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**Rihova, Ivana and Alexander, Matthew (2016) Resource asymmetry in service encounters : coping strategies and outcomes for front-line employees. In: AMA Servsig 2016, 2016-06-17 - 2016-06-19, Maastricht University. ,**

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# **Resource asymmetry in service encounters: coping strategies and outcomes for front-line employees**

## **1. Introduction**

Front-line employees (FEs) within service settings have attracted academic attention since the late 1970s. Indeed, Ostrom et al. (2015) reveal that academics rate their knowledge on 'generating employee engagement to improve service outcomes' as highest amongst all other current issues in service research. Despite growing interest in dehumanized, technology-led services (Rust & Huang, 2014) and new service perspectives which centre on proactive, engaged and collaborative customers in value-generating actor networks (Lusch & Vargo, 2014), it is unlikely that FEs will be redundant for a few decades yet.

What is more, human interactions in contemporary service encounters create scenarios where positive outcomes from co-created encounters may be challenging. Ostrom et al. (2015, p. 134) recognise this by calling for research on the "coordination mechanisms (e.g., structures, scripts, and shared norms) appropriate for managing different forms of interdependencies among employees and customers in cocreation" and consideration of outcomes for employees. Our study explores these interdependencies in settings where resource asymmetry may lead to role conflict for FEs.

## **2. Theoretical Background**

Service research acknowledges the interdependent roles of the firm and its customers and the centrality of operant resources in value creation processes (Lusch & Vargo, 2014). For FEs the evolution of the service encounter results in reconfigured roles and

new co-creative processes (Bowen, n.d.). These roles see FEs as: innovators (a source of creativity); differentiators, (through authentic delivery); enablers (facilitating and integrating customer processes and resources); and, co-ordinators, (interdependent role with understanding of specific forms of resource integration processes and practices) (Bowen, n.d.). Our research explores the coordination role of FEs, by focussing on situations where interdependency in service exchanges with customers creates challenges for FEs.

In organisational theory the presence of conflicting information or instruction can contribute to role conflict and ambiguity (see Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970) and negative role outcomes (Shamir, 1980). The growth in collaborative encounters may present new forms of role conflict for service employees, particularly where specific customer demands (e.g. a desire for specific customization) contradict the company's rules and regulations (Edvardsson, Tronvoll, & Gruber, 2011). Alternatively, specific configurations of customers' operant resources may lead to asymmetrical encounters where the extent of a customer's cultural resources, defined as specialised knowledge/skills and imagination by Arnould et al. (2006), are either superior or inferior to those of the FE. These asymmetrical resources may then cause conflict for employees with negatively valenced outcomes, such as emotional burnout or job dissatisfaction (Bettencourt & Gwinner, 1996).

### **3. Methods**

A pilot study collected data from six tourism FEs (contexts included visitor attraction, tourist science centre, heritage centre, coach tours) using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Gremler, 2004). A total of 25 incidents were collected.

As per Grove and Fisk's (1997) procedure, FEs were first asked to describe the purpose of the encounter between them and tourists and then to recall situations when a tourist a) knew more about [the service or its information content] than the interviewee; and b) where they thought they knew more than the interviewee (but did not). Prompting questions elicited details about situations and their outcomes. Content analysis was then used (Gremler, 2004).

#### **4. Findings**

Analysis of incidents revealed that in some encounters there was resource asymmetry between FEs and customers regarding the level of knowledge relating to the encounter. These incident categories were categorised as 1) customer resource superiority and 2) customer resource inferiority. Each type of asymmetry precipitated identifiable coping strategies, which are summarised below. Representative quotes are included in Table 1.

##### **Customer resource superiority**

Some situations saw customers' cultural operant resources superior to those of the FEs. Customer's personal histories, memories, previous experiences and also level of expertise, enthusiasm and interest would often render them more 'knowledgeable' about the object of service. In such situations two different types of coping strategies were identifiable: a) co-delivery and b) adaptation.

*Co-delivery strategies* are evident in scenarios where customers' cultural resources are shared with the FE who uses these to personalise the service encounter and to make it more meaningful for other customers. Tour guides used this strategy in targeting customers with a kind of specialism or personal knowledge of a destination

and asked to share these resources with other tourists. This helped to personalise the experience and charged it with emotional value.

**Adaptation strategies** (integration/ incorporation?) emerged in scenarios where the FE actively integrated customers' specialist knowledge as operant resource into their own resource set and adapted future service scripts and customer encounters accordingly. For example, visitor assistants at tourist attractions engaged in in-depth conversations with tourists with expert knowledge or interest in the context. Information gathered in such encounters was then used in future encounters.

Outcomes of customer resource superiority saw tourist's resources either incorporated into the FE's narrative or in some cases, the customer was invited to deliver part of or all of the encounter.

### **Customer resource inferiority**

Our participants also identified incidents where customers' operant resources were perceived as inferior to those of the FE. In these situations two different types of coping strategies were used by FEs: a) correcting and b) bