer.

This inductive aspect of qualitative methodology sits well with an approach such as mine. I aim to construct theories and conceptual frameworks from the data taken from my site of research (the job centres studied). By allowing the research agenda to emerge as opposed to imposing it from the start draws on a grounded theory style approach. This method was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Strauss and Corbin (1990) who argue that such a theory is:

'inductively derived from the study of the phenomena that it represents....One does not begin with a theory, then prove it. Rather one begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge' (p.23).

The extent to which researchers can actually achieve a 'tabular rasa' with complete open mindedness has been questioned. Indeed, it goes against the idea of the researcher's subjective frame of reference argued in this chapter. Thus, the concept of 'pure grounded theory' is impossible to achieve (as acknowledged by many grounded theorists themselves). However, this study draws



upon this approach in the way that it looks towards the data in order to define the important issues (for more on this see section 5) and grounds its theory in the data.

Thirdly, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate to the subjective nature of my topic. The different research paradigms should not be seen as essentially bad or good, right or wrong. As Silverman (2000:1) rightly observes, ‘...the choice between different research methods should depend on what you are trying to find out’. My philosophical assumptions and my research topic both lead me to search for the subjective meaning of social action. Specifically I aim to understand the behaviours frontliners use to cope with violence on the frontline. I am not concerned with collecting quantifiable data on issues such as the number of frontliners who have experienced violence, the amount of recorded violent incidents, and the turnover of frontliners. In my research, subjective accounts, taken together, will be the foundation upon which theoretical frameworks for understanding can be constructed.

The subjective nature of my topic, combined with my philosophical assumptions mean that subjectivity is fundamental at every stage of the research. However, positivistic research sees subjective research as biased and lacking in rigour. Many regard social scientists as journalists or soft scientists and regard their work as full of bias (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). However, this argument is countered by the criticism that quantitative research uses a set of ad hoc variables to analyse and count its variables (Blumer 1956, Cicourel 1964, Silverman 1975) whereas qualitative researchers describe how they actually go about counting and analysing. Thus, the implication of this is that quantitative

researchers still use these subjective methods unknowingly whilst still claiming scientific objectivity (Silverman 2000). However, rigour is still important in qualitative research; it is just evaluated in different terms.

#### **4. Reliability and Validity in Qualitative research**

##### **Reliability**

LeCompte and Gotez (1982) distinguish between external reliability which they identify as replication, and internal reliability which they describe as consistency. External reliability does not seem a plausible view in light of the stance taken by this research; that the process is sensitive to the subjective nature of the contextual factors, including the researcher's presence. For example, an interaction like a semi-structured interview cannot be exactly replicated because it is shaped by the personalities and states of mind of the participants, and the way in which those individuals interact on a particular occasion. In other words, reactivity prevents replication being a valid way of assessing the external reliability of most qualitative research, this study included.

However, King (1994) outlines some guidelines for internal reliability (or consistency). He argues that researchers should acknowledge their prejudices and assumptions and strive to set them aside. Here 'strive' is the operative word because although it is not possible to entirely bracket off personal feelings it is important to try in order to keep their influence to a minimum. In doing this, the researcher should 'allow themselves to be surprised



by the findings' (p.31). Others argue that consistency can be achieved through collaboration with other researchers (LeCompte and Gotez 1982, King 1994, Silverman 2000). This is where the researcher seeks the views of others on the interpretations of the data. Although co-working is not an available option when working on a doctoral thesis, I did discuss my interpretations with both my supervisors. However, consistency between researchers does not prove the 'truth' of the interpretations but it may allow the researcher to feel that her analysis has more credibility. Similarly, a divergent view does not make the researcher's interpretations 'untrue', but it may challenge her reasoning or expression of her argument. Therefore, although inter-rater reliability cannot be said to contribute to the evaluation of the quality of the research outcomes, it may aid intellectual rigour through the consideration of other interpretations and perspectives.

## **Validity**

For King (1994: 31) a qualitative study: 'is valid if it truly examines the topic which it claims to have examined'. This is based on the 'truthfulness of the data', something which may be hard to establish when the research is dealing with subjective meanings and interpretations. King and others again make the case here for collaborative research (King 1994, Reason and Rowan 1981).

Another way of strengthening both validity and integrity, is the use of respondent validation or verification to check understanding (Reason and Rowan 1981). I was able to do this in my research through checking understanding during my interviews and

conversations with frontliners by using clarifying questions and tentative summaries. Reason and Rowan (1981) go so far as to suggest that researchers take tentative findings back to respondents for further collaboration and elaboration. However, this method has been criticised by a number of writers (Bloor 1978, Bryman 1988, Silverman 1993) because of difficulties of interpretation. Interviewees can only apply the researcher's emergent theory to their own experience, while the researcher has access to the perspectives of all participants, and may interpret the data in a different light or apply different criteria to those used by participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Equally, as Bryman (1988) notes, interviewees may introduce further data, rather than confirming or contesting the interpretation. Therefore this study did not use this method.

Validity and credibility can also be increased through triangulation. The use of triangulation in phenomenological research such as this, is not to establish the objective truth, because this would be incompatible with the subjective nature of this research. Rather, triangulation is used to address the issue of the rigour of the research process rather than providing evidence of a definitive interpretation or outcome. This may involve using different data collection techniques, comparing data from different sources and comparing interpretations with others 'who share a similar world' (Reason and Rowan, 1981a: 243). In my research, I used a number of research methods, including qualitative interviews, participant observation, story sheets and the analysis of formal documentation (these are discussed further in). This also allowed me to compare data from a number of sources.



## **Generalisability**

Generalisability is concerned with the application of findings to a wider scope than just that of the study. In quantitative studies, this is the extent that the research is applicable to the population that it is supposed to represent. In qualitative studies, it is the applicability of theoretical propositions across different contexts (Bryman 1988). In other words, whether certain aspects of the findings can be seen to be relevant to other contexts where there is a commonality of experience (Kvale 1996). Kluckholm and Murry explain the idea that even small studies are applicable to some other people/context 'Every man is in certain respects a) like all other men b) like some other men, and c) like no other men' (Clyde Kluckholm and Henry Murray in Polkinghorne, 1990:102)

I used three techniques to promote generalisability. First, I sought job centres that held different characteristics to give me the possibility of diverse experiences. Additionally, I recruited frontliners from different ethnic backgrounds who were both male and female.

Second, I followed Hartley's suggestion (1994) to promote the validity of theoretical propositions by developing an understanding of the processes which underlie both actions and the context in order to be able to specify the conditions in which actions may be expected to recur. For example, I looked at the different constructions of violence within the employment service and how this impacted upon frontliners coping mechanisms.

Third, I identified consistencies and differences in findings (Reason and Rowan, 1981) and related emerging insights from the literature.

A final point which I feel is noteworthy is that this research did not aim to uncover some objective reality of what is and is not violent, rather it was aiming to explore the different organisational constructions of violence which underpinned the way that frontliners cope.

## **5. Research Approach**

I decided to draw on elements of grounded theory for data collection and analysis, in that I generated theory directly from the data. I started with a broad area of study and let the data guide the direction and progressive focusing of my research.

What does grounded theory actually mean? It is theory which is derived inductively from the data which was systematically gathered and analysed throughout the research process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). Therefore, data collection, analysis and theory stand in a reciprocal relationship with each other. A researcher does not begin with a pre-conceived theory in mind, rather the researcher begins with an area of study and allows the theory to emerge from the data. The idea behind this is that theory which is constructed is more likely to resemble the 'reality' studied than theory derived from a series of ideas and concepts based on experience, or else pure speculation. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that 'grounded theories because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer



insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action' (p.12).

However, grounded theory has been criticised for its failure to acknowledge theories which guide work at an earlier stage. Miles and Huberman note 'any researcher no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to field work with some orienting ideas, foci and tools' (1984:27). However, researchers who draw on grounded theory do recognise that a state of complete objectivity, a 'tabular rasa' is impossible to achieve. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that every piece of research (quantitative or qualitative) has an element of subjectivity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argue that what is important is to take appropriate measures to minimize the subjectivity into their analyses. They argue that to do this researchers should be open, with a willingness to be surprised and that the researcher should think comparatively; that is by comparing incident to incident in order to stay grounded in the data. They argue that the researcher should obtain multiple viewpoints of the phenomena studied and gain data on the same phenomena in different ways. In addition, they recommend that the researcher periodically step back and ask 'what is going on here'.

Grounded theory is also criticised for concentrating on the generation of theories at the expense of their quality and usefulness. It is argued (Silverman, 2000, Bryman 1988) that used unintelligently it can degenerate into an empty building of categories or a 'mere smokescreen used to legitimise purely empiricist research' (Silverman 2000 p.145). However, Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasise that this approach needs to be used in conjunction with imagination and creativity. Although the major feature of this research is the idea of grounding concepts in data,

they constantly stress the importance of creativity of researchers and argue that it is an essential ingredient (Sandelowski 1995a). Strauss and Corbin explain that:

It is entirely possible to complete a grounded theory study, or any study, yet not produce findings that are significant. If the researcher simply follows the grounded theory procedures/cannons without imagination or insight into what the data are reflecting – because he or she fails to see what they are really saying except in terms of trivial or well known phenomenon – then the published findings can be judged as a failing on this criterion[i.e. of being significant] (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 256).

They explain that ‘techniques and procedures, however necessary, are only a means to an end. That they are not meant to be used rigidly in a step by step fashion’ but with flexibility and intelligence. They explain that it is the construction of new insights and understanding which are *significant* and *useful* that is at the heart of this method.

## **6. Research Process**

Described simply, the research process that I followed involved creating an interview guide pertaining to the broad focus of my thesis, doing 20 interviews to discover key issues, analysing the twenty interviews, defining research questions, carrying out participant observation, creating a second interview guide on the basis of the data gained , recruiting participants, doing another 25 interviews, giving out and collecting story sheets, interviewing the four union activists and then finally analysing the data. This



suggests a linear process, whereas in practice it was actually more cyclical in nature. For example, I started to analyse my data while still collecting new data and I continually reassessed my data collection in order to monitor its effectiveness throughout. I was aware that concurrent data collection and analysis had implications for the nature and quality of my research. If I allowed early data analysis to focus later collection too strongly, there was a risk that I might determine key themes prematurely, overlook other relevant themes and exaggerate those which might be specific to limited individual contexts. In this type of research, I wanted issues to arise from the data, as opposed to imposing the issues myself. To avoid this, I tried to strike a balance between focused exploration and open-mindedness by pursuing emergent themes that appeared promising, whilst avoiding concentrating on any single theme that failed to engage participants or to elicit expansive responses.

Equally, my record was not linear in that when well into the process of constructing theories after the completion of all data collection, I realised that a significant omission of my study was the failure to gain any perspective from the union. This was something I had overlooked and it was only in analysing my data that I identified this gap. Therefore I had to collect this data over a year after the other field work was carried out. Obviously due to the changing circumstances within the ES this was not ideal. However, I was able to make the best of a bad situation by finding frontliners who were union representatives and union officials for the ES at the time of my previous fieldwork and asking them to respond to questions with this period in mind.

In the following sections, I describe the data collection process, before going on to explain my approach to data analysis.

## **Selecting Participating Organisations**

My research was unusual in that instead of having to recruit an organisation, one presented itself to me. Shortly after starting my thesis, the district manager of a regional district in the Employment Service approached one of my supervisors and asked if they would be prepared to produce a consultancy report. My supervisor and I negotiated a deal whereby we would jointly do the report, if I could have full access to the organisation.

In this way practical reasons affected my choice of organisation. However, it was not only for reasons of access that I chose this organisation. The ES could not only offer me an insight into frontliners lives, but due to the nature of its work could provide me with extreme examples of the pleasure and the pain of frontline work, bringing the highs and lows into sharp focus. The type of work carried out in the ES (finding work, distributing benefits) means that intense emotion can often result from the interaction between the ES frontline and the service recipient. I was aware that the scope for pleasures was large; finding someone a long wanted job must feel like a huge achievement. On the reverse side, I was generally aware that many of the customers down the 'dole office' could be difficult. Although at this point I had no idea of the extent of abuse or violence.



## **Recruiting Participants**

### *Stage 1*

As explained, in order to gain access I had to carry out research for a consultancy report. This meant that for the first twenty interviews I discussed the job centres to be studied with the district manager. Although his input at this stage would seem unwanted, it was actually useful because he had a working knowledge of the job centres which could help me decide which ones to study. Equally, he did give me an almost entirely free hand to carry out my research because he believed that as a researcher I was an 'expert' and should be left alone to make the best choices. I explained that I wanted six job centres which were as contextually diverse as possible. This was to ascertain the effects of their differing surroundings on frontliners' worlds. The district manager described the different job centres and we decided on four. These were a large city job centre, a small city job centre, a small village job centre and a middle sized job centre. As well as asking questions pertaining to the consultancy report (which was on communication) I also used the interviews as a way to gain knowledge on key issues in frontliners lives and it was from these first interviews that I generated my preliminary research questions which were used in the next stage. The first 20 interviews can be considered as a pilot study used not as 'fine-tuning', as is often the case in survey research, but as a way to identify key issues for frontliners in frontline work. This was the start of a process of progressive focusing and so was not a separate phase, but in fact was part of the qualitative research as a whole. This was in line with grounded theory approach taken (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

Right from the start of this research I allowed the data to underline the key issues and thus help shape the theory.

To select the participants for the first round of interviews, I was given a list of frontliners' names in each job centre. I contacted the managers who each agreed to an interview and then sent out letters to every frontliner asking them if they would volunteer. In this letter I explained that I was a thesis student who had the authorisation of the district manager on a project about communication. By stressing my student status, I tried to play down my involvement with management. I specified that all participants had to be willing volunteers, who were interested in talking about their experiences of the frontline. I stressed that people would need to be free to participate in an interview lasting around an hour during working hours and that replies would be kept anonymous. In accordance with this, all names of ES participants (and clients) have been changed in the data used throughout this thesis.

I sent the letters to two of the four job centres simultaneously where they provoked outrage! In these job centres the managers had not mentioned my study and the frontliners were concerned that the district manager had given their names out to a random student. I realised that I should not have played down my contacts with management quite so much. At the time I did not understand why people were getting so upset, it was only later that I understood the frontliners need to keep their full names protected. This high concern with security was my first clue about the role of perceived violence in the culture. The first I heard about the problem was when the union contacted me. They explained the problem, (they already knew, and were supportive of the project)



and informed me that they had reassured members that I was legitimate. They advised me to stress to participants that they would be anonymous, (although my letter had already stated this, obviously they needed further reassurance) and to send all letters to the managers to distribute. I did this for the remaining two jobcentres. The managers then informed me of the volunteers. Using this method, there is potentially a risk of including only employees who were uncritical of their employing organisation and consequently generating a more positive picture of their experience of frontline work than if I had recruited participants myself. However, I did not find this to be the case. In fact I found that employees who volunteered were either very positive about the organisation (as one would expect), had the intention of expressing a particular message and have their voice heard (these were often more critical) or were frontliners who '*fancied an hour off work*'. In the event I found that many respondents expressed both negative and positive views about their experiences of the frontline.

### *Stage 2*

The job centre chosen for the participant observation was chosen as a result of non-probability sampling. That is a sample was selected which I felt would yield meaningful data about the areas studied. The decision was taken between the district manager and myself. I decided that it would be best to spend my time in a middle sized job centre set in a town, not a city or a village. My first round of interviews influenced this choice as I discovered that the middle-sized job centres seemed to experience issues which were prevalent to both small and large job centres. I asked the district manager to find a job centre that would fit this description and who would be willing to take me. The end result was the job

centre studied. I decided to spend both months in one place and not split the time between multiple job centres because I felt that the purpose of participant observation was to experience participants worlds in-depth, something which I did not feel that I could do in less than two months. Equally, Waddington (1994) argues that the longer a researcher is present, the more unusual or exhibitionist behaviour will disappear.

### *Stage 3*

In the next round of interviews, I used a combination of methods. I used non-probability sampling to personally select the interviewees from the jobcentre in which I did the participant observation. This was because I knew them and so selected those that I felt could generate meaningful data for my study. I selected the other three job centres according to contextual differences and the insight this would provide and according to whichever manager would let me use the job centre. For these job centres I used whichever frontliners volunteered.

My decision to only interview around five employees from four different organisations was influenced by my research aims. From a research point of view, I aimed for diversity in terms of experiences, perceptions and interpretations. Although involving four organisations was more time-consuming than restricting myself to one or two, I thought this approach would increase the likelihood of recruiting participants who had a range of experiences.



#### *Stage 4.*

After each interview in the second round of interviews, I handed out a story sheet with a stamped self-addressed envelope and asked participants to fill it out and send it back to me. I also handed out 'extras' to the job centre in which I did participant observation. Unfortunately response was low. In fact I gave out around 48 sheets and only got 20 back.

#### *Stage 5*

I contacted the union and asked to interview 4 people who were union officials and union representatives at the time of my other fieldwork. I then interviewed the four people who volunteered.

### **Description of my Sample**

Frequently, qualitative researchers aim to explore one (large) case in depth (Silverman, 2000). Recognising the practical difficulties of this Miles and Huberman (1984 p. 36) ask; 'knowing, then, that one cannot study everyone, everywhere doing everything, even within a single case, how does one limit the parameters of a study?' This is true of my study; it would be impossible to examine all employees within the Employment Service. Thus it is necessary to use sampling.

Miles and Huberman (1984, p. 41) suggest that as well as sampling people, the researcher is also sampling 'settings, events, and

processes' and that it is necessary to determine which of those will be the most data-rich. Therefore, although the person might be a good source of information, their situation might not necessarily be suitable or of relevance. A further consideration is presented by Silverman (2000); that it is unlikely that cases will be chosen randomly, but rather chosen as they are the ones that allow access; access arguably being one of the key problems in qualitative research. This is applicable to my research where the choice of location and organisation was influenced by the available access.

I decided to use non-probability rather than probability sampling. Non-probability sampling enabled a choice of participants who could provide a diverse perspective on their experience of violence within the ES. This type of sampling is labelled in different ways by different writers. Maxwell (1996) terms it 'purposeful sampling' LeCompte and Preissle, 1993 call it 'criterion-based selection' and Punch 1998 labels it 'deliberate sampling'. Maxwell (1996 p. 70) states that purposeful sampling is a

'strategy in which particular settings, persons, or events are selected deliberately in order to provide important information that can't be gotten as well from other choices' (p.70).

I purposely selected job centres with certain qualities and employees who were in the positions of frontliners, job centre managers or union activists.

Forty-Nine qualitative interviews were carried out with employees with different organisational positions (see table below).

*Table 1- Organisational Positions of Participants*



District Managers	Job Centre Managers	Frontliners	Union Officials	Union Representatives	Total Interviewed
1	6	38	2	2	49

I decided to mostly concentrate on frontliners because I was interested in understanding how service providers experienced frontline work. I was able to interview frontliners who dealt with a number of interventions, these included New Deal 18-25, New Deal 25-50, New Deal 50+, Fortnightly Signings, RDV, Disability Claimants, and Personal Issues, an ES term for those claiming without a fixed address. Despite the fact that the focus of this study is on frontliners, employees from different levels of the organisational hierarchy were interviewed in order to gain diverse perspectives to build up a richer picture of violence and the ways that frontliners cope. Frontliners were made up of two levels in the hierarchy, one of which was officially classed by the ES as management. However, as both these grades dealt with the public, they have been classed together as frontliners. Job centre managers were classed as 'management', since from this grade onwards the employees had very little, if any, contact with the public and they played a more administrative and managerial role. The district manager was classed as senior management. The selection of such a narrow range of employees to be considered as managers may account for the seemingly homogenous picture of them portrayed in my data. When collecting data, I was surprised by the similarity of different managers' opinions because I had expected a more varied range of viewpoints. This coincidence of opinion may have been a reflection of my narrow definition of managers. Alternatively, because the job centre managers were given orders by the district manager to allow me to carry out my research, they

may have associated me more closely with senior management than the frontliners did. This may have influenced them to tell me what they saw as a more politically favourable organisational viewpoint - that is, an opinion that was in line with the perspective privileged by the formal organisation. Equally many of the managers had never been frontliners and so may have been ignorant of frontliners' experiences. Those that had, had not been one for a number of years, so perhaps management had forgotten exactly what it was like.

The interview sample consisted of:

*Table 2- Gender and Ethnicity of Sample*

Female	Male	Caucasian	African-Caribbean	British Asian	Total Interviewed
27	22	35	2	13	49

Table 2 gives a breakdown of the interviewees by gender and ethnicity. The predominance of women in front-line positions in service work is reflected in the heavy representation of women in this sample. Both the union officials were men, although there was both a man and a women who were union representatives. In management grades, the sexes are in approximately equal proportion and my sample of managers interviewed reflected this. During my research, significant differences emerged between management, frontline, and union respondents regarding the way that violence was constructed. However, there were no significant differences within each of the two levels of hierarchy between male and female respondents regarding the social construction of violence. Therefore, although Hearn and Parkin (2001) rightly point out, that the study of organisational violence should be



located within the organisational power structures, which are gendered, the primary focus of this study is on the influence that the differing construction of violence by management and frontliners had on the ways that frontliners coped with violence.

The participants from different ethnic backgrounds, reflected the multi-racial nature of the workforce within the ES. However, the sample was not meant to be proportionally representative of the ethnic population of the ES (dealing with such a limited number in the sample makes this impossible). Participants from different ethnic backgrounds were interviewed as a matter of theoretical interest, that is to see whether the differences led to variants in the way that frontliners coped with violence. This study recognises the importance of being aware of the effects that ethnic origin may have on different aspects of individuals working lives. However, on analysing the data, no significant differences emerged between white and non-white employees regarding the way frontliners coped with violence. Therefore this issue is not separately examined by this study.

### **Different Job Centres**

Participants were chosen from six different job centres within the district. These job centres were selected due to their differing surroundings in order to ascertain if their contextual setting within the differing locations would affect how frontliners perceived and coped with violence. I asked the district manager (who was authorising my research) if I could study job centres which were as contextually diverse as possible. The result was the following six. Two of these job centres were comparatively large and set within the centre of the city. These were labelled Large, City, Job Centre 1

and Large, City, Job Centre 2. Both of these were set within the same city centre, but they each dealt with different claimants according to the alphabetical letter of their surname. Another two of the job centres were middle sized and were set within two different small towns. These were labelled Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1 and Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2. The remaining two job centres were both small sized. One was set within a small village and so was labelled Small Village Job Centre and the other was set with the inner city and had been opened there as a response to the race riots which had taken place in that neighbourhood. This was labelled Small Inner City Job Centre.

The interviews were conducted in two rounds using participants from Large City Job Centre 1, Small Inner City Job Centre, Small Village Job Centre, Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1 in the first round and Small Inner City Job Centre, Small Village Job Centre, Middle Sized Town job Centre 2, Large City Job Centre 2 in the second round. The intention was to take around five interviews from each job centre in the first round and in the second round the intention was to do ten interviews in Middle Sized job Centre 2 (where I did my participant research) and five in each of the other job centres involved in the second round (Large City Job Centre 2, Small Inner City Job Centre and Small Village Job Centre). Two extra frontliners were interviewed who were union representatives (and have been included under the heading of their job centres below) and two union officials were also interviewed. The union members were recruited through contact with the union achieved through information from frontliners with which I had previously had contact with. The criterion was to find two union officials and two union representatives. However, due to under or over subscribing of volunteers, the results were as follows:



*Table 3- Sample of Participants from each Job Centre*

Large City Job centre 1	Small Inner City Job Centre 1	Small Village Job Centre 1	Middle Sized Town Job centre 1	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	Large City Job Centre 2	District	Union Officials
5	8	9	6	12	6	1	2

In order to protect frontliners' identities I have attached a code to each frontliner instead of a name. This also has the advantage of providing an at a glance context for the individual frontliner because it also includes job centre worked at, gender, ethnicity and position in the organisation.

The table below shows the frontliner/management/union codes and how they are worked out.

*Table 4 Frontliner Codes*

	Respondent No	Position	Gender – MALE/FEMALE	Ethnicity C/BA/A <sup>2</sup>	Final Code
Large city job centre 1					
Large city job centre 1	1	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre 1-1- Frontliner Female- Caucasian
Large City Job Centre 1	2	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre- 1-2- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Large City Job Centre 1	3	Manager	Male	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre- 1-3- Manager- Male- Caucasian
Large City Job	4	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Large City Job Centre

<sup>2</sup> C= Caucasian, BA= British Asian, A= African-Caribbean.

Centre 1					1-4- Frontliner- Male- British Asian
Large City Job Centre 1	5	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre 1-5- Frontliner- Male- Caucasian
<b>Small Inner City Job Centre</b>					
Small Inner City Job Centre	6	Frontliner	Female	African	Small Inner City Job Centre-6- Frontliner- Female- African
Small Inner City Job Centre	7	Manager	Male	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-7- Manager- Male- British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	8	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-8- Frontliner- Male- British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	9	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-9- Frontliner- Male- British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	10	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-10- Frontliner- Male- British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	11	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-11- Frontliner- Female- British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	12	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-12- Frontliner-



					Female-British Asian
Small Inner City Job Centre	13	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Small Inner City Job Centre-13-Frontliner-Male-British Asian
Small Village Job Centre					
Small Village Job Centre	14	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	15	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-15-Frontliner – Female-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	16	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-16-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	17	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-17-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	18	Manager	Female	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-18-Manager-Female-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	19	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-19-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	20	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-20-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	21	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-21-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian
Small Village Job Centre	22	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Small Village Job Centre-22-Frontliner-Male-

					Caucasian
<b>Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1</b>					
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	23	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-23- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	24	Manager	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-24- Manager- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	25	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-25- Frontliner- Female- British Asian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	26	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	27	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27- Frontliner- Male- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1	28	Union Rep	Male	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Union Rep-Male- Caucasian
<b>Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2</b>					
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	29	Manager	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-29- Manager- Female
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	30	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-30- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized	31	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town



Town Job Centre 2					Job Centre 2-31- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	32	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	33	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-33- Frontliner- Female- British Asian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	34	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34- Frontliner- Male- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	35	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-35- Frontliner- Female- British Asian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	36	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-36- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	37	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	38	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-38- Frontliner- Male- Caucasian
Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2	39	Frontliner	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-39- Frontliner- Female- Caucasian
Middle sized town job centre 2	40	Union Rep	Female	Caucasian	Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-

					Female-Caucasian
<b>Large City Job Centre2</b>					
Large City Job Centre 2	41	Frontliner	Female	African	Large City Job Centre-2-41-Frontliner-Female-African
Large City Job Centre 2	42	Frontliner	Female	British Asian	Large City Job Centre -2-42-Frontliner-Female-British Asian
Large City Job Centre 2	43	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre 2-43 Frontliner-Male-Caucasian
Large City Job Centre 2	44	Frontliner	Male	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre -2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian
Large City Job Centre 2	45	Manager	Female	Caucasian	Large City Job Centre 2-45-Manager-Female-Caucasian
Large City Job Centre 2	46	Frontliner	Male	British Asian	Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian
<b>District Manager</b>	47	Senior Manager	Male	Caucasian	District Manager-47-Manager-Male
<b>Union Officials</b>	48	Union officials	Male	Caucasian	Union official-48-Male-Caucasian
	49	Union officials	Male	Caucasian	Union official-49-Male-Caucasian

## **7. Data Collection**



I collected data through a number of methods. This had the advantage of the possibility of triangulation. By mixing several methods their strengths and weaknesses are counterbalanced and a more complex picture of organisational life developed (Handy 1991:821). Firstly, I used qualitative interviews. Forty nine were conducted in all, over three phases of the research. This was supplemented with participant observation, analysis of formal documentation and the use of story sheets. Each of these methods will be discussed in turn.

### **The Qualitative Research Interview**

The qualitative interview is also known as semi-structured, 'in-depth' 'exploratory' 'unstructured' (King 1994) and 'guided' interview (Bell 1993). By focusing on subjective meanings rather than uncovering some objective reality, and by using a broad guide rather than a schedule, the qualitative interview can be differentiated from other types of research such as structured interviews and structured open response interviews (King 1994: 15-16). Qualitative interviews are used to explore the ways in which particular events, situations and processes are experienced and perceived by the individuals involved. According to Kvale, they should 'gather descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale 1983: 174).

I chose to conduct qualitative interviews because I felt that it suited the nature of my research which is exploratory and based on understanding the participant's social world. The goal of qualitative interviews is to understand the participant's perspective

and to understand how and why she holds this perspective. In the qualitative interview the researcher seeks to understand the underlying constructs which underpin their beliefs and opinions, which they use to explain events (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe 1991). Therefore this technique will allow me to understand what frontliners understood as violent customer behaviour and enable them to give me their account of how they coped with it and why.

It is common for qualitative interviews to vary widely in aspects such as foci and practical considerations such as location, timing and recording techniques (King 1994). However, despite these differences, qualitative interviews share a number of common features. These will be discussed in terms of application for my research.

A key characteristic of semi-structured interviews is a low degree of structure, with a high proportion of open, probing questions (King 1994, Reinharz 1992). One way of achieving a low degree of structure is to use an interview guide with a framework of topics rather than a set of predetermined questions. The fact that interviews are only very loosely structured, allows the interviewee to have a hand in shaping the interview instead of passively responding to a rigid set of pre-prepared questions. Structured interviews by contrast deconceptualise the question and force the researcher's perceptions onto the interviewee.

Another feature of the qualitative interview is an emphasis on exploration of specific situations relevant to the interviewee, as opposed to abstract generalisations imposed by the researcher. This fits in well with my study examining frontliners' experiences of



violence within the specific context of the ES, which was actually an issue that emerged from participants' responses.

The importance of the interviewer-participant relationship is another common characteristic of the qualitative interview. Whereas in the more naturalistic science methods the individual is objectified and seen as a subject from which to obtain information, within the qualitative interview the respondent is considered a participant with whom the researcher builds a relationship. This is central to the research process. (King 1994). An advantage of this is that internal validity is promoted because the researcher is able to check or clarify meanings during the interview. The richest data can be obtained when the relationship between the participant and the researcher is one of trust and rapport, and the latter feels able to express herself fully and is able to describe her feelings and views, rather than giving brief, socially-acceptable answers. I used three techniques in the first round of interviews to promote trust.

First, I sent all participants an introductory letter, explaining the research project and their role should they wish to participate. In a few cases I made telephone contact prior to the interview and this helped me to feel more comfortable and relaxed on meeting participants and, I hope, had a similar effect on them.

Second, I was aware that responses in the later part of the interview may be shaped by the earlier stages and by participants' anticipation of lines of discussion. Therefore, I spent time at the start of the interview establishing rapport and explaining the content of the interview in a bid to encourage participants to be more open and forthcoming. I detailed my research's aim and clarified and confirmed confidentiality and assured participants

that responses would not be individually attributed. I explained my reasons for using a tape recorder and checked that participants were comfortable with this. All but two participants were willing to be recorded. To help set interviewees at ease, I opened with straightforward questions about name, job title and their organisational duties.

Third, I tried to project an encouraging and interested attitude by using suitable body language and open questions, and by being aware of the possible effects of my self-presentation on the content and presentation of participants' accounts. Reactivity (the tendency for both interviewer and interviewee to modify their contributions and body language in response to their interpretations of the other) is characteristic of qualitative approaches to research. For example, each participant has implicit (and possibly explicit) reasons for presenting herself in a particular way to the researcher. Whilst I am sure that this is the case in my research, I was convinced that the frontliners' interview accounts were closer to their own beliefs and accounts than those given in other contexts. Although, as the researcher I will have influenced the account that was given to me, I believe that the frontliner was under less pressure to recount events in a way that pleased the listener when in the interview situation with me than in the other work situations that I observed them in. When management was around I believe that they were under a large amount of pressure to recount versions of events in a way that was pleasing to management. Equally, in the canteen amongst other frontliners I believe that they had peer pressure which caused them to recount events in a way that pleased the other frontliners. Although I believe that, to an extent, the frontliners will have been recounting events in a way that pleased me I am convinced that they were under less pressure to



manipulate the recounting of events than in other situations. Thus I believe that of all my data, the data from these interviews offered the account of frontliners' perceptions which were closest to their own interpretative systems of assumptions, beliefs and 'common sense' views. In addition however, I do acknowledge that the account that I heard as the researcher was filtered by my own perceptions and interpretations.

The use of semi-structured interviews has implications for the data collected. The data generated will be varied, meaning that the researcher will have to identify key themes that emerge during the process of data collection, and often review the subjects covered in the interview as she proceeds. Many themes may emerge from the data, requiring the researcher to analyse a large volume of data before selecting the themes she considers to be most important for both her research topic and contribution to knowledge. My initial interviews informed my later interviews and helped shape my focus considerably. This is frequently the case in grounded research.

My broad focus prior to the first set of interviews was on understanding frontliners' lifeworlds and how they experienced the claimant process. However, consistent with a grounded theory approach my research area emerged through an iterative process of data collection and analysis. The importance and significance of violence in frontliners' working lives became more evident the more that I researched. Throughout the process of collecting and analysing data I was struck by the amount that frontliners talked about customer behaviour they experienced as violent and the many ways they devised to cope with this. My interview guide and in fact my research as a whole became more and more focused on

this issue over time. Thus my focus on customer violence reflects my participants' views on what is important rather than my imposing issues on them.

Another surprising issue to emerge from the data was the amount of stories told about violent customers. This is covered more fully in section 7.4.

### **Participant Observation**

‘When one’s concern is the experience of people, the way that they think, feel, act, the most truthful, reliable, complete and simple way of getting that information is to share their experience’ (Douglas 1976 112).

According to Taylor and Bogdan (1984:12) participant observation ‘involves social interaction between the researcher and informants in the milieu of the latter’. This allows the researcher to experience, first hand the day to day experiences and behaviour of subjects in particular situations and, if necessary to talk to them about their feelings and interpretations. The extent of involvement of the researcher varies from one study to the next. In this study I was often able to be a ‘participant-as-observer’ described by Burgess (1984). This is a researcher who ‘forms relationships and participates in activities but makes no secret of intention to observe events’. However in other situations I was only able to be an ‘observer-as-participant’ due to certain data regulations regarding the privacy of data. This is when a researcher maintains only superficial contact with the people being studied.



The form that participant observation takes will vary from study to study in terms of foci and practical issues such as time spent in the field and the amount of access given. However, there are a number of features common to most participant observation. These appeal to me and seem to fit well with my research.

Firstly, in line with my overall research approach, participant observation is an inductive procedure which is seldom a 'one shot process' (Waddington 1994:110). This means that the research problem becomes progressively more focused and susceptible to explanation – often in terms of concepts spontaneously introduced by the subjects themselves (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). This was certainly the case with my research, where the issue of customer violence emerged as significant as the study progressed. Therefore this aspect compliments the inductive nature of my research approach as a whole and enables me to define and refine emergent theories as I go along.

Secondly participant observation can easily be used in conjunction with other methods. In fact, Denzin (1978) argues that most practitioners adhere to the principle of 'triangulation' through the use of more than one method. Researchers often rely on other sources of information such as diaries, minutes, letters (Jorgensen 1989). This fits well with my research in which I mixed several methods with participant observation, such as qualitative interviews, analysis of formal company documentation and the analysis of story sheets. Handy (1991) praises the use of participant observation combined with other methods as enabling 'the strengths and weaknesses of the different techniques to be counterbalanced and a more complex picture of organisational life developed (Handy 1991:821).

Thirdly, participant-observation is highly suitable to my overall research approach in that it is a subjective process which seeks to elucidate subjective meanings. This fits well with participant observation which, according to Jorgensen (1989), is most suited to research projects which emphasise the importance of human meanings, interactions and interpretations.

The subjective nature of this method means that researchers will need to manage the process through interpersonal skills, starting from gaining access. Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 20) explain that in order to get access it is important to project the right image, convince gate keepers you are non-threatening and give a 'vague and imprecise' summary of the research procedures and objectives in order to reduce the risk of defensive or self-conscious behaviour (Waddington 1994). Once the researcher has gained access she must concentrate on maintaining a non-threatening image. According to Fetterman (1986:89) the researcher should be 'courteous polite and respectful' and should avoid uninvited displays of friendliness and familiarity (1991:89). Taylor and Bogdan (1984) emphasise that they should try to emphasise whatever feature they have in common with their respondents, act interested in respondents' views and try to help people wherever possible.

Personal attributes will also affect this type of research. Waddington (1994) argues that Fieldworkers need to be aware of how various structural variables like age, gender, class, ethnicity can impact on the research process and affect the 'reality perspectives' of the observer and respondents alike (Gurney 1991; Warren 1988). During my participant observation, I tried to project



the image of a young naïve student who was very interested in their working lives. This stance had several advantages. Firstly, it played down my connections with management and emphasised my connection with the university, meaning that I was less likely to be seen as management's spy increasing their confidence to confide in me. Secondly this persona was non-threatening. Thirdly, my slight naivety meant that frontliners were eager to tell me 'how it is' and give me their perspective on things.

However, the subjective nature of this method is frequently levelled as a criticism against it. The researchers presence may have an impact on the reality she is observing (Waddington 1994). In addition, it may cause people to act in ways that they would not usually act, although Waddington (1994) argues that the longer a researcher is present, the more unusual or exhibitionist behaviour will disappear. Another criticism linked to the subjective nature of the process is that it is hard to remain 'objective' in so far as it is hard not to form attachments to certain groups. However, Waddington argues that research bias is not only inevitable to studies involving participant observation, but often beneficial to the study. He argues that it allows deeper understanding of meaning.

'Whilst a researchers presence is bound to have an impact on his or her data, it is preferable to address the possible effects head on than merely pretend – as positivists do-that research can be carried out in a social vacuum'.(Waddington: 118).

Ethical dilemmas can also be a problem in this type of research. This can be of the nature of whether to inform the authorities about illegal or dangerous activities (Waddington 1994). For example

Powdermaker (1966) describes the dilemma which confronted her when she stumbled across a white American lynch mob in pursuit of a black victim. She had little time in which she decided not to protest. This gives an extreme example of the sort ethical dilemma facing a participant-observer. A much less extreme example of an ethical dilemma arose in my research. Frontliners admitted to purposely losing claims of customers they did not like, which meant that the claimants would have had to wait a lot longer for their money. This could have caused them hardship. Some might take the view that I should have told management of this practice. However, I decided not to for three reasons. The first was pragmatic – I did not think that there was much that managers could do to stop it. The second was the more selfish-I did not want to jeopardise my research and the third reason was because I felt that by telling management I would betray their trust.

Practical problems may also arise from this method. For example, gatekeepers may, affect what the researcher is able to find out, researchers may have to commute a long way from home in order to spend time in the field, and the process of observing and writing up notes is a time intensive process.

However, despite the weaknesses outlined above there is much to be gained by using this approach. Waddington argues that the ‘benefits to be gained from adopting a participant observation approach to appropriate research will far outweigh any practical ethical problems likely to be encountered’ (p. 119). He argues that it helps build up trust and confidence in the researcher which helps respondents to confide in them. This method certainly helped my study yield rich data, through the deep insights into the field studied. It was highly suitable to my study which is underpinned



by philosophical assumptions which embrace subjectivity. As Waddington rightly stresses:

‘I see no need to apologise about the so-called softness and subjectivity of my approach...no other methodology could have given me such as authentic insight’ (p.118).

### **Analysis of Formal Documentation**

Organisational documentation comes in many forms: company annual reports; public relations material; accounts; statements; policies on marketing strategies; rules and regulations to name but a few. These varied documents ‘constitute a rich source of insights into different employee and group interpretations of organisational life, because they are one of the principal by-products of the interactions and communication of individuals and groups at all levels’ (Forester 1994).

These documents should not just be seen as a preview to quantitative analysis, but are important in their own right (Forester 1994). They can be analysed as systems of meaning and understanding, just as other manifestations of behaviour (Sausure 1974). They allow the discovery of different understandings and interpretations of different organisational sub-groups.

A key advantage of this method is that it can help supplement other sources of data and thus help triangulation. An important advantage for my research is that it can provide insights into differing interpretations by various organisational subgroups (Forester 1994). In my research collecting data from formal

documentation provides me with ‘the official organisational view’ along side other more informal views that may be gained through qualitative interviews and participant observation (which may or may not also elicit a formal perspective).

This method may be extremely time consuming and it can often be difficult to gain access. The documentation obtained will be highly dependant on permission form those higher up and/or gatekeepers.

A possible criticism often levelled about this approach, is that the documentation may be subjective and not ‘an accurate record of events and processes’ (Forester 1994: 149). However, this research does not strive to get down to one objective reality, but to understand reality from the participants’ perspectives (frontliners within the ES), therefore this subjectivity is not deemed as a weakness. This research does not argue that company documentation risks the possibility of being subjective; it is seen as a certainty that it will be subjective. Nor is it concerned with its accuracy, this research is not trying to uncover objective fact but different understandings of the world. In fact this study is concerned with the subjectivity of these documents and hopes that this will provide fresh insights into the understanding of the frontliners’ life-world.

## **Stories in Organisational Research**

Organisational stories now comprise a significant part of organisational studies and generate a formidable bibliography (see Boyce, 1996, who has assembled five pages of key references in her literature review). However, separate philosophical approaches



view not only the purpose of stories differently, but also even what constitutes a story.

According to writers from the folklorist perspective (Dorson, 1969; Georges, 1969, 1980 and 1981; Newhall, 1980), the major reason for stories is entertainment, which can only be grasped when the story is heard in situ; interpreting stories, though, kills them. However, it is often argued that stories were redefined by modernity through their use as opposition to facts, consequently losing much of their connection with enjoyment and entertainment (Gabriel, 2000). Here, stories are perceived as firmly subordinate, being part of fantasy and the world of uncontrol rather than the sciences and control. Writers such as Benjamin (1986) argue that storytelling is dead because of social and technical factors which make storytelling redundant, such as mass entertainment. All in all, modernity is said to have destroyed storytelling just like it has destroyed other, old crafts. Gabriel (2000) terms this 'narrative deskilling'.

However, it also argued that modernity spawned another discursive line on stories. This line views stories as products of experience shaped by conflict, domination, resistance, control and uncontrol (Gabriel, 2000). This does not mourn the passing of stories, but rather views them as marginalized presences in every nook and cranny of modernity - for example, in interpersonal spaces of organisations, private spaces of parents reading to their children or the psychoanalytic coach. This approach is broadly interpretivist, seeking to unmask the hidden symbolism of stories, reading them as depositaries of meaning and expressions of deeper psychic, interpersonal and social realities. Gabriel (2000) argues that the root of this approach lies in Romanticism as it seeks to restore a

modern kind of folk, a way of behaving outside the modernist structures and institutions:

‘evading controls, laughing at the absurdities of the impersonal systems and rediscovering their humanity in their ability to mould reality to their wishes and fantasies through storytelling’. In contrast to the rationalist tradition within modernism, this approach has tended to emphasise emotion and desire as well as their repression. (p.16).

Whilst interpretivism remains in the modernist perspective, distinguishing story from fact and different narratives from stories, postmodernism blurs these distinctions. Postmodernists see stories all around us - virtually any piece of text, any object, tells a story; indeed, failure to tell a story is a story in its own right (Gabriel, 2000). For example, advertisements, material objects (branded and non-branded), consultant reports, performance appraisals, official documents, works of art and legal documents do not merely furnish material for stories but are in fact themselves stories. The argument goes that the proliferation of information in late capitalism has led to a massive process of turning information into experience, signifiers into signifieds, through the medium of stories. Boje & Dennehy (1993) argue that the more people are buried in a mass of information the greater the importance of stories: ‘stories make experience meaningful, stories connect us with one another; stories make the character come alive; stories provide an opportunity for a renewed sense of organisational community’ (p.156). Indeed, stories and experience are often linked in postmodern discourse, as stories transform into experience and experience transforms into stories. Narrative emerges as the privileged form of sense-making as ‘the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful’



(Polkinghorne 1988). As Gabriel eloquently claims of postmodernism,

‘if organisations are par excellence jungles of information, stories come to the rescue of meaning. Stories re-enchant the disenchanted, introducing wit and intervention, laughter and tears, into the information iron cage’ (p.18).

Similarly, Boje (1991) claims that:

‘In organisations, storytelling is the preferred sense making currency of human relationships among internal and external stake holders’ (p.106).

This is a point which can be found with endless variants in the post-modern literature. In the post-modernist approach stories seem to sweep all other sense making or explanatory devices aside. To generalise, postmodernist discourses have privileged storytelling as sense making devices above all others and thus lost sight of distinctive qualities of story telling such as entertainment, justification and challenge. This has also led to the blurring of boundaries between stories and other types of narrative, including interpretations, theories, and arguments (Gabriel 2000).

Although this review draws on the folklorist interpretation of stories, as narratives with simple but resonant plots and characters, it is mainly situated within the modernist perspective in that it is concerned with stories as meanings and as expressions of social realities. It does not argue, as many post-modernists do, that all types of narratives can be seen as a story ,(Mangham and Overington 1987, Watson 1994, Clark and Salaman 1996, Davidson 1992, Harris and Timms 1993) rather it argues that stories are a distinct type of narrative. Stories can be distinguished

from other types of narrative by their loyalty to both effect and the story itself. This is as opposed to other narratives whose loyalty essentially rests with the facts (even if these are not correct).

Gabriel (2000) subscribes to this distinction and argues that

‘Only by treating stories as distinctive types of narrative, claiming special privileges and subject to special constraints can we use them as windows into organisational life.....If we insist on treating every consultants report, every cliché, every overhead transparency and every statistical table as ‘telling a story’, we inevitably assist in making story-telling, as a meaning-bestowing activity, in its very-ubiquity, moribund’ (p. 29).

This research perceives stories as marginalized yet present in various forms in organisations. Stories are not dead but alive in organisations, although some embody a more vibrant culture than others. Importantly, this review does not recognise every sense-making device as a story, but recognises stories as distinct from other narratives.

### **Collecting Stories as Data**

In my research I collected stories and analysed them alongside the rest of the data. Gabriel (2000: 4) highlights the importance of stories as ‘factories of meaning, creating it, transforming it, testing it, sustaining it and fashioning it and refashioning it’. He stresses that the importance of a story ‘lies not in the facts but in the meaning’ (2000: 4). From the outset of my data collection I was surprised and delighted with the amount of stories told about customers, particularly violent customers. Although stories were often told during interviews, I observed that these were most prevalent in the frontliner canteen. The non-stop story telling here led me to decide to collect stories as one of my research methods.



Within my research, I felt that by encouraging the frontliners to recount stories, it would allow them to escape the imposed organisational rhetorics and realities and to tell the issues their way. I hoped that by doing this, I would allow frontliners to express the meanings that they felt were important and relevant to their work. Thus this method of collecting data allowed frontliners to select and frame aspects of organisational life that they found important.

I recorded stories as data from the interviews and during my participant observation. I also came up with the idea of story sheets in a bid to encourage frontliners to write stories down. However, disappointingly, frontliners did not seem as keen to formally write down stories as they had been to informally discuss them in the canteen. This issue is further explored in chapter ten.

This research does not analyse stories for their own sake with the aim of discovering more about the nature of stories. Rather this research is concerned with the meanings within stories as a gateway to deeper understanding of organisational issues within the ES. Gabriel (2000) argues that ‘stories provide a fascinating window onto a wide range of emotions that one might not normally associate with organisations’ (p.149).

Stories do not present information or facts about events, but they enrich, enhance and infuse facts with meaning. The researcher must rid themselves of the notion that the data be accurate, reliable, objective etc and must be prepared to engage personally with the emotions and meanings that reside in the text. Facts are not dissolved by stories but enhanced by them (Gabriel 2000). This

approach sits well with the subjective nature of my research and its intention to uncover perceptions and understandings of organisational violence.

The process of collecting stories means that certain interpersonal skills are of utmost importance. Gabriel (2000) argues that in order to elicit stories the researcher must be a fellow traveller on the narrative who shows interest, empathy and pleasure in the storytelling process. He argues that they must under no account risk alienating the story teller through pronouncing judgment, or by seeming to doubt the narrative. Whilst the researcher can ask for clarification of particular aspects of the story they must be seen to do this in the interest of increased understanding and pleasure, not as a questioning of the facts. The building of trust in the relationship between researcher and participant is extremely important in all types of qualitative research and the collection of stories is certainly no exception. Participants place themselves in a vulnerable position when recounting stories will their story be believed? Understood? Appreciated? Twisted? Misrepresented? As Gabriel (2000) rightly points out ‘The researcher must put him or herself in the position of the respondent as storyteller and appreciate the latter’s vulnerability’ (p.138).

A weakness of storytelling is that it is easy to use stories selectively to re-enforce the researchers’ preconceived ideas or assumptions either specifically about the organisation or more generally speaking. Gabriel (2000) explains that ‘with selective presentation, editing, heading and framing, a narrative may be put to work within virtually any overall story’ (p.151). He explains that the researcher must be on constant vigilance against this. However, as long as I am aware of this danger and try to avoid it, it may also



be argued that this supplementary use of stories could be another form of triangulation and help increase the reliability of my research.

Collecting stories as data, as with all methods, involves a number of practical issues. Firstly there is the problem of access. Gabriel argues that most organisations are not interested in purely collecting and analysing stories for their own sake and that they will rarely grant access for this purpose. He argues for the need of framing the research in terms which will interest the organisation and increase the probability of access. This issue was not a problem for me because I had already obtained access (see section 6.1).

Secondly, researchers must decide how much of the research role they want to project. Will they prompt their respondents with questions on areas which interest them? Will they ask for the feelings which the narratives evoke? Will they seek clarification when they do not understand something? The more interventionist researchers risk undermining the spontaneity of the storytelling, but they will be able to speak with greater confidence about the storytellers own sense-making processes (Gabriel 2000). I attempted to strike a balance here by allowing the story to run its course before asking questions clarifying its meaning.

Thirdly, the question arises of should the researchers join in the storytelling, reciprocating with their own stories. This may further encourage participants with their retelling, but the risks of this approach are numerous. The researchers own stories may fall flat with the respondent, trivialize the research activity or generate a particular type of counter narrative on the part of the respondent.

The stories may then be more related to the research context than to the organisational one. In light of this I decided not to reciprocate with my own.

Lastly, the researcher must decide how they will explain the collection of stories to the participant. One approach is to ask specifically about stories and to explain to the participant that their goal is to collect stories. This will result in a large number of stories and material, but it risks the researcher imposing her definition of what is important or meaningful (Gabriel 2000). The other method is to collect stories as and when they occur. The advantages and disadvantages of this method is exactly the reverse of the first method. An advantage is that the stories are encountered in their natural state and the participant uses them to give meaning when he or she chooses. Disadvantages are that less material is collected and more time and money are consumed. Gabriel argues that seeking to elicit stories but not telling respondents, raises ethical questions about perusing research agendas hidden from his or her subjects. He argues that practical questions are raised – if stories are to be collected as part of participant observation, then do they get the tape recorder out? Take notes? This may seriously inhibit storytelling. It is also often not possible to keep written notes such as a story told in a bar or a corridor.

This dilemma was largely solved for me by my use of multiple methodologies. When doing participant observation, I collected stories as part of the data in general. Respondents knew that I was observing them in general but they did not know that I was interested in stories as part of this data. This had the advantage that they will have occurred more naturally in everyday life, although it



is worth noting that all data (including stories) will have been affected by the researcher's presence. When carrying out qualitative interviews I used certain questions which were aimed at eliciting stories and my story sheets explicitly stated the intention. On the whole stories were part of my data in general, of which respondents were aware that I was collecting. Therefore I did not feel it necessary to explicitly tell them about stories.

## **8. Data Analysis**

In this section I explore the role of data analysis in my research and explain my analytical process.

The purpose of data analysis in my research, and in much of constructivist research in general, is to access participants' psychological worlds. This research draws upon data analysis techniques which are in line with my grounded theory approach and are appropriate for the qualitative nature of my research. From an interpretive perspective, the process of collecting, interpreting and analysing data are not distinct separate phases. I see both data collection and analysis as reflective processes which are interconnected and overlapping. However, it is necessary to adopt a formal procedure for analysing data together with the ongoing, implicit process of analysis that naturally occurs.

Grounded theory offers a way of developing analysis of observational data. My analysis involves three basic phases, outlined by the grounded theorists, Glaser and Strauss (1967). These are:

1. An initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data.
2. Saturation of these categories with many appropriate cases in order to develop their relevance.
3. Developing these categories into more general analytical frameworks with relevance outside the setting.

Despite the impression given by the list above, the process of data analysis did not follow a pattern of linearity and clarity but in fact was characterised by uncertainty and ambiguity. However it is important to point out that these techniques are procedures that are designed to be used flexibly and creatively. Strauss and Corbin (1990) emphasise that data analysis 'techniques and procedures, however necessary, are only a means to an end. They are not meant to be used rigidly in a step by step fashion' (p.14). The idea is to provide the researcher with a set of tools with which to approach their research and which will enhance both their confidence and their creativity.

**Phase 1 - An initial attempt to develop categories which illuminate the data.**

In my research this phase involved, familiarisation, transcribing the data and highlighting the emerging themes and issues and conceptual ordering.

### *Familiarisation*

The first stage of grounded theory is suggested to be familiarisation, i.e. rereading the transcripts and noting the key points, a process that is ideally completed shortly after the interview. In my research after each interview I wrote a summary



of what I felt were the key points. I re-read my field notes each night and read through each formal document and story sheet as soon as I had received it.

### *Transcribing The Data And Highlighting The Emerging Themes And Issues*

All the data from the interviews, the field work notes and the story sheets were transcribed. Although this stage was extremely time consuming and laborious, it was still an integral part of the analytical process. It forced me to submerge myself in the data and allowed a preliminary analysis of the key issues and themes which would later be the basis for my codes.

### *Conceptual Ordering*

Conceptual ordering is the organisation of data into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions and then using description to elucidate those categories. This is more commonly referred to as the process of creating codes (Miles and Huberman 1984, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Dey 1993). Dey (1993) explains that codes must be meaningful with regards to the data but also meaningful in relation to other categories. It is important that these initial codes are flexible allowing the project to evolve and progress.

‘Creating categories is both a conceptual and empirical challenge: categories must be ‘grounded’ conceptually and empirically...We could say that categories must have two aspects, an internal aspect- they must be meaningful in relation to the data- and an external aspect- they must be meaningful in relation to other categories’ (Dey 1993: 96-97).

The first stage of coding uses open coding which is 'the analytic process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions discovered in the data' (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In order to code my data I used a computer software programme called N\*Vivo. This was an extremely useful method of organisation as it allowed me to sort my data into easily accessible categories, enabled quick retrieval of data which was coded according to single or multiple codes; comparison of segments and most importantly refinement and development of codes,

All the data was studied by microanalysis (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This meant that all the data was examined in turn, document by document, line by line, word by word. My field notes were split into eight, one document per week. Initial thoughts and ideas were stored in free nodes. Nodes can be understood as containers for data and thoughts about data. This type of node is unorganised and represents as yet unconnected ideas about the data. In essence they capture general themes about the data. Each free node was given a heading and all data relevant to that category was stored under that heading. After each document I reviewed and revised my categorisation in light of the new data analysed. This again alludes to the idea of 'progressive focussing' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995: 206) which runs throughout the research process in this study. At the outset the categories were defined very broadly, but as the research progressed they became more specific.

## **Phase 2- Saturation of these categories with many appropriate cases and development of the categories**

This stage involved further analysis and linking of the codes.



### *Further analysis and Linking of the Codes*

As more data was analysed categories became more tightly defined and data from free nodes was moved into 'tree nodes'. This type of node was particularly useful because it allowed me to split up these broad categories through the use of interlinking 'children' which served as sub-categories under the broad headings. Equally it also allowed me to combine categories if they were too narrow, resulting in a fragmented analysis. This stage of coding is labelled by Straus and Corbin (1998) as axial coding. It is the process of relating categories to their subcategories linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions.

The use of N\*Vivo allowed me to redefine (or even change my categories completely) and track the development of nodes through the use of memos. This meant that the evolution of the project was tracked alongside my developing thinking about the data. The use of tree nodes also served to help link the data. Whilst the use of categories allows the exploration of the data and a comparison of the similarities and differences, it can destroy the bigger picture. The categories relationship with each other is important in maintaining the overall perspective.

This construction of categories leads to a refocus of analysis. Instead of viewing the data in its original context, it will now be viewed in the context of the categories (Dey 1993: 29). As the set of categories become established, they are able to be more precisely defined, meaning that on the last few documents only minor adjustments need to be made.

### **Phase 3 - Developing these categories into more general analytical frameworks with relevance outside the setting.**

In this phase, the research moves to selective coding which is the process of integrating and refining theory. In open coding, which takes place in the first stage, the analysis is concerned with generating categories and their properties and seeks to determine how categories vary dimensionally. In the next stage, axial coding is used to develop categories which are systematically linked with sub categories. However it is not until the major categories are finally integrated to form a larger theoretical scheme that the findings take the form of theory. Selective coding is the process of integrating and refining categories.

Although grounded theory focuses on data to generate theory it does acknowledge that 'no researcher enters into the process with a completely blank and empty mind' (Strauss and Corbin 1998 p.12). It therefore acknowledges that previous knowledge of theory and common sense understanding, in general, will affect the analysis of data. Understanding and developing the categories does not just happen as pure induction, but is influenced by theoretical ideas as well as common sense understanding (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). Grounded theory encourages the use of literature in this final stage of analysis in order to confirm findings and to illustrate where the research differs from the literature. In this way existing theories and typologies can be 'tested' against the data.

Hammersley and Atkinson argue that the coding will not be sufficiently established to allow 'testing' in this way until the final stages of analysis. They argue that 'the process of testing requires considerable further development of the theory or explanation'



(p.124). This has been the case in this study. Although the literature constituted an important part of the analysis, the direction of the research was largely a direct response to the data collected. In line with a grounded theory approach, categories could not be tested in this way until nearing the end of analysis.

## **9. Conclusion**

This research has been based on epistemological and ontological assumptions which deem reality to be subjective and socially constructed. This socially constructionist approach has led to the use of qualitative methodology in order to answer the primary research question ‘In what ways do service workers cope with violence on the frontline?’ Qualitative methodology was appropriate for my research due to both my underlying philosophical assumptions and the type of data that I wanted to find out. Specifically a grounded theory approach was used to allow theory to be constructed that is grounded in the data. It is hoped that by using this approach my research would reflect my participants views on what is significant as opposed to my imposing my view on them, and them simply responding to it.

The methods used were 49 semi-structured interviews, participant observation, analysing formal documentation and collecting stories. The data collected from these were thoroughly digested and analysed before constructing theoretical frameworks which were grounded both in the data and constructed in light of existing theory to bring forth my findings.





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## **Chapter 7**

# **THE CONSTRUCTION OF CUSTOMER VIOLENCE BY THE FORMAL ORGANISATION**

## **1. Introduction**

This chapter explores how formal organisational policies, procedures and training affect the way that customer violence experienced is constructed within the Employment Service (ES). This chapter starts with a brief overview of the formal organisational perspective before moving on to examine separate elements of this view in greater detail in light of the data collected during the course of my research. Finally, this chapter considers the link between the way that the formal construction of reality has developed and the myth of customer sovereignty. In line with all of my data chapters all names in the quotations have been changed in order to protect respondents' identities.

## **2. Overview**

Within the ES, formal organisational training policies and procedures affect the way that customer violence is perceived in a number of ways. Firstly, the extent of customer behaviour that is regarded as violent by the frontliners is not recognised as such by the organisation. Secondly, violent incidents experienced are constructed as a result of service workers' poor customer service skills, meaning that blame is ascribed to the frontliners. Thirdly,



through this attribution of blame, the formal organisational viewpoint individualises the responsibility for perceived violence and, consequently, service workers are expected to cope with it individually. The dominant organisational construction of customer violence can be encapsulated in three major points:

1. Lack of official acknowledgement of frontliners' perceptions of the systematic nature of customer violence.
2. Responsibility for violent incidents experienced: The individualisation of violence and the culpabilisation of frontliners.
3. Mode of coping with violent incidents experienced: Frontliners cope individually.

Each of these basic elements will be considered in turn. However, before doing this it is important to examine which elements of the organisation comprise the 'formal organisation' and construct the formal organisational view. In my research, I define the formal organisation as made up of the official procedures, policies and employee training. It also includes management statements. As discussed in my methodology chapter, only employees who do not deal with the service recipients were labelled as management. Although the highest grade of frontliner was recognised as a management grade by the ES, it was decided that any employee that interacts with the public would be considered as a frontliner. Therefore, it is only job centre managers who are identified as 'management'; the district manager and above are considered as 'senior management'. The managers interviewed not only gave a similar view to each other but they also voiced an opinion which was reflective of the discussion of the 'formal organisational view'. Thus, management statements have been included in the 'formal organisation'.

### **3. Point One: Lack of Official Acknowledgement of Frontliners' Perceptions of the Systematic Nature of Customer Violence**

Although it is acknowledged by management that violent incidents do happen in the job centres, they are portrayed as a fairly infrequent occurrence. Many of the incidents are not recorded in the incident books, which are used to provide the figures on customer violence used and quoted by management. This is highlighted in the following quotes taken from a union official and a union representative:

*'All members of staff were encouraged - more so I have to say by the Trade Union than management - to record all incidents, but in my experience was very few; well to put it in another light, only the extreme incidents were recorded...At a guess, at least 70% of incidents were never recorded. Two reasons: one - the pressure of time; cause you gotta take time out to do that; and second - there was a certain degree of pressure from management, saying, 'Oh you don't wanna record that, you know, so, no, no way were they recorded.'*

(Union Official-49-Male-Caucasian)



*'Yeah...the endless controversy - and it does relate to something we said earlier, was the number of incidents. Because of the under-recording, and there was a huge propaganda war around the screens dispute about the union saying one thing and the management the other; and the problem was that the management had come up with figures and said well, 'I don't know what you're talking about, this is the number of incidents', and the union's case was, 'Yes, but that's probably 10%...', and it's a very difficult subject to statistically come out on top with, because there is massive under-reporting. There still is, I'm sure there still is. It's so hard to judge. But it has to be seen in the context...96/7% of people do not - you know it is the tradition...small, like one or two people. It's a tribute to the public we deal with that the vast majority put up with long waiting times, waiting ages for benefits in a very reasonable and patient manner. I think the Trade Union would always appreciate that; it is a minority of people.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre1- Union Rep-Male-Caucasian)

The above quotes help illustrate that management only acknowledged officially recorded incidents as violent. Due to under-recording, a large proportion of what staff perceived as violent customer behaviour went unnoticed and unrecognised. That the majority of customer behaviour that frontliners perceived as violent goes unacknowledged is further revealed through formal policies such as training, official procedures for violence outside the ES and individualisation of violent incidents. These will now be discussed.

## Training

In training, the frontliners were repeatedly told that theirs was not a 'high risk job' and, to underline this point, it was compared with jobs that work with dangerous machinery. This was the official line, which may have been used in order to avoid health and safety obligations or may just have been developed because senior management are unaware of the frequency of customer behaviour that is perceived to be violent. The following quote from a frontliner implies that it is mainly the former (avoiding health and safety obligations) although the latter (ignorance of the frequency of incidents) also plays a role in the official line that it is a 'low risk job':

*'I wouldn't describe them as rare [violent incidents]. Rare to me would be something that happened once in a blue moon and that's not the case.'*

*(Q- So why do you think they would say that?)*

*Why do they say it? Have a false sense of security, not meeting their obligations as an employer from the health and safety point of view. It's an official line and official lines are developed by people not doing the job, someone in their ivory tower sitting in London head office or Sheffield head office who's probably never sat on a front line actually and know what it's like. They've got the theory but not the practice.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)*



The training course which I witnessed was called 'Handling Difficult Situations'. Violent and aggressive customers were rarely directly mentioned and, instead, less innocuous phrases and ideas were used. For example, instead of incidents, frontliners find themselves in 'difficult situations' or perhaps in 'situations where they need to invoke health and safety procedures' or, indeed, 'situations where they need to consider their own safety'. Two quotes taken from interviews with both a trade union representative and an official highlight the absurdity of the language used in training in order to avoid exposing what frontliners (and the union) perceive as the violent nature of some of the customers:

*'In training we have 'challenging' customers! ...Challenging situations - not violent customers; not drug addicts - people with different lifestyle choices...!'*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)

*'What do they call it? Reliability under pressure, adaptation to change...yeah it's like in our reports, it's just absolute management bollocks...it just takes things away from the real issues - like violence basically, aggression - nobody wants to use those words, because obviously it suits their means to call it something else...'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-Union Rep-40-Female-Caucasian).

Both of the above extracts highlight that, within training there is an avoidance of the words 'aggression' and 'violence'. The first quote uses humour to put this point across and the second uses a more serious, frustrated tone. By avoiding the use of such words

perceived customer violence remains unacknowledged. Of the two-day training course on 'handling difficult situations', there is only two hours actually devoted to violent customers (labelled 'challenging customers') the rest concerns customer service and equal opportunities for the customer.

In training, customers and customer service in the ES was compared to customers and customer service in other commercial organisations. No differences between customers of commercial organisations and those of the ES were identified - except the lack of choice in service providers. The frontliners' experience of a high level of customer violence was left unacknowledged. For example, the service provided by the ES was frequently compared to that of a bank, while failing to acknowledge that, amongst many other differences, a bank does not have as much customer behaviour that is experienced as violent. Due to the lack of recognition of the extent of customer violence experienced, training was often viewed by frontliners as unrealistic. For instance, advice for dealing with knives and guns was not covered on the training course, despite the fact that service workers have recounted incidents involving them. Staff were told not to engage with angry customers and 'just to calm them down', but without saying how. Although the signs of pathological anger were discussed and frontliners told that, if these are shown, to get out, it was explained that these are very rare. Everyday customer aggression was not dealt with at all. Frontliners were discouraged from talking about any violent incidents they experienced; when an incident was described or a story recounted, the trainer acts surprised as if it is a one-off, and says 'I haven't heard about that one.' This implies that incidents are so rare that they are all widely discussed. However, this sparked the telling of many incidents and



the majority of frontliners attempt to tell stories about perceived violent incidents that they have heard about, seen or experienced. The trainer swiftly silenced them by saying that they must stick to schedule and get on and, at this point, she also asked me to stop writing things down without giving a reason. Through her silencing, she did not allow herself or the service workers to acknowledge the high level of customer violence experienced by frontliners in the job centres. She was uncomfortable with discussing incidents and repeatedly quoted statistics claiming that customer hostility is rare (whether or not this was especially directed at me because I was an outsider in the room is difficult to say). Be that as it may, the everyday violent incidents that frontliners experience are not really addressed. In the following quotes by service providers it is possible to see the inadequacy of the training in addressing everyday violent incidents. The second of these quotes has already been cited in my introduction chapter.

*'because of the situation where I challenged her, it was probably a week after, I'd been on a training course I thought oh I know how to deal with this situation page 12, woman bursts into tears, calls you a cunt and rips the paperwork up - no it's not in there!'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2- 34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

*'I've had one incident where somebody actually came up with a knife; that's not on training and that was a down-and-out we have problems with him now, he actually is a ministerial issue where he just comes in, gets his giro and goes; but yes and I'm not the only one he's attacked as well...'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26-Frontliner -Female-Caucasian)*

*'I don't think I'm blaming by the way. I'm not blaming my line manager, whatsoever but it just strikes me that we have men in suits smiling being presented with Investors in People charter mark awards for saying that they're investing in training in their people, I query that. Whatever, do they now realise that at a lower level there are people who want specific training for a job and it is not available, it's never relevant to the job, it does not marry up as far as I'm concerned. It's something I feel very strongly about, I think training is a big issue. I like to do a good job and anybody that knows me knows that I like to do a good job...'*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

All the above quotes emphasise how training did not address issues that were relevant to frontliners' experiences in their work life. The next two quotes, taken from a trade union representative and an official respectively, also highlight the inadequacy of training:

*'I think it [training] was perfunctory, to say the least; we used to be sat on a course where you'd engage in role play - which you know some people used to dread, and role playing can never really be a facsimile of a real situation, I think. I think the training was there to satisfy the Health and Safety regulations - as opposed to anything else. It wasn't sufficient in my view - no way. My most famous example was the infamous ES blanket! Yeah, there was a proposal to bring in a specially designed corporate blanket that you could throw over an aggressive customer! I always failed to see how that might calm their wrath, to be honest, having a blanket thrown over them! Some might say it's a blanket approach to a*



*problem that you shouldn't adopt - but I wouldn't say that! But erm, no I think it was the bare minimum.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)

*'(Q- Do you think training was sufficient?)*

*No, there was not enough and it was frequently irrelevant to the job. We used to have a thing called... 'The Blanket', if someone was particularly violent. There was a joke where they would throw a blanket over somebody to calm them down! ...And you had to say things like, 'Stop hitting me'! ...This was part of the training! ...Stop hitting me now!'*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)

In these two quotes, the union activists both draw on dark humour to make the serious point that the training provided did not realistically address the issue of customer violence experienced by frontliners in their working life. Both use the example of the blanket proposal to show this. The second quote also highlights the advice given in training which is unrealistic. A further example of this was that frontliners were advised to impose things on the signing desk that they felt would be impractical and would cause problems for themselves. For example, they were told to tell the customer not to swear in their presence, else they would refuse to serve them. This is contradictory as refusing to serve someone is looked down on and another service provider will then have to do it anyway. The following frontliner implicitly implies the unrealistic nature of the training course when she explains that none of the advice given in training would actually be of any use.

*'Good customer service you mean? In certain situations everything you think of on a training course, it all goes out the window. I've often been in there before doing a board check with Syretta or Jenny, and that's basically when you're on that side going round the boards, and there were some guys in here then playing hell...just running round and acting like goons, jumping on chairs and all sorts and situations like that I've often thought what I'd do if something did actually kick off on the other side; and you just forget all about the training course basically, nothing that you could actually use is on it. If somebody's as rude to me as they have been to Luke I don't know what I'd do, to be honest, but I don't think that it wouldn't be something from the training course.'*  
(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

### **Lack of Acknowledgment of Perceived Customer Violence Outside the ES**

Service workers often experienced violence from ES customers outside work due to events that occurred in the Job Centre. This was not recognised by senior management and it was not acknowledged on the training course. The official policy was that the ES would not take responsibility for incidents which occur outside the ES building, even if the service provider is actually on ES business at the time, and would offer no support or insurance. When a frontliner on training asked about violence outside the office, the trainer told her to check her local office policy, yet there was no office policy and, presumably, the trainer would have known this. The trainer may have said this because I was sitting in



on the session and she did not want me to know that violence outside the ES was not acknowledged or it is possible that this issue was always avoided in this way. The following quotes from two union representatives show that, despite the trainer's insistence to the contrary, violence outside the workplace was not recognised. Indeed, this was an issue which was publicized by the union but which they were never able to do anything about as the following quotes from union representative and union officials show:

*'one of our members of staff was assaulted on the doorstep outside the office; the person who assaulted him was a member of the public - one of our customers - and they were basically said, 'sorry we're gonna do nothing'...and he'd been given quite a beating...and they said well no there's nothing we can do to help - even though we were waiting to get into the building, staff entrance/public entrance, right next to each other - there was no support...*

*(Q-What did the Union have to do for him?)*

*He didn't want to pursue it himself - cause he didn't see why he should, he thought that management should be supporting him - and they didn't.*

*(Q-How did they justify not supporting him?)*

*...There again, they seemed to think well it's not on official premises - it's not our problem, it could have happened in the street...and they just left it like that; I think he sought his own - out - off the record!*

*(Q-Were there lots of incidents which happened outside?)*

*...That happened quite a lot...you always treat customers as if you are gonna meet them in the street - and invariably you will - and I've known quite a few people who have had aggression off customers they've met...and there's no support - none whatsoever.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28 -Union Rep-Male--Caucasian)*

*'It was justified on the simple basis, it didn't happen on the premises, so it's not their problem - which I know sounds a little crude, but that was their approach; so if you got - even if you had reasonable justification for saying it was in relation to work, so you met somebody outside work said, 'I know you!', maybe it's as simple as that, said well, 'Not our problem, it's not on our premises, we're not responsible', which is curious enough - because if a member of staff is engaged in misdemeanours outside work, where they're responsible, that can affect them at work, I believe, still does...It's curious, cause let's say as a civil servant you're engaged in a punch-up in a pub or something, whatever it might be, and it gets back to the powers that be - they can take action against you, even though it's completely non-work related...Even if you don't pay your Council Tax bill...they'll discipline you - yeah...You can't go into debt, you become overdrawn or whatever - yeah, they discipline you, or sack you...*

*(Union Official- 49-Male- Caucasian)*

The above two quotes both show how the ES refused to acknowledge any perceived customer violence or aggression that took place outside the ES even if it was a result of relations within the ES. Indeed, in the first quote the union representative cites an



example of customer violence that actually took place on the job centre doorstep, but even this was not acknowledged. This is yet another example of the lack of acknowledgment of perceived customer violence.

#### **4. Point Two: The Individualisation of Violence and The Culpabilisation of Frontliners**

Within the ES, the failure to acknowledge much of the customer behaviour that frontliners experience as violent ties in with the idea that it is bad customer service skills that lead to this violent customer behaviour and is therefore largely the frontliner's fault. If violence only happens to inadequate frontliners, then the organisation does not need to acknowledge it in general, as it is due to individual's inferior skills. Newton et al's (1995) work on stress asserts that the individualisation of the discourse on stress means that the social and collective causes of stress are obscured (see chapters three and four). The same seems to hold for the individualisation of violence in the ES. The following quotes taken from managers help illustrate the dominant perspective, which individualises violence experienced through attributing blame to service workers' inadequate frontline skills:

*'There are times when sometimes there can be words or actions by members of staff that can provoke something that could have been diffused.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-1-Manager-Female-Caucasian)

*'I always say, treat people how you want to be treated and I do think you need to have a level of customer service, you do need to*

*know if the customers are happy with the service that you are offering because you can't work or improve on that. If you don't have customer service and you don't treat clients with respect and listen to their needs then that's what causes the problems. That's when you start getting aggro within the office.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre- 7 -Manager-Male-British Asian)

These quotes from managers reflect the formal policies and dominant ideals that imply violent incidents experienced are largely due to frontliners' inadequate customer handling skills rather than customers themselves. When discussing violent incidents experienced with customers, the emphasis in the above quotes is on how the frontliner has gone wrong whilst the role that the customer played is not even mentioned. This constructs violent incidents experienced, primarily as the service workers' fault. This perspective can be seen in formal training and the formal policy of dealing with 'difficult situations'.

## **Training**

In training, the importance of customer service was constantly expressed and it was implied that customer violence experienced was a result of frontliners' inadequate customer service skills. For example, when very briefly told how to deal with anger frontliners were meant to recognise anger, stay calm, use active listening, signpost the different possibilities for the customer and check the facts with the them. The trainer detailed how doing each one badly can cause anger, rather than emphasising performing each one of these tasks in a response to anger. This suggests that the service workers will be the primary cause of anger, instead of assuming



that anger might occur anyway. The trainer then wrote up a pattern of someone becoming angry on the board, which was seen as the definitive way it would happen, not as a suggested alternative. She wrote:

*Build up*

*Then*

*Trigger*

*Then*

*Escalator*

*Then*

*Finale*

This model includes the idea of a trigger at an early stage. The possible triggers were discussed at length, largely focusing on bad customer handling skills. The trainer described how certain actions (poor listening abilities, poor signposting, poor confirmation of the facts, poor labelling) could be triggers alongside other inadequate customer service skills. These included no setting of limits (for example, she advocated telling a violent customer not to swear), aggressive body language (for example, service providers folding their arms and leaning forward) and inflaming rather than calming the situation by the phrasing of the frontliner's conversation (for which no precise example was given). Service providers were also told to familiarise themselves with the 'difficult' customers, and then to change their behaviour with these customers in order to avoid the otherwise inevitable violent incident. It was stressed that by using good customer service skills with a difficult client a violent incident could be avoided altogether. This idea implies that once a difficult customer is identified, any violent incidents experienced will be due to service provider's failure to

significantly modify their behaviour. This idea that a violent incident reflects badly on the frontliner is part of the reason why service workers use various methods to avoid experiencing customer violence.

Another example of the individualisation of customer violence within the training session was the portrayal of the Benefit Agency (BA). After the trainer described the BA as being poor at customer service, in the next breath she explained that the BA has many more incidents than the ES. She did not overtly state the connection, but left it as an unspoken conclusion. She did not mention the other possible reasons for this, such as the BA having greater involvement with people's money or a more difficult client group, for example, hardship cases. It could be argued that the trainer's spiel is only a single instance, but my data show that this view advocated by the trainer is reflected throughout the ES, as the next section details.

### **The Formal Policy of Dealing with Violent Incidents**

In order for the frontliner to officially record a violent incident experienced, both the manager and the service worker are required to fill in separate forms. On the frontliners' official incident form, the question was asked whether the frontliner had been on a 'handling difficult situation course'. This again implies that the incident may have something to do with service providers' skills. In the manager's report of the incident, which must be attached to the service provider's report, it is advised not to accept what has happened at face value, but to try to put together what happened themselves. They are advised to identify the problem the member



of staff was trying to solve (note it assumes that there was a problem) and look at how it was handled and what triggered the violent incident experienced (again, it assumes that there was a trigger). Additionally, they need to note if the frontliner had been in an incident before, potentially implying that if a service worker had been in other incidents, the problem lies with the service provider and not the service recipient. Thus, management are encouraged to analyse violent incidents experienced by frontliners to see how the service worker could have been at fault instead of assuming that it was a difficult customer or situation. The following quote from a manager illustrates this point:

*'I would definitely say that you've got to look at each incident and say, well, could that have been avoided. Was there something that we did that enhanced that action, was a frontliner not co-operative enough with that client, did they provoke it in some way. And yeah, some front liners do struggle with good customer service when it's in an aggressive way.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2- 45-Manager-Female-Caucasian)

The analysis of the incident to see where the frontliner has gone wrong is part of the individualisation of the responsibility for customer violence. This links in with the dominant view that violent incidents can be seen as a reflection of inadequate customer handling skills. This can be seen in the following quotes from management:

*'I would say it's how you treat people and you can see it happening sometimes and you think, don't go down that road because you could end up thumped but I think that's where as a*

*manager you've got to step in and say, well, you know, try calm this situation down a bit but it all comes down to customer service.'*

(Large City Job Centre 1-3-Manager - Male-Caucasian)

*'I think it depends how you deal with people, a lot of it's how you come across isn't it? If I'm abrupt and rude with someone then what should I expect back?'*

(Small Village Job Centre-5-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

*'I think it's got to be a case of, if you've got a good team under you and they're giving good customer service then you're gonna minimise that [violence] all the time.'*

(Middle sized town job centre 1-29-Manager-Female-Caucasian)

*'I mean we are actually doing a customer survey at the moment, ticking boxes, just a random selection of people that see when they come through the door, I think they're looking at the feedback we're getting. We obviously do provide the right sort of service because we're getting very positive feedback, that if they have to wait more than five minutes we always apologise, so that they know we're aware that we've kept them waiting. We're professional, we're friendly, would you recommend your friends and colleagues to come in and it's always yes, I've not seen a no yet. So we are doing the right things as an office and this shows, we don't have many incidents.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-7-Manager-Male-British Asian)

In all the above quotes, the onus is on the service workers' actions and how these can incite or avoid customer violence. That violent incidents experienced are the fault of the frontliners' poor



customer service skills also exists in the idea, expressed by many managers, that they had to use their superior customer handling skills to save the situation and avoid an incident. The following quotes from management illustrate this point:

*'If you've got a member of the public who is being quite violent and your member of staff is not calming them down but winding them up even further and being abrupt or rude or whatever, and you're thinking, oh don't do that. Sometimes you've got to jump in and calm the situation. I've had to jump in and take the customer away from the person and say, come and sit down this end of the room and come and have a chat with me just to get them out because you can see them getting really het up and you think, oh, no this is going to end up in a punch up. But definitely, if somebody hasn't got those skills it could easily cause trouble and I think that's why.'*

(Middle sized town job centre 1-29-Manager-Female-Caucasian)

*'I mean to me, if someone's verbally abusing me and getting angry I'll allow them to get that anger out and then I'll try and calm the situation down but we don't all work to the same degree. Other people say the wrong word at the wrong time and they'll fly even worse, and you can't interfere that's the thing, sometimes I wanna go over and say...I have done it but then you're undermining that person that's trying to deal with the client, so it is very difficult'.*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1- 24-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

*'And sometimes your stomach does get a bit churny and you think, oh, my goodness I've got to try and calm this situation down and it*

*does give you the old butterflies in your stomach but touch wood, I've usually been able to calm them down and get them to listen and be reasonable. You try and bend things a little bit and say, well this is the way it should be done but we'll try and bend this that way to get somebody accommodated and usually you can.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2- 45-Manager-Female Caucasian)

As noted, the perception that frontliners' poor customer handling is frequently responsible for violent incidents experienced was also illustrated in the attitude in the job centres towards the Benefit Agency (BA). The BA has more violent incidents in total than the job centres and the reason for this is largely reported to be because of their poor customer service skills. When pressed and questioned, ES employees admit that the BA also have to deal with different and difficult situations that are more likely to promote violence, but their poor customer handling skills is more freely cited as the reason for the BA's increased number of incidents. This is a dominant viewpoint and one most cited by managers as the following quote shows:

*'In my experience a lot of benefits agency staff are quite arrogant in their dealings with customers, it's the knowledge thing isn't it. They know about benefit and the customer doesn't and it's almost like a I know and you don't and you don't need to know, whereas I think for ES it's a skills job, it's about supporting people to make choices in decisions and giving them options. You know. And so we need to reach out and build a relationship with that customer, with the benefits agency they don't. It's either black or white, right or wrong, you've ticked a box or not. There's no need, they don't feel the need to develop a relationship. I've listened in too many times to poor customer service from the BA and would disagree with that*



*entirely. An arrogant sort of I know opinion, a great shame. And yeah, they have a lot more incidents.'*

(Middle sized town job centre 1-29-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

*'The people that you get, if you get Jason from the BA, down here...big jolly chap...he's just a walking cliché basically! He'll come down here and puff his cheeks and just provoke people and then incidents are bound to happen.'*

(Large City Job Centre 1-3-Manager-Male-Caucasian).

*'Yes, you do sort of get hassle at the Benefits agency but erm, I think the staff has to be more approachable about it. Because even if I ring the Benefits agency they can be really rude to me on the phone and say, well that's the way it is, we can't do anything about that form. They don't offer anything to help around the problem.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-45-Female-Caucasian).

The above quotes directly link the incidents experienced by the BA staff with their lack of customer service skills. In the first quote, the greater amount of incidents experienced by the BA is mentioned after deriding their level of customer service. The responsibility for customer violence experienced is again given to the frontliner. Union representatives and officials seem well aware that the onus for aggressive and violent incidents experienced is frequently placed with the service worker, something the following quotes show. The first and third quotes are from a union official and the second quote is from a union representative:

*'I think really, their approach these days is - it's all part of the job, and you will hear Managers say, 'Right, if you can't put up with this, you shouldn't be doing the job...', and that's it, and that's a*

*widely held view these days -- which I think is true in many occupations, unfortunately. The onus is put back on the front-liner. I think that's the conclusion that we arrive at, and more often than not the staff get indirectly blamed for creating the situation in the first place - which is rarely the truth of it.'*

*(Union Official-49-Male-Caucasian).*

*'when we merged with the Employment Service the customer was always right, and if there was an incident the emphasis was always on, 'how did you interpret this? What did you do to make them do that?' Now if there was an incident and someone was assaulted...it's like your fault - that's what most people felt - and they didn't really pursue it really, call the Police, or take any legal action...you have to take a personal case out against this person yourself. So we felt there was no support from management.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Male Caucasian).*

*'After the establishment of the Employment Service, I think it was at best casual and at worst negligent attitude to customer aggression. Now there were two reasons for that; one - that the department didn't want the bad publicity in the Press and the Media of course; and secondly - it was often seen, unjustly in many circumstances, that it was the staff's fault that this aggression occurred - cause they handled things wrongly or whatever; and whereas that may have been the case in a few cases, generally it wasn't.'*

*(Large City Job Centre 2-45-Female-Caucasian)*

Unlike the quotes taken from management, who often imply that customer violence experienced is the frontliners' fault, the two



extracts above taken from union members activists state this managerial idea, but both dispute the truth of it.

### **5. Point Three: Frontliners Cope Individually**

The dominant organisational construction of violence affects the ways that frontliners cope with customer violence experienced. The formal viewpoint individualises the responsibility for customer violence and so following on from this, service workers are expected to cope with it individually. This section will consider the coping mechanisms used by service workers that are influenced by this individualised construction of violence. All the coping methods are carried out by frontliners individually as opposed to collectively.

#### **Bending the Rules**

Frontliners reported 'bending the rules' rather than confronting the customer and risking an officially recognised incident. This is desirable as, according to the formal perspective, they will be largely held responsible for this. The following quote helps highlight this point:

*'I went out the weekend and I saw this guy and he's got the gall to come in this morning and say he hasn't worked I can't confront him. (Where did you see him?). In the fair. So, the customer looks you in the eye and is rude to you and lies to you and you have to accept it and be pleasant, cause if you don't that's inviting trouble. That angers me immeasurably*

*(Q. Trouble from who?)*

*From everyone really, the customer, the management, they'll come for you at all angles.*

*(Large City Job Centre 2-42-Frontliner-Female-British Asian).*

It is clear that the frontliner is not going to confront a fraudster in order to avoid the trouble that she will receive off both the customer and the management. The next extract also provides an instance of ignoring and bending the rules in order to avoid customer aggression:

*'No, no, no no, never, never even the people who've been aggressive here with everyone else, you know they've been ever so friendly to me; never in my twenty-seven years none of them have been violent, they've been ever so friendly. I think its because I turn the odd blind eye, yeah. I've been in market town, everywhere and they've been really friendly yeah, they just said, 'Man from Social Security...I'm coming to see you, you know' because some of them are working on the market stalls which they shouldn't be really, but I turn a blind eye and they say, 'Look I'm going to, you know, give you good apples now you know'! Yeah they are all friendly, really friendly, no problems at all.'*

*(Large City Job Centre 2- 46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)*

In this excerpt the frontliner links 'turning a blind eye' to the lack of violence he encounters. He also emphasises how customers who are hostile to other frontliners have not been this way with him, asserting therefore that customer violence experienced is related to the way customers are handled. This sentiment is echoed in his



boast that he has not experienced customer violence in twenty-seven years, implying that this is a result of his customer interaction as opposed to fortunate circumstance. This is reflective of the formal view which renders frontliners as responsible for the violence they experience. Indeed, this particular frontliner takes the customer service ideology to the extreme when he accommodates the customer to such an extent that he blatantly accepts them flouting the rules. In the next passage, the service worker explains that whilst some frontliners do not bend the rules, some do:

*'Like I say, what was your experience when you were down on the Frontline, talking to people...in terms of judging who does the job differently? cause my experience of Frontline and certain people, you have to keep the queue going down, so they keep signing them and getting them out, getting them out, they don't have chance to spend quality time with people. Whereas other people will spend a long time trying to get people into work and it's often the people, the long term unemployed, that you're under the impression slightly that they're scamming the system so certain people, and you can figure out who they are, spend a long time sort of trying to force people into work; which often causes [violent] incidents whereas other people will only make that effort if they're interested, which makes life much easier. If they're scamming the system I will just sign them and get them out basically.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

The frontliner asserts that by not strictly keeping to the rules it 'makes life easier' and that sometimes it is better to abandon some of the normal duties such as finding work for customers ('or forcing them into work') in order to avoid aggression. Again, this highlights the idea that frontliners are responsible themselves for

customer violence experienced and for coping with it. The following extract also illustrates frontliners bending some of the rules:

*'But you know the ones that are not coming, you'll say, 'What have you done to look for work?' and they start being a bit... say okay, 'Sign, go'. Some of them you can joke it down, and say, 'Well I know you've not looked for work, just sign on and go' or the ones that are working and signing, 'Well go back to work now' and they know that you know and they're okay. You just sort of, you've got to be able to sort of judge, immediately that person sits down in front of you, what level they're at sort of whether they're on the angry side or the simple side, or whatever.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26-Frontliner-Female Caucasian).

Here, the frontliner openly acknowledges to the clients that he knows they are flouting the rules and, in this way, he himself bends the ES rules which encourage policing of the claimant. He explains that the service has to be tailored to each client and uses the example of a client 'on the angry side'. The union were aware of the frontliners bending the rules as the next quote from a union official shows:

*'The level of customer service was unrealistic because again this refers to some previous answers; at the end of the day we're going by the law - so in a situation where the law says you can't, you cannot pay this person, there's really not much more you can do; you can use all the techniques of trying to calm down their anger- but the best way of calming somebody down is giving them some*



*money! So, aside from bending the rules - which I think we probably did on occasions - it was unrealistic, most definitely.'*

(Union Official-49-Male-Caucasian)

Whilst talking about how unrealistic customer service expectations can be, he admits that frontliners bent the rules in order to cope with the potential customer violence.

### **Anger Displacement**

Frontliners also use anger displacement to deal with the experience of violence and aggression. They vent their anger in other ways than retaliating to the sovereign customer, which would run counter to the customer service ideals promoted by management. Frontliners express their anger in ways such as swearing, punching the desk, and having a cigarette. In the subsequent quotation, the frontliner smokes a cigar as a means of dealing with his frustration:

*'I've only ever seen him have a reaction once, and that was when some guy was being really rude and out of order, threatening to rip his head off and all sorts and he went outside and had a cigar and he was shaking; I think basically he wanted to walk round the car park and hit him or something!'*

(Small Village Job Centre-17-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

Here it is observed that the frontliner in question would really love to hit an irate customer but instead he goes outside and has a cigar as a way of dealing with it. His physical reaction emphasises the aggrieved service worker's infuriation and the need to displace it in some way, since he is unable to direct it at the source (the

aggressive customer). The following also illustrates this need to displace frustration:

*'Things have changed because before we became open plan there were people and public on all floors, we used to have a floor that was solely for advisors working, who sort of did all the paper work, and you would be able to come upstairs and sort of scream that such and such has given you a load of grief on the counter and take it out there, but it seems as though because you're in front of the public all day every day, you can't do that. So the only place we can get our anger out is the canteen.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-43-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

Similar to the above extract, during observations, it was fairly common to see frontliners go outside and have a cigarette, or walk away from the frontline and swear under their breath - always out of view of the aggressive customer. Both these actions were ways of displacing anger which frontliners are unable to show to the sovereign customer, who must be treated with respect. This method of coping is detailed in other research, such as Mann (1999), Sutton (1991) and Hochschild (1983) (see chapter four), although the writers refer to it as a way to deal with difficult customers in general as opposed to violent and aggressive customers.

### **Blaming Violence on Other Frontliners**

Blaming violence experienced on other frontliners' deficient skills was common and worked with the official policies to individualise and culpabilise the believed instigator. Service workers did not



want to be perceived as having inferior customer service skills or indeed feel responsible for any incidents, therefore they denied that they were accountable for the perceived customer violence directed towards them and blamed colleagues. The following helps illustrate this coping mechanism:

*'she'll spend twenty minutes sitting down there filing, and that's gotta be really aggravating for people in the queue. When you look at Pete, he might as well have a stamp basically sausage factory or whatever; and then you get Jenny sitting there looking at one piece of paper for twenty minutes. Both of them must annoy the customers and then if you have to deal with them after, they're already gonna be irate, before you've even said anything.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-41-Frontliner-Female-African-Caribbean)

Here, the service worker lists inadequacies in other frontliners' customer service skills and connects this to customer anger. In this way, he colludes with the formal perspective and renders his colleagues as responsible for customer violence experienced. The following quote also highlights this idea:

*'No, that's one thing that doesn't bother me here; I always think people it depends on how you handle them to a great extent. I mean, yes, I've had the odd occasion where somebody's sort of really let off, but you calm them down and nine times out of ten they end up going away and apologizing afterwards. You realize they're not angry with you personally it's the drugs or the way they've been treated previously that they're angry with.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2- 30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

This frontliner exclaims that the irate customer is not angry with them personally, but the cause is the drugs that they have taken or previous treatment of them. By blaming another frontliner this invokes the formal, individualistic perspective that violence experienced is primarily *some* service provider's fault. In this case, the service provider uses it to displace blame from themselves onto another frontliner.

### **Expediting**

Frontliners frequently coped with clients they perceived as aggressive by dealing with them rapidly in order to get rid of them as quickly as possible. This method usually enabled them to avoid experiencing violent incidents and the potential slur on their competence. This mechanism is briefly described in research carried out by Bailey & McCollough, (2000) who label this 'Expediting' (see chapter 4), although here it refers to dealing with difficult customers in general. The following quote helps illustrate this point:

*'At the end of the day I don't want to antagonise him. If it looks as if he's going to be slightly antagonistic, my aim is to get that guy in and out of that jobcentre as quickly as possible. I'm certainly not paid enough to do heavy sort of searches and sort of stuff like that with him and I wouldn't get any support off management. It's as simple as that. The idea there is if he has done any work in the last two weeks, no, sign here, date here, please, see ya. It's as simple as that.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-8-Frontliner-Male-British-Asian)



Above, the frontliner admits that if the customer appears to be aggressive or capable of being antagonistic he tries to deal with him as quickly as possible. Many service providers claim, as he does, that they feel that they are simply not paid enough to risk experiencing violence by trying to force customers to search or apply for jobs. The frontliner also emphasises the lack of support from management, reflecting the indirect way in which the formal perspective individualises customer violence experienced. Therefore frontliners reduce the risk of perceived violence by keeping their interaction with them as short as possible. In the following quotes, frontliners explain that customers who are renowned for being violent are dealt with quickest:

*'If you know someone who's pathologically unstable don't bother arguing with them, see them quickly and get rid of them, that's it. For example we get some people who you know are addicts or alcoholic, and if they come in drunk I mean there's no point reasoning with them, or explaining, cause it's not gonna sink in, just try and see them as soon as you can and don't make any problems for them, try and do everything beforehand prepare and that's it, just ask them to leave; cause you know they're not gonna look for jobs, there's no point in saying that you need to fill this in, fill that in, cause it's just gonna cause [violent] incidents, just try and get rid of them.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-8-Frontliner-Male-British Asian).

*'When I was at Leicester we used to have a saying, SAGRO, sign and get rid of, if the client was potentially aggressive. Just get rid of them as quickly as possible and put a sign on, not job searched this time.'*

(Small Village Job Centre- 15-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

*'We have one particular customer who is potentially violent who was actually barred from signing on here because he trashed up a DSS many years ago and you can see in him he's a time bomb waiting to explode. To a great extent we all get on with him and he was shaking hands when he found a job recently, which didn't work out. He's...we've earned his trust and he's earned our trust. Again he is illiterate so, we don't antagonise him by asking him to do certain things there, we just get him to sit down, sign and get him out..... There was one incident a few months ago when his giro hadn't turned up on time and we needed to fill out forms and check with the post office and you could see he was physically shaking because it hadn't gone right for him. One word out of place and all hell would have broken loose, absolutely clear about that, and we wouldn't be backed by management.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2- 44-Frontliner-Caucasian-Male)

In the last quote, the frontliner expresses the feeling that the customer was easily incited towards hostility and so they dealt with him as quickly as possible in order to try to avoid this. He was aware that the longer the customer was there the more chance there was of experiencing violence, using the metaphor of a time bomb to evoke this. He also stated that management would not 'back' them, again alluding to the idea that the service providers are individually responsible to cope with customer behaviour perceived as violent. However, this quote also invokes a collective sense of coping as the frontliner constantly uses 'we' instead of 'I', thus implying that the service workers are all coping together. This quote is taken from a large city job centre where 'we' probably referred to the service workers only as no other grade worked on



the frontline. The second quote also uses 'we', again implying a collective way of coping. This quote was taken from a particularly small job centre of 5 staff, all of which worked on the frontline (except the job centre manager) and so the 'we' is probably referring to the job centre as a whole.

### **Putting on a Brave Face**

Frontliners also coped by 'putting on a brave face' with the intention not of avoiding incidents but of minimising the fuss. In interviews, although service workers talked readily about perceived violent incidents, they were keen to claim that it did not bother them. By putting on a brave face staff may have hoped that the incident would be forgotten as quickly as possible, as would the slur on their professional abilities. Frontliners also often claim that although it may not bother them, it certainly does affect the other service providers. The following quotes are examples of frontliners coping with customer violence experienced by 'putting on a brave face':

*'Oh, it was awful. Oh, he was so, so stressful. He was a very, very clever operator. He knew how far he could go, you probably read where he told Jill to make sure she washed her dirty knickers before he came in again. (No, I didn't read that) You didn't read that. (No, I think I read the formal account) Oh, right. Have a look to see if you can see anything in the incident book about Mr. Smith so you can see the sort of things ... very, very personal to the women. Exceedingly nasty...He just wore you down completely. He made Paul very unwell, he couldn't cope with it. Nicola's like*

*me, she'll take it on board and I'd take him on board but no, he doesn't get to me.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female).

The above customer who was perceived as aggressive was described by the frontliner as exceedingly nasty and she can still clearly remember a comment made over 3 years earlier. Equally, she admits that 'he weighed you down, he'd just go on and on'. All of this suggests that the service provider may well have been affected by the event, despite her claims to the contrary. However, she stresses that she is not affected by it because she is experienced enough to cope with it and compares this to other younger service providers who, without her experience, cannot cope. Her ability to cope is portrayed as a reflection of her frontline skills - an idea promoted by the formal organisational perspective. By describing the customer as so difficult and explaining that he seriously affected another frontliner she emphasises what a proficient frontliner she is. The following excerpt also provides an example of putting on a brave face in order to cope with customer violence experienced:

*'I mean I have had, I have been threatened. I was threatened that I was gonna get knifed when I walked out of work in the evening but that was really a one off. That was a very young girl, it was when I worked on the 16/17 year old section. I'd just said no to an early payment and she was just not very happy about it. Now personally, that didn't affect me because I just thought she was just mouthing off but one of the receptionists who worked on the team was really worried because he said he knew her out of work and said that she had a lot of not very nice friends so he was a bit concerned for me. When I left work that evening he actually*



*walked me round to the car park and said, just in case she is lurking out there I'll come out with you but aside from that, I've not, you know. But it's not the sort of thing that I'm gonna worry about because it is sort of once in a blue moon. I am one of these people if somebody shouts, it doesn't affect me because I think, why are they shouting. And I'm more the sort of person that will try and get in and calm them down, although not everyone is like that and it does affect the others.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-33-Frontliner-Female-British Asian).

In this extract, the service worker continuously emphasises how an aggressive incident experienced did not bother her. At the same time, she explains that in contrast to other frontliners she is good at calming the situation down. This again echoes the formal perspective by emphasising the importance of a frontliner's skills in dealing with perceived violence. The following quotation differs in that the service provider openly admits feeling scared, but not showing it on the outside:

*'There's still aggression, yeah... Staff, it can make you very unnerved if you see an incident take place in the morning, for example, you're unnerved for the rest of that day. You try not to be, you try not to bring it out with some other clients we have people come in and say you've coped very well with it, but I don't feel like I have, inside I'm shaking, but I don't show it. I'm petrified that when I leave here at night there's gonna be a reoccurrence of it. Or you get the stalkers who just come in to look at you that's frightening, yeah I've had a couple of incidents at Leaborough; just found out one of my stalkers have been sectioned!'*

(Middle sized town job centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Not only does the frontliner admit to not showing her feelings but she also links this to 'giving good customer service' by disguising her real feelings for customers. In the subsequent extract, despite trying to 'put on a brave face', ultimately a frontliner reveals he cannot conceal his real feelings and claims he cannot 'go through with it', suggesting that pretending to be 'ok' is an act that he has to go through:

*'Yeah, funnily enough, the hero sort of thing, you try to act like everything is ok, the ambulance came in 'No, I'm alright mate'. I didn't get checked up. Went into work the next day, I just felt falling off a horse sort of thing, the longer I leave it, so I physically went in the next day, got back on that reception desk in the afternoon and I just had a complete panic attack. Complete breakdown. And I said, 'I'm sorry, I can't sit on this desk at all', I just couldn't go through with it.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

### **The Erection of Workplace Boundaries**

Service work in the ES involves blurred boundaries between frontliners' work and home lives. In this section I show how the erection of workplace boundaries can be used as a coping mechanism.

Work frequently spills over into home life through customer behaviour which is perceived as violent and is directed towards staff outside work. The following extracts are taken from interviews with frontliners and help illustrate perceived customer



violence towards service workers outside work. Both find that it is not only themselves but also their family which are affected by the threat of this perceived violence:

*'I do not think that we should be expected to put up with this excess of personal abuse. And locally our children are shouted at,*

*(Q-Really?)*

*We are spat at in the street, my car's been pinched.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre-23-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)*

*'It's not so bad with the jobcentre at the moment but if its people who have a grievance against benefits agency because of the benefits they cover, if people get miffed, to put it nicely, yes it worries me. I live in the next village so I use Huntsworth a lot, my husband is a police officer and although he is on a motorbike, he covers this area when he's not doing the training. I've got children that ones going to the - and all of a sudden it gets a little bit closer to home and I'm very, very aware of it...'*

*(Small Village Job Centre-21-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).*

In the above two quotes the aggression experienced from the frontliners work life crosses over into their home life. Both find that it is not only themselves, but also their family which are affected by the experience of customer violence. Two further quotes also illustrate customer violence outside work:

*'Trouble was I happened to see him in town at lunchtime and he just towered over me, but luckily I just stared him down and got away with it yeah.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-44-Male-Frontliner-Caucasian)

*'I can recall a particular incident many, many years ago, I'm going back probably 19 years ago. I hadn't been in long and I was in a pub with my fiancée at the time in Leicester. He played pool for a pub team and we were away at a different venue and this one that I knew came across to me and said, I haven't had my effing giro this week and I was very unnerved by it. I was unnerved by that because I was coming back from the ladies so I wasn't anywhere near the people who I was with, very isolated and I was probably only about 18, or 19 so very naïve and very inexperienced of dealing with that sort of thing and I do remember saying something like well, come in and see me tomorrow at work and we'll see what we can sort out. But it can be very unnerving.'*

(Large Job Centre 1-2-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Whereas the quotes so far illustrate work spilling into home life through customer violence experienced, the following quotes from frontliners show the blurring of boundaries between work and home life although without the presence of perceived violence:

*'Oh, yeah. Very friendly. I see them at mosque as well when I go because I live in this area as well, or on the street or in the park, library, anywhere. Yeah, they're very friendly with me, talk to me, if they have any questions I just tell them or ask them to come to the Jobcentre.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-12-Frontliner-Female-British Asian).

*'There was one chap I met that I'd interviewed and I met him in the supermarket and he was fine. And I couldn't remember, you know how you go away and I was thinking 'where do I know that*



*man from' and you think oh, that's right it's Mr. So and so, I interviewed him last week or whatever.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-8-Frontliner-Male).

In the same way that work life can spill into home life, home life can spill into work life. For example, friends, partners, or family may come in as clients, or actually the frontliner may live in the job centre's neighbourhood and thus may see neighbours come in. The following quotes provide examples of home life spilling into work:

*'But anyway, and also he was a bit so he threatened to kill her, he'd done various things to her, threatened to kill her kid, also went round the house and all sorts; and her boyfriend's patience snapped I think. So, the husband was in here just sitting there in fact I actually interviewed him because I knew why he was here, he was sitting there to stalk Smitta; so I said look cause he didn't know that I knew everything 'Excuse me can I help you at all, you got any jobs you want to look at?'. So he said yes, so he came over and I interviewed him and luckily I got rid of him quickly because what had happened, Smitta had apparently warned the boyfriend don't come in at the moment because she was expecting him in, 'don't come cause my husband's in', and she knew there'd be a bloodbath. So the boyfriend came up with a hammer! He actually did it he was silly because he screeched up in the car, as fast as he could in order to jam the brakes on, so it was a real eeeeh-type thing to affect, they saw it upstairs and saw him getting the hammer out of the boot well you know damn well you don't need a hammer to sign on! So they phoned the Police and the Police came and saw, but he got quite aggressive with the security guard because he'd been f'ing and blinding at the security guard 'You're*

*fucking useless, look you've let him to see my Smitta'. Well the security guard couldn't help but let the husband in, so that was really bad, but the Police took him away and then eventually, unfortunately, he drove his car at him and he's now inside, the boyfriend, unfortunately, he's in such a state because he's inside now on attempted murder. It's so sad I mean you don't, it's so sad because she's a lovely girl, it's just, I don't know she made a few mistakes.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

*'Because she'll tell the jobcentre that she's got a health problem, it's actually my boyfriend's aunt, so I won't get involved because it's family, distant, but she signs on in Chester. So she says she's got health problems and the jobcentre gets so fed up with her in the end they send her on the sick.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

Whereas the above quotes illustrate the blurring between work and home life, another boundary that was frequently blurred is that between personal and professional relationships. During observations I sometimes noted examples of this, such as clients who recounted personal details or problems, or frontliners who became personally involved with the client, creating apparently enjoyable spaces for themselves. The following set of quotes help demonstrate the blurring between personal and professional relationships:

*'Well everybody knows, I had to do it, I had to put it on the thing, yeah. Basically I'd been signing her for quite a while and when I first met her, oh don't be silly she would never go out with you sort*



*of thing, I never even thought to honestly, it's true I'm just one of those, like really instantly you know. So what happened was I happened to bump into her in town and it was rather funny cause she'd got voluntary work cause I'm a Christian, go to church, yeah and she said I just thought, as I said having our usual pleasantries, and I says oh you look a bit tired and she said oh I've got a church meeting tonight, cause that's the name of the action group you see. So I thought she said church, so I said oh yeah church, and she has got Christian connections with church, so we went for a drink another time and it started from there, a couple of months ago, so she sort of stays weekends with me now and then goes cause she's got her own home at the moment, but it looks quite promising! I'm amazed though cause I mean they're all sort of meeting people...but I think it's all legal and above board, so everybody knows, I can't touch her claim or anything now you see, but I must admit I couldn't believe that you know when I met her, I really couldn't so that's how I met her!'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27 -Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

This frontliner was required to stop serving the customer because, alongside their professional relationship, they have been involved in a personal, romantic relationship. Thus, their professional relationship was replaced by an entirely personal one. In the next quote, a frontliner tells of a customer's attempts to turn a professional relationship into a personal one, although this was not intended by the frontliner involved, nor welcome:

*'And we all knew what he was like and that he was ...(What exactly was he like?) .....He was very devious and he said things that weren't very nice. I mean for example, he called me a stuck-up fat cow (INAUDIBLE COMMENT). Yeah, yeah. And she*

*interviewed him and I think, so that he didn't get angry or start going off like he does and she was... overly nice and, of course, he took it the wrong way. And, I sat next to them listening because, you know, I was just interested any way how she dealt with him and because she was being nice to him, he took it because he thought she fancied him and he asked her out but it was horrible, it was sickly, it made your stomach churn because of the way he was. And of course he got aggressive when she said no. And that again is something that can happen, I think. If they take it wrong way, and he obviously, genuinely took it the wrong way. He thought that she was being nice to him for the wrong reason, I'm sure of that. So, you know, that was a bit strange really.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-15-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

This frontliner's friendly manner was, no doubt, an attempt to prevent the experience of customer violence through customer service skills, but was taken by the customer as meaning more than professional courtesy and he tries to take the relationship from professional to personal when he asks the service worker out. In the next quote, a frontliner explains the necessity of bringing personal elements into the professional relationship:

*'Yeah, yeah. To complete an interview properly you are going to have to talk about personal circumstances. So you talk to them about their health problem, that's personal anyway. It's when they start showing you their scars and things it's not too nice!'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-36-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

In the above quote, the frontliner acknowledges the necessity of bringing some personal elements into the professional relationship.



In the following extract, the frontliner also allows personal interaction, which although seems to create an enjoyable space for the frontliner is mainly justified through reference to the customer service ideology:

*'One guy that used to come in for RDV gave me his number! You know that guy...*

*(Q-Why did he give you his number?)*

*Why do you think! Yeah, that sort of thing, horizontal friends as I say! Not that I've done it by the way! ...You get a few people that when they come in you know you can have a really good chat to them, just have a laugh and things like that. There's one particular guy that Jenny and I talk to quite often, have a laugh and stuff like that so in a sense it's quite good we've got that, we are building a bit more friendly relationship to the other clients...'*

*(Middle Town Job Centre 2-33-Frontliner-Female-British Asian).*

Some frontliners are uncomfortable with these 'fuzzy' boundaries and therefore erect their own clearer-cut ones. Notably, the level of violence that service providers' experience within the job centre plays a role in whether they erect boundaries between themselves and clients or whether they feel comfortable working without them. My data showed that, in general, the frontliners that came from the job centres which dealt with benefits, who experienced more customer violence and consequently felt the need to erect boundaries. However, frontliners who came from the smallest job centre, which did not deal with benefits at all and where they experienced significantly less violence, did not express the need to mark out boundaries. The creation of boundaries by some

frontliners, therefore, acted as a way of coping with perceived customer violence. The following quotes are all taken from frontliners who do erect boundaries and who come from the five job centres which dealt with benefits. In the first instance:

*'No, I don't think so, no again you've got to I think that's something you've got to do when you're at work, and you don't discuss your personal situation. I mean there are times, we've all sat there and there's been times when you know, 'Oh no you don't understand... ', and you think well yes we've been through, but you just don't discuss your personal you've got to keep that to yourself haven't you and I make sure that I don't get involved into those sort of conversations.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2- 30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

In the next quote the service worker voices her opinion that she does not like to get personal at work and so she makes sure that she does not 'get involved with these conversations', thus she erects a barrier. Although on first impression it seems that the frontliner described in the excerpt is comfortable with fuzzy boundaries, it soon becomes clear that in fact she is not. She actually hides in order to avoid a client who wishes to get too personal:

*'Yeah, it's like it's not so much you're just dealing with the benefits side or helping them get back into work; but there's also other problems that you get drawn into. I know that a lady on erm our section she had a client that comes in regularly to tell her how she's doing in getting custody of her children which is nothing to do with benefits or work, and erm she just comes in and updates her every so often.'*



*(Q-Does it help having relationships...?)*

*No, cause I don't think it helps in general because erm people do get attached to you and they generally won't tend to go and see other people, and a lot of the time it's not related to what you're trying to accomplish with them. But the lady who deals with it, deals with this particular lady, doesn't like seeing her anymore so she goes and hides when she comes in!*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).*

The frontliner described above puts space between herself and the client because she feels that she has become too familiar. In the next quotation, another frontliner also purposely avoids clients, however, this time, this takes place within a non- work setting:

*‘‘cause I've only lived here about a year and a half, or something like that, so I don't really see many of them. I see the odd one in town when I go out on lunch and things like that but generally not that many.*

*(Q-Do they say hello?)*

*I avoid them!*

*(Large City Job Centre 1- 1-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).*

This frontliner makes sure that clients do not cross over from work into her home life by avoiding clients when she sees them in non-work contexts. In the subsequent extract, a frontliner establishes a boundary between her home life and work life by separating her workplace from her neighbourhood:

*'But I don't think I'd like to live here though. Because Beryl said I could work in Leicester if I wanted to, it was not long after I came here. My boyfriend lost his job, he done his ankle and his leg in and he didn't have any money so I was paying like, my mortgage at home and I rent here, because I still have my own flat up home and then all my petrol and my travelling, all the bills and everything and we couldn't cope. Sharon, she said, I can get you transferred to Leicester to the city centre office and then just have to get the bus and that would be cheaper for you. But I don't fancy working where I live because then you'd see them all the time wouldn't you and they would be living around you. I'd rather be away. Not that I think anything would ever happen it's just to be safe.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

This service worker decides not to work in a job centre that is closer to her house in order to separate her home and work life. This separation seems to be motivated by a desire to avoid the experience of customer aggression. Although she states that she thinks 'nothing would ever happen', she contradicts this when she explains that 'it's just to be safe', suggesting that working in the same neighbourhood may not be. In the following quote, the service worker recounts a similar need to keep work and home life independent:

*'Not personally, no. I don't think you need to get too personal. I mean they can say some basic things, but you've got to draw the line somewhere and I don't think they should over step that line to be honest, because work is work and life - because there's life outside work if you know what I mean. So I mean yes. I mean*



*some people come in and they give you their whole life story, which to me they shouldn't be doing because at the end of the day it's work and they shouldn't unless you ask - but no, I don't think they should ask too much about your life.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2- 41-Frontliner-Female- African Caribbean).

In contrast, the subsequent set of excerpts are all taken from service providers who willingly work with blurred and uncertain limits and, therefore, do not feel like they need to impose boundaries. The frontliners seem comfortable working without rigid boundaries separating home and work life, professional and personal relationships. All of the quotes, with the exception of one, are taken from service providers who come from the smallest job centre studied, which does not deal with benefits. In practice, this means that they generally experience much less customer violence than in the other job centres. The only exception to this was a quote from a DEA (Disability Employment Advisor) within one of the larger job centres. The client group that she deals with also tends to be perceived as less violent because she does not deal with their benefit herself. Instead, other frontliners will sign them on and deal with their disability allowance, whereas the DEA only offers additional help.

*'You know, if they even wanted to ring me up just for a chat to say, well, look, I'm feeling mighty down. I've applied for this job and I've not got anywhere!'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre - 6-Frontliner-Female-African Caribbean).

Here, the service worker offers up her service as someone to listen to customers' problems, acting less like a professional service worker and closer to the role of a friend. The next frontliner quoted, outlines an advantage of meeting the clients outside work, making it clear that he doesn't have a problem with this lack of boundaries between work and home life:

*'Oh yeah, yeah. No actually funnily enough people you know tell staff how helpful they were and they also tell if they've got a job as well because in some cases we don't see clients and although we are trying to follow up and call on them and see what happened because we run case notes as well. So if we don't see a regular for two or three weeks we assume they've got a job but we try to encourage them to let us know but when they don't we try to phone and chase it up. In a couple of cases Celia has been to Sainsbury's and a couple of clients have said, Oh, you know I'm working now and that's where I'm working and thanks for all the help and whatever so we find out that way too. It's a good rapport that the staff have got.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre- 9 -Frontliner-Male-British Asian).

Whereas the frontliner cited emphasises the merits of a blurring between work and home life when it naturally occurs, the next quoted service worker actually contributes towards this by actively thinking about helping clients on her days off:

*'There's no point doing that, you have to try and get on the side of the client and get the client on your side, and hope that way, work together hopefully, and if there is some co-operation it goes a long way, and you feel as if you wanna put yourself out for them, and*



*you find yourself walking in town on your days off looking for work for them which is really sad!*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-8-Frontliner-Male-British Asian).

The quote points out that crossing the professional/personal boundary can benefit the service providers' work, something which is reflected in the next extract. Here, the frontliner admits that she gets personal, although she also admits that it is an individual choice, implying that not all service workers do this:

*'Oh god, the times I've woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning and had a brain wave! You do! I suppose really when you've got so close to the clients in the sense that they've had a job interview at, say, 4 o'clock and you're thinking 'Oh god, I wonder how they got on?' You're pacing and you're thinking to yourself, wondering, wondering. I do personally take it really personal, although I shouldn't. That's me. That's just a me thing though.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre1- 2-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian).

In general, then, as shown by this section, when frontliners experience a high level of aggression in their working life, understandably, they do not want home life and work to mix. To achieve this, they deal with this element by creating their own boundaries.

## **6. Customer Sovereignty and Customer Violence Experienced**

This thesis asserts that the formal organisational construction of customer violence experienced is largely due to the promotion of the 'myth' of customer sovereignty. It is frequently argued that this

myth is promoted in order to manage the tensions created by the organisational desire for both customer orientation and efficient rationalisation (Korczynski, 2002; Ritzer, 1999; Campbell, 1987). This concept of customer sovereignty as just a façade can be seen especially clearly within the ES where the constructed nature of the customer differs to that of the commercial sector. ES customers seek services and benefits which are rationed, without the expectation that they will receive them. This means that they need to conform to the ES's requirements as opposed to the ES conforming to their demands. The use of the customer sovereignty ideology, therefore, seems particularly false within this context. Nevertheless, the customer sovereignty ideology is heavily promoted within the ES.

The way that customer violence is constructed by the formal organisation is linked with this organisational promotion of customer sovereignty. Firstly, customer violence experienced is not acknowledged because it is perceived as the result of poor customer handling abilities, something which is linked to the customer service ideology. If this is the case then the experience of customer violence only happens to inadequate frontliners who must assume full accountability. This means that violence is not something for which the organisation needs to take responsibility. In addition, the organisation does not recognise the systematic nature of the violence experienced by the frontliners within their work and the impact that it has on the service workers. Secondly, rendering service workers culpable for customer violence experienced is also linked to the customer sovereignty ideology. The customer is upheld as an important sovereign to such an extent that the ES identifies with the customer more than its own service providers. Interestingly, a frequent source of frontliners'



disagreements with customers is based on service workers' attempts to uphold the rationalized rules. By identifying with the customer, therefore, at the expense of the frontliner, the ES is also often doing this at expense of the rationalized rules of the organisation. This is reflective of the conflict of interests between customer orientation and rationalisation which is masked by the customer sovereignty ideology (see chapter four). Thirdly, the individualised mode of coping can also be attributed to the promotion of the customer sovereignty ideology. Violent incidents experienced are constructed as a result of service providers' poor customer handling skills and the blame is placed firmly with the frontliner rather than the all-important sovereign customer. In this way, responsibility for violence and aggression experienced is individualised and, consequently, service workers are expected to either avoid it or cope with it individually. This constant emphasis in the ES on customer sovereignty is promoted through training and official policies, each of which will now be considered in turn.

## **Training**

In training, the ES's 'core values' are studied. These values are 'People, Products, Presentation and Procedure'. As a constant reminder, they are pinned up 'backstage' on notice boards throughout the job centre and referred to in appraisals. 'People' and 'Presentation' reflect the strong emphasis on customer service. Under the 'People' heading the trainer wrote out the following terms on a white board. Bracketed commentaries were not literally written up on the white board but represent the way these terms were discussed by the trainer.

*Courtesy (to the customer)*

*Listen (to the customer)*

*Be Approachable (to the customer)*

*Eye Contact (to the customer)*

*Body Language (when dealing with the customer)*

*Empathise (with the customer)*

*Explain (why/reason to the customer)*

*Encourage (the customer)*

*Interpreter (ES should provide an interpreter for the customer).*

All these aspects fit in with the idea of giving a high level of customer service to the sovereign customer. The term 'people' is used to refer to the customer and not any other group of 'people' within the ES (although she does briefly mention that co-workers can also be considered as 'people' too, as they are 'internal customers'; in the appraisals, the concept of 'people' is often expanded to include relationships with co-workers.). This whole section on 'people' is related to serving the all-important customer. All these aspects, except the last one, fit in with the relational idea of customer sovereignty. The frontliner is told to be courteous to the customer, listen to him, use appropriate body language and so on, implying that the service workers needs to display the respect that the sovereign customer deserves. In fact, all these aspects help build the image of customer sovereignty.

Under the 'Presentation' heading the trainer wrote out on the black board:

*Professional (client will be helped and will get best possible help)*

*Welcoming*

*Clean and Tidy*



Part of the 'good customer service' is thus the presentation of the frontliner. This notion of customer sovereignty is something pointed out by Nickson et al (2000), who argue that the request for a certain appearance, usually well dressed and neat, implies that the customer's importance is deserving of these symbols of respect. Notably, customers are not subject to the same requirements, therefore this dress code serves to promote the myth of sovereignty.

### **The Mystery Shopper Policy**

The ES, like many service organisations, operates a mystery shopper policy. This is where management send a representative in who poses as a 'customer' and assesses the level of service that he/she is given. Each job centre will be awarded an overall mark, which is made up from a mystery shopper's visit (termed an 'evaluator's visit'), another mystery shopper's visit assessing different things (termed an 'assessor's visit'), a mystery customer's phone call enquiry and a mystery customer's letter.

The policy of having a mystery shopper also aims to ensure a high level of customer service and thus fits in with the idea of customer sovereignty. In this policy, the relational aspect of customer sovereignty is again highlighted as not only are the frontliners encouraged to act as if the customer is sovereign and consequently relationally superior, here the customer may actually be representing their hierarchical superior in disguise. The mystery shopper assesses the following things:

Visit from Evaluator (45% of overall mark)

Mystery Shopper assesses : waiting times  
welcome desk  
2 week intervention  
enquiry responses

Visit from Assessor (30% of overall mark)

Mystery Shopper assesses: posters e.g. on how to give  
complaints  
asks about 10 vacancies

(Unlike the visit from the evaluator, the assessor tells staff if they are they are the mystery shopper after they have looked at the vacancies.)

Phone calls (20% of overall mark)

Mystery Shopper assesses: pick up time  
official greeting

Letter (5% of overall mark)

Mystery Shopper assesses: speed of reply  
clarity

All the elements assessed by the mystery shopper are linked to the idea of the myth of customer sovereignty through the emphasis on a high level of customer service. The sovereign customer, full of importance, should not be kept waiting too long (waiting times), should be welcomed appropriately (welcome desk), should be treated well every time they come in (every two weeks on the customer intervention) and will have all their enquiries answered satisfactorily (enquiry responses). The complaints of the sovereign customer should be taken seriously, their job needs should be



attended to (vacancy checking), their phone calls should be answered quickly (pick up times), they should be then greeted on the phone correctly (official greeting) and all enquires should be speedily (speed of reply) and clearly dealt with (clarity).

An extract taken from an ES manager shows how the idea of the mystery shopper is connected to the idea of customer sovereignty and the importance of the customer:

*'We used to give people tickets and we'd time them, we'd do it all manually. Now it's the Mystery Shopper, which I'm all for but I don't think people take it as seriously as they should do, and they ought to, the customer should come first.'*

(Middle Sized Town Centre 1-25-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

### **The Job Seekers Charter**

The concept of customer sovereignty can be seen to be embodied in the Job Seekers Charter. This is a statement of 'the level of service that customers can expect from the ES' and bullet points the rights of customers and what they can anticipate from frontliners. This is hung on the walls of the job centres and printed on the back of signing books. It promises that frontliners will wear a name badge and give their names when they telephone or write to people. Consequently, sovereign customers have the right to service workers' names and first name terms are used despite the fact that the customers are usually addressed as Mr/Mrs, etc. The use of a name badge was an issue taken up by the union, who fought for frontliners' right to either use a false name or else just their first name for safety reasons. The outcome was that

frontliners were allowed to do this if they requested the privilege to do so from the job centre manager. Some managers did not approve of the practice and did not inform frontliners that they had this choice. (However, it is important to state that this was not the case with all managers as the second quote below shows). The next two extracts are taken from union officials:

*'Dress code...what you have to wear - that's what they do first of all; they say you have to wear a name badge...and then they took the screens out, and then...'*

*(Q. I thought Front-liners didn't have to have their full name on the badge...?)*

*Well if you didn't it was looked down on by management; they always had a thing that no - your full name down; a lot of places didn't tell staff that information, and made you put the full name - christian and surname - but we knew that it's not the case; so a lot of people kind of just had what they liked on it, as long as you can be identifiable... - you can have whatever you like on it, as long as you can be identified by a customer...*

*(Q. Did many front-liners ask for that to happen?)*

*...Yes, because everybody's name badges done out with your full name, without even being asked...'*

*(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian).*

*(Q. Were there safety concerns about name badges?)*



*Yeah...Managers - individually some were okay...others not really...As far as I'm aware, no member of staff was, at the end of the day, forced to put their whole name on the name badge; but let us say some encouraged it more than others. But as it turned out, that didn't become the issue we thought it might be - because eventually people were allowed to just put their first name and service title. One little concession!*

*(Q. Did many front-liners ask to just put their first names on?)*

*Erm, yes! A reasonable number, yeah - yeah, a reasonable number...many people had their full name on, but if you were a new starter, for example, they'd just print their name out for them...it's like positive input - you don't ask, you get your full name.'*

*(Union Official-49-Male-Caucasian).*

The fact that the union had to campaign to protect frontliners' names shows how it was assumed by the formal organisation that the customer had a right to frontliners' names. This again reflects the idea of customer superiority within the relationship.

The Job Seeker Charter also promised that frontliners are polite, considerate, open, fair and honest when dealing with the customer, that they would respect their privacy and apologise if they get things wrong and would put it right promptly. All of these things set out the rights of the sovereign customer who should be treated with the appropriate respect and not just a user of a service. The important customer should also not be kept waiting; the Charter promises that the customer will be seen on time with an appointment and within 10 minutes without an appointment.

There were also ‘six official customer service commitments’ that frontliners were supposed to carry out. These were seen as ‘good principles of customer care’ (quoted from a training handout). These are:

1. I will always be helpful and friendly towards the customer.
2. I will be responsive to individual customer needs.
3. I will behave professionally.
4. I will take responsibility when I deal with customers.
5. I will earn my customers’ trust.
6. I will demonstrate pride in myself, my Jobcentre and the Employment Service.

All these customer service commitments demonstrate the stress that is put on customer-focused service. All six aspects of service commitments are designed to help construct a more ‘enjoyable’ experience for the sovereign customer.

### **Comparison with the Commercial Organisation**

As already explained, there was constant emphasis on providing good customer service in the ES, evoking the idea of the sovereign customer. The idea of such customer service was a concept which first occurred in the private sector and, notably, the ES frequently referred to the commercial sector when trying to encourage frontliners to deliver this level of service. This comparison is well illustrated by the following quotation from a manager answering the question of what she considered important on the frontline:



*'It's your customer service, you've got to give good customer service and what I'd say to people is, you know, put yourself into that person's shoes who is sitting on the other side of the counter or the other side of the desk. I mean if you came into an office or a bank or whatever, and somebody was sat there with a grumpy face and not pleasant, you'd not want to be seen by that person. So definitely good customer service.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-45-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

In this quote, the ES is compared to a bank, again drawing selective comparisons with commercial organisations. The comparison with a bank was often used when talking about customer service, which implies that the ES should provide similar customer service without acknowledging the differences existing between banks and the ES.

In training, the ES was constantly compared to a commercial organisation. For example, over lunch frontliners were given a survey to fill out regarding how they felt about the service in other organisations (all commercial). This enabled service providers to transfer their feelings about the customer service that they receive to the customer service that they give. This was furthered through a whole training session devoted to what they liked/disliked about being a customer. This encouraged frontliners to perceive themselves as customers and identify with their fellow customers, who were also portrayed as commercial. Korczynski (2002) argues that promoting frontliners' identification with the customer is a way to generate committed emotional labour (see chapter four). Within this constant comparison with commercial customers, it was never pointed out that ES customers differ in many ways to other commercial customers. The only distinction highlighted was

the customers' lack of choice. The trainer emphasised that if the ES customers do not like the service, they are not able to go somewhere else. The many other discrepancies are ignored.

### **The Nature of the Customer in the ES**

The contradiction and resulting tension between customer orientation and rationalisation can be seen when either the customer is satisfied at the expense of the rules, or the rules are upheld at the expense of the customer's desires. In the latter example, customer sovereignty is exposed as a myth and frequently the customer becomes irate. Thus, the myth of sovereignty is a façade that easily crumbles, which can be seen particularly clearly in the ES - the ES customers do not have choice of organisations and they are thus not autonomous in the modern sense of sovereignty and have to obey a set of rules. Equally, instead of paying for the service, they are frequently there to collect money themselves. The service workers process their requests and have considerable knowledge which they can choose to share with or withhold from the customers. Therefore, here the idea of sovereignty as relational power also seems somewhat negated as frontliners have a certain amount of power over the customers. The following managerial quote illustrates this point:

*'There's a lot of people that come into Civil Service perhaps specially BA, the Tax Office, where they're dealing with the public, they go through a power complex, especially if they've been signing on and now they're this side of the counter. It takes a few years to get it out of their system before they become sympathetic.'*  
(Middle sized town job centre 1-24-Manager-Female-Caucasian).



Indeed, it is only recently that ES service recipients were called 'customers', previously they were referred to as 'clients' or 'claimants'. This represents more than a change of wording; it is an attempt to create and maintain the commercial idea of customer sovereignty. Since my research, a trade union member informed me that the term 'frontline' has now also been changed to 'the customer facing' because frontline has too many negative connotations. The following quote from the district manager illustrates the changing nature of the ES and how it has become increasingly customer-focused, constructing the myth of customer sovereignty:

*'It's moved significantly with New Deal because New Deal is very much client focused and it's about helping individual job seekers into work. Here it's slightly different because we've got two private sector organisations doing most of New Deal for us. Again, a Ministerial decision. They wanted a mixed economy with the employment service and private organisations delivering New Deal. We happen to get private sector models here.'*

(District Manager-47-Male-Caucasian).

As this quote shows, the ES uses some private organisations for part of its service, thus developing the idea of commercial customers further. In the following quote, a manager describes how the frontliners that deal with the unemployed claiming jobseekers allowance, have now become more like the speciality frontliners who deal with the unemployed on disability allowance. These service workers are now supposed to give a higher level of customer service which is more focused on the individual. Supposedly, the customer is now treated less like a client or a

claimant (terms previously used) and now treated as a sovereign customer with a higher level of customer service and more autonomy/power regarding ES decisions:

*'The New Deal has made mainstream advisors operate more like DEAs in focusing on the customer need rather than anything else.'*  
(Large City Job Centre 2- 45-Manager-Female-Caucasian).

This next quote also illustrates that the ES uses the idea of a commercial customer. It is taken from a trade union representative who highlights the frequent comparison with a bank, although he also states the differences:

*'Well we are often compared to a bank, okay, you could say we're like a bank - but we're not; banks have screens, and if you don't like that particular bank you can just join another one. You've got no choice - you have to come to us, cause there's nobody else offering a different service; so to users we are serviced...well we're not in business, say users are like a bank or a railway station...is incorrect...'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1- 28-Male Caucasian).

Due to the nature of the customer in ES, then, it may be especially difficult to uphold the myth of sovereignty. When running through the idea of 'products' as one of the four core values in training ('People, Products, Presentation, and Procedures'), the major product, job seekers allowance, is only barely acknowledged. Perhaps this is because the concept of job seekers allowance belies the fact that customers are not commercial customers but hope to receive something as opposed to buying something. The union representatives interviewed emphasised the different nature of the



customer and argued that the commercial idea of ‘customer sovereignty’ did not apply. In the next three quotes, they point out that management interpreted customers’ needs inaccurately when they draw on the customer sovereignty ideology.

*‘but our experience is our customers are only interested first and foremost in they want their money sent to them first of all - they don’t care about scrap screens and crap jobs! Or whether you’ve got feng shui to people and a green office; they want to get the money and get out as quickly as possible; and if they want jobs.....that’s their main priority - always has been... but I mean now the customer’s king aren’t they? But there are different interpretations of what the customer really wants... So you know, payment of benefit is bottom of the list where management is concerned.’*

(Middle sized town job centre 1-28-Union Rep-Male-Caucasian).

Here, the union representative stresses that, although the formal organisation claims to put the customers needs and desires first (in line with the customer service), management actually define these needs and not the customer. He further argues that the customers’ number one priority, benefits payment, has in fact been defined by management as a low priority and is consequently not dealt with. This again highlights the use of customer service ideology as a façade which enables the tension between rationalisation and customer orientation to be managed. In the next two quotes, a trade union representative and an official similarly explain how management have concentrated on the trappings of commercial customer sovereignty (nice office, smart workers) without really catering to the ‘real’ needs of the customer at all:

*'We used to sit on a big high stool behind the counter, they all come in, sign up, thanks very much there's the money and off they'd go...have a smoke, do what they like...you know it was okay.... But I think... what do they want from us? Do they want purple office and a settee? ...A name badge and a tie - are they bothered? ...They don't want the aggravation, ...they want you to pay the money, as quickly as possible without all the hassle and aggravation of trying send them on a crap job.'*

(Middle-Sized Town Job Centre 2- 40-Union Rep-Male-Caucasian).

*'because the way to meet those customer needs, which the trade union acknowledges, is by having the correct resources, the right amount of trained staff in the right place - none of which I have to say we had really; which is why even now the waiting times in our new service are as bad - if not worse - than the old service before the ES. Again, this is obviously an opinion, but the level of customer service is - I would suspect - actually declined in some areas. But it looks good! Presentationally, the office looks nice, it's got new technology, new colours and they get people in to take photos of it when there's nobody there - it's lovely; but the reality for customers is no better.'*

(Union Official-40-Male-Caucasian).

Taken overall, in these quotations, the trade union officials and representatives assert that management have wrongly defined customers' needs. They point to the office improvements and dress code which are all part of the commercial relational ideology of customer sovereignty and argue that these are not required by the customer in the ES. In this way, management appears to have tried to improve customer sovereignty in line with the traditional notion



of the commercial customer, ignoring the fact that the customer within the ES is of a different nature. Here, the idea of customer sovereignty is shown particularly clearly as a myth.

## **7. Conclusion**

Within the ES, the organisational policies and training affect the way that the concept of customer violence is perceived. Customer violence is constructed in such a way that frontliners are rendered responsible for not only their ability to cope with the violence experienced but also for the violence experienced itself. Due to service workers' culpability, the organisation does not assume accountability in any way for the violent incidents experienced and thus, in this way, the perceived systematic nature of customer violence is not acknowledged.

However, although this dominant perspective is privileged by those in hierarchical power, there will still be other interpretations of reality that will compete to be seen as 'the truth'. These other perspectives will also affect how frontliners cope. The next chapter explores an alternative take on organisational reality which affects how service providers perceive and cope with customer violence experienced.

## **Chapter 8**

# **THE CONSTRUCTION OF CUSTOMER VIOLENCE BY THE INFORMAL ORGANISATION**

### **1. Introduction**

This chapter will explore an alternative viewpoint to that promoted by the formal organisation. Both perspectives exist in relation to each other and both views compete to be seen as the 'truth'. Additionally, both influence the frontliners in the choice of coping mechanisms they use in order to deal with violence they experience.

This chapter will start by briefly outlining the informal organisational perspective that has arisen in competition to the formally privileged viewpoint. It will then examine this view through the three major dimensions that were used in the previous chapter to examine the formal organisational perceptions. These are the dimensions on which both views essentially rest and on which they both differ. They consist of 1. Acknowledgement of frontliners' experience of the systematic nature of violence; 2. Responsibility / Blame for violent incidents; and 3. Mode of coping with violent incidents.



## **2. An Outline of the Informal Competing View**

As discussed in the previous chapter, the dominant formal perspective does not acknowledge the systematic nature of violence experienced in the everyday working lives of frontliners. Any violent incidents experienced are constructed as a result of frontliners' poor customer service skills and thus the blame is placed with the frontliners' abilities. Through this attribution of blame, the formal viewpoint individualises the responsibility for violence experienced and frontliners are expected to either avoid it or cope with it, individually.

In direct opposition to this version of reality is a competing informal viewpoint, which is subscribed to by many frontliners. Contrary to the perspective encouraged by the formal organisation, this view asserts the systematic nature of violence in the working lives of the frontliners. Instead of emphasising violence experienced as the frontliner's individual problem, this perspective constructs it as a collective problem common to all frontliners. Equally, instead of seeing customer violence as a product of frontliners' skills, this view emphasises that the fault is with the body of customers, who are part of the organisational system. This view asserts that the customers as a body, will inevitably behave in a way that frontliners perceive as violent. In this way, this view asserts the systematic nature of violence experienced. However, it is important to point out that this view does not blame the organisational systematic factors such as procedures and policies. It is the customers (who are seen as part of the system) who are blamed and not the procedural systems in place. In contrast to this, the union attributes blame to the organisational system overall,

particularly the benefit system. Although the unions view is briefly discussed in this study, it is important to note that it is not the focus of this study and so although acknowledged, it will not be explored in any depth.

There are a number of coping mechanisms used by frontliners which draw on the informal, collective viewpoint and, although the majority of these involve collectively coping with other frontliners, there are also coping mechanisms which are carried out individually.

### **3. Why Does the Opposing View Exist at All? What Purpose Does It Serve?**

The dominant organisational viewpoint has arisen because of management's desire to promote the myth of customer sovereignty. As discussed in the previous chapter, customer sovereignty as a myth is extremely transparent in the context of the ES where the nature of the customer differs to that of the customer in the commercial sector (although as pointed out in chapter four it is also a myth even in the private sector). Frontliners are the instruments through which this myth is executed and they are able to experience this myth themselves whilst recognising that it is but a façade. Equally, customer behaviour that they experience as violent is not acknowledged as such by the formal organisation. A large majority of frontline staff interviewed considered a significant proportion of the customer behaviour they experienced as violent, yet this was not acknowledged as such by the formal organisational view. Violence from clients were seen by staff as a systematic part of their everyday lives, as explained by two



frontliners in the following quotes. The first quote was also listed in the introduction chapter.

*'I've done 20 years and I can honestly say that it doesn't get any easier, no, I don't think it does at all. And I've never got to the stage where it doesn't affect me. You can feel frightened every time because it's the unpredictability of the situation, when someone is blowing and shouting and violent, they are not behaving rationally or reasonably so therefore unpredictable and you're not quite sure what their next move is going to be.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'I mean, clients can be really nasty and aggressive but at the end of the day they're people and some of them are aggressive because they're frustrated and some are violent for the hell of it, if you shout loud enough you'll get what you want.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-36-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Out of the thirty-eight front-liners interviewed, twenty-nine referred to customer behaviour that they experienced as violent. For the most part, this subject was broached by the front-liners themselves (twenty two front-liners out of the twenty nine). However, within the ES much of the violence experienced by frontliners was either not recognised as such by the formal organisation or else was constructed as the frontliners' fault. Therefore, the frontliners will want to be able to draw upon a different version of events which better lends itself to their experiences. Thus, the informal collective view acknowledges their perception of the systematic nature of violence and tallies better

with their experience of life on the frontline. Equally, acknowledging the perceived systematic nature of violence absolves the frontliners of much of the guilt assigned to them by the formal organisational view, something which will benefit frontliners.

The lack of acknowledgment of behaviour that frontliners feel is violent may mean that frontliners wish to construct another version of reality which they feel is more consistent with their experiences and this is a plausible reason for the construction of this informal perspective. These two opposing viewpoints can be stripped down to three key dimensions on which they both essentially rest and in which they both differ. Therefore, it is useful to examine these viewpoints through these three major dimensions, which can be found in the table below:

**Table 1: Major Dimensions of Both Approaches**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Formal approach to violent incidents</b>	<b>Informal approach to violent incidents</b>
<b>Acknowledgement of frontliners experience of the systematic nature of violence</b>	Denial (Violence is constructed as the individual frontliner's problem)	Acknowledged (Violence is constructed as a common, collective problem of frontliners)
<b>Who is blamed for violent incidents experienced</b>	Frontliner	Customer
<b>Mode of coping</b>	Tendency towards individualised ways of coping	Tendency towards collective ways of coping

Before exploring these three major dimensions, it is important to examine which elements of the organisation construct the informal collective perspective. This view consists of frontliners' opinions and behaviours. It includes all frontliners, that is, all employees who deal with the public. It does not include employees who do



not deal with the public, therefore it does not include management or union officials. Whereas management render frontliners responsible for customer violence in their defence of the sovereign customer (see the previous chapter), frontliners often draw on the informal collective perspective to actually blame the customer (see section 5 below). As discussed in the previous chapter, management is part of the formal organisational perspective; consequently, they do not form part of the informal collective perspective. It is important to stress that the collective perspective is not part of the formal organisation, but is expressed in informal spaces such as the canteen, the pub and outside the job centre. It is not articulated to management (part of the formal organisation) or in the training sessions (again part of the formal organisation). Furthermore, although the union is supportive of two of the three major tenets, it is not part of the collective informal view. That is not to say that this perspective is not an immensely important one, but it is not part of the collective informal view (nor the main focus of this study). The informal collective perspective allows frontliners to collectively cope with what they perceive as customer violence by offering support and comfort without directly challenging the formal organisation. Despite the union's acknowledgment of frontliners experiences of customer behaviour as systematically violent and despite tacit support of the frontliners' coping collectively (see section 4 and 6 respectively), the union's stances are official and are often espoused in the formal organisation in order to try to change the systems that are in place. The union's standpoint does not take place in the nooks and crannies of organisational life, but is an official stance which is often levied against the formal organisation. It is not a source of comfort and pleasure (like the informal collective perspective) but a means of support which aims to change the organisational

systems in order to improve frontliners' lives. Thus it is not part of the collective informal view.

A useful example which illustrates the collective informal perspective is whom the frontliners confide in after experiencing violent encounters with the customer. After what is considered as more everyday, systematic occurrences of customer violence, frontliners de-stress by confiding in each other in social areas such as the canteen, outside the job centre or in the pub (see communities of coping, section six). Frontliners did not confide in management for fear of being blamed as the following quotes show:

*'I wouldn't talk to management about it, but just talk to colleagues in the canteen or something. Management turns it round 'what did you do?' 'What did you do to make them react' I mean there is the odd one who is more sympathetic, like, but once bitten twice shy I suppose...Yeah but they don't have time, all the bitching takes place in the canteen, and that's limited by who's in the canteen with you! If Melanie {the manager} is around... But when you're sitting like I sit opposite Debra all day and moan about the customers, the people, everything...'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

*(Q. Would you talk about aggressive incidents there?)*

*Definitely, it could be what you'd call a 'letting off steam service', we talk about things we certainly can't say on the frontline! ...Depending on the seriousness, it'd be unlikely that we talk to*



*management about it...there's an opinion if you can't handle it you shouldn't be in the job.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-43-Frontliner-Male)

Equally, unless the frontliners want to officially record the incident (something which they do not often do) they do not talk to the union about it either:

*'If I have a pretty nasty incident I find a union official, have a casual chat or whatever with him, gauge the situation before filling in the form [official incident form]. If it was really bad I might ask them to bring it up at the next office meeting, yeah, although not everyone will, I mean there is obviously this thing with blokes, where they want to look tough, yeah. But no, I would let the union know, I mean if it was only something minor, well no, but otherwise...*

*(Q. What would you do if it was something minor?)*

*Well then I'd just probably have a good grumble about it in the canteen with my colleagues, just get it off my chest, you know.'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

Thus, the frontliner explains that he would tend to talk about experiences with customer violence with other frontliners. He points out that it is only if he wanted to officially record it that he would speak to the union. Although not stated so explicitly elsewhere, this was typical of frontliners' behaviour in both my data from interviews and participant observation. Frontliners only involved the union in more extreme cases of violence, which would also be officially recorded. In other more everyday

examples, frontliners just speak to each other. The following quote from a trade union representative helps illustrate this idea:

*'The Trade Union frequently would encourage members to record incidents. You would usually find that the keener somebody was as a T.U. member, the more likely they were to record the incidents. It was often a case of it didn't really matter and nothing scares me, and something really bad happens...record, where's the form! So, yeah, there's two factors there.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Union Rep-Male-Caucasian)

As management only recognised officially recorded incidents as customer violence the union was keen for frontliners to record more incidents in order to enable them to bring a stronger case for safety issues for frontliners. The following quotes from a union activists help demonstrate this:

*'They weren't recorded – no. We as a Union encouraged frontliners to record incidents, but ... it's like crime figures today, isn't it - it's not an indication of what's really going on...'*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)

*'As a union rep I would always encourage them to write it down. Even if we were just chatting about it, me as a friend, I would still try and get them to record it. I would get them a form to fill in, even if they hadn't asked for it. It's important to record incidents to see the bigger picture.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)



The union was keen to bring informal acknowledgment of customer violence experienced into official recognition. However, at the time of my research they had not succeeded, as most incidents were not recorded.

In summary, the informal collective perspective is made up of frontliners who collectively espouse this view as a group in the informal spaces of the organisation.

#### **4. Dimension 1: Acknowledgement of Frontliners' Experience of the Systematic Nature of Violence**

The perspective privileged by the formal organisation does not acknowledge the extent of the violence experienced by the frontliners. Many service workers may question this version of reality, therefore, and look for another which is more in line with their experiences. Unlike the formal organisational perspective, the informal version of reality acknowledges frontliners experiences of the systematic nature of violence in the frontliners work. It perceives customer violence as a problem common to all frontliners through attributing the blame to the ES's customers. By its very nature, this view is not reflected in the formal organisational policies but it is reflected in the way that the frontliners talk about aspects of their working lives. The following quote, which is taken from an interview with a frontliner, helps show this. In this quote she uses the word 'incident' which is an abbreviation of the term 'violent incident' which is the terminology used within the ES to describe perceived customer behaviour. Part of this quote has already been cited in the introduction.

*'I suppose I would compare an office with an office, and the likelihood of an incident in an office like this is lower compared to an inner city office. But that doesn't mean to say, it only needs one nasty incident and you can really shake people's, self confidence and from personal experience I never feel comfortable, you can feel the adrenalin rise straight away and you immediately think where's this gonna end? Can I cope with that abuse today which is often personal, you know. They make it personal, they'll comment about your thighs or your shape or whatever and there will be bad language and you think, can I really cope with that today, do I deserve it. And of course you don't.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-16-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

Here, the frontliner explains that the levels of violence vary from job centre to job centre, but she does not question the fact that violence is a part of all job centres. She also takes the blame away from herself as a frontliner by stating that, despite self-doubt, she does not deserve it. She also highlights the notion of threat when she questions what the 'incident' is leading up to. In the following quote, a frontliner also stresses the expectancy of violence.

*'I don't come to work expecting an incident but saying that when they happen, you're not surprised. Does that make sense really? There's an expectancy that it will be there but you never know when the next one's gonna be. In fact I only said this morning, this is my fourth week in Hantshire and we haven't yet had an incident and I was very surprised. The last time I worked in Hantshire you would perhaps have two or three a week.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-25-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)



In this quote, the frontliner admits that she is not surprised by the occurrence of violence as they happened twice or three times a week in Hantsire. Equally, the fact that she does not come to work expecting an incident suggests that she no longer thinks about them, perhaps because they have just become part of working life or perhaps because, as she points out, they cannot be predicted. In fact, despite saying that he does not expect an incident, she is surprised when one has not occurred for a while.

In the next quotation, a service provider describes the reoccurrence of customer violence in the larger job centre. This quote is taken from a frontliner who works in a small job centre which unusually does not deal with benefits:

*'And in terms of sort of the threats of physical violence and various other things, you just say, sorry, I don't want that. I think when you do work here and you don't see it happening here, so there's no way I'd go back to that and I don't think any member of staff should sort of have to put up with it... certainly not physical abuse and not a great deal of verbal abuse at the end of the day either.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-6-Frontliner-Female-African)

Thus, the frontliner explains that after working in a job centre with virtually no violence experienced (unusually one that did not deal with benefits at all) she would not like to go back to the other job centres. She acknowledges that there is much violence experienced at the other job centres - something that she does not want to put up with herself. In the excerpt which is considered next, it is possible to see how customer hostility has become part of frontliners everyday life, when the service worker laments the

differences between the job centre she previously worked in and the one she currently works in:

*'I don't know I don't know to be quite honest; I suppose because it's not so open plan; I mean they can get through here where there it's just masses of desks and there's no gaps between the desks so they know they've got come over at you, so it's easier to throw something. Where, here, they're more likely to come at you through the gap. I don't know, there's no cameras, there's nothing to back me up if anything happens, I think that's what worries me.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The service worker clearly explains her worries about what she perceives is a weakness in defence against perceived customer violence that could affect her personally. By thinking in this way, it is clear that she has an expectancy of experiencing violence and therefore acknowledges that it is part of the job. The union also recognises the fact that the experience of customer violence is a frequent occurrence as the following quotes show. The first is taken from a union representative:

*'A large part of stress is the threat - rather than the reality... and this applies in many jobs, of course, these days. If you're doing a job where there's the threat of aggression or violence, you might go a whole day without it, you might go a whole week if you're lucky - but it's the fact it's in the back of people's minds all the time, that it might happen. That's the most stressful thing for staff - and the lack of support when it happens.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)



According to the union representative, then, customer violence is constantly on frontliners' minds through the notion of threat. He also explains that you are lucky if you manage to go a whole week without experiencing customer violence, thus acknowledging its perceived frequent nature within the ES. In the next quote, the union official explains why the union was opposed to the position of 'floor walker':

*'I think the problem with that is the floor walker's role is that they are completely in the open all the time, and they are - if you like, they're a focal point for all complaints about waiting signs, procedures, all the rest, and they're in a very exposed area and in a place where customer aggression is frequent - that was the point of that.'*

(Union official-49-Male-Caucasian)

Note that the trade union official explains that the union was against the position of 'floor walker' because it leaves the frontliner exposed in a place which he acknowledges as experiencing 'frequent customer violence'. In this way, the union also acknowledges frontliner's systematic experience of customer violence and supports the collective informal perspective (although as previously noted the union is not part of this perspective).

## **5. Dimension 2: Responsibility for Violent Incidents**

The formal organisational perspective portrays violence experienced as a function of frontliners' poor customer handling skills. If frontliners follow this logic, they may conclude that they

are a bad frontliner. It is probable that the frontliner will not want to accept this idea and so will look for another version of the 'truth'. The idea that it is in fact the customer who is to blame and not the frontliner is a preferable version of reality for the service worker. The customer is the only other person in the interaction and is therefore an easy person at whom to point the finger. Indeed, it is often the case that frontliners lay the blame with the customer. This is part of what I term the informal organisational perspective. The following data taken from frontliners help illustrate the idea that frontliners often blame the customer for the violence that they experience.

*'It's very difficult to give good customer service when you're dealing with some of the notorious clients, and those that just come in to be disruptive and aggressive. Because a bank doesn't have to do it, comparing it with a bank, they don't have to deal with those sort of people because they don't have bank accounts. The difference between us and a lot of customer service industries are that we have got to deal with every walk of life, desirable, undesirable and it is difficult for us out there to give good customer service all the time when they act like they do.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Here, the frontliner explains how hard it is to give good customer service, when some of the clients 'just come in to be disruptive and aggressive'. She highlights how failure to give good customer service is not the fault of the frontliner (as suggested by the formal perspective) but conversely the 'undesirable' customers. The following quotation also stresses that it is the customer who is responsible for violence experienced:



*'If someone is being awkward or angry, you can try to be as nice as you can and give them a good service but if they don't want it, you can't really force it can you. A lot of them just like to get in, get their signing book and go home. They're not bothered about anything else.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The extract above implies that the customer is already aggressive and that there is nothing the frontliner can do, as opposed to the idea that the service worker made the customer aggressive. This sentiment is echoed by the frontliner cited below:

*'It's not like that it's different. You're dealing with people from the lowest of the low...and they're just different altogether, and those are the most difficult to deal with. It's fine going to a Customer Care Course and you're told how you should do things but it's quite difficult when you have to deal with it in practice. It's only experience that can teach you how to deal with aggressive and difficult customers like these.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

The above quote again labels customers as difficult and aggressive, laying the blame firmly with them. Both of the two extracts above also point out that customer care is of little use with hostile customers such as these. This directly contradicts the formal perception that frontlines can avoid or avert the experience of violence through good customer care skills. In the next excerpt, not only does the frontliner blame the customer for the perceived

violence caused, but she also points out that violence is often used as a tool for customers to get what they want:

*'Yes, definitely, I think you have to stand firm. Hard as that is. If there is a really genuine reason why they need that payment then fine, but if there isn't and they've already signed a statement to say they're not going to ask for anymore, they're not going to ask for any more, they're not having it. And if they kick off, fine, call the Police, but if you give it to them this time they'll shout louder next time, they use it to get their way.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-36-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

This service worker perceives it as the frontliner's job to be hard and resist the violence experienced so that it does not lead to further violence next time. This directly contradicts the idea that customer service can be used to avoid the experience of violence. Through interviewing union officials and representatives it was clear that, in line with the informal collective view, they did not blame the frontliner for incidents which were perceived as violent. However, although the union representative implied that the customer was to blame, the union officials differed from the informal perspective in that they held the 'system' in general to be accountable. This was a departure from the frontliners' frequent blaming of only the customer (who they talk about as if they form part of the system with which they work). The following quotes were taken from union representatives who were also frontliners:

*'because it's very, very stressful - very, very hard to deal with...very high rates of sickness, stress - because we're dealing with very difficult customers...Have you actually seen what it's*



*like?...but it is very stressful, very high turnover of staff...it is difficult dealing with people who not so kindly tell you what day of the week it is! ...And argue you know, it's their pay day - and it's difficult.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Union rep-Male-Caucasian)

*'obviously we follow the law - the Social Security law - and a prime example of that is - and this relates to the ES of course, is what we're interested in...our primary focus, we were told, was to get customers back into work - which of course many customers saw as their priority, and that's what they were there for. However, for a lot of customers they weren't interested in jobs in all honesty. So whereas our push was, 'Oh you interested in this job, or that job?'...'Look, I need some money mate!'...Perhaps in stronger language than that of course! So you know, things started to get aggressive.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)

These two quotes from union representative imply that it is the customer that is the cause of aggression. This may be because they still work as frontliners and so draw on a collective perspective as other frontliners do. However, they are not as derisive about the customer as many other frontliners are, which may perhaps be a concession to their position in the union. The following two quotes taken from union officials illustrate how the union largely holds the system accountable, a different emphasis to that of the frontliners:

*'there's numerous reasons for customer aggression - which I can go into if you want, but that's another question! (Go On) ...Well*

*it's environment, for a start - over-crowding, queues. This may all seem obvious - but they all contribute. And obviously the primary thing is the benefit system; its complexity, customers finding it difficult to understand claim forms, procedures. Some of the letters, even to this day, that we send out you'd have to be a legal expert to interpret them - which most customers aren't - needless to say. The reason for customer aggression, primarily, is they're not getting the service or the money that they feel they should - and nine times out of ten that's down to the system we operate, not the staff.'*

(Union official-49-Male-Caucasian)

*'the contributing factors to customer aggression were the complexity of the benefit process, and adverse decisions. Basically, adverse decisions against customers, which for obvious reasons they didn't like - stopping payments, fraud cases, that sort of thing. Things over which we had little influence basically.'*

(Union official-48-Male-Caucasian)

Although neither of the union officials blames the service workers, they do explicitly state that the benefit system is the cause of much perceived customer violence. This is a departure from the informal collective view of frontliners which holds the customer as accountable.

### **6. Dimension 3: Mode of Coping**

The dominant organisational view individualises the responsibility for perceived customer violence, as it lays the blame with the frontliners. This means that frontliners will be expected to cope



with it individually. Although the informal competing perspective also individualises the cause of violence experienced - by blaming the customer (who is talked about as part of the system) - it does acknowledge that customer violence experienced is a collective systematic problem that is common to the majority of frontliners. Therefore this perspective allows frontliners the chance to cope collectively, as well as individually. When drawing on this perspective, even if frontliners cope individually, they will still be coping with what is perceived as a common, collective problem. In this section I will examine the various ways of coping used by frontliners which are based on the collective, informal point of view and, in doing so, will show how they reflect this way of thinking and the three key dimensions of which it consists. This has the dual purpose of using data to examine the informal collective perspective itself and also to explore how this perspective affects the informal coping mechanisms used by frontliners.

## **Collective Coping Mechanisms**

### **Collective Coping Through Communities Of Coping**

Research into frontline jobs has shown that frontliners cope socially and communally as well as individually (Benner & Wrubel, 1989; Norbeck, 1985; Smith, 1999; Bailey & McCollough, 2000) and they do this through communities of coping Korczynski (2002). In my research I have found that frontliners use each other and their collective presence to help them cope with the violence that they experience. The collective coping mechanisms identified in my research were: 1. talking

about customer violence experienced at work together in the canteen, 2. using humour to relieve the stress of perceived violence, 3. keeping vigilance over each other in order to try to protect each other from the more physical acts of violence experienced, 4. telling each other stories about the violence they experience, and 5. using offstage area to cope. These coping mechanisms draw upon the collective informal perception, and are actually carried out collectively through the use of ‘communities of coping’.

Before discussing these coping methods, though, it is worth noting that the union was supportive of the idea of frontliners coping collectively as a group as the following quote from an union official shows:

*‘It’s important to cope together as a group to build teamwork, so it’s not just a bunch of individuals working together, but a team. That way they can swap good working practice as well as supporting each other.’*

(Union Official-49-Male-Caucasian)

The union official emphasises that coping as a group helps frontliners foster an important team spirit on the frontline. This sentiment is also echoed in another quote from a union official:

*‘It sounds cliché but team work is everything on the frontline. People need to support each other and it is especially important for the new less experienced staff. Often, in the canteen the older staff will need to reassure the new staff, they will talk to them and look after them.’*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)



This quote, like the former, emphasises the importance of collectively coping in fostering teamwork. However, it is important to note that in my data from frontliners, service workers did not use these coping mechanisms as a way of fostering teamwork, but simply as a way to cope with the difficulties of dealing with customers they experienced as violent. This is evident in the following section on collective coping mechanisms.

### **Talking in the Canteen**

One of the ways that frontliners collectively cope is through talking to each other about the violence experienced in their work. This helps them let off steam and disperse stress. Frontliners frequently discuss how awful the customer is in order to emphasise that it is not anything to do with the frontliner. This idea was frequently expressed by frontliners in interviews and also frequently observed by myself when carrying out fieldwork within the job centre. This can be seen in the next quote, where the service provider discusses the fact that, despite not talking in the canteen with other staff from the job centre in which he is currently working (a small village job centre, which meant that he had to go up for lunch individually), he did previously in the larger job centre he worked in:

*'What the others get up to at lunchtime, I have not got a clue what they talk about, but when I worked at Wigston, yes we used to do that. And say, Mr. So and So was in today, oh he's a pain or do you have problems with him as well sort of thing! And then I tried to read a serious newspaper and the others were laughing so much*

*that you would just put it down and sort of join in with them. I think it's a good way sometimes of relieving the pressure and the tension, don't you think? I mean, Oh that Frank today, sort of tell your tale - Oh, I had to sign him and he's still as bad as ever, stuff like that.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

The above quote illustrates how frontliners discuss specific customers, collectively agreeing that they are difficult. It helps them support each other by blaming difficult relations on the customer as opposed to on the service provider. The following three quotes state this idea more explicitly:

*'Yeah, again everyone will go off and have a mutter and sort of talk it through together and say, like, stupid idiot or whatever and the clients do the same actually. It's quite amusing. If there's trouble they all stand there muttering amongst themselves, ooh, look at him! Then they'll sort of sit down and say, 'oh, I can't believe that guy did that, isn't that awful' and stuff like that. But no, people will talk it through to get it off their chests and it is upsetting for the individual that has taken that sort of aggression and it takes that individual a little while to get back into the swing of things because you are anxious.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-36-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'(Q. In general do people discuss clients?)*



*Yeah, have a moan at tea break. Let your stress out. Retell the mornings events. I think even just to know that they are an awkward client and it's not just something you've done.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'Well obviously we meet in the canteen. Sometimes it's just social chit chat, sometimes it's 'Oh! I meant to tell you about Mr So and So!' So that happens. But I mean there are systems in place, but that's not always enough and I think sometimes face to face conversation and a chat about Mr So and so is often required, and makes you feel so much better. Its good to know that they all find him difficult.'*

(Large City Job Centre 1-1-Frontliner Female-Caucasian)

All the above three quotes highlight how service workers share their experiences of the customer in an attempt to relieve anxiety and stress. Placing the blame with the customer relieves the service worker of the responsibility for customer violence. Although the three above quotes pertain to 'difficult' and 'abusive' as opposed to customers, during my fieldwork I often observed frontliners discussing violent customers in the same way. However, when in the canteen I was often unable to record individual antidotes, as I did not want my presence in the canteen to be disliked. Also, I wanted the frontliners to act as close to 'normal' as possible, without feeling that they were being analysed. However, it is worth noting that in this type of research the researcher will impact upon the findings gained, not only through his/her subjective perception of the world but also by his/her physical presence. Nevertheless, I was sometimes able to make notes upon leaving the canteen and managed to record a few of the types of customer-related

discussions of this nature (although nowhere near as many as I heard because I was often accompanied out the canteen by a well-meaning frontliner). One such discussion centred around the difficulty of serving a young girl due to her violent (and especially threatening) boyfriend that insisted on accompanying her on every visit. In another discussion, one frontliner asked another if they had served Mr So and So (the one with the two teardrops tattooed on his face) and how the other one had found him. The other frontliner replied that he had found him to be aggressive and intimidating and a discussion then followed about what a terrible customer he was and also how awful tattoos on peoples' faces were. Yet another time, an aggressive customer was described as a 'dosser', when a third walked past and said something similar to 'some people are professional doctors and he is a professional sign-er-on-er.' He then went on to joke that his need to protect his 'salary' was the reason for his intimidating behaviour.

By collectively talking about customer violence experienced, this coping mechanism recognises that it is a common problem to all frontliners, therefore recognising its perceived systematic nature. Equally, this method locates the blame firmly with the customer. These dimensions directly oppose those that make up the dominant formal organisational viewpoint

## **Humour**

Some of the literature on humour recognises it as a way to cope with organisational life (Roy, 1958; Linstead, 1985; Collinson, 1992; Talbot & Lumden, 2000). Within the ES, humour played a part in helping the frontliners collectively cope with customer violence experienced. As with the stories, the majority of the



humour is directed at the customer, although frontliners laugh at each other as well. The following quote illustrates how humour helped frontliners collectively cope with what was perceived as a very violent customer, Mr Jones, who was eventually banned from the job centre for his hostile behaviour:

*'He's got a tremendous sense of humour, nobody believes the sense of humour he's got sometimes because he just doesn't come over. I mean, to look at Tim you wouldn't think it. But we had one client, Mr Jones, who has been our most notorious client of all times and ever will be. We put the Christmas tree up in the canteen, just a little one and when we walked in, what had Tim done, Tim had drawn a caricature of Mr. Jones dressed as a fairy! That is your relief, that's brilliant because that's what you need. And that's what the canteen is, it is. And that's how it should be. You should be able to go in there and let rip and doesn't matter who it is because you do need to get it out of your system as quickly as possible because you've got to deal with other people and you mustn't let it take it out on them.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the above quote, the frontliner explains that humour provides a sense of relief from difficult customers. Here, she talks about the specific customer 'Mr Jones' who was renowned for his violent behaviour. By collectively ridiculing the customer, not only is he seen as the one with the problem as opposed to the frontliner, in this instance it is also a temporary reversal of power relations. Instead of treating the sovereign customer with the respect, they are ridiculing and belittling him. Mr Jones may have been chosen in particular because he was an especially violent customer who

required especially attentive customer service. In this case, therefore, such a reversal in power relations (however temporary) would have been gratifying for frontliners. This also ties in with the collective informal perspective as the act of putting his caricature in the canteen for all the frontliners to see recognises that this difficult customer is a common problem to all frontliners. This acknowledges that perceived violence is experienced as a systematic and not an individual problem. In the following quote, the frontliner also describes using humour to deal with customer violence experienced:

*'Yeah, like sort of gags and stuff but you know all the time. Even Joe he's got a really strange sense of humour!...you talk about it as if you enjoy it, sort of pretend to enjoy it, but make light...you don't enjoy it all, you'd much rather not have any aggro. But it's just like people picking up sayings and stuff like some bloke came in and punched the sign and called Joe, 'A fucking plum' and that was it all day, just going round calling Joe a plum to wind him up...just ridiculous childish stuff, but gets you through the day! There's a certain element of not being heard, to be out of order, on this side of the table like you'll walk past somebody and you're about to deal with him and you'll get Ben walking past me and he'll sort of, 'The tosser!', as he's about to sit down and say, 'How can I help you...?', coughing and saying, 'Wanker' and stuff! I know it is very childish, but it amuses me, that's why I'm in the job, cause I'm very immature! We just make sure that the manager or whoever doesn't overhear us'.*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

In this quote, the frontliner describes humour being used in a slightly different way to the previous account. Instead of directly



mocking the customer, the customer is indirectly mocked by the use of customer's own insults in a playful way, causing them to appear ridiculous. This can be seen as a protective mechanism. By making insults seem ridiculous, this diminishes the insult's power to hurt the frontliners. In fact, the use of humour here undermines the seriousness of the customer violence experienced as a whole. By not taking the 'sovereign' customer insults seriously, this is another example of a symbolic reversal of power relations. Indeed, the frontliner mocks not only the customers' insults, thus refusing to take them seriously, but he explains that service workers often insult the customer back. However, it is important to emphasise that the name-calling is done covertly, thus still maintaining the façade of customer sovereignty. The following quote was taken from a conversation with a frontliner who was on a break. I was able to record it and so the quote is directly transcribed:

*'It's just a case of you've got to have a sense of humour anyway. You know, it goes such a long way and I think it's trying to cultivate that and keep it going on a daily basis because sometimes it is a bit of a grind so if you've ... One of the frontliners here, he's so funny and he just makes you laugh. He's one of these, he's always got corny jokes but he could turn anything into a joke but he's quite good for the rest of the staff because they say, oh, no that's really corny but everybody will still have a giggle about it. And I think it's being able to take the mickey out of each other and keep it light-hearted. If you have had a bit of a rough day, angry customers, just to make a bit of a joke and say, well, at least we can still have a good laugh sort of thing.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-41-Frontliner-Female-African)

## Keeping Vigilance Over Colleagues

Another way that frontliners cope collectively is by watching out for each other and then joining in to help if the situation is felt to escalate. This method of coping again links in with the collective perspectives because it acknowledges the perceived systematic nature of customer violence instead of viewing customer violence as the result of a frontliner's poor customer handling skills. The following quote is an extreme example of the frontliners collectively looking out for each other, as the frontliner physically puts herself between a colleague and a perceived violent customer. This quote is also cited in my introduction chapter.

*'I've had one here, which was a Benefits Agency, where a bloke came over... Well the chap had got his hair off with the Benefits Agency over a payment something to do with a payment and he came over and went to hit James and I stood in front of him, but I didn't think, I just didn't think, I just stood up and said 'Will you get out this office now' and I think purely for the fact I was a female and I weren't a bloke...I heard him on the way up, he says, 'I'm glad you're a big bastard' at James so I knew he was after him cause of his size; so I just stood in front of him and he jumped down, I said, 'Just get out the office now!' and he ran out, and then phoned up about an hour later and apologized, yeah. But he'd actually come up on the counter and everyone was like, 'God what you doing, you mad woman, you know you're only tiny!'. But I didn't think at the time, it was only afterwards I thought oh my God what have I just done, look well if he'd have had a knife, I'd have never stood a chance but my natural reaction is towards the staff, which I think we'd all be the same.'*



(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Here, the service worker states that all frontliners would do the same, implying that they all look out for each other. Whether this level of heroism would be repeated by all frontliners or not, there are plenty of less extreme examples of this coping mechanism. The following quotes provide examples of frontliners looking out and after each other when they feel that a customer is threatening and thus violent. The second excerpt has already been quoted in my introduction chapter.

*'A client one of the Advisors was seeing, he was leaning like this and I could see she was like this...and we called her from the other side of the room, called her on the phone and said are you alright, just answer yes or no! She goes yes, yes, don't worry and just put the phone down... The client's not aware that we're doing that, but we do...You have to.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

*'when Manera had that guy and he was a bit funny with her I sat with my finger on my buzzer and my heart was going like that all the time and I thought, cause I thought he's going to start, and I thought his dad's going to be of no use, his dad would probably just say, 'Calm down'! And then, Peter and Tim were watching as well. Once you get an awkward one, if you look round, everyone is taking notice.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'Obviously if something's going on and you think, oh hold on, this is gonna escalate out of all proportion, I'm one, I've always got my ear open. It's amazing, you can sit working, you've got your head down but your ears are always flapping, know what I mean! And it's oh, there's a raised voice there so I'll listen a little bit closer.'*  
(Small Village Job Centre-19-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'...someone was queue jumping and then, it was an Asian, coloured bloke I think, and I heard him say to somebody, 'You white bastard' and then 'I'll push your teeth in', because he thought he was jumping the queue; but actually that did get diffused I pressed the panic alarm cause I thought well I don't know whether Ellie was, what state she was in like, so I better make sure she's alright but as it happened she was okay and then I think some other frontliners came down and it diffused then.'*  
(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-39-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

All the above four quotes show the many ways that frontliners keep vigilance over each other. Examples include physically trying to protect someone, calling them on the phone when with a customer to check that the frontliner is ok, keeping a finger ready on the panic button, actually pressing the panic button and listening in to each others conversations with hostile customers. The constant readiness to help in aggressive and violent situations emphasises frontliners operating as a group, not on an individual basis. This mechanism acknowledges the systematic nature of violence experienced through an awareness of customer threat.

## **Stories**



As previously discussed research has shown that a function of stories is enabling organisational members to cope with working life (Boje, 1991; Tangerlini, 2000; Weick, 1985). Within the ES, part of the collective supportive talking is in the form of stories which are generally used to underline the unpleasantness of the customer. These stories help refute the dominant individualistic approach which lays the blame firmly with the frontliner and instead acknowledges the systematic nature of violence experienced and blames the customer. These stories can be grouped into the different ways that they deride the perceived violent customer. These categories are 1. The stupid and unintelligent customer, 2. The frontliner triumphing over the customer 3. The unreasonable customer, and 4. Stories simply about the customer's physical acts of violence. This coping process covered both abuse and violence although most of the data given here pertains to abuse (with the exception of the customer's acts of physical violence). However, I did observe the telling of many stories about perceived violent customers that would fit into the above categories but unfortunately, due to the sensitive nature of the data that I was collecting, it was often difficult to directly record the stories. Therefore, most of the stories listed are taken from interviews. However, occasionally I was able to record a few stories. There are also some stories that I observed and recorded after I left the canteen, which although will necessarily differ from the original telling (due to my writing it down after the event) will be similar to the original story. It is also worth noting here that the stories told in the interview will also differ from the original telling as the frontliners will be telling the researcher as opposed to a fellow frontliner. Unfortunately, the amount of stories that I managed to record were but a fraction of the stories constantly told. In addition, although stories are categorised here for ease of

understanding and reference, some stories could be seen to fit into more than one category. All the stories cited illustrate coping mechanisms drawn from the informal collective perspective.

### **1. The Stupid and Unintelligent Customer**

These stories, unlike the other stories, did not portray the customer as nasty or terrible, but as stupid and unintelligent. These stories usually (but not always) had a humorous element to them and made the frontliners' smile or laugh, thus helping relieve tension of a perceived violent or abusive incident. I heard the following story in a canteen and later prompted the teller to share it with me in an interview:

*'Yesterday, I was interviewing this lady and she was very...what's the word...and she was a bit bolshy and irate and sort of 'I think it's disgusting, look at me, someone like me, all my experience and no-one will employ me, I think it's disgraceful...', she was literally that type of pompous person, she was middle-aged, and we were going through her job history, and why she left a particular job, and there was this particular job she was asked, 'Why did you leave that?' 'I was off sick', she says, 'I knelt on a drawing pin and it went septic'. I don't how I stopped myself laughing!'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the above, a '*bolshy*' customer is belittled in the eyes of the frontliner by what she perceives to be a very funny occurrence. This story may have alleviated the stress that the frontliner felt at having to serve someone she disliked and still treat them with



respect, even when she was not treated with respect herself. The following extract portrays the customer as stupid and also has a humorous tone. This story was collected in an interview.

*'I was going to see this lady who I was told had some health problems and that she could get uppity and heated about it, I wasn't sure, I didn't know what they were, all I knew was that she couldn't get up the stairs and I wasn't to upset her. So I knew that I had to go downstairs to see her and, we used to have the reception, where the Welcome desk is now, we used to have a reception and the woman on reception had actually said to her, you know, Joan will be seeing you and for some reason, and to this day we don't know why, the girl on reception had misunderstood what this lady said. She thought the lady said, 'Can I go to your loo before the interview. So the girl took her to the toilet, the downstairs toilet. It's quite a wide one and because this lady was disabled she, you know, well, normally you'd say, you'd have to use somewhere else but we let her use the loo. So she just opened the door and said 'Here's the loo' and the woman thought for some unknown reason that we were asking her to stop in the loo while she waited for me, I've no idea why she thought that. So this lady went in there and she was early I believe and when I got down there they said this woman had been in the loo for 15-20 minutes, it might have been even longer. What are we going to do? Because they thought she might not be very well, you see and I didn't know what was wrong with her or anything so I went in and the door was open and she was actually sat on the loo, and she was a big lady, and I couldn't see, I mean you just don't look do you! And I just said, 'Are you alright, I thought I'd just better check?' and she sort of went, mmm, nodded and I got out quickly thinking if she wasn't she would say. I thought OK and we left it longer and I think another*

*15 minutes went by until somebody had come back from lunch and had gone to put their coat up and I don't know whether it was an exchange of words but this woman suddenly burst into tears and was under the total misapprehension that she had actually been asked to sit in the toilet and wait for this interview! Oh, dear, well I had to interview her after that, and we still don't know what was said and the receptionist was very apologetic, we all were, but we couldn't understand why she would have thought for one moment that we would have expected her to sit on the loo and wait for an interview! But anyway, that was the funny story anyway.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-39-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The above story caused much mirth and laughter among the frontliners who, rather than having too much sympathy with the customer, saw it as evidence of the customer's stupidity and classed it as a funny and not an upsetting story. This story also features a frequently angry client who gets their comeuppance. Another humorous story about a stupid customer was observed in the canteen. This story attracted lots of smiles from frontliners who also emphasised that the customer's madness was linked to his angry and violent behaviour. I later stopped and asked a frontliner to tell me about it and the following excerpt is the result. However, this version has lost much of the humorous element and just focuses on how 'mad' the customer is and downplays his previous aggressive behaviour. There is also more empathy with the customer in this version. This highlights how difficult it can be for a researcher to gain this type of material. When telling me this story, aspects were changed because the new version was perceived as more 'appropriate' for me. Nonetheless, this version still has elements of the idea of the stupid customer within it:



*'I've got one client who literally every morning probably gets up and walks from Glenfield or whatever, right through to the other end of the city, for no apparent reason, and then he'll walk from there to the other end of the city over there, for no apparent reason, and he'll come into town for no apparent reason and then go through into London Road. And I had a day off and I went to General Hospital and I saw him walking towards there, came back, went to OB saw him there; went to Glenfield saw him there; and this is the kind of life these people lead, and you think well it's so sad, no wonder they can be a bit cranky sometimes. But on the other hand, he's very happy in his own little world, so who are we to judge?'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

## **2. The Frontliner Triumphant Over The Customer**

In these stories, the unpleasantness of the customer is still stressed, but the frontliner details triumphing over the hostile customer. According to the dominant idea of customer sovereignty, the frontliner should be subservient to the customer's needs, but these stories directly contradict this ideology. These stories may be told because the situation (getting one over on the customer) is noteworthy, as it does not often occur. The following quote is an example of such a story.

*'Well what made me laugh was when Mr Smith constantly came in, came in claiming destitution, 'I can't afford this, that and the other' and you can only take it on face value...and erm the funniest*

*thing, I was driving around the day before yesterday and we stopped at a traffic light myself, my wife, kids and erm looked across, he's there in a brand spanking new Beetle and I looked across and the look on his face said it all! It was fantastic! You know, erm, and he was due in this morning, and I was just hanging on, waiting for him to throw his weight around and I was just looking for the opportunity to say, you know, but he didn't turn up, he didn't turn up.*

*(Q. Didn't he?)*

*I suppose it got to him in the end, you know before that he was coming in here and you know laying the law down as it were, 'I need my money now!' This, that and the other and the next minute he's driving around in this thing in very swanky clothes and everything.'*

*(Medium Sized Town Job Centre - Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)*

In this story, the frontliner triumphs over the perceived aggressive customer by catching him out in his lies. The frontliner is waiting eagerly for the customer to 'throw his weight around' so that he can use this to his advantage and have a come back to the customer. However, the customer may understand this because he does not turn up. The following story also illustrates the idea of the powerful frontliner triumphing over the awful customer.

*'I had someone yesterday, he failed to attend his interview with Sanjay, he had a follow-up interview with me yesterday, which he attended half an hour late and he came in shouting, trying to be intimidating, so I said to him face on, why didn't you attend?'*



*(Q. What did he say?)*

*'Oh I had a job interview', so I made him write down exactly where the job interview was, what it was for. He said, he told me he was doing a training course and Sanjay's rung up the provider and basically he didn't need to be there and he wasn't going, he said he sits in the library, ...so I said so you don't attend the registers so they don't know you're there? 'No I just go and do it in my own role', I said well that's not gonna affect your training then is it? Cause he pulled up the argument that he couldn't do the training because he was doing the college course so if you do it in your own time then you don't need to attend, so you can do it in the evening if we want you to go training.*

*(Q. What did he say?)*

*He didn't have much to say, except for swearing at me, so I said well basically I need to book you in with Sanjay again, and I issued him a Direction a second Direction to attend and see Sanjay and also see me again...basically if he doesn't attend the next one then I'll take Adjudication action [which could affect his benefit], see how he responds to that.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-35-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)*

### **3. The Unreasonable Customer**

In these stories, the customer is portrayed as awkward and unreasonable. Again, it is a type of story that emphasises how it is the customer and not the frontliner who is the cause of customer

violence above. I overheard the following story being discussed in the canteen. I later was able to ask the frontliner to repeat it so that I could record it. The following is a result of this:

*'Yeah. I've just been paying PI's [Personal Issues – the homeless] and this girl, she was about seventeen or eighteen, she was pregnant and she wanted her giro and we didn't have her giro and she started you know being physical, she started pulling my shirt and all this you know yeah. I said look I haven't got your giro but we can sort something out in the afternoon, but she was quite aggressive you know, totally unreasonable, I didn't like it, yeah. She was trying to have a go at me, but her friend or somebody told her and they said 'Look, he's trying to help you', so they just calmed her down and eventually we sorted it out but she took half the morning, yeah!'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

Here, the frontliner emphasises how aggressive the customer is. He points out that even her friends could see that she was being unreasonable, he highlights that the problem lies with the customer and not himself, the service worker. The next quote also provides an example of an unreasonable customer story and was taken from an interview:

*'We have one particular client that's coming in shortly and the only person he will see is Derek because he's fallen out with everybody else in the office. And the sad thing is that he doesn't like being questioned about his job search which is virtually non-existent and we asked post to submit them to vacancies and all he will look for was jobs abroad. And we asked him why he didn't attend to interviews and he then starts shouting, blowing, storms to*



*the District Manager and complains about us questioning him and the District Manager who wasn't available, the Assistant District Manager at the time wrote a letter back to him apologising for the behaviour of the staff here...And agreed that he would only see Derek, didn't ask Derek if he would mind seeing this particular client, he just wrote to this client saying you can see Derek.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-21-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the above excerpt, then, the frontliner describes an incident with a difficult customer, stressing how unreasonable he is. She explains that by asking him about his failure to attend interviews (which is viewed as a common and reasonable question in the ES frontliner's job) the customer is triggered towards hostile behaviour. The story, therefore, emphasises the customer's unreasonable behaviour, again highlighting that it is not the frontliner's fault. I overheard another example of a story about an unreasonable customer in the canteen, which, although I could not record, I was able to write it down shortly after. In this story, the frontliner explains that a customer turned up at the job centre expecting to be seen that day, when usually customers need to book an appointment a couple of days ahead. The frontliner had no spaces for interviews but the customer refused to move and stated that he would wait there until he was seen. The customer was described as being threatening and refusing to move. In the end, the frontliner had to face him out and tell him that there was nothing that he could do. After 20 minutes or so, the customer left, swearing as he did so. In this story, the frontliner stressed that there was nothing that he could do and that he had told the customer this. The customer's action of staying there was portrayed as an unreasonable (and also pointless) act. It is worth noting, however, that many frontliners actually moan about the fact that if a

customer shouts loud enough they are much more likely to get what they want, making the customer's action much more understandable. This is not alluded to in these stories, perhaps in order to construct the customer as totally unreasonable or behaving pointlessly, rather than having to acknowledge that this type of behaviour may get results.

#### **4. The Physically Violent Customer**

Many stories told by frontliners describe the customer as violent using physical acts. These stories acknowledge violent customers and place the blame for the hostility firmly with them. The first two stories are about the same incident. After waiting in the canteen after lunch, before doing my four final interviews in a large city job centre, I heard two employees talk about a fellow employee and a violent incident. I subsequently asked the people I interviewed about it and two of the four were able to tell me the story. The first quote (which has already been listed in chapter 7) gives the story in much more detail than the second and thus it has been included first.

*'No, a hammer that's another story actually. I tell you what mate, this'll make the Sun this will, or the News of the World! Yes, well actually quite a good friend of us and shame really cause she's a nice girl and I won't go into all the details we'll be here all day basically she'd been married, husband beat her up and she left him about three years ago, and you know what I've been telling you, it's been a dating agency! Well she met her new boyfriend through here, right, so what happened then was that the husband cause he's a Muslim and apparently their women are for life, they're chattels for life and so God help them. Yeah I think I'll become*



*Muslim! But anyway, and also he was a bit so he threatened to kill her, he'd done various things to her, threatened to kill her kid, also went round the house and all sorts; and her boyfriend's patience snapped I think. So, the husband was in here just sitting there in fact I actually interviewed him because I knew why he was here, he was sitting there to stalk Smitta; so I said look cause he didn't know that I knew everything 'Excuse me can I help you at all, you got any jobs you want to look at?'. So he said yes, so he came over and I interviewed him and luckily I got rid of him quickly because what had happened, Smitta had apparently warned the boyfriend don't come in at the moment because she was expecting him in, 'don't come cause my husband's in', and she knew there'd be a bloodbath. So the boyfriend came up with a hammer! He actually did it he was silly because he screeched up in the car, as fast as he could in order to jam the brakes on, so it was a real eeeeh-type thing to affect, they saw it upstairs and saw him getting the hammer out of the boot, well you know damn well you don't need a hammer to sign on! So they phoned the Police and the Police came and saw but he got quite aggressive with the security guard because he'd been f'ing and blinding at the security guard 'You're fucking useless, look you've let him to see my Smitta'. Well the security guard couldn't help but let the husband in, so that was really bad, but the Police took him away and then eventually, unfortunately, he drove his car at him and he's now inside the boyfriend unfortunately he's in such a state because he's inside now, on attempted murder.'*

*(Large City Job Centre 2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

*'The big incident well the big incident was whilst I was off, so er I got to hear about it in the canteen. Apparently, it was erm, it was a friend of a person who worked here, and erm he was coming to*

*get the ex-husband of the person who works here, so... There's a person who works here, yeah, and it was erm her husband who was coming in to sign, and her boyfriend came in to meet him with a hammer! So, that was the major incident, but he never really got through the doors the security guard stopped him, so erm he never got through the doors.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

The first quote describes the violent incident and, despite the fact that the customers are personally related to the frontliner, entirely blames them and paints the frontliner as the innocent party. He describes the first customer (the frontliner's ex-husband) as an awful wife-beating, wife-threatening man. The second boyfriend is portrayed as acting stupidly, despite the frontliner's attempt to prevent it by warning him not to: 'She was expecting him in, 'don't come cause my husband's in', and she knew there'd be a bloodbath'. Although the second quote does not particularly emphasise who is to blame, along with the first, they do highlight the communal telling of stories. Not only does the frontliner know about the incident despite being away, but he explains that he 'got to hear about it in the canteen'. The collective telling of stories about physically violent customers is also emphasised in the subsequent extract:

*'There was one when that guy jumped over the desks. Some geezer, I can't remember his name, but we were all talking about it, it was round the city like wild fire. Some gentleman was disgruntled, I don't know what about but he leapt over the desks, because obviously we've got a row of desks but he just jumped over the tops and he started throwing stuff around, chairs, computers and obviously that was really scary for both customers and staff alike*



*because how the room was laid out was that some of the staff were trapped in a corner and they couldn't get passed him. And I think, fortunately the guy was not angry at staff...so he didn't attack the staff he just wanted to make a mess but that must have been so scary for people...'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

In the above quote, the frontliner alludes to the idea that many stories are told between the frontliners: 'we were all talking about it, it was round the city like wild fire'. Equally, similar to the other stories, the service worker makes it clear that it was nothing to do with the frontliners: 'the guy was not angry at the staff'. Blaming the customer rather than the frontliner is part of the collective informal perspective. The next story is also about a customer who was perceived as violent through his physical acts. I overheard it in the canteen and, although I was unable to directly record it, I was able to write it down myself after leaving. The frontliners were talking about a difficult customer, who has been very violent in the past. Such was the extent of his violence that they no longer let him wait in the queue, but saw him as soon as he came in. They also did not go through the normal procedure with him, but just signed him and got him out. Whilst talking about him, a frontliner told the story that this customer had previously been banned at another job centre and that the manager had to have four policemen around him to do it. They all then speculated that they should not have to see him, but that he should sign by post. In this story not only are the frontliners laying all the blame for the perceived violence on the customer, but they describe him as such an awful customer that they do not feel that they should have to serve him at all. This story recognises a collective root of violence experienced (the customer) and supports this collective idea further

by stating that they should not have to deal with him at all. This idea clearly contradicts the formal idea that it is a frontliner's bad customer service that is the cause of the violence experienced.

All the above stories (the stupid unintelligent customer, the frontliner triumphing over the customer, the unreasonable customer and the violent customer) all portray the customer in a derogatory way and lay the blame for violence experienced firmly with the customer. This is in accordance with the informal collective view. By telling stories about the hostile customer, frontliners are drawing on the informal viewpoint which acknowledges the systematic nature of violence that frontliners experience and places the blame for these incidents with the customer.

### **Off Stage**

The emotional labour literature details offstage areas as an important coping mechanism in everyday life (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 1991; Martin, 1991). Although offstage areas are not officially sanctioned in the ES, frontliners tend to use offstage areas as places to relieve their stress and collectively cope with customer violence experienced. However, offstage areas can also be used by the individual to cope on their own. An 'offstage area' is any area away from the frontline and the eye of the public. This coping process covered both abuse and violence though most of the data here pertains to abuse. However, I did witness frontliners using offstage areas to cope with customers that were perceived as violent. For example much of the other informal coping mechanisms which detail coping with violent customers (such as



humour, stories and talking collectively) were expressed here. In the Job Centres the offstage area was mainly the canteen as the following quote illustrates. This quote has also been used in chapter seven.

*'Things have changed because before we became open plan there were people and public on all floors, we used to have a floor that was solely for advisors working, who sort of did all the paper work, and you would be able to come upstairs and sort of scream that such and such has given you a load of grief on the counter and take it out there, but it seems as though because you're in front of the public all day every day, you can't do that. So the only place we can get our anger out is the canteen.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-43-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

Thus, the service worker explains that they often feel like getting out of public view in order to express themselves freely, without conforming to the customer service ideals. This idea fits in with the collective perspective where the common problem of perceived customer violence is recognised and the customers are blamed for this. The next two quotes also focus on offstage areas as a place to relieve stress brought on by difficult customers. Like the previous quote, these quotes also state that the only off stage area is the canteen:

*'I think when you're dealing with the public all the time and I think that's where some of the stress comes into the job now, because we are in the public view all the time; years ago you used to have people on sort of Frontline or doing interviews at certain times and probably only a couple of days of the week, and the rest of the time they were doing paperwork in the background so if you did get an irate phone call or something like that you could put the phone down and say something and let off steam. But you can't now because you're often taking those phone calls where you've got someone sitting in front of you, or you know somebody does let*



*off and then you're onto the next person so there isn't the same, there's nowhere to let off steam and same set up when you go on your break or chat in the tea room... You just need to let off steam I suppose, yeah.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-30-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

*'No, it's talked about in the canteen everything is talked about in that canteen! But it's all stress relief at the end of the day. Someone else to understand what you're going through. I mean we've all had experiences everyone has in this place, no doubt about it; even Ben I mean Ben's only been here a few months, he's still had experiences which he'd know about you know. We've all got them problems, or you get the clients that you know are gonna be the difficult ones, just with you, because they don't like you as a person. I mean Janice has a lot of I suppose she's told you, she has a lot of it where they come in and they don't like her, and they'll come in just to rag her up! Get her going.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-31-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The next quotation also recognises the need to relieve tension in offstage areas. Although the frontliner also acknowledges the canteen as an offstage area, she also includes outside the job centre as a place where she can relieve stress:

*'Probably, it might be for the staff up there it's just getting it off your chest. I suppose the way I deal with it is just not go to the canteen sometimes and just go out for a walk just to clear your head.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-16-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

All the above quotes emphasise the importance of offstage areas as a place to relieve stress caused by difficult and hostile customers. The usefulness of offstage areas is that they allow frontliners to drop the mask of emotional labour and express themselves freely. However, like the majority of other coping mechanisms, this method still enables the frontliner to maintain the myth of customer sovereignty 'on-stage' on the frontline.

### **7. Individual Mechanism that Stems from the Collective Informal Perspective**

Although the following coping method has also arisen from the informal collective perspective, it is different in that it is largely carried out individually as opposed to collectively.

#### **Covert Resistance Against The Customer**

Covert resistance against the customer can be carried out in many forms. This contradicts the idea of customer sovereignty as it locates greater power with the service worker; although the frontliner will still probably give the illusion of customer sovereignty (using trappings such as addressing customers as Mr or Mrs.) they may actually be getting their revenge against them. This is why this method has been labelled as covert resistance and not just resistance. It emphasises the idea that customer sovereignty is but a façade. Covert resistance draws upon the informal coping mechanism because violence experienced is acknowledged as a common problem with the customer as the



source, and frontliners therefore feel justified in fighting back against them. In this mechanism, the perceived violent customer becomes the adversary who needs to be outwitted or punished. The following quote highlights covert resistance as a way of coping with hostile customers. I had heard about this incident for a frontliner when chatting in the canteen and he later described it to me in an interview. It was recounted to me as a humorous and amusing incident without disapproval, as if the frontliner was a mischievous and amusing child:

*'But Janice is sort of like remnants of that; but she's funny as well she's the one who turned round and said, 'Oh I think I've missed Miss Hoyty-toyty's evidence this morning' cause one girl come in irate shouting and said, 'I could do your job, I've gotta a degree, I'm more qualified than anybody' and Janice was like taking it all and not being rude back, and then walked away and said, 'Oh I think I've missed her evidence'.*

*(Q. What did she do with her evidence?)*

*Missed evidence is not putting enough information for it to go through quickly so it delays stuff; and that had me in stitches basically just cause you don't expect it from her.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

Another form of covert resistance is the strict application of every single rule, or the selective application of rules in order to make life difficult for the customer. This point is explained by a frontliner in the following quote. It was taken after I observed an interaction with a customer that seemed short, and so I asked the frontliner about it and was able to directly transcribe it:

*'I'm not bothered. There are certain rules that you can apply and there's different ways of applying the rules in order to make life difficult. Some people will, erm, 'How's your job search been going?'. 'Okay' right sign here, go. 'How's your job search..?', another person, or the same person dealing with a different client, 'How's your job search going?'. 'Oh not bad'. 'What have you done?'. This, that and the other. 'You got any evidence, what happened at the interview?' and they'll go like you supposed to. When you sign somebody you're supposed to go through LMS, look on their interview history the sub history see if there's any demark tends for interviews; a lot of the time they don't even do that. I mean you're supposed to do an RDV as well. But you just apply the rules more sort of officiously... There are rules there and they don't often get applied, but if you wanna make life difficult for the client you just play it all straight down the middle - every rule to the tee basically and then just turn round and say well it is part of the so-and-so, we did tell you this when you signed on.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

In the above quote the frontliner makes life difficult for the customer by applying every single rule. This is the exact reversal of the coping mechanism of 'bending the rules', described in chapter seven. The following quote (which is part of an excerpt cited earlier in this chapter) also helps illustrate covert resistance against the customer.

*There's a certain element of not being heard, to be out of order, on this side of the table like you'll walk past somebody and you're about to deal with him and you'll get Ben walking past me and he'll sort of, 'The tosser!', as he's about to sit down and say, 'How*



*can I help you...?', coughing and saying, 'Wanker' and stuff! I know it is very childish, but it amuses me, that's why I'm in the job, cause I'm very immature!*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

Perhaps due to its nature, whilst observing frontliners I only ever witnessed one good example of covert resistance. In this instance, the frontliner waited for a threatening client to stand up to leave but had not yet moved away from the signing desk. The frontliner sprayed some air freshener on the chair and whilst she was doing this she said in a loud voice, 'Is it just me or does it smell around here?' This was obviously directed at the client who then swore at the frontliner and walked off.

The above quotes and observation are the only evidence that I found for covert resistance. This suggests that either this does not occur frequently, or that the frontliners did not reveal this practice either physically or verbally to me as a researcher. As previously noted, this type of research is of a sensitive nature and the researcher's presence will have an impact on the research carried out. The extent of covert resistance is therefore hard to gauge, however it is certain that it is present to some extent and thus worth noting.

## **8. Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the informal collective perspective through data from research on ES frontliners. Contrary to the formal organisational viewpoint, this acknowledges the systematic nature of violence experienced in the working lives of frontliners.

Instead of emphasising perceived customer violence as the frontliners' individual problem, due to poor customer service skills, this perspective constructs it as a collective problem common to all service workers through blaming the customer. There are a number of coping mechanisms that frontliners use which draw on this collective viewpoint and these include ways of coping both as an individual frontliner and collectively with the other frontliners.

As has already been explained, the informal organisational perspective exists in relation to the opposing view privileged by the formal organisation. Both perspectives compete to be seen as the 'truth' and both influence the frontliners coping methods. Frontliners do not completely subscribe wholeheartedly to one perspective or the other but, despite the contradictory versions of reality, draw on both perspectives in order to make sense of their working lives. At first, it would seem strange that frontliners would acquiesce to the formal perspectives in any way, because they cause frontliners to become responsible for violent incidents experienced. However, frontliners help maintain and re-create these perspectives, allowing themselves to be influenced by these formal perceptions. It is to this issue of why and how frontliners subscribe to both views that we now turn to in the next chapter.



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## Chapter 9

# EXPRESSIONS OF REALITY - WHY, WHEN AND HOW THE INFORMAL AND FORMAL PERSPECTIVES ARE EXPRESSED

### 1. Introduction

In chapters seven and eight, I have examined the coping strategies that frontliners used to deal with violence experienced and the versions of reality from which they originate. In this chapter, I aim to explore, firstly, why the informal and formal perspectives were used. Secondly, this chapter examines *when* individual frontliners subscribe to both versions of reality and *when* the differing perspectives are employed. Thirdly, this chapter examines *how* these versions of reality are expressed, that is, the genres that are used.

### 2. Why are the Informal and Formal Perspectives Used?

As explained in the previous chapters, the different ways that the frontliners cope with violence experienced rest on two opposing perspectives within the organisation: the formal and the informal. In exploring the opposing perspectives, the two previous chapters have outlined the broad purpose of both these perspectives. The formal organisational perspective has arisen in such a way as to help promote the myth of customer sovereignty, whilst the



informal collective view allows frontliners to counter this myth and express themselves in line with their experiences of customer violence. This chapter now considers why these views have arisen in the way they have in greater detail. As previously discussed, these two opposing viewpoints can be stripped down to three key dimensions on which they both essentially rest and on which they both differ (see Table 1 below). When exploring reasons for the development of these perspectives in detail, it is useful to examine them through the framework of these three elements.

**Table 1: Major Dimensions of Both Approaches**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Formal approach to violent incidents</b>	<b>Informal approach to violent incidents</b>
<b>Acknowledgement of frontliners' experience of the systematic nature of violence</b>	Denial (Violence is constructed as the individual frontliner's problem)	Acknowledged (Violence is constructed as a common, collective problem of frontliners)
<b>Who is blamed for violent incidents experienced</b>	Frontliner	Customer
<b>Mode of coping</b>	Tendency towards individualised ways of coping	Tendency towards collective ways of coping

### **3. Dimension 1 - Acknowledgement of frontliners' experience of the systematic nature of violence**

#### ***The Formal View***

As already discussed in chapter seven, the formal organisational perspective does not acknowledge the frontliners' experience of the systematic nature of violence within the ES. According to social constructionism, particular versions of reality lead toward

particular forms of action and away from others (Burr, 1995). Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, it follows that subsequent action will work in the interests of those able to impose their particular version. Thus, the formal organisational view can be imposed by those with hierarchical power and will therefore benefit this group. The lack of acknowledgment of frontliners' experience of the systematic nature of violence would seem to benefit those with hierarchical power within the organisation on both an ideological and practical level. On an ideological level, it means that the organisation will not have to take responsibility for the high level of violence experienced by the frontliners and stress that this causes. On a practical level, this lack of managerial responsibility means lower insurance, fewer precautions have to be taken and a lower level of training implemented. For example, lack of acknowledgement of violence outside the workplace means that they do not have to have insurance covering this. The assertion that the job is 'low risk' means that they can have a much lower level of insurance inside the workplace, with less safety measures needing to be put in place. Similarly, the training does not have to deal with the extensive violent situations the frontliners may experience but can focus on the more organisation friendly issue of customer care instead.

### *The Informal View*

A large majority of frontline staff interviewed considered a significant proportion of the customer behaviour they experienced as violent or aggressive, yet it was not acknowledged as such by the formal organisational view. Consequently, frontliners may



have wanted to construct a version of reality that they felt tallied better with their experiences on the frontline. The informal collective version does this because it acknowledges their experience of the systematic nature of violence. By acknowledging the perceived systematic nature of violence frontliners absolve themselves of much of the guilt assigned to them by the formal organisational view, something which will benefit frontliners.

#### **4 Dimension 2 - Who is to Blame for Violent Incidents Experienced**

##### ***The Formal View***

The formal organisation lays the blame firmly with the frontliner and their lack of customer service skills. Within frontline interaction there are three parties involved; there is the customer, the frontliner and the organisational system. Due to their direct involvement, it is most likely that one of these alternatives will be selected as the reason for customer violence. The formal organisation will not want to lay the blame with the customer due to the promotion of customer sovereignty (see chapter seven, section eight), nor will it want to lay the blame with its own organisational system as this will mean that it will be held responsible. It is, therefore, convenient for the organisation to lay the blame with the third aspect of this interaction: the frontliner.

### *The Informal View*

The informal collective perspective attributes the blame for perceived customer violence to the customer. When the frontliner experiences violent incidents, they will not want to subscribe to the formal organisational idea that they are a culpable and inadequate frontliner with inferior skills, so they look to blame someone else. They may blame the customer, and not the organisation, for a number of reasons. Firstly, the frequent personal insults they experience from customers will be difficult not to take personally, creating bad feeling and animosity towards the claimant. Also, by behaving in this way, the service recipient is not fitting in with the idea of a 'customer' promoted by the formal organisation which is based on the commercial idea of the customer. By not adhering to the commercial role and not acting as they are 'supposed to' this may render them an easy target.

## **5. Dimension 3 - Mode of Coping**

### *The Formal View*

As explained in chapter seven, the formal organisational view has a tendency towards individualised ways of coping. By individualising the cause of violence experienced, it follows that it is up to the individual to deal with it. This is beneficial to the formal organisation (or rather, those that have imposed this view) because it means that they do not have to take responsibility for helping the frontliners deal with customer violence experienced. The organisation will not have to put procedures in place to help



the frontliners cope with violence experienced and, perhaps more importantly, will not have to take responsibility when frontliners fail to cope.

### *The Informal View*

The informal perspective favours a collective way of coping or else an individualised way of coping that draws on collective ideals. This follows on from the idea that it is not the frontliner but the common problem of the ‘bad’ customer that is at the cause of violence experienced. Following on from this idea, frontliners are encouraged to cope with it together in a collective way. By coping collectively frontliners are able to find comfort and solidarity from each other, assuring themselves that they are not alone in their experiences of customer violence. As already discussed in chapter seven, these coping strategies include talking to each other about the violence they experience, telling stories, using humour, keeping vigilance over each other in order to protect each other and communing in offstage areas. Each of these reassures the frontliner that they are not the only one experiencing violence and offers support and solidarity.

## **6. Why Frontliners Subscribe to Both Competing Views**

As has already been noted, the formal organisational view exists in relation to the directly opposed collective informal one. Both perspectives compete to be seen as the ‘truth’ and both influence the frontliners in their choice of coping strategies. Twenty nine out of thirty eight frontliners in my data drew upon both perspectives

within the same transcript, and examples of these shall be looked at later on in this chapter.

### **Why Frontliners Subscribe to the Formal View**

At first, it would seem strange that service workers would buy into the formal perspectives in any way, because they are portrayed as responsible for violent incidents. However, frontliners do in fact draw on this version of reality, maintaining and re-creating it.

Frontliners may partially do this in a bid to impress management, gain promotion or, at the least, avoid trouble. For example, they may emphasise how customer-focused they are when management are around, stressing the importance of customer service skills against perceived violence. Alternatively, frontliners may draw on this perspective in a bid to gain control and predictability over customer violence experienced. By subscribing to the idea that it is only inadequate frontliners who suffer violent incidents, as 'good' frontliners they should be able to avoid customer violence. They are able to feel in control instead of being victims of random events.

It is evident from the data that frontliners do get huge enjoyment from many of the non-violent customers and this is often the most satisfying part of their work. With this, frontliners tend to be inclined to subscribe to the formal perspective when having a positive encounter with the customer because they will attribute their success to their superior customer handling skills. The frontliner in the following quote explains that she likes working



with the customer and it is clear that she gets a lot of pleasure from this:

*'For me, I like working with people; don't like working on my own in a room, I like to see different people. Most of them are very, very nice and they chat and it's not just about the jobs or the training, they just chat about anything in general, and they're really lovely people.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The frontliner in the following quote also emphasises how much she enjoys working with the customer and that it is a 'pleasant' part of her job:

*'The pleasant thing about my job I think is the customer contact because everybody that you see is different. You're never gonna have the same situation in front of you.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-19-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

By subscribing to the formal perspective, therefore, stressing their superior customer service skills, frontliners will further enhance their enjoyment. If they drew on the collective perspective for these customers, it would diminish their enjoyment, because success with these customers would not be due to their own skills but due to having a 'good' customer in front of them. The following data highlights that when frontliners talk about dealing with enjoyable customers they subscribe to the formal perspective and highlight their superior customer handling skills:

*'You know, I have job satisfaction. If somebody finds a job through me or if I can help somebody out anyway, say in benefits or in any other enquiries, comes back and says thanks, or gives us cards or writes comments, I feel happy. Happy and satisfied. Job satisfaction.'*

(Large City Job Centre 2-46-Frontliner-Male)

The above quote not only illustrates the satisfaction that frontliners gain from dealing with some customers but also draws on the formal perspective by linking this to their excellent customer handling skills. In the following quote, a frontliner also emphasises how well she deals with customers before explaining that it gives her great job satisfaction:

*'The rest of my team thinks that I am bribing my clients off. We always discuss ...! (laughter). My (INAUDIBLE PHRASE) are proving excellent, they really appreciate what we're trying to do. Especially this one lone parent, on the day I saw her she was in tears. She didn't have a clue where to start, what to do. She had just lost her mother, single parent so I booked her an appointment to see the guidance advisor at least for a start. It would open up the doors for her and that's what she wanted to do and from there I sent her, well she was given the guidance, she came back to me and I sent her for some training. The training that she wanted to do. After finishing her training she came back to me and told me that she was going to go and work. I had been helping her out and in the end she got the job and, of course, it wasn't just a card, it was flowers and it was cards after cards, telephones after telephones, and the way she really appreciated what I had done for*



*her and I can't stop talking about her! Because it gives me the job satisfaction that I need to hear.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-11-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

In the above extract, the frontliner outlines the steps that she took, thus emphasising her customer handling skills, before explaining that the client was very happy and it was a successful outcome. The next quote again explains the pleasure frontliners can gain from customers and links in her service skills with this, by stating that she is able to help clients in need:

*'And that's where a lot of your job satisfaction comes from when you're dealing with a lovely customer who you know needs the help and you're able to do something for that person and you invest the time.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-33-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

The following quote is taken from a frontliner who explains how he managed to get a customer various jobs through the use of his skills. He does not attribute this success to a willing customer but to his own skills and effort. In fact, he rules out the possibility of it being down to the customers by explaining that they were 'totally de-motivated':

*'In actual fact, there's one particular guy who I think I found three jobs for. Very interesting character, I think he'd been signing for quite some time when I started here about four and a half years ago, totally de-motivated, totally and utterly. His partner wasn't working either and she didn't even want him to work, she used to come in, 'er, no jobs for him'. And eventually I think he'd been*

*signing for that long that we were pushing him into things more and more. He got a job, it was a temporary job, it lasted about six months, sort of labouring, helping out, pegging out for people, measuring stuff, well, he didn't look at the numbers, just how far it was going. General labouring and he was as happy as a sand boy with it, loved it. Came back and thereafter he said, if there's anything more like this you must let me know and since, again I've done, he's not on the phone so I've gone round to his house, pushed a card through saying, urgent vacancy come in and see me. And he's had two other ones. He's back with them now but again he's still really keen and I think, the same guy we got three temporary vacant jobs and the employers have all said how happy they are. Really good. Again he knows his own limitations, I know his limitations, if I can match up to something where it's not going to be too difficult for him in terms of lack of his reading and writing skills, he's a damn good worker, the sort that gets his head down and works all day, has his breaks and is quite happy, thank you very much. So it's er, obviously it can be difficult, to a great extent people that are illiterate and would probably refer to a different employment adviser for more specialist help, but it depends how much help they actually need.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

In the above extract, a frontliner emphasises how skilled he was in dealing with the customer by pointing out how difficult it is to deal with illiterate customers. In the subsequent excerpt, a frontliner explains how she used her service skills to get a customer a job after just one session despite the fact that the customer had been having trouble finding a job:



*'There was one customer that I used to see, see (INAUDIBLE PHRASE). She was looking for a job quite sometime, probably over six months and I saw her and ask her to come down here and help her out, and give you more time here. So she came here and she just came once and I got her to fill jobs, and she got one of those jobs and she was very happy so she came a few days later with a box of chocolates and flowers and cards and everything, so we were quite chuffed actually and she was very happy and she said if she had known that you were such a good team here, I would have come before.'*

(Small Inner City Job Centre-12-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

### **Why Frontliners Subscribe to the Informal View**

As can be deduced from section 6.1 above, frontliners buy into the informal perspective for precisely the reverse reasons to the reasons they subscribe to the formal: because they do not want to be held responsible for customer violence experienced. This is especially attractive to a frontliner who has just experienced a violent incident or who experiences them frequently. Therefore, when recounting their experiences of customer violence, frontliners subscribe to the collective informal perspective. The following quotes about perceived violent incidents draw upon the collective rather than the formal individualist viewpoint. The beginning of the first quote has already been cited in chapter one and chapter seven.

*'I've had one incident where somebody actually came up with a knife; that's not on training and that was a down-and-out we have problems with him now, he actually is a ministerial issue where he just comes in, gets his giro and goes; but yes and I'm not the only one he's attacked as well... and do you know about Personal Issue Giros, people of no fixed abode? They come in and collect it, they don't anymore like they used to and he used to come and if it wasn't here, cause Benefits Agency at time weren't based in the office, they had to go away...He threw three computers on the floor and came at me. That's the only one. And it was difficult to come in the next day, I had to force myself to come into work cause I got to the doors and thought I can't do it, I can't do it...but I did.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

The above extract is taken from an interview with a frontliner and describes a violent incident that she experienced. She portrays the customer as the problem, in line with the informal collective perspective. She emphasises how bad the customer is by explaining that the job centre currently has 'problems with him', that he was 'a ministerial issue', that the frontliner 'is not the only one he has attacked' and that he 'threw three computers on the floor' before coming at the frontliner. She also explains that having a knife 'is not on training' and, consequently, that this incident had nothing to do with customer service skills, which is a direct contradiction to the formal perspective.



The following quote is taken from an interview with a frontliner from a small job centre. However, in this quote the frontliner talks about a violent incident that happened when he was in a large city job centre where he previously worked. This quote has also been used in my introduction chapter.

*'I was attacked quite violently when I worked at Stuart Street. It was on the main, have you ever been to Stuart St? (I have yes). On the very first desk that you go into, not where the security guard sits, there's usually somebody from the department that sort of sits there. I was there, this was about 8 or 9 years ago, and a guy just sort of came in and shouted at the top of his voice, 'where are all the fucking jobs'. I was so taken back by this statement and I said, 'Look they're on the front'. And he said, 'Where are all the fucking jobs' and before I said anything he had actually picked up from the desk a welcome sign, funnily enough, and the next minute, bang over the head, bang over the shoulder. I sort of ran into another room and he followed me and a female member of staff tried to get him off me so he punched her in the face. Then he went into another main room and started picking up computers and smashing them on the floor, blah, blah, blah and then sort of ran out. Apparently from there he picked up a spade and went to a Laser Quest place and started threatening people there. So that, I was shook by that, there's no doubt about it, I was really shook up by that...In the actual jobcentre, you probably have three or four minor incidents a week, certainly lots of physical abuse which you expected, sorry verbal abuse which you half expected but then there was the threat of physical abuse. Obviously this was a one off, thank God but I was shook up. Thereafter when I worked at Hantshire and Wigston, yeah, things like signing trays that could*

*be a weapon, welcome signs, anything that could be a weapon or could be thrown, personally I was always telling people, look for God's sake, get that off the table please because of what happened with this guy who, incidentally got imprisoned for it, I think he got about three months for it and he was, drugged up at the time and just lost it.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-14-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

In the above quote, the frontliner recounts his experience of a violent incident, drawing on the informal view. He does not empathise with the situation of the customer, as he had done previously in the interview, but describes the customer as awful and totally at fault. He explains that before he had time to really talk to the customer, the customer was being violent (hitting him over the head). In addition, he explains that this customer was violent to other members of staff, again emphasising that it was not something he did as a frontliner individually, but the fault of an out-of-control customer. He also draws on the competing informal perspective by acknowledging the systematic nature of violence with the statement that not only do they have 'three or four minor incidents a week' but that also verbal aggression is to be 'expected'. He further persists with the idea of systematic violence by warning colleagues to be careful of anything that could be used as a weapon. The following account of customer violence also draws on the competing informal perspective. This quote has been previously used in my introduction chapter.

*'This customer was very, very aggressive I asked him to sit down and he wanted to sign on, then he still wouldn't move, you know he was disturbing another client and then he threatened me...*



*(Q. He threatened you?)*

*Yeah, he just said that he will see me outside, he says he'll sort me outside and he really meant, he was quite serious and he was very aggressive, and yeah.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre -2-38-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

In the above quote, the frontliner again describes the customer as 'very aggressive', and thus it implies that it is the customers not the frontliner fault, in-line with the informal view. In fact, in this short piece of narrative, he keeps stressing the customer's aggression. He states that the customer is aggressive, threatening, and disruptive. Frontliners rarely draw on the formal view of violence when recounting personal incidents because they do not want to be held responsible (as explained earlier). In fact, out of all the accounts of violent incidents that have happened to the frontliners themselves, none of them questioned their own ability in relation to dealing with customer violence experienced.

## **7. When the Informal and Formal Perspectives are Expressed: Situations in which Frontliners Draw upon Differing Perspectives**

### **Violent Incidents Against the Frontliners Themselves**

As explained in the above section, when recounting an incident where the perceived violence was directed at the frontliner personally the informal perspective was used. Frontliners did not want to be held responsible for the incident. However, when frontliners had a successful encounter with a customer, they

tended to draw on the formal perspective, as explained in section 3.1.

### **Violent Incidents Against Other Frontliners**

Despite the general tendency to subscribe to the informal competing view when recounting a violent incident which they experienced personally, service workers tended to make use of both perspectives when recounting violent incidents that happened to his or her colleagues. Their willingness to employ formal perspectives here may be because this will not involve blaming their own customer service skills. It seems that if a frontliner was recounting an incident in which they were involved and in which they had a negative experience then they would subscribe to the informal view. If a frontliner had a positive experience through involvement with a particular customer they were more likely to utilise the formal perspective, and blame other service providers skills, whilst conversely being able to praise their own, for any 'bad' handling. If a frontliner was not involved, or did not have any contact with the customer, they were inclined to use the informal version of reality.

The following three quotes all employ the informal view in order to describe perceived violent encounters that other frontliners had. In all of these, the frontliners acknowledge previous experience of the customer which was also negative. In the first quote, the frontliner describes a violent incident with another frontliner who was dealing with a customer with which she had had previous difficulty. This quote has already been cited in chapter eight.



*'The only other one, which I wasn't involved in, was a bloke I'd had aggro off before and I only heard it because he was attacking Alice, and someone was queue jumping and then, it was an Asian, coloured bloke I think, and I heard him say to somebody, 'You white bastard' and then 'I'll push your teeth in', because he thought he was jumping the queue; but actually that did get diffused I pressed the panic alarm cause I thought well I don't know whether Ellie was, what state she was in like, so I better make sure she's alright but as it happened she was okay and then I think some other frontliners came down and it diffused then.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-39-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the above quote, not only does the service worker admit to having problems with the customer before, but she was also directly involved in the incident described by the fact that she pushed the panic alarm. In the job centres, using the panic alarm was treated with contempt unless the circumstances were very severe because it was often claimed that it actually incites customer violence when pressing the panic alarm, therefore, frontliners would want to justify their own actions. This is made much easier if they use the informal view because then the customer can be blamed instead of the frontliner's skills. In the example given, we can see that the customer is indeed portrayed as the reason for the perceived violent incident; he is clearly seen as the aggressor. In the ensuing extract, the frontliner describes an angry customer and refers to the fact that she has previously experienced violence from him. Again, the frontliner uses the informal perspective to recount the incident and explains that no matter how nice the frontliner was, the customer would have been

aggressive anyway. (This quotation has previously been noted in chapter seven).

*'And we all knew what he was like and that he was ...(What exactly was he like?) .....He was very devious and he said things that weren't very nice. I mean for example, he called me a stuck-up fat cow (INAUDIBLE COMMENT). Yeah, yeah. And she interviewed him and I think, so that he didn't get angry or start going off like he does and she was... overly nice and, of course, he took it the wrong way. And, I sat next to them listening because, you know, I was just interested any way how she dealt with him and because she was being nice to him, he took it because he thought she fancied him and he asked her out but it was horrible, it was sickly, it made your stomach churn because of the way he was. And of course he got aggressive when she said no. And that again is something that can happen, I think. If they take it wrong way, and he obviously, genuinely took it the wrong way. He thought that she was being nice to him for the wrong reason, I'm sure of that. So, you know, that was a bit strange really.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-15-Frontliner –Female-Caucasian)

In the next extract, the frontliner recounts a perceived violent incident involving a 'supervisor', which in large city job centres were often the head of the team of frontliners but still had contact with the public:

*'I had a problem with one customer...the funny thing is, in fact somebody else, a Supervisor faced him down once, he was a bit of a character this Supervisor and I think he pushed him a bit, and I mean he'd have loved him to hit him, he'd have give him one back! So this bloke said something like you know, 'I'll push your face in'*



*so he stood up over the desk to him, 'What, do you wanna try it then', or something! But what we found out later was that the DSS had to have the Police cause he carried a shooter! So it's a good job I didn't know that! I think I'd have sent him to the job!'*  
(Large City Job Centre –2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

In the above account, the service worker describes a perceived violent incident that occurred in light of other violence that he had also experienced off this particular customer. He utilises the informal version of reality by emphasising that not only did the customer threaten the frontliner, but that he also caused trouble at the DSS. The frontliner's actions are mentioned in this quote, but they are not criticised, but slightly glorified and the frontliner is portrayed as a brave hero. The next three quotes are accounts of other frontliners' experiences of violent customers. In these quotes, although the narrator acknowledges prior experience of the customer, in these encounters the experience has been positive. Consequently, these extracts are written from the formal perspective:

*'And there's other ones, well there's one Mr. Walters he was one of mine, young black lad, very very aggressive not towards me, in fact I never saw him like that at all; he used to come in here and say, 'I'm going for an interview' got no confidence and have a chat with him, and yet he'd gone to Aberdeen House which is where he signed and they'd ring and say what have you done to him, he's throwing chairs around, down there because they messed his benefit up and he hated them. And I'd say no, he's not like that at all, and I'd say what were you doing down there, and he'd say, 'Well I don't like them', he'd say I want to sign on here and he was so nice.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-26-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Here, the frontliner points out that it was another frontliner's poor handling skills which riled the client. She explains that they messed up the client's benefit and that he hated them for it. She contrasts this bad behaviour with his good behaviour with her, implying that her skills were thus superior in enabling her to avoid violence. She also states that whilst he 'hated them' at the other job centre he actually wanted to sign at her job centre. She finishes off with the confirmation that it was not the customer who was to blame as she states 'he was so nice'. In the following excerpt, a service worker also describes another colleague's experience of a customer perceived as violent which uses the formal perspective:

*'There was one where a colleague here, Dan, was dealing with some lads and they were getting very, very well Dan is very pedantic, very pedantic and they were being very aggressive, and they were f... 'ing very loudly; so I just said, 'Do you think you could keep your swearing down?' and they started on me and I just shouted, 'Get out now and don't bother coming back!' and they did. They sort of went, 'Uhhh!' and they went.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

In the above quote, despite pointing out that the customers were being aggressive, which would suggest that it was the customer's fault and thus draw on the informal view, this quote actually implies that it is the frontliner's lack of customer skills which are to blame for the incident occurring. Firstly, she emphasises that Dan is very pedantic and, secondly, she explains that when she



used her superior customer service skills - by telling them to keep their swearing down, etc. - they did what she said and she sorted the issue out. In the next quote, the frontliner employs the formal perspective and focuses on another frontliner's action as a cause of violence experienced:

*'He said, well he jumped over and erm...yeah he was on this floor and he...someone pressed the panic alarm and he said, 'Oh well I best do something now eh?' so he started pushing all the monitors on the floor, he picked a couple up and tried to chuck 'em, but they're on the cords, the protective cords, so they didn't get very far. And then he chucked like a few files out of the window and things like that yeah... So we decided that we wouldn't press panic alarms, and that we'd try and you know get people to erm...because I'd seen him before and he was alright.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-27-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

In this extract, the frontliner implies that it was the use of the panic alarm by some frontliner that triggered off the perceived violence and goes on to say that, as a result of this, they try not to use their panic alarms any more. She points out that when she had dealt with the customer he had not been violent, adding further weight to the idea that it was the frontliner's actions (the pushing of the panic alarm) that was to blame for the violence experienced. The next three quotes are all accounts of perceived violent incidents that happened to other frontliners. In these narratives, the raconteur does not admit to previous contact with the customer, nor do they seem to have been involved in the incident in any other way. All three are framed within the informal version of reality.

*'He come in and he sat down and he was like, miserable face and I think he was on drugs because he was like he was falling asleep and that. His dad was there and Ayesha said, you haven't filled in this form, would you mind filling it in for us. And he goes 'no, I'm not, I've given you the information before, get it yourself'. She says, well, I'll fill it in for you, she says, we'll just go through it together. And she started asking him questions and he was saying 'I've told you, I'm not telling you' and he was being really nasty and shouting at her but she was dead calm and she went all through the form with him and that and then she was saying, whereabouts do you want to work. 'I'm not bothered, you tell me. You just want us to say anything so you just put on what you want and I'll sign it'. And he was saying, 'I'm not willing to work here and I'm not willing to do that' and she was saying, but you have to be. 'I'm not willing to work forty hours a week'. But you have to be for a jobseekers allowance. 'OK then, just put it down, but I'm not'. Like everything she said he had an answer for and she said I'm not trying to be awkward, I'm trying to help you and his dad just said, you've got to open up a bit! And that's all he said throughout the whole interview and I thought God, if that was me and my dad, my dad would have killed us! Know what I mean! And his dad had said that he had council rent arrears of thousands of pounds and he'd got to sort himself out so his dad had fetched him to make sure his claim got done. He was really bad.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-37-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

When describing the incident, the frontliner makes it very clear that it is the customer who was to blame. She explains that 'he was on drugs', he would not give the required information and that he



was being aggressive. In contrast, she makes sure that there is no mistaking that the frontliner in question had good customer handling skills. Besides describing how the frontliner was asking questions in order to help the job seeker, she specifically states that the frontliner was 'dead calm' throughout and that she even tells the customer 'I'm not trying to be awkward, I'm trying to help you'. The following quote is also an example of a violent incident which was experienced by frontliners other than the raconteur and which draws on the informal perspective. It has already been used on my introduction chapter.

*'This guy, Mr Smith, I don't know what was the matter with him, he's on drugs and all sorts and he came in and he beat up the bloke on the Welcome Desk, assaulted other members of staff. I would have been on that desk if I hadn't been over here; and ironically enough he was one of our clients...Nelson Street cause his name began with an A. He literally went through the signing hall downstairs and threw all the monitors and how the hell he did it, he smashed them, cause those screens are pretty tough glass and he managed to smash some of the tubes, the whole lot totally written off. Then he managed, God knows how, to jump out of a window and just went straight through it yeah, but anyone will tell you about Mr Smith.'*

(Large City Job Centre –2-44-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

The narrator of this incident was not involved because he was working at another job centre at the time it occurred. However, he is able to tell it in some detail and, notably, uses the informal perspective to do so. He focuses exclusively on the behaviour of the customer and uses Mr Smith's actions to empathise what a terrible incident this was. This has the effect of leaving no doubt

about who to blame for the incident: the customer. In the next extract, a frontliner again describes a perceived violent incident in which he was not involved and frames it using the informal view. The first part of this quote has already been used in chapter seven.

*'I've only ever seen him have a reaction once, and that was when some guy was being really rude and out of order, threatening to rip his head off and all sorts and he went outside and had a cigar and he was shaking; I think basically he wanted to walk round the carpark and hit him or something! ... so he just pulled a leaflet off and said if you want to phone them you can phone them, have a complaint form and there it is, and left it at that.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-17-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian).

Here, the frontliner emphasises how well his colleague dealt with the situation despite the fact that the client was clearly seen to be difficult and violent.

### **Frontliners' Dual Use of the Perspectives According to the Situation**

As discussed above, it is clear that frontliners do not tend to buy wholeheartedly into one perspective or the other but draw on each of them to suit their own needs, depending on the context. In twenty-nine of the thirty-eight transcripts of frontliners' interviews, examples of both perspectives could be found even if one perspective was used more than the other. For example, the two quotes below are both taken from the same interview transcript. The first quote draws upon the formal view and the second quote draws upon the informal competing view.



*'You know, I try and be realistic to individuals, I relate well to the customer, so I do like that side of my job.'*

*(Q. Do you think people respect you for that?)*

*I'm gathering so, cause I don't get as many incidents as anyone else! And I get more compliments letters than anything else. I am pretty easy-going you've got to be able to relate to people, and I think that's where a lot of things do go wrong in the ES, with the recruitment side of things, they don't recruit the people they should be recruiting, there's too many incidents cause of it.'*

*(Q. Who should they be recruiting?)*

*I think they should be recruiting people what are more people-focused.'*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)*

In this quote, the frontliner directly links the amount of violent incidents she experiences (not many) to the quality of her customer handling skills (which she describes as good), thus employing the formal perspective. However, in the second, following quote from the same transcript, when recounting another violent incident experienced she lays the blame with the customer, thus using the informal perspective. She explains that the customer is 'on heroin', is 'very, very aggressive' and suggests that he is unreasonable by the fact that he would not listen to anyone. This quote has already been cited in the introduction chapter.

*'I mean I had a chap the other week who was on heroin and he was getting very very aggressive and Larry came over and basically backed me up he started to try and explain it. He said the same as what I'd said but... he was getting very, very angry and shouting and it didn't matter how many times I was trying to tell him that he'd had his money stopped through New Deal and he had to go over the other side he was like, 'Ahh, it's you, you stopped my money!''*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

We see that, despite claiming earlier that her good skills with the customer stopped her from experiencing much violence, in this account, the frontliner implies that whatever her actions nothing could have stopped a difficult customer from being so aggressive. The following two extracts are another example of one frontliner drawing on two different views.

*'Oh yeah, yeah it's because the way I deal with them and it's because I just, I've been really friendly to them and I just say that look it's my job and I'm here to help, and if you have done anything wrong I'm here to correct you, I'm not here to penalize or you know, yeah so we've had no problems at all you know. They will come to me if they've got problems, like eighteen years or ...or anybody, they have been aggressive to somebody else, but they come to me and they're fine, they say, 'Look can you sort me out', you know they come to me, yeah.'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

*'You get clients who are very rowdy, who have so much more to drink than they should and erm even drugs and everything are*



*even being passed around in the queue, you know, on one occasion I saw that. Erm, and one particular client didn't have a payment that day for whatever reason he wasn't even signing on with us to be honest, but he insisted on it and literally came over the counter to get it, kind of thing! And erm I was like cornered. It was awful.'*  
(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

In the first quote, taken from an interview, the frontliner again explains that his customer service skills, or 'the way he deals with them', mean that he does not experience customer violence, even when colleagues have. In fact, he even states that he has had 'no problems'. However, later in the interview he contradicts this, shown with the second quote, where he stresses how violent a customer is, thus drawing on the competing informal perspectives and laying the blame with the customer. The next quotation also illustrates how an individual frontliner will draw on both perspectives. This time the frontliner draws on the differing perspectives, one after another in adjacent paragraphs:

*'Yeah...all the incidents you know, I feel really proud you know because I make them happy you know, they leave the office and next time they are I don't know which one to mention because I've been here for a very long time and there's been so many incidents you know, so many people I've helped, that you know I don't know which one to say you know! We have these ladies come in you know, persons come in depressed you know starts crying and ring offices and then sort the money out. There was this, recently there was this lady from Zambia you know, she had lost her family in the trouble and she had come here and she was quite shaky and she was very reluctant you know she was not reluctant, she wanted to you know start work but it was getting really difficult, she really*

*needed my help, so I helped her to get into this care home looking after old people. She was very, she's very intelligent, but she had lost all the confidence, but I sent her for this job and then she started as part-time and she started as full-time and she had built all the confidence and she has been ever so thankful yeah she says, 'Thanks for all you've done for me'; because she came from you know all trouble is it Zambia, yeah, and she has spent all her life there. Now because of the trouble there she's come here and she had no confidence at all, you know got low morale, but now she's got a job, and that's thanks to me. See, I used to draw maps for her, I used to you know so she gets the route, bus routes, you know everything I used to sort everything out for her; and then she started part time work, she started full-time and she finds the staff at the nursing home very, very friendly. She enjoys the job and, yeah, she's settled down. I feel very proud, yeah, it makes me very proud.*

*(Q. Are there any clients that you don't like serving?)*

*There are clients which make you angry, yeah, you know you get some people who come in and say, 'I want you to get me a job', well it's not just up to me, it's up to them as well, yeah, like the Mr. Smith thing just cause he's got a degree he thinks he's, you know, got a God-given right to get money like £6.50 an hour; he's never gonna get it. Those kind of people really make me angry, yeah, because they've been on the dole for the last fifteen, twenty years they come in and shout and throw their weight around, and they've got these expectations; they're never, you know, gonna get it they should find a job themselves or even lower their sights, yeah.'*

*(Large City Job Centre –2-42-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)*



The frontliner in the above quote first talks about a successful encounter and stresses how she was skilful in achieving this. Following this, she talks about an unsuccessful and un-enjoyable encounter with a customer in which she emphasises that it was impossible to help such a difficult customer. Thus, as illustrated above, frontliners can use both perspectives. Indeed, despite the impression that the formal and the informal perspectives are contradictory, it could be argued that they are extremely alike because both these views are keen to individualise rather than systemise the violence, although each view blames different individuals. Frontliners are able to swap from one to the other depending on the situation. When considering this issue, the question of why the organisation is not held responsible arises. A plausible answer would be the enjoyment that the frontliners gain from certain customers and feeling that they are skilful frontliners (as discussed in section 6.1). If frontliners were to blame the organisation they would be opposed to the whole system, meaning that they could not draw on the formal perspective and attribute successful encounters to their superior service skills. Instead, by individualising the blame for violent incidents experienced and blaming either a colleague or a customer they are able to draw on both the informal and formal perspectives according to the situation. That is, frontliners are able to apply the formal perspective to their successful encounters and thus credit it to their first-rate customer handling skills, whilst applying the informal perspective to those frontline encounters that were not so successful, absolving them of blame. Frontliners did not appear aware of the inconsistency that is apparent, and they did not try to justify their use of both versions of reality.

## **Different Job Centres, Different Perspectives**

Despite the fact that the job centres studied differed in size (small, medium and large) and location (city centre, inner city town and rural), my data suggests that frontliners still used the perspectives in the same way, according to positive and negative outcomes and the extent to which they were involved. For example, the two smallest job centres experienced a much lower level of violent customer behaviour and, perhaps not unrelated, had a greater amount of time to spend with each client. This resulted in service workers from these job centres experiencing a greater number of pleasurable encounters and less violent ones and, therefore, they tended to use the formal perspective more during an interview than the service workers from the larger job centres. However, although the formal perspective was employed more by frontliners from these job centres, both the informal and formal perspectives were used in the same way as elsewhere. For example, when describing an unpleasant violent incident that they personally had encountered, they still used the informal perspective in much the same way as frontliners did in the larger job centres.

Another notable difference between the various job centres studied was that the two smallest job centres did not use the formal perspective to deal with other frontliners' violent experiences. I have argued that the formal or the informal perspective can be used to describe other frontliners' violent experiences, depending on the level of involvement of the narrator. Indeed, in all of the job centres except the two smallest, I have found examples of both perspectives being used. However, in the small job centres I only found that the informal perspective was used when describing other frontliners' perceived violent encounters. This is most



probably because in the small job centres the frontliner narrating always becomes involved and thus uses the informal perspective. These job centres each consisted of five staff in total and no more than four working together at any time. The frontline was set in much smaller rooms and the frontline itself was much smaller than those at the larger job centres. Therefore, if one frontliner experienced an incident, the likelihood is that they all became involved in some way, because it is impossible for them not to see and hear it. The following quote from a frontliner from one of the job centres helps illustrate this point:

*'It's so small that you often know even if you're not signing, you hear when they come when they come in and if you are doing something else you can hear what's going on.'*

(Small Village Job Centre-19-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

Apart from the differences outlined above, my data did not suggest any other significant differences in the use of the two perspectives between the different job centres. Although there were differences in frequency, there was no difference in context.

## **8. How the Informal and Formal Perspectives are Expressed: Oral and Textual Perspectives**

As has been explained, frontliners drew on the informal perspective to express what they could not do through the formal organisation because the customer violence that they experienced was not acknowledged. Frontliners coped communally to form a collective unmanaged part of the organisation. It was, therefore, no coincidence that the informal perspective was only expressed orally whilst the formal perspective was largely expressed

textually. The informal view was expressed in situations where the spoken word dominated because it was usually expressed collectively as part of a group. The informal perspective was a lived, informal culture that evaded the formal organisation and thus formal management. It was expressed orally between the frontliners as a group in places such as the canteen. Conversely, the formal perspective was largely constructed in situations where the written word dominated. In fact, an interesting observation about my research was that when I asked for stories (part of the collective coping strategies) to be written down, many of the written stories I received were based on the formal perspective and became somewhat bland and lacking emotion. This was despite the fact that many of the frontliners had orally told me many stories which drew on the informal perspective and were full of emotion. It seemed that by changing the genre of the story (writing it, not telling it) meant that the underlying assumptions about reality changed as well. The following story is an example of the written stories that I received that drew on the formal perspective and consequently lost a lot of the lively style and emotional tone that was found in the stories that were told orally:

*'A Difficult Customer'*

*In my role as Adviser Administration Support, I recently had to advise a client who came into the job centre to complain that his claim had been closed because he had failed to sign. The client was initially hostile because he said he had been misinformed about signing procedures. I defused the situation by asking the client to take a seat. I asked open ended questions in order to gather as much information as I could determine what cause of action to take, such as what dates the client had been supplied*



*with, and what they had been informed to do by members of staff. I then checked with my Line Manager to verify the best course of action to take. She suggested I liaise with the Reviews and Adviser teams to establish what the client had been advised. I explained to the client that he could still claim for the outstanding period if he made a fresh claim and he could do so if he was willing to wait for an appointment cancellation. Meanwhile I said I would help him complete his forms, the client accepted this proposal and was therefore seen by an Adviser later that day. A potentially confrontational situation was therefore avoided and a dispute resolved satisfactory. During our next team meeting I brought this case to the attention of the team and emphasised that each member of staff should reiterate to clients the importance of signing procedures.*

(Large City Job Centre 2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

The above story reads like an answer to an interview question. The focus is not on how awful the customer acted, or how bad the frontliner felt, but how well the frontliner dealt with it. He outlines the courses of action he has taken and explains that he averted what he experienced as potential violence when she resolved ‘a potentially confrontational situation’. This again fits in with the formal view, as she does not refer to violence experienced directly. Equally, he shifts all the responsibility for ‘confrontational situations’ to the frontliners themselves by showing how he averted it and also by emphasising to other frontliners the importance of their actions. The story also seems to be lacking in the emotional tone that were common to my other stories, as does the next story which is also written in a similarly bland style:

*‘A Satisfied Customer’*

*In my role as Advisor I am responsible for taking new claims and conduct 13 week reviews. I recently dealt with a client who had been made redundant from a major local employer and he was getting angry and upset. The client was confused and concerned over what to do, as this was the first time they had been unemployed and had never had to use the job centre before. The client wanted to know what benefits they could claim, how they went about it and if training was available. I explained the type of benefits there were and the criteria for claiming them, doing so without using jargon-for instance explaining what Job Seekers Allowance was and not just referring to 'JSA' and also explaining how one was assessed according to clients total income rather than referring to 'JSA IB'. I also explained about immediate entry to training by victim of large scale redundancy and explained the different types of help available (i.e. work based learning and programme centres). I gave details of training opportunities available, thus giving the client time to decide his training requirements, which he could discuss at the interview with the adviser). I then summarised what I had said and asked if the client wished to proceed with their claim. I also gave my name as a contact and recorded the advice given on the computer. I completed the interview by informing the client about how to use the job centre for looking for employment and offered to do a job search. The client was impressed about the service we offered members of the public and was happy with what I had explained and left the job centre satisfied.*

*(Middle Sized Town Job Centre -2-38-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)*

This story draws on the formal perspective and emphasises the importance of service when the frontliner outlines the procedures



she used to deal with the client. The focus is on how the frontliner dealt with the client as opposed to how awful the client was and how they felt about this. In it, she sympathises with the customer and explains that his anger was because he was 'confused and concerned'. The next written story also focuses on the frontliner's actions and how they successfully dealt with a hostile client:

*'A Satisfying Customer'*

*A client had difficulty completing Job Seekers Allowance form. I had advised him to complete as much as he could and I would help him with the rest. The client said to me whilst completing the form, 'it is so fucking long' and I replied 'the form is not as bad as it looks most of the questions will not apply to you'. Anyway, I helped him with the questions he could not answer. After I got the form checked by the advisor. The client appreciated my patience and my help. Before he left he said 'thank you for your help'.*

(Large City Job Centre-2-41-Frontliner-Female-African)

Here, the frontliner explains that not only did she use her customer service skills to stop the customer being violent but that she also went so far as to make him appreciate her efforts. This employs the formal perspective and the idea that it is not the customer but the frontliner that can either stop or cause violence. Often the written stories that I collected stopped being actual stories altogether but just became bland narratives. The following quote is an example of this:

*'A Satisfying Customer'*

*It is difficult to bring to mind a particular circumstance. A 'satisfying customer' is to me, defined by a) Helping any client to get back into work. You share the delight in their achievement. Essentially, you feel better when the client has shown, over the period he/she has used the office, that they are genuinely determined to find a job. Another feel good factor is when the client takes the time and trouble to write into the office and say an extra special thanks to us. I am aware of 3 letters in the 2 years I have been here b) Helping any customer – whether it be a jobseeker, employer etc (external customer) or colleagues within this job centre or from other offices/departments (internal customers) – who make an enquiry and you can provide them with the answers, enabling them to have the information they require.*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-33-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

In the above quote, the frontliner does not tell an actual story but goes to the extreme of defining a satisfying customer. The majority of written stories were narrated through the formal perspective, written in a formal style. However, there were exceptions where stories were written down yet still framed by the informal view. These exceptions were taken from frontliners which I already knew well and had spent a fair amount of time with. The following story provides a good example of an informal story initially heard orally during my participant observation that retained something of the original when written down:

### *'A Difficult Customer'*



*Got to be the middle-aged woman who burst into tears and called me a cunt before throwing a pile of papers at me. She came in at about 10 o'clock in the morning and smelt like Gin Lane. She had obviously been drinking heavily, which I'm not necessarily opposed to but it's never really a good idea to start at breakfast. The lady sat in front of me in an Iron Maiden t-shirt with hair that looked like things were colonising it (told you I'm not one for stereotypes) and asked me for details on a specific job as PA to a company director that required experience of all sorts of software packages. When she told me she had never heard of the packages I suggested that for 17,000 P.A. she was perhaps not suitably qualified. We sat in silence for about 30 seconds (felt like an hour) before she let out a wailing sound and as tears ran down her face she shouted that she wasn't prepared to be patronised by a little cunt like me (I'm six foot one...). What I felt like saying was 'look its 10 in the morning and you're pissed, lack of IT skills is the least of your problems'. What I found myself saying was 'sorry if you've interpreted what I was saying as patronising, it wasn't meant to be...I was just pointing out that the job description called for someone with more experience, if you feel that strongly about it you are entitled to make a complaint'. She screwed some leaflets up and threw them at me whilst blowing spit bubbles out of the corner of her mouth and stormed out. I could feel everyone around me staring at me and tried to behave as if nothing had happened, but when the first words the next client said were 'I know how she feels I had a nervous breakdown last year its not fair how some people are treated' I just stared at her and said something along the lines of 'behave'.*

*I went to a Handling Difficult Situations course a couple of weeks later and mentioned the situation, the trainer suggested I could*

*perhaps have approached the subject of her drinking problem directly but with tact...when I asked how, he suggested humour. I only asked her about her IT skills I dread to think what would have happened if I had started cracking gags. On occasions you find yourself dealing with situations that in order to be changed call for wholesale changes to peoples lives and personalities and I am not sure that the jobcentre is the best place for dealing with that.*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

The above story is written in a far more casual, lively way than the previous written stories examined and describes in detail the frontliner's emotions. It is framed through the informal perspective and emphasises how difficult the customer is, as opposed to stressing the service workers use of skills. The narrator does this through describing her early drinking, her clothes and her infested hair. He then defends his skills and also emphasises how unrealistic training is when he describes how he was told to deal with it on the Handling Difficult Situations Course. Although the next story is short, it also provides an example of one of the few written stories that utilized the informal perspective:

*'A Difficult Customer'*

*One client kept angrily insisting on going for chef vacancies for which he was well qualified – problem was he stank to high heaven!!!!*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-32-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

This story, like the previous one above, draws on the informal perspective by focusing on the customer and how they are at fault.



Both of the stories do not centre on the frontliner's actions but on the awfulness of the customer. Although the first does mention the service worker's actions, they are listed to show that there was nothing more he could do.

Both the above stories differed to the other stories written down in that they were from frontliners that I knew personally from working at a job centre. Perhaps the difference was because I had already been accepted as sympathetic and one who could be told 'the truth' as they saw it. In fact, when going to interview with someone that I did not know, someone whom I had already interviewed told the interviewee 'she's alright, she understands it, don't worry about talking to her'. This implies that the informal perspective can only be shared with those who can be trusted to understand, support and listen to this perspective. Perhaps this also suggests that it cannot be shared with someone who would use the formal view to discredit this lived informal perspective. The informal view contradicts the formal perspective promoted by management, so perhaps service workers need to establish trust before writing it down because they would not want management to see it. On the whole, the stories overheard in the canteen drew

on the informal perspective, whereas the written stories tended to draw on the formal perspective. This supports the idea that the informal view is a lived, oral experience.

In contrast, the formal organisational view is largely textual as it is constructed through organisational policies and training and tends to be used in situations that require the written word. For example, there is the use of forms to textualise the recounting of a violent incident experienced and shape it to fit in with the formal

perspective (see chapter seven, section 4.2). Training also relies heavily on the written word through the extensive use of handouts and the whiteboard. The trainer talks about topics that are written on the white board and are part of her written agenda. This is carried out to the extent that the way the customer becomes angry is written down in decisive steps, just as the frontliners' ways of coping with anger is also written down. It seems that because these are written down they gain legitimacy and become the only way that things should happen or should be done. When frontliners draw on the informal perspective, in training by recounting violent stories of perceived violence, the trainer stops these oral accounts and brings them back to the formal view by pointing to the written down agenda and stating that they must stick to it (see chapter seven).

In fact, that which was not written down ceased to exist under the formal perspective. Much of the customer behaviour that frontliners experienced as violent was not written down in the incident book and therefore was not classed as violent by the formal perspective. Equally, there was no written policy on violence outside the workplace and thus violence outside the

workplace was not recognised by the formal perspective. However, the formal view was expressed orally by frontliners on occasion, for example in my interviews. This perspective is expressed individually by the frontliners but is not used or shared with other frontliners, therefore it is not a 'collective' perspective and does not require the spoken word for it to be reproduced, unlike the informal perspective. The formal perspective is reproduced throughout by the written word, through organisational policies



and training, and thus does not solely rely on the spoken word to survive. Overall, then, the formal perspective is primarily textually based whereas the informal perspective is primarily orally based.

## **9. Conclusion**

As suggested by social constructionism, it is clear that in the ES dominant groups will privilege certain versions of reality over others, although other perspectives still co-exist alongside the dominant versions of reality, competing and colliding for validity. As has been explained, in response to the dominant organisational view in the ES, a competing opposing perspective has been created and re-created by frontliners. However, service workers do not completely subscribe wholeheartedly to one notion of reality or the other but, despite the contradictory views, subscribe simultaneously to both perspectives in order to make sense of their working lives. Frontliners' subscription to the differing notions of reality has implications for the way in which frontliners cope with the violence experienced. The formal perspective lends itself better to individual coping strategies and the informal perspective is more suited to collective forms of coping. However, the use of both these perspectives by the frontliners also has implications for the organisation itself. These implications are explored in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 10**

### **ORGANISATIONAL IMPLICATIONS**

#### **1. Introduction**

This chapter examines the organisational implications of the differing perspectives on customer violence which are experienced within the ES and the coping mechanisms that they engender. These implications include the reproduction of the status quo, the invisibility of violence, the promotion of a 'them and us' culture and the significance taken on by a manager's physical presence. Each will be considered in turn.

#### **2. Reproduction of the Status Quo**

As explained in chapter nine, both the formal and informal perspectives individualised violence. The formal view individualised violence by rendering the frontliners as responsible for violence, whilst the informal view blamed the customer. This meant that the frontliners looked to change individual factors, such as frontliners themselves, or the customer as opposed to changing the structural and situational factors of the organisation. Therefore on first impressions it would seem that both views were essentially conservative and preserved the status quo. In many ways this is true; individualisation of violence through these viewpoints were largely conservative and usually did not encourage organisational change but instead preserved the situation.



In the previous chapter it was asserted that, in some practical ways, a lack of change in the current status quo was beneficial to those in hierarchical power. If the organisation was forced to accept responsibility for the violence, it would have needed extra resources for increased training, support services and better insurance. Equally, besides these practical reasons, management acknowledgment of frontliners' experiences of customer violence would have meant contradicting the customer service ideology. The idea that the customer is behaving badly does not sit well with the idea that the customer is king and can do no wrong. So, in this way, it was in management's interests to tolerate the informal view because it allowed frontliners to continue to cope with high levels of violence experienced.

The question now arises of whether the reproduction of the status quo was in fact beneficial to the frontliners. On first consideration it would appear that it was. Frontliners were able to draw on different versions of reality with different customers and different situations and use whichever perspective was beneficial to them. This way, they preserved many of the enjoyable aspects of interacting with the customer, whilst coping with the stress that they experienced from the negative side of perceived customer service and customer violence. However, by conserving this status quo the frontliners continued to experience high levels of customer violence whilst coping unaided by the formal organisation. By challenging and changing the situation, frontliners could have reduced the violence they experienced or even have prevented it altogether. At the very least, by attributing fault to situational and structural factors, frontliners could have forced the formal organisation to recognise the high level of violence that they experienced. This would have benefited them in a practical manner

in the same way that the lack of recognition benefited those in hierarchical power. The frontliners could have been given training that they felt realistically meets their needs, better insurance and, in general, more organisational support to help them to cope. Equally, frontliners would have benefited psychologically as they would not have been held responsible for customer violence and this would have fostered a more enjoyable working life for them. There was much common ground between the frontliners and those higher up in the organisational hierarchy. The frontliners derived a lot of job satisfaction from the ability to make the customers happy and satisfied, an outcome which is also usually much desired by the formal organisation (Korczynski, 2002). Equally, those higher up in the organisation would have benefited from a more contented frontline, not least through less sickness and a lower turnover of staff (turnover was cited to be high both by frontliners and management). Therefore, on closer inspection it would seem that a change in the situation which reduced or prevented the violence experienced would have been advantageous to all concerned.

However, after considering the ways in which the informal view did conserve the status quo, it is important to consider the fact that it may have not been entirely conservative. As was shown in chapter eight, the union attributed blame for perceived customer violence to the structural and organisational systematic factors meaning that this was a much more radical viewpoint which had potential to change the status quo. By its very nature, the trade union was representative of many of its members, and therefore must, in part, reflect some of their views. Thus although the informal view (largely expressed through the communities of coping) is different to the view espoused by the union, it is probable that in some way the informal view fed the unions



polices. In this way the informal view is not conservative but sows the seeds for campaigns for organisational change. The informal view's acknowledgement of the systematic nature of violence experienced by frontliners may be articulated to the union who feel that it is their duty to instigate change and protect service workers.

This thesis asserted that the informal view was espoused collectively and as its label suggests, informally, and was often nothing more than a way to express and cope with the stress of customer violence. It is argued that this view was mainly located within the unmanaged organisation where it was not concerned with challenging or dealing with the formal organisation. However, as discussed in chapter eight, prior to recording a violent incident (thus bringing it into the formal organisation) frontliners sounded it out within their communities of coping. The following quote taken from a frontliner (which is also quoted in the discussion in chapter eight) helps illustrate this:

*'If I have a pretty nasty incident I find a union official, have a casual chat or whatever with him, gauge the situation before filling in the form [official incident form]. If it was really bad I might ask them to bring it up at the next office meeting, yeah, although not everyone will, I mean there is obviously this thing with blokes, where they want to look tough, yeah. But no, I would let the union know, I mean if it was only something minor, well no, but otherwise...*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

It seems that here the informal view, expressed collectively may sometimes have been a precursor to bringing the informal account of the incident into the formal organisation. These formally

recorded incidents used by the union to challenge the status quo. In this way the informal communities of coping sowed the seed for attempts at organisational change. Indeed Simms (2003) argues that communities of coping may be a good resource for unions to tap into, in order to succeed in unionising sectors that have not traditionally been represented. Indeed, as discussed in chapter eight, in the ES the union encouraged frontliners to record violent incidents which were discussed informally in the context of communities of coping. The following quotes taken from union activists (already noted in chapter eight) help show the this encouragement:

*'The Trade Union frequently would encourage members to record incidents. You would usually find that the keener somebody was as a T.U. member, the more likely they were to record the incidents. It was often a case of it didn't really matter and nothing scares me, and something really bad happens...record, where's the form!'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Union Rep-Male-Caucasian)

*'As a union rep I would always encourage them to write it down. Even if we were just chatting about it, me as a friend, I would still try and get them to record it. I would get them a form to fill in, even if they hadn't asked for it. It's important to record incidents to see the bigger picture.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)

*'They weren't recorded – no. We as a Union encouraged frontliners to record incidents, but ... it's like crime figures today, isn't it - it's not an indication of what's really going on...'*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)



However, although the above quotes illustrate that the union encouraged frontliners to record customer behaviour that they perceived as violent, they also highlight frontliners' reluctance to do so. I also observed that frontliners only tended to report incidents that they found unusually threatening or serious and thus in this way were more in line with the formal organisational tendency to only recognise extreme customer behaviour. This suggests that although unions may have some success in drawing on the issues raised in communities of coping, this may be limited. The communities of coping and the informal views espoused within may remain largely part of the unmanaged organisation and thus outside the parameters of control (Gabriel 1995). Although the informal view did feed the unions campaigns for change, it was often, but not always, nothing more than a way to express and cope with the stress of customer violence experienced.

### **3. The Invisibility of Violence**

As previously discussed, I argue that the formal organisation did not recognise the perceived systematic nature of violence within the ES. Customer behaviour which was frequently experienced as violent by frontliners was not acknowledged as such or else it was constructed as the frontliner's fault and thus nothing to do with organisational factors. In this way, much of the violence experienced by frontliners was rendered invisible by the formal organisation.

However, power is not uni-directional and the frontliners did not passively absorb what was proclaimed from on high. Rather, they helped shape and were shaped by the organisation of which they were part. In fact, both the individual and collective coping mechanisms both contributed to the construction of violence as invisible. Each will be considered in turn.

The individual methods contributed to the individualising of violence and to the rendering of the victims as culpable in a number of ways. These methods were such as blaming other frontliners' skills, bending rules, anger displacement, expediting and putting on a brave face.

The first method, blaming violence on other frontliners' deficient skills, was common and worked with the official policies to individualise and culpabilise the victim. The following listed mechanisms were all used to allow frontliners to cope with the notion of threat which was included in customer violence. These involved avoiding what could be considered as 'official' violent incidents through bending rules, anger displacement and expediting. In these ways, frontliners used a number of ploys to avoid formal categorisation, probably to distance themselves from these events and the stigma of inadequacy which followed in their wake. Frontliners also coped by putting on a brave face with the intention, not of avoiding experiencing violent incidents altogether, but of minimising the fuss. However, this meant that violence experienced was quickly skipped over and, again, much of it was rendered invisible.



The very nature of collective coping mechanisms meant that, to a certain extent, they acknowledged the systematic nature of violence experienced by frontliners. However, collective coping methods were also complicit in the invisibility of violence. Mechanisms included talking about violence at work together in the canteen, telling each other stories, using humour, keeping vigilance over each other, using offstage areas to cope and covert resistance against the customer. By coping together as a group, frontliners tended not to challenge the construction of violence experienced out of the workplace, but accepted the status quo by finding ways to deal with it within the existing paradigm. For example, by talking about customer violence experienced and telling stories about it, they recognised that it was a common problem and thus they asserted the perceived systematic nature of violence. However, by not actively challenging the level of aggression experienced, the construction of violence out of the workplace was allowed to continue and in this way frontliners were complicit in the construction of violence as invisible.

Frontliners were also complicit in the invisibility of violence through their failure to record violent incidents and make them official. It was true that this practice was largely discouraged by management who, as explained, usually blamed the frontliner for the incident and therefore frontliners did not want to record them. However, frontliners could have recorded more incidents and braved management's disapproval, something which was encouraged by the union as the following quotes from union activists show. All of the following quotes have been used in chapter eight (and also cited earlier in this chapter in section two).

*'The Trade Union frequently would encourage members to record incidents. You would usually find that the keener somebody was as a T.U. member, the more likely they were to record the incidents.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-28-Union rep-Male-Caucasian)

*'They weren't recorded – no. We as a Union encouraged frontliners to record incidents, but ... It's like crime figures today, isn't it - it's not an indication of what's really going on...'*

(Union Official-48-Male-Caucasian)

*'As a union rep I would always encourage them to write it down. Even if we were just chatting about it, me as a friend, I would still try and get them to record it. I would get them a form to fill in, even if they hadn't asked for it. It's important to record incidents to see the bigger picture.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-40-Union Rep-Female-Caucasian)

As can be seen in the above quotes, the union encouraged frontliners to record any customer violence. As management only recognised officially recorded incidents as customer violence, the union was keen for frontliners to record more incidents in order to enable them to bring a stronger case for safety issues for frontliners. However, unless the incident was quite a serious one, frontliners did not record the incident, helping render the rest of the violence invisible (see chapter eight section three). However as discussed in the previous section the collective coping mechanisms cannot be said to be entirely conservative, as the informal perspective helped feed union policies and campaigns.



One-off violent incidents experienced were acknowledged by the formal organisation because they were recorded. Equally, one-off incidents which were experienced as especially violent were easy for the organisation to recognise as violence, and not as just a product of bad frontliner skills, because they did not have to be seen as part of 'normal organisational life'. This only served to further construct the remaining violence as invisible. The following quotes from two frontliners at the same city job centre help illustrate the formal organisation's acknowledgment of certain violent incidents:

*'Yeah, we had a very major incident here, like you know this guy came in and he was supposed to be really violent and the policemen took to arrest him and he had pulled out a gun on the Police in here on the ground floor. So he pulled out a gun and then we had these armed Police you know that come in to you know get him, and we had surveillance party across there you know across the office on the ground and we had the armed Police on the first floor, so they were going to get him when he came to sign on. So we had a very major incident you know. The Head Office was involved and the Manager was involved, and yeah and all the people who were on the Frontline they were told that you know this is going to happen because the Police wants to arrest him.'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-46-Frontliner-Male-British Asian)

*'there was an incident a little while ago and I think Jim Tyler {district manager} was involved where an actual Police incident etc, oh gosh I can't remember the specifics, but a client...can't remember for the life of me exactly what happened but someone who was supposedly armed and was due to be arrested ended up*

*on the foyer downstairs and Police actually did arrest at that time, and we have specific policies in place for that now but until that was, actually happened and the way everyone reacted to it was thoroughly unprofessional. It was so you wouldn't believe it if you didn't see it for yourself, but obviously we're looking at, what, forty-five 'x' amount of staff here and each one has to be trained, each one comes from different backgrounds, different ways of viewing these things, and different people think they're doing the right thing. But certainly a proper policy has to be educated to everybody and I think that was taken on board at that time. Although we are yet to hear exactly what, I think, but we still have set rules and regulations regarding this sort of thing now.'*

(Large City Job Centre –2-42-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

Both these frontliners are talking about the same incident, which was acknowledged by the formal organisation as violent through the involvement of district office and the creation of specific policies, as highlighted in the above quotes. This type of incident was a rare occurrence and this meant that it did not have to be recognised as part of normal everyday life in the job centre. Thus, the organisation recognised this incident as violent without needing to change or affect the current organisational status quo. By only recognising and illuminating these rare incidents, the other more mundane incidents which are experienced as violent and aggressive, are not acknowledged, becoming further hidden. Acknowledging the rest of perceived violent customer behaviour would mean that the organisation would have to admit that experiencing violence and aggression was a part of frontliners' normal organisational lives and would require far-reaching changes within the organisation.



#### **4. Promotion of a 'Them and Us' Culture**

The use of both the formal and informal perspectives promoted a 'them and us' culture. Although frontliners drew on both perspectives within the organisation, the formal perspective was more strongly associated with management as a group and the informal view was more strongly associated with the frontliners as a group. When frontliners were together as a group in informal spaces, such as the canteen, they drew upon the informal perspective in order to form 'communities of coping' (Korczynski, 2002). By drawing on an opposing perspective to that of management, they distinguished themselves as a distinct group from management, thus creating a group identity and a 'them and us' culture.

The coping mechanisms that arose from the informal perspective were generally much better suited to collective coping. The majority of these mechanisms actually required the individual to be part of a group in order to be carried out. These ways of coping were such as talking about customer violence at work together in the canteen, telling each other stories about the customer violence they experience, using humour to relieve the stress of violence experienced, and by keeping vigilance over each other in order to try to protect each other. Although other collective coping mechanisms could be carried out individually, such as relieving stress in offstage areas and carrying out covert resistance against the customer, both attributed blame to the customer for the violence and thus helped bond the frontliners through the acknowledgment of a common problem. By using the informal

view, frontliners coped as a group, linking this perspective with the identity of themselves as frontliners.

Although frontliners did draw upon the formal perspective, they did this individually and not as a group. When observing frontliners interaction within the canteen I frequently witnessed them drawing on the collective perspective but I rarely observed the frontliners referring to the formal perspective. The formal view only seemed to be drawn upon individually when the frontliners were interviewed, meaning that this perspective was not associated with the frontliners as a group. Drawing on the formal view with each other would have betrayed the communities of coping that had arisen.

The coping methods that drew on the formal perspective were: bending the rules, displacing their own anger, expediting the client, putting a brave face on their own feelings, and erecting personal boundaries (see chapter seven). The nature of these coping mechanisms meant that they lent themselves much more easily to being carried out by an individual and not as part of group consensus. As already discussed, the formal perspective was embedded in official policies and procedures and frequently were espoused by management, therefore this view became associated with the management as a group. The expression of these perspectives in this way contributes to a 'them and us' culture.

### **5. Managers' Physical Presence on the Frontline**

As has been discussed, the formal view did not acknowledge much of the violence experienced by frontliners. One implication of this



was that frontliners wanted their managers to be physically around them on the frontline. In this way they were reassured that their manager was not ignorant of the violence they were experiencing, despite the formal organisation's lack of acknowledgment. Adding to the notion that managers were ignorant of the violence experienced by frontliners was the fact that the majority of managers' offices were far away from the frontline, meaning that managers did not have to be exposed to customer violence as part of their job. Through the remoteness of managers' offices, alongside the lack of acknowledgment of frontliners' experiences of violence by the formal organisation, a manager's physical presence came to represent his or her knowledge about an employee's work and the violence experienced. For example, if managers had a frequent physical presence on the frontline, employees were able to see for themselves that the manager is there observing the violence they experience, despite the formal view:

*'I mean this manager, he's a lot better than the last one. The last one didn't have any clues whatsoever. He lived in cloud cuckoo land as far as I was concerned. We never saw him. But this one's a lot better. He's more the people's person. So yes, obviously you can talk to him about - depending on when you see him - you can talk to him about whatever...So yes, he seems a bit better.'*

(Large City Job Centre-2-41-Frontliner-Female-African)

This employee clearly states that the old manager was ignorant of all that was around him (he was in 'cloud cuckoo land'). She qualifies this statement with the fact that he was never observed to be physically there in their working area. She then compares him to the current manager, and explains that he is a lot better,

presumably meaning that he is less ignorant. She explains that you can talk to him whenever you see him, suggesting that he is frequently around on the frontline. The following quote also illustrates that an absence of a manager's presence in the frontline area indicated their ignorance of employees working lives and a concurrence with the formal view:

*'And if somebody's a pretty lone character anyway and they have to wait 35 or 40 minutes to be seen, they're steaming by the time you get to them and you know it, you can hear it in the queue, and you can't just hear it but see it... language gets abusive, it's personally abusive, and you think I'm going to get this man in 10 minutes ... And it's pretty disgusting sometimes. Some of us can cope with it, but some of our other staff - it depends on personal circumstances - but they can't always cope with it or find it very, very distressing and I really feel that they [the management] are so far removed from the frontline, all these changes that they're being expected to make puts so much more pressure on your function...they should support us, they don't understand.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 1-23-Frontliner-Female-Caucasian)

This employee stresses that because 'they' (the management) are so distant from the frontline, they do not understand the violence that employees' experience. She explains that the management have no idea about what the implementation of various changes will involve because of this ignorance of employees' everyday working experiences.

As noted, a manager's physical presence came to be significant largely due to the formal organisational perspective, which did not



acknowledge the systematic nature of violence experienced by the frontliners. A manager's physical presence in non-work areas took on different connotations; a manager's physical presence in non-work areas was strongly disliked. Within non-work areas frontliners coped collectively, indulging in the informal perspective which was contrary to the formal perspective. As discussed in the previous section, management was associated with the formal perspective and therefore their presence was not welcome in non-work spaces. This desire to keep informal spaces as areas that were free from management jurisdiction further contributes to the 'them and us' culture. The following quote taken from a frontliner helps show this:

*'Make sure you do this. Make sure you do that. We started saying that we don't want any work on that white board, because we used to leave messages for each other. You know, if someone's had a baby, or I don't know whether it's still there, but two people have had babies and we put it up on there, born such and such and congratulations to whatever, and at one stage we did say we didn't want any work on there because it's a tea room and we want to go in there and relax and get away from that. But that didn't go down very well, but it did - you know, the stats and that were taken off, but then she does put stuff on there, which is work related. She's often in there doing it. Whether it gets read or not is another story.'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-35-Frontliner-Female-British Asian)

In the above quote, a manager's actions are resented when she brings her jurisdiction into the canteen. A management presence in the form of directives on the whiteboard is also heavily resisted.

Work was put up on the board then, after resistance in the form of complaints, was taken down. Following this, work is again put up, but here the feeling is conveyed that frontliners (purposely) do not read it. This may well be a tactic to avoid the formal organisation spilling over into informal areas. In the following quote the frontliner explains that what is talked about is restricted by who is in the canteen and she gives the specific example of her manager. She explains that she and a colleague like to moan about the customers (amongst other things) which is consistent with the idea that frontliners share the informal view in the canteen. This quote has also been used as part of a longer quote in chapter eight.

*'Yeah but they don't have time, all the bitching takes place in the canteen, and that's limited by who's in the canteen with you! If Melanie {the manager} is around... But when you're sitting like I sit opposite Debra all day and moan about the customers, the people, everything...'*

(Middle Sized Town Job Centre 2-34-Frontliner-Male-Caucasian)

## **6. Conclusion**

The way that the frontliners coped has implications for the organisation. Through the examination of these implications, it becomes clear that power was not uni-directional but that all organisational members played a role in creating and reproducing organisational realities. Although the status quo was largely unbeneficial for the frontliners, it was important to realise that they were often (though not always) complicit in the creation and reproduction of these organisational realities. Nevertheless, that is not to argue that they have complete freedom of action for their



part. Implicit in many organisations, including the ES, is the role of hierarchical power, which will privilege the views and actions of those higher up and seriously inhibit the views of those lower down.

## **Chapter 11**

### **CONCLUSION**

#### **1. Introduction**

First, this chapter provides an overview of this study, underlining its importance and situating it within the literature. Following on from this, it will discuss the different ways that violence is constructed and the impact this has on the way that frontliners cope. Finally, this chapter examines the interplay between the different constructions of violence, before exploring the wider theoretical, political and research implications.

#### **2. Overview of Study and Empirical Contributions**

This thesis has explored the coping mechanisms used by Employment Service (ES) frontliners to deal with customer behaviour that is experienced as violent. The continued growth of the interactive service population increasingly shifts customer-worker relations to centre stage. This means that the way that frontliners cope with customer violence is a significant and important area of study.



Within the ES, frontliners' experience much of the customer behaviour as violent. The type of work carried out in the ES - helping people find jobs, distributing benefits, and so on, means that intense emotion can often result from the interaction between the frontline and the service recipient. On the one hand, finding a long-wanted job might well provide a sense of well-being for both parties concerned. However, countering this, repeated failure to find work and/or the stoppage of benefits will frequently result in negative feelings which can sometimes lead to customer behaviour that is experienced as violent by the frontliner.

Providing customer service to abusive customers has frequently been acknowledged as a potentially painful experience for frontliners (Hochschild, 1983; Taylor, 1998; Smith, 1992; Korczynski, 2002). The need to find ways to cope with this has also been recognised (Hochschild, 1983; Korczynski, 2002 and 2003; Mann, 1999). The emotional labour literature details ways that frontliners cope with performing customer service in general (for example Hochschild 1983, Noon and Blyton 1997, Taylor and Tyler 2000, Wharton 1993 and Taylor 1998). This thesis has been more specific in its focus through examining precisely how frontliners cope with an extreme end of emotional labour - customer violence. ES frontliners' frequent experience of much customer behaviour as violent made the ES an excellent context within which to study this topic and has provided rich insights into this area. Accordingly, this thesis has been able to examine how the organisational construction of violence underpins the way that frontliners cope with violence experienced and the implications of this. The interplay between the organisational construction of violence and the means of coping used by frontliners is something

that has tended to be overlooked within the emotional labour literature. In fact, in this literature there is a shortage of studies which adequately consider the issue of customer violence at all. However, as discussed previously, an exception to this is research carried out by Boyd (2002) which addresses violence in both the railway and airline industries. Yet customer violence can be a significant albeit painful part of emotional labour. The lack of research on the way in which frontliners specifically cope with this aspect is thus an important omission in the literature, and one that this thesis has sought to help redress.

Within the organisational violence literature, the way frontliners cope with violent customers is mostly located within the more positivistic literature, which focuses on health and safety aspects. Here, violence is used as a self-evident, objective term, which, as chapter three has argued, is problematic. Within the more interpretive literature, the idea that frontliners cope with customer violence is referred to only in passing; there are no in-depth studies in this area. Again, this thesis has strived to help remedy this oversight.

A further weakness of the organisational violence literature is that organisational violence is explored through the use of generalisations at a macro level, without exploring the construction of violence in-depth at a micro level (for example, Hearn and Parkin 2001, Hearn 1994). Such writers tend to call for future research in the area, and whilst they do allude to the social construction of violence in organisations, they do not examine how or why this happens (for more on this see chapter three). This thesis has strived to go some way to fill that gap, having



investigated the construction of violence at a micro level and considered its implications.

In exploring the way that frontliners cope with customer violence, this thesis has sought to integrate both the emotional labour literature and the organisational violence literature. In doing this, it has combined insights from both in an attempt to deepen our understanding of frontliners methods of coping with customer-worker violence.

As previously discussed, my research found that within the ES there were two main constructions of organisational violence: the formal organisational construction of violence and the informal construction of violence. Both of these elements influenced frontliners' ways of coping and will now be examined in turn.

### **3. The Formal Construction of Violence**

On analysing the data collected, it was found that the formal organisation constructed the idea of customer violence through formal policies and procedures, training and management rhetoric (see chapter seven). Indeed, it was discovered that the formal organisation constructed customer violence in such a way as to deny frontliners perceptions of its systematic nature and to render much of the violence experienced by frontliners as invisible (see chapter ten). It achieved this in two main ways. Firstly, the ES did not acknowledge much of the customer behaviour experienced by frontliners as violent, as such. It accomplished this by failing to acknowledge any customer violence experienced that was not recorded in the incident books, which were the basis for figures

used and quoted by senior management. If an incident was not in the incident book it was not classed as violent and thus ceased to exist. The organisation did, however, acknowledge acts of violence experienced which were unusual, such as those involving the police. By acknowledging only those uncommon or extraordinary acts as violent, more mundane violence experienced was not seen as part of 'ordinary' everyday life. Consequently, it was thrown further into shadow and, in contrast, seen as normal. In this way, much of the customer behaviour that is considered by the frontliners as violent is not acknowledged as such by the formal organisation. This denial of the systematic nature of the more mundane violence experienced by frontliners is supported by the writings of Hearn and Parkin (2001). They claim that just as sexual harassment was, until recently, regarded as a normal part of organisational life so too are many other organisational violations - including violence. They emphasise that by recognising the more extreme acts of violence, the more mundane acts are allowed to pass as normal or unnoticed.

Secondly, it was found that the formal organisation constructed frontliners as responsible for violence. The formal organisation employed the customer sovereignty ideology to construct violence as a product of frontliners' poor customer service skills by implying that a skilful frontliner should be able to avoid such incidents. Thus, the formal organisation did not acknowledge the systematic and structural causes of what frontliners perceived as violent incidents, thereby disassociating the organisation with customer violence. In this way, customer behaviour which is experienced by frontliners as violent is constructed out of the workplace. This construction of the victims of violence as responsible corresponds with the mainstream discourse on coping



with stress. In accordance with the individualisation, of the stress within academic and media discourses, coping strategies proposed by organisations to deal with stress tend to be predominantly 'victim-centred' (Fineman 2003: 147) and aimed at the individual (DeFrank and Cooper 1987) whereas organization level strategies are comparatively rare (Murphy 1984). Writers such as Newton (1985) and Fineman (2003) point out that by constructing stress as an individualised concept the stressed subject is much more likely to look to him or herself as the cause and much less likely to recognise social and collective causes.

Equally, this individualisation is also consistent with a study by Rowlett (1986) in which social workers felt responsible for the violent behaviour of clients. However, Rowlett's study - like so many studies of violence in organisations - takes the concept of violence as a given and thus does not recognise its polysemic nature. That is, Rowlett does not consider different constructions by different organisational groups, the role that social structures might play, nor the dominant ideologies that may underpin them. In my study, recognising the polysemic construction of violence has led to the finding that the dominant ideology of customer sovereignty underpins the construction of frontliners as responsible for violence, which is an important one. Significantly, the finding is applicable to other frontline contexts where the customer sovereignty ideology may also be employed to render the frontliners responsible for customer violence. Of course, this raises public policy implications. These are considered later in this chapter.

Through its construction of violence, then, the formal organisation individualises the concept of violence. As previously discussed not

only is a failure to *cope* with violence experienced seen as a frontliner's fault, but also the *customer violence itself*, is constructed as the service worker's fault through their failure to avoid the situation using good customer service skills. This fits in with a study carried out by Rowlett (1986) which found that social workers felt responsible for the violent behaviour of clients. This thesis extends these findings to a frontline context, arguing that customer sovereignty is used as a way to force service workers to accept responsibility for the violent incidents they experience. The methods of coping were found to reflect this.

Thus, the organisational construction of violence denies the perceived systematic nature of violence through the two major ways discussed above, and effectively constructs violence experienced out of the workplace, rendering it invisible. This study suggests that the ideology of customer sovereignty provides an important ideological underpinning for the invisibility of customer-worker violence in not only the ES but also many other service organisations. Even though the nature of customers for the ES differs significantly from customers in the private sector, in which the idea of customer sovereignty originates, the ideology of customer service was still present. 'Despite the differing nature of ES customers (non-paying, no choice and so on) the ideology of customer sovereignty still played a significant role in the construction of customer behaviour perceived by frontliners as violent as invisible.'

From the above discussion it becomes apparent that customer sovereignty plays an important part in the construction of customer-worker violence in organisations. The wider implications of this are considered later on in this chapter. However, despite the



fact that the customer sovereignty ideology is increasingly being adopted within the workplace, a significant omission of the violence literature is its lack of consideration of customer sovereignty and the role it plays in customer violence. This is one of the many ways in which the writings on emotional labour can add to the violence literature and help deepen our understanding of customer violence. Thus, by bringing these two literatures together, this thesis has sought to help rectify this oversight.

### **Formal Methods of Coping**

As discussed formal coping mechanisms, which have arisen from the formal construction of violence, are carried out individually: in accordance with the formal organisation's individualisation of violence. Methods include: expediting, anger displacement, bending the rules, putting on a brave face and erecting boundaries. The first two of these are detailed in the emotional labour literature. Although, as noted earlier, this literature does not specifically deal with coping with customer violence but coping with customer service in general, it has insights which are applicable to coping with customer violence. Each of these will be considered in turn.

The first means of coping discussed was the idea that frontliners coped with the threat of violent customers by 'expediting' them. That is, some frontliners coped with particularly well-known violent customers by dealing with and getting rid of them as soon as possible in order to avoid experiencing violent incidents. This method of coping was identified by Bailey and McCollough (2000), who argue that frontliners do this to shield other customers from the abusive customers as well as ending the unpleasant

encounter for themselves. My data did not find any reference to the idea that frontliners wanted to shield other customers, perhaps this was because the ES is not attempting to retain customers and so shielding them becomes of less importance. However, my findings did indicate that the main reason why frontliners coped in this way was to avoid the threat of violence developing into a full blown violent incident, which would accordingly be blamed on the frontliners as a result of their lack of customer handling skills.

Another coping device employed by the ES frontliners was the concept of anger displacement. This was where instead of being angry with the sovereign customer, which the dominant ideology of customer sovereignty would not allow, they showed their anger in other ways - for example, swearing, punching the desk or having a cigarette. Sutton (1991) talks about debt collectors hitting their desks as a way to disperse anger and Hochschild (1983) refers to the coping mechanisms of cussing, hitting, chewing ice or flushing the toilet repeatedly in order to deal with the difficulties of customer service. My research found that because ES frontliners were dealing with face-to-face service interactions they had to displace their anger away from the frontline.

The next mechanism to be considered was breaking the rules. Although this is not referred to in the emotional labour literature, it is similar to the research within the public sector literature. For example Prottas 1974 argues that the rules within a public sector bureaucracy are such that frontliners can manoeuvre and then 'bend the rules' to have a discretionary amount of autonomy and power. Indeed it is frequently argued that this independence allows staff to make public policy in the sense that they affect what actually happens to the recipients rather than what the official



policy makers intended to happen (Lipsky 1978, Brintall 1981, Wunsch et al 1981, Prottas 1979). The remaining ways of coping I found in my research that stemmed from the organisational construction of violence have not been identified by the emotional labour literature. These mechanisms include denial that the customer is angry with the frontliner themselves, putting on a brave face and erecting boundaries (see chapter seven). All of these methods alongside bending the rules, allow the frontliner to cope with customers experienced as violent whilst still maintaining the façade of customer sovereignty - and thus still being a 'good' frontliner in the eyes of the formal organisation. Customer sovereignty was used as a way to force frontliners to accept responsibility for the violent incidents experienced and the coping mechanisms reflected this. The blaming of another frontliner, for example, was an attempt to shift the responsibility for the violent incident onto someone else. Bending the rules and expediting were all used to avoid what could be considered as 'official' violent incidents. Frontliners want to avoid official incidents due to the stigma of inadequacy which is attached. As previously discussed, this is similar to findings by Rowlett (1986) who argues that social workers who expressed violence from clients were stereotyped as inadequate and stigmatised. The coping device of putting on a brave face reflects the frontliner trying to cope with the violence whilst still retaining the image of a 'good frontliner' who copes easily with customer violence without violating the idea of customer sovereignty. This finding provides examples of surface and deep acting as described as Hochschild (1985) yet here it is not just used to allow the frontliner to perform emotional labour, but also to cope with customer violence as well.

#### **4. The Informal Construction of Violence**

In contrast to the formal organisational construction of violence, the informal perspective does not construct perceived violence as an individualised concept, but as a collective one which is common to all frontliners. Customer violence experienced is seen as a problem regardless of customer service skills and blame is placed firmly with the customer. The coping mechanisms that arise from this perspective reflect this and provide frontliners with the chance of coping collectively, together as well as individually. Even if frontliners cope individually, when drawing on this perspective they will still be coping with what is perceived as a common, collective problem. However, most of the ways of coping in this perspective are collective methods of coping and require more than one frontliner to be carried out.

Collective coping is not considered at all within the organisational violence literature - a gap in knowledge that this thesis aims to help fill. As previously noted this idea was first identified within the emotional labour literature - by Hochschild (1983) and has since been alluded to in other research (such as Korczynski 2003, Sutton 1991, Benner & Wrubel, 1990; Norbeck, 1985; Satyamurti, 1981; Handy, 1990; Benson, 1978; Bailey & McCollough, 2000; Sutton, 1991; Smith, 1999; Zemke & Schnaff, 1989). This general idea of collective coping is broadly reflected in my in-depth exploration of specific coping devices. As previously noted in chapter four, although collective coping is acknowledged in the emotional labour literature, with the exception of Korczynski (2003), it is not examined in any depth. However, this thesis seeks to further this exploration of collective coping by specifically focusing on the issue of coping with violence by examining it in a different



frontline setting, one where customers and frontliners meet face to face. As suggested by Korczynski (2003) that varying interactions will impact on the communities of coping, my research found that this different type of interaction had implications for the enactment of communities of coping - collective coping took place in offstage areas and not on the frontline in view of the customers. Equally, this context of face-to-face interaction involved the threat of customer physical harm, bringing the possibility of physical acts of violence into the equation. This impacted upon collective coping mechanisms used. In particular, frontliners kept vigilance over each other. This means of coping is not alluded to in the literature and more research is needed to examine if this type of collective coping is more common in frontline organisations with a comparatively high number of face-to-face violent customers.

Korczynski (2003) argues that the origins of communities of coping lie in the frontliners need to sustain the myth of customer sovereignty in the face of abusive customers. He further argues that frontliners are unable to talk to their managers because they are the ones espousing the customer sovereignty argument, but that they turn to each other and form communities of coping. Although my study supports this argument, it also found that the ideology of customer sovereignty actually renders the frontliners as responsible for the violent incidents, providing another reason why service workers cannot turn to their managers and thus cope collectively. Frontliners could not talk about violence with their managers and still remain a 'good frontliner' because the customer sovereignty ideology constructs the violence experienced as a result of their own inadequacies.

Although the interpretivist literature on organisational violence does not individualise the concept but portrays it as a product of social structures (Hearn, 1994; Cately and Jones, 2002; Hearn and Parkin, 2001), the collective experience of violence is not acknowledged at all. Indeed, Hearn and Parkin (2001) not only fail to acknowledge this aspect but actually comment that organisational violence is unusual in that it is experienced predominantly on an individual basis and not as part of a collective. This thesis hopes to rectify this oversight.

The informal construction of customer violence lays the blame with the customer, who is viewed as a common problem. This serves to bring about communities of coping which unite the frontliners as a group and help reinforce a group identity. By drawing on an opposing perspective to that of management as a group, they are distinguishing themselves as a distinct group, thus creating a 'them and us' culture. The group identity associated with this collective way of coping may actually limit the extent to which the ideology of customer sovereignty is subscribed to by frontliners because these coping processes focus their attention on how awful the customer is, a far cry from the image of the sovereign customer. More research is needed to ascertain if communities of coping set limits on how far management can take the ideology of customer sovereignty.

### **Collective Coping Mechanisms**

The coping mechanisms which arise from the informal construction of violence include: 1. talking together in the canteen, 2. telling each other stories, 3. using humour 4. using offstage areas



to cope, 5. keeping vigilance over each other and 6. covert resistance against the customer. All six methods were influenced by the informal construction of customer violence. However, methods 1-5 inclusive were actually carried out collectively and all formed part of the idea of communities of coping. Many writers have talked about the collective aspects of coping (Korczynski 2002, Fineman, 1995; Benson 1978 Menzies, 1959; Satyamurti, 1981; and Handy, 1990). For example, Fineman (1995: 21) found that field social workers would often look to each other for comfort, whereas Wrubel (1989) and Norbeck (1985) both explored the importance of collective coping in nurse's work. Equally, Benson (1978) also alludes to the significance of coping collectively in research on retail workers.

The first means of coping, talking together about violent customers, is written about in the emotional labour literature and so, again, this literature has relevance for customer violence. Although this coping device is not always stated explicitly it is alluded to in much of the emotional labour literature under the guise of frontliners coping collectively. For example Hochschild recounts that collective talk helps raise the workers mood whilst on duty (p.115) and Korczynski (2000) has noted the painful experiences among call centre workers. By talking between themselves, this study found that frontliners are able to reassure themselves that they are not inadequate frontliners as implied by the formal construction of violence.

The next manner of coping that was detailed is the collective telling of stories. The emotional labour literature does not mention stories as a method of coping specifically, although it does sometimes use stories as part of its overall data. However, the

literature on organisational stories does mention that they can be a method of coping with the difficulties of organisational life in general. Gabriel (2000) argues that stories may be used to express what cannot be expressed through straightforward talk due to organisational policies and norms. This is relevant to the way in which frontliners tell stories about violence. In the ES, the majority of stories told by frontliners derided customers. This was in direct contradiction to the dominant customer sovereignty ideology in the organisation, thus stories can be perceived as a way of expressing that which cannot be expressed in a straightforward way. This is a similar finding to that of Hochschild (1986) who argues that a story frequently told about an airhostess was used to challenge the company's frequent emphasis on the need to smile. It is probable that in organisations where there is a strong emphasis on customer sovereignty, there will be a rich story culture. Writers such as Gabriel (2000), Tangherlini (2000) and Martin et al (1983) take suffering as one of the functions of stories, when they argue that stories are an expression of misfortune and a release of emotion. This supports my findings that frontliners used stories as a way to release emotion and tension brought on by customers that were experienced as violent.

Humour, was the next coping mechanism discussed. This was a way to relieve the stress of violence experienced. In general, this is not specifically examined in the emotional labour or the violence literature. However, an exception to this is Sanders (2000) exploration of the coping strategies employed by prostitutes to manage occupational hazards. She found that prostitutes used six types of humour to deal with these hazards, which included the possibility of violence. However, workplace humour and joking relationships have been recognised as significant kinds of



organisational behaviour since the 1950s (Bradney, 1957; Sykes, 1966; Wilson, 1999; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). A fair amount of this literature also recognises humour as a way to cope with organisational life (Roy, 1960; Linstead, 1985; Collinson, 1992; Talbot and Lumden, 2000), although little has been written specifically about humour as a way to cope with work place violence. Focusing on the ES specifically, although Blau (1955) largely focuses on the negative effect of frontliner ridicule of clients, he does acknowledge that this can be a way of coping which serves to absolve the frontliner of guilt. He claims that the telling of jokes was a way of removing group tension and guilt surrounding benefit recipients. Indeed I found that within the ES, humour played a part in helping the frontliners collectively cope with their experiences of customer violence. As with the stories, the majority of the humour was directed at the customer, although frontliners laughed at each other as well.

Some writers highlight the use of humour as a way of coping by providing workers with a means of support (Bolton, 2001; Bolton and Boyd, 2003; Duncan and Feisal, 1989; Barsoux, 1993). Ackroyd and Thompson (1999), for example, point out that mockery often targets management, thus promoting greater solidarity between workers. This idea seems relevant to the ES frontliners because, although the humour was not directed at the common adversary of management, it was aimed at another common antagonist: the perceived violent customer. This was an interesting finding and one which highlights the authority of the customer in frontline work. Alongside the rational-legal authority identified by Weber, it is often argued that authority also derives from the customer (Korczynski, 2002), giving rise to the perception of 'two bosses' (Mars et al., 1979; Shamir 1980).

Therefore, just as ridiculing management is found to have encouraged worker solidarity (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999), it is very probable that the use of humour to mock the customers in the ES also promoted frontliner camaraderie.

Workplace humour is often referred to as a challenge to organisational ideas and ideologies. Linstead (1985), for example, points out that due to the perception that humour is inconsequential play, ideas and concepts can be voiced which would otherwise not be acceptable or possible. This was the case in the ES, where frontliners used humour to voice complaints against the customer, which due to the customer sovereignty ideology would be frowned upon if expressed in a more serious way. This function of humour is similar to the use of stories which, as noted earlier, were used to express what could not be expressed in a more serious way. Organisational humour is also perceived as challenging existing social structures through its potential to reverse power relations (Linstead, 1985; Douglas, 1975). This idea was apparent in the use of humour within the ES. By collectively ridiculing the customer, not only is the blame for the incident reallocated, but there is also a reversal of power relations. Instead of treating the sovereign customer with respect the customer is mocked and belittled. Indeed, the use of humour within the ES may also have been a reflection of the ambiguous nature of the customer. On the one hand, frontliners are encouraged by the formal organisation to view them as a commercial, sovereign customer, yet on the other hand, the frontliners are aware that the customers differ in nature to commercial customers. Therefore, the mocking of the 'sovereign customer' may be an expression of the contradictions within the organisational structures within which they work. Indeed, Douglas (1975) suggests that jokes often work well because they mimic or



articulate inconsistencies within the social structure. She claims that if there is no inconsistency in the social structure then no joke can appear (1975: p.110).

As discussed above, by challenging organisational identities and structures humour is often viewed as subversive and a form of resistance (Douglas, 1975; Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). However, it is important to remember that, in the ES at least, humour was used as a way of coping with customer violence and not changing it. In this way, the use of humour can be seen as essentially conservative. Writers such as Cohen and Taylor (1975) argue that humour is not a prelude to social change but a means of distancing people from their circumstances by regarding them with less seriousness. Thus, instead of viewing humour as subversive, it is seen as a way to preserve the status quo. However, in light of the above discussion about challenges to the organisational ideologies within the ES, to portray humour as totally submissive is to deny its enormous symbolic power. Rather, this thesis draws on Linstead who argues that it is more accurate to acknowledge humour's paradoxical quality to resist the dominant formulations but also to accommodate them (Linstead, 1985).

The next coping mechanism to be discussed is the use of offstage areas. This is referred to in the emotional labour literature as both a management-led strategy (Mann, 1999) and, equally, as a coping mechanism led by frontliners (Boje, 1991; Gabriel, 1991). In the ES, it was found that it was frontliner led, and informally occurred in the offstage area of the canteen to allow service workers to practice informal ways of coping collectively. This meant that a manager's jurisdiction in the canteen was severely disliked, which helped contribute to the 'them and us culture' (see chapter ten).

The final collective coping mechanism of keeping vigilance over each other was not identified in either the emotional labour literature or the violence literature, but it nevertheless was found to be an important way that frontliners cope and thus my research expands knowledge in this area. Due to the nature of this method of coping, it is still highly likely that it will only be used in organisations where frontliners experience acts of physical violence. When frontliners are faced with a customer who is perceived as violent they will naturally become concerned with their safety and equally the safety of their colleagues. This highlights that although many of the means of coping will be common amongst the majority of frontliners across organisations, some will also be dependent on the context of the organisation. As previously noted Korczynski (2002) argues that the different type of interaction will have implications for the enactment of communities of coping. The face-to-face context of the ES which includes the high threat of physical acts of violence means that it is different to other frontline contexts in the way that frontliners cope with abusive customers. Firstly, frontliners will keep vigilance over each other, as discussed above, and secondly, frontliners need to cope off stage because they need to do this away from the customers.

The final coping device, covert resistance against the customer, is still considered a collective means of coping even if carried out individually, because it is still concerned with coping with what is seen as a common problem: the customer. This method of coping is written about at by Van Maanen and Kunda (1989) who illustrate how ride attendants in Disneyland used various ploys to deal with difficult customers. Hochschild also provides the



examples of a flight attendants coping in this way, for example pouring 'ex-lax' into a customer's coffee or purposely spilling drinks(p113-114). These writers point out that this goes against the 'service ideal' whilst at the same time maintaining the mask of emotional display that is required by management ideals. This was certainly found to be the case within the ES. However, it is important to note that although frontliners were directly contradicting the ideology of customer service espoused by the formal organisation, it was not an open challenge to management. It was conservative and was not aimed at change, but at coping with the situation.

### **5. Opposing Realities: A Discussion of the Interplay of the Differing Constructions of Violence**

As has already been explained, the formal construction of violence exists in relation to the directly opposing informal construction of violence. Both perspectives compete to be seen as the 'truth' and both influence the frontliners in their choice of coping mechanisms. Frontliners subscribe to either perspective, depending on the situation, to suit their own needs and ends.

A finding of this research is that frontliners' means of coping were often part of maintaining this social order. Instead of challenging the current paradigm, they found ways to cope with it. This shows that although the formal organisation played a central role in constructing the status quo, the workers themselves were not simply passive recipients of this dominant approach. Rather, workers often acted as agents in the process of constructing organisational reality.

This study asserts that both the informal and formal construction of reality impacted on the way that frontliners coped. Much of the emotional labour literature focuses on the efforts of managerially imposed feeling rules (Hochschild, 1983, Tolich, 1993). This study explores these social rules imposed by the formal organisation and contributes to this literature by examining specifically how they impact on the ways that frontliners cope. Equally, although emphasised less in the literature, this study found that feeling rules inherent in the informal organisational culture also impacted upon frontliners coping mechanisms and thus contributes to the literature in this way. Writers frequently emphasise 'offstage areas' as places where employees can 'drop the corporate mask' (Hochschild 1983) and reveal their feelings about the customer or management. Places such as school staff rooms, behind the kitchen door of a restaurant, in a closed police car, in a doctor's rest room and so forth (Goffman 1956; 1959; Gabriel 1998; Hearn 1993) are seen as places which are free of organisationally imposed feeling rules. Although this study concedes that they may be free of managerially imposed rules it also emphasises that within these informal areas there are also social codes which will also govern employees behaviour and thus impact on the way that frontliners cope. This point is alluded to by Fineman (1996) when he points out that such 'safe places' allow workers an amnesty from the normal emotional labours through the experience of a different set of emotional codes. Goffman (1963: 118) explains how performers communicate through a process of impression management that includes a system of (on) stage and (off) stage talk and stage cues. Stage talk is used exclusively between performers to collude secretly, showing contempt for the audience. Jokes humour and nicknames are aspects of stage talk and part of dramaturgical tools



to protect a group of performers (sex workers) and hide information from the audience (clients). Team collusion is maintained through a system of secret signals that pass information surreptitiously without the audience knowing (Goffman 1956: 112). Sanders (2000) argues that cohesion amongst the sex work community is achieved through a secret code of verbal insults, private and coded jokes in the stage set of saunas, escort agencies and brothels. Emotions are situational, where particular displays of emotion are attached to specific social encounters (Fineman 1996), therefore behavioural rules will exist in both the formal and informal organisation. Actors interpret their situations and seek to make sense through negotiating meanings with their fellow workers (Berger and Luckman 1966; Weick 1979). Fineman (1996) succinctly explains that 'meaning-seeking souls who invent and invoke social rules to help them on their way (Fineman 1996: 551).

An important finding was that workers, unwittingly, largely acted to cope with the violence in ways that tended to reinforce the processes set in place by the formal organisation. However it was also pointed out that collective coping mechanisms may not have been entirely conservative, but in fact may have encouraged organisational change by feeding the union's campaigns. Principally the collective coping mechanisms were just a way to express and cope with the stress of customer violence experienced. However, they also played a role in sowing the seeds for and supporting the union's campaigns for organisational change.

The above finding has implications for the way that reality is constructed. This finding emphasises the importance of human

agency in constructing organisational violence, something the violence literature frequently fails to recognise. Whilst emphasising the importance of social structures, it is also important to acknowledge the fact that power is not unidimensional and that human agency has a role to play. Unfortunately, many of the writers in this area (Hearn and Parkin, 2001; Cately and Jones, 2002; Linstead, 1997; Hearn, 1998) fail to do this and instead focus on the social structures exclusively. Perhaps this is understandable when researching organisations because, as Fineman (1995) explains, despite the fact that the individual is actively involved in the reproduction of social structures, there may be very little that they can do to materially affect them. However, this thesis has found that human agency, however limited, is in fact essential to organisational reproduction. This thesis aims to give credence to human agency, something which is somewhat neglected in the interpretive organisational violence literature.

The status quo was largely maintained by both frontliners and management and this was probably because it was beneficial to both – specifically, in the short term. In many practical ways, a lack of change is beneficial to those in hierarchical power. If the organisation was forced to accept responsibility for the violence experienced, it would need extra resources for increased training, support services, and better insurance. Additionally, besides these practical reasons, management acknowledgment of customer violence experienced would mean contradicting the customer service ideology. The idea that the customer is behaving badly does not sit well with the idea that the customer is king. In the short term, the organisational situation was also beneficial to frontliners. They were able to draw on different perspectives with



different customers and situations and thus use each perspective when it was beneficial to them. This way they preserved many of the enjoyable aspects of interacting with the customer, whilst coping with the stress that they experienced from the negative side of customer service: violent and difficult customers. It was only when the customer behaviour that was experienced as violent was perceived to be particularly threatening that frontliners went just beyond coping with the behaviour and also recorded the incident. This was something which forced the organisation to deal with the issue as well as being encouraged by the union in a bid to support their campaigns for organisational change in the area of customer violence.

In the long-term, change could meet important interests of both parties. By challenging the structural causes, and thus changing the situation, the frontliners may be able to reduce the violence they experience. At the very least, by attributing fault to situational and structural factors, frontliners may be able to force the formal organisation to recognise the high level of violence that they experience. The frontliners would benefit symbolically because they would no longer be held responsible for aggressive incidents and they would no longer be expected to cope alone by the formal organisation. They would then be able to talk about the violence they experienced without being constructed as inadequate frontliners. In a practical sense, they could be given training that they feel realistically meets their needs, better insurance and, in general, more organisational support to help them to cope. A change in the organisational situation would also benefit management. Acknowledgment of certain customer behaviour as violent means that better support for frontliners can be offered alongside measures designed to reduce this behaviour or even

prevent it. Less violent customers will almost certainly mean more satisfied customers. Indeed, there is common ground between the frontliners and those higher up in the organisational hierarchy. The frontliners derive a lot of job satisfaction from the ability to make the customers content, an outcome which is also much desired by the formal organisation (Korczynski 2002).

Change within the ES however, may be difficult to achieve. The formal view individualises violence meaning that the frontliners will look to change individually as opposed to changing the situational and structural factors of the organisation. The informal view also individualises violence by blaming the customer, although as previously discussed, the communities of coping are not entirely conservative dissatisfactions discussed within, have a tendency to inspire and support union movements. The existence of these informal pockets may also mean that the organisation is especially resistant to management-led change. Korczynski (2003) argued that communities of coping had important implications for how far the social relations of the workplace were open to management control. He maintains that significant communities of coping make management intervention more difficult. Findings from this study would suggest that even if management were able to alter the informal perspective and coping mechanisms that arise from it, it would be difficult to affect the communities of coping because they largely remain part of the unmanaged organisation. The collective ways of coping are essentially informal, expressed orally and expressed in offstage areas where the presence of management is disliked and resisted. They also help create a 'them and us' culture stopping the frontliners from identifying with management. Equally as previously pointed out, although the union may tap into these communities as resources for



organisational change, as suggested by Simms (2003) success may be limited due to both the communities of coping tendency to remain in the unmanaged organisation and also the union's limited influence over management in general.

## **6. Theoretical, Policy and Research Implications**

This thesis has brought together the literature on emotional labour and organisational violence and in doing so it has introduced the concept of customer sovereignty to the violence literature. This study found that the ideology of customer sovereignty helped shape many aspects of customer violence, and so will now be discussed referring to implications for theory, research and policy.

### **The Role of Customer Sovereignty in Violence**

This study has argued that the ideology of customer sovereignty was used to construct customer behaviour that was perceived as violent out of the workplace and render it invisible (see chapter ten). The invisibility of violence is achieved through a number of ways, which will now be examined separately exploring the implications for theory, research and policy.

Within the emotional labour literature it is often argued that disillusionment occurs because the bureaucratic side of the service highlights the customers' lack of any real sovereignty, which can then quickly turn into abuse (Ritzer, 1999; Korczynski, 2002; Leidner, 1993). Similarly writers on the public sector such as Prottas (1979) explain that a major cause of disenchantment may

be the realisation that in lieu of being the sovereign he/she is just another case to be processed. This quick change from enchantment to disillusionment may well lead to customer anger, abuse and even violence. This aspect has prompted writers on organisational violence to point out that marketing's constant rising of expectations through competition advertising has self-defeating consequences Hearn and Parkin (2002) and Boyd (2002).

This thesis argues that this idea can be extended to the extreme end of abusive customers: violent customers. This thesis makes a theoretical contribution in arguing that the ideology of customer sovereignty plays a much larger role in customer violence than acknowledged. As well as contributing to customer violence it is argued that the customer sovereignty ideology is used as a means of 1. inducing frontliners to accept customer violence through denial of its systematic nature, 2. rendering service workers as responsible for customer violence, and 3. influencing the way that frontliners cope with the violence. These will be discussed consecutively bringing out the theoretical, policy and research applications.

This thesis found that customer sovereignty was used to make frontliners accept perceived customer violence as part of their working lives. Customer violence was frequently experienced on the frontline, but was portrayed as part of normal frontline life and thus not constructed as violent at all. Frontliners' experience of violence as systematic was denied. This has wider theoretical implications for other frontline organisations where customer service may also be used to compel frontliners to put up with perceived systematic violence. In fact, in private organisations where, unlike the ES, they are desperate to gain and maintain



customers, this situation may be intensified. The logic of competition may mean that this powerful supporting ideology of customer sovereignty is increasingly employed to render violence invisible. Further research needs to be carried out in this area to ascertain whether this is the case. This also leads to policy implications and begs the question of whether, in the same way that the outside regulation has been employed to attempt to address the male-female violence in organisations (Hearn and Parkin 2002), outside regulation is also required to challenge the invisibility of customer-worker violence. This point highlights the importance of debate on the need for policy regarding customer-worker violence in order to protect frontliners' physical and emotional well-being.

Secondly, the ideology of customer sovereignty was used as a means to render the frontliner responsible for the customer violence. The organisation blamed the frontliner's customer service skills and thus shifted responsibility from the organisation. It is no longer the organisation's problem, but that of the frontliner. Surprisingly, it was found that ES frontliners also frequently used the customer sovereignty ideology to render one another responsible for perceived customer violence. This thesis asserts that one of the reasons that frontliners do this was an effort to gain predictability and thus some sort of control over the occurrence of violence (see chapter nine). In fact, after exploring the literature, this study questions whether a theoretical implication of this findings may be that this is a common way of coping in service organisations where the interaction is face to face and there is a high risk of customer violence and thus a greater need for predictability. For example, Rowlett talks about social workers who constructed each other as deserving of customer violence.

This is again a context where there is a high risk of face-to-face violence. Similarly, Tanhgerlini (2000) talks about paramedics needing to blame each other's skills as a way to impose order on what are essentially unordered events. In her study of sex workers, Sanders (2000) argues that re-framing serious incidents experienced (including the experience of violence) in a humorous way is also a way of denying their victim hood and re-defining themselves as in control. Despite the consistency of this study's findings about control with evidence from other studies, the wider applicability of this finding is merely a postulation and can only be confirmed through further research. Thus a research implication of this is that more studies are needed to answer the question of whether face-to-face violence increases the need for predictability and thus control of the situation.

Thirdly, this study found that customer sovereignty also affected the way that frontliners cope with their experiences of customer violence. It was found that many of the methods used by frontliners allowed them to cope, whilst at the same time maintaining the important mask of customer sovereignty. Thus a theoretical implication of this is the use of this ideology as a control mechanism to induce frontliners to accept and cope with difficult working conditions, whilst at the same time still getting the frontliners to give the all-important customer service. Hochschild's (1983) research implicitly supports this point when she emphasises that trainers recommendations for coping with emotional labour were that of imagining the difficult passengers as children, yet not sharing grudges with other flight attendants.

It is significant that in the ES collective coping, which vilifies the customer, took place away from the frontline. This allowed the



frontliners to retain the facade of customer sovereignty on the frontline. Indeed, collective coping was not only centred around supporting other frontliners but also on maligning the customer. The communities of coping did not include management and are one of the few places where frontliners did not have to maintain the myth of customer sovereignty. It was found that frontliners did not merely refrain from espousing the customer service myth, but destroyed it completely with their denigration of the customer. This finding may have theoretical implications for other frontline organisations, raising the question of whether there is a counterbalancing relationship between the strength of the customer sovereignty ideology and the extent of collective coping. Again although my findings suggest that there is, further research is needed to confirm this.

The three points discussed above illustrate the underlying logic of customer sovereignty ideology: the customer is always right. Carrying this logic through, this often means that customers' feelings and needs become privileged over everything, including the needs and feelings of frontliners. A theoretical implication of this was that customer sovereignty was used by the ES to put the customers' needs over those of the frontliners by forcing them to accept behaviour they considered as violent, take responsibility for this perceived violence and by inhibiting the way that frontliners coped with violence experienced. This study proposes that this exploitation of the customer service ideology, which justifies customers' well-being over frontliners', is likely to be widespread across frontline organisations. The use of this ideology in the ES is reflective of its use in private sector organisations. In private companies, the need to attract and retain customers makes it even more likely that the customer sovereignty ideology will be used to

justify putting customers' well-being over that of frontliners. In fact, the question arises about the extent that management uses the customer sovereignty ideology to justify their actions. The extent that this ideology is used to justify difficult conditions in organisations, especially violent customers, in organisations is currently under-researched and further study needs to be carried out in this area. In fact the far-reaching implications of this means that regulation may be needed to protect frontliners well-being on the frontline in the face of the all-important customer, esteemed above all else. The increase of competition in this sector (Kumar, 1996: p.12; Korczynski, 2002) means that customers will only become more important, causing this trend to intensify.

This study suggests that the ideology of customer sovereignty provides an important ideological underpinning for the invisibility of customer violence in not only the ES, but in many other service organisations. It is recognised that the kind of work in the ES - helping people find jobs, distributing benefits, and so on - may result in a high level of violent customers. However, within the private sector there will still be abusive and sometimes even violent customers and it is highly likely that customer sovereignty will still be used as a means to render violent customers invisible. More research is needed to reinforce this claim. This also has important implications for public policy and this study argues for the use of outside regulation in the same way that Sexual Harassment Laws have been used to attempt to address the invisibility of male-female violence in organisations. Although Hearn and Parkin (2001) do not discuss customer violence specifically (but organisational violations of which violence in general is a part), they do compare the invisibility of organisational violations in general to the invisibility of sexual harassment and



they argue for non-national regulation such as E.U. legislation. This thesis concedes the merits of this argument, but argues far more specific regulations are needed to challenge the invisibility of customer violence. A number of trade unions have begun campaigns in this area (Simms, 2003), but given their minimal influence in the private service sector, other forms of outside regulation will probably be required.

The logic of competition means that the supposed function of the customer sovereignty ideology is to maintain the customer sovereignty myth in order to retain and attract new customers. This prompts the question therefore of its purpose in the ES where they are not trying to retain and attract as many customers as possible, but rather ration their goods to those that the government feels is most deserving. Equally, ES service recipients differ from the private sector model of the customer - they did not have service choice, they could not choose where they went for the service or indeed what service they received. Although the new public management movement attempted to increase choice (Wilcocks and Harrow 1992) many writers point out that due to the nature of the service, this is an illusion (Flynn 1997). The use of the customer service ideology consequently seems misplaced, setting up expectations that can never be filled. This will frequently lead to disillusioned customers, who, as pointed out in the emotional labour literature, will be frequently angry, abusive customers. These conditions, combined with the particularly emotive nature of the ES service, means that this provides perfect conditions for extremely angry and even violent customers. Thus a theoretical implication of this is the notion that the customer sovereignty ideology contributes towards conditions which induce violence. In light of this, this thesis questions the use of this ideology within the

ES. This study does not advocate that service recipients should be treated without respect or care but it does argue that they should not be treated as 'customers' in line with the customer service ideology.

The above section shows the important role played by the customer sovereignty ideology in customer violence. This area is generally under-researched and more studies are needed to investigate the relationship between the customer service ideology and customer violence in a number of different frontline settings, including both public and private sectors.

### **The Construction of Organisational Reality**

The construction of violence within the ES has wider theoretical implications for the nature of organisational power and the construction of organisational reality. What frontliners' considered as violent, management did not and it was management's version which was deemed as the correct one. This supports the point made by Burr (1995) that knowledge and social action go together, leading to particular forms of action and away from others. Given the dominance of certain understandings and the subordination of others, she argues that subsequent action will work in the interests of groups that are more powerful and against those in weaker, more precarious positions.

Absurdly, those who defined violence were not those who experienced it. This point would suggest the need for a more active workforce voice with regards to customer violence. This idea highlights the importance of having a visible - and influential -



union presence in the workplace. In theory, current Health and Safety Legislation should enforce an active worker voice and/or participation. The issue of employee involvement is addressed in the 'Safety Representatives and Safety Committees Regulations' (1977) and 'The Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations' (1996). The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) explains that these regulations require employers to inform employees on matters relating to their health and safety. Employee representatives may make representations to their employer on matters affecting health and safety of those they represent. Similarly in the most recent HSE published leaflet for employees, 'Violence at work: a guide for employers', employers are encouraged to involve employees at 'all stages' of enforcing health and safety guidelines (HSE, 2000).

As discussed above my study highlighted the importance of varying power status of different organisational groups and their influence on the way that customer violence is perceived and dealt with. A policy implication of this is that despite the current legislation aimed at encouraging an active workforce voice, its' failure to recognise the interaction of different groups means that, at least within the ES the legislation fails at eliciting worker involvement. The findings of this study suggest that, in practice the failure of this legislation is likely to be widespread. For example, 'involving' employees who are clearly pressurised into voicing views which are compatible with management opinion may well mean that employees' actual perceptions are ignored regardless of the required 'involvement at every stage' (HSE 2000). This potential widespread failing of the Health and Safety legislation needs to be further researched.

Although this thesis argues that those with hierarchical power will be able, to some extent, to impose their version of truth (as argued by Burr 1995), those with less hierarchical power will still contribute to creating organisational reality, even if they are unaware that they are doing this. Workers were not taken to be passive recipients of the dominant approach, but were understood to help shape the construction of violence. The importance of human agency in the construction of organisational violence is an important point and one which is underdeveloped in the interpretive organisational violence literature. Whilst emphasising the importance of social structures, writers fail to acknowledge the role of human agency (Hearn and Parkin 2001, Cately and Jones 2002, Linstead 1997, Hearn 1998). Although frontliners did not have the power to impose their construction of violence as the correct version of the truth, they were still able to affect in some way the prevailing, managerial construction. Frontliners coped in ways that re-enforced the organisational construction of violence, whilst at the same time bringing forth an informal recognition of the systematic and collective nature of violence. This highlights the fact that in organisations the dominant perspective will not be the only perspective, but that there will be a multitude of interpretations of reality (Burr 1995). This has theoretical implications for the necessity of worker consent when changing the culture in organisations. Management should not expect to successfully change the culture from top down. In fact, although the methods of coping were mainly conservative, the existence of these informal pockets of communities of coping may mean that the organisation is especially resistant to management-led change. Even if management were able to alter the formal perspective and the way that frontliners cope, it would be difficult to affect the informal communities of coping who do not accept the presence of



management. This links in with Korczynski's (2003) argument that significant communities of coping make management intervention difficult. It is more likely that the union will be able to harness the communities of coping in support of organisational change, which as discussed earlier is an argument taken up by Simms (2000). However success may be limited due to the communities' tendency to be located within the unmanaged organisation.

## **7. Limitations of Study**

In this section I aim to explore the possible limitations of my study and reflect on how this has affected my research. First I examine the potential problems of both the approach taken and my data collection methods. Lastly I consider what I 'might' have done differently.

Due to the qualitative approach taken and the adoption of a subjective world view, there will be difficulties associated with applying the findings of this study beyond this particular research setting. However, as in much research of this type theoretical propositions can span across contexts (Bryman 1988) where the processes which influence respondents' perceptions have commonality with the experiences of others (Kvale, 1996), meaning that even small studies are applicable to some context (Kluckholm and Murrey in Polkinghorn 1990 p. 102). For example, in this study it has been argued that the ideology of customer sovereignty plays a significant role in the construction and enactment of customer violence. The presence of this ideology in numerous other service organisations makes it a strong possibility that at the very least elements of this study are likely to be indicative of the experiences of service workers in other

frontline organisations. In a similar way, the assertion that the interplay of organisational groups has a part in customer violence may well be consistent with members of many other service organisations where there is also such interplay. Thus it is likely that what has been uncovered here is much more widely applicable than the ES alone.

The subjective nature of this method and the fact that the researcher's presence will have an impact on the reality she is observing is frequently levelled as a criticism against it (Waddington 1994). For example, in my research, the behaviour of the frontliners sometimes altered when shadowing them. A good example was a particular frontliner who had been unemployed herself and had a great deal of sympathy with participants. I later found out that not only did she often turn a blind eye to certain client information (which would have been detrimental to their claim) but she also often covertly advised them on the responses to questions. However, when shadowing her for a day at the beginning of my participant observation, she did everything to the letter, thus giving me a false picture of her usual behaviour. Nevertheless, I did find that the longer I stayed researching in the job centre, the more I felt that frontliners returned to their normal behaviour patterns. This is consistent with the findings of Waddington (1994) who argues that the longer a researcher is present, the more unusual or exhibitionist behaviour will disappear. Although a researcher's presence will necessarily impact upon his or her data, it is preferable to address the possible effects, than merely pretend that the research can be carried out in a social vacuum (Waddington Pg.118). Reflexivity is almost a taken for granted part of qualitative research (Cassell and Symon 2004).



In my approach to data collection and analysis I decided to draw on elements of grounded theory. Although the use of grounded theory brought many advantages for my research (see chapter six), there were also some practical drawbacks. Firstly it took me longer to find a research agenda and involved many false starts and blind alleys. Not only was this frustrating, but the uncertainty that an important research topic would ever emerge was also highly stressful. Equally, the general nature of many of the interview questions initially asked designed to elicit issues relevant to the participant meant that some interviews occurred which did not refer to the research topic at all. Considerable time was spent on these data which lacked specific details relating to the focus of this study. Having said that, the data was nevertheless important in the contextual information provided.

The use of participant observation also brought disadvantages because it was often difficult to directly record data. Unfortunately, some potential data may have been lost because of the time which elapsed between my observation and recording the data. Many stories in particular were casualties of this process. However the deep and extremely rich insights generated by this method more than made up for this deficiency and it is definitely a method that I would consider using again in other research.

Reflecting back on my research there are a few things that I might have done differently in order to improve my study and the research process. Firstly I would try to find a significant research topic earlier on. I would do this by taking the time to consider my data set more deeply before deciding on a research focus. Instead, I had a tendency to charge head first into every new issue that my

data presented, thus changing my topic several times. That said, although I did not eventually focus on all the issues uncovered at the outset, these issues certainly did contribute to my developing understanding of the research setting.

Secondly, in concentrating on the complexities of frontliners working lives and coping mechanisms, the complexities of managements experience has largely been overlooked. Within this study, management have tended to be portrayed as unemotional, two-dimensional images with a homogeneity of opinion. Management have been associated with and seen as part of the formal organisation. This is a weakness of this study, because as Fineman (2003) rightly points out: 'Emotion is the prime medium through which people act and interact'. It is probable that although I only encountered opinions which were complicit with the formal organisational view, management will have also had other perspectives on organisational reality as did frontliners. It is likely that they too will have been influenced by both informal as well as formal organisational culture, (although not necessarily in the same way as frontliners) despite the fact that I was unable to access this. It is probable that they too will have been complicit in some form of informal organisational culture.

Management were not able to dictate all the circumstances in which they worked and they too had their own hierarchical superiors to report to and their own pressures accompanying their job. For example, they work in a performance centred environment with their own targets and are expected to promote a private sector style customer service with service recipients who are very different from a commercial notion of the customer. Indeed, managers constant championing of the formal organisational



culture in their relationships with frontliners may well have been a reaction to such pressures.

Bearing these difficult circumstances in mind, it is very likely that managers will have used their own coping mechanisms. Although it is probable that both the formal and informal cultures within the organisation are likely to have impacted upon the coping methods used, the different context in which the managers worked will have meant that the ways in which the managers coped will have been different to frontliners' coping mechanisms. They did not work face to face with the ES claimants alongside other employees but were often the only manager within the job centre, and were the only employee with their own office. Therefore, this context may have had an impact on the extent of collective coping that managers used. Further research needs to be done in this area.

Reflecting back on my research, I can only speculate on the reasons for the homogeneity of different management opinions and their emphasis on a more formal input. Perhaps, I was only privy to a more 'formal view' from the managers researched because, for them, I was associated with senior management, their hierarchical superiors. The job centre managers were given orders by the district manager to allow me to carry out my research, they may have perceived me as being more closely involved with senior management than the frontliners. This may have influenced them to give me a viewpoint which was more consistent with the formal organisational perspective. This factor coupled with the ES emphasis on the importance of the customer may well have shaped the views managers espoused. If repeating this research I would also spend a few days shadowing management as well as frontliners in order to gain a clearer picture of their world. However, it is important to point out here that the focus of this

study was frontliners, not management, and I felt that I did gain a deep understanding of service workers' organisational worlds.

## **8. Concluding Comment**

This study aimed to deepen understandings of customer violence, particularly the ways in which frontliners coped with it. It is hoped that this study has generated insights that have far reaching implications for wider contexts than the ES alone. Customer violence was a distressing experience for the frontliners studied and it is important to understand this concept and the way that it is coped with more fully. This thesis has attempted to contribute to knowledge on customer violence; however as outlined above, gaps remain in our understandings of this issue, and more research is still needed to more fully understand the ways in which frontliners experience and cope with violence.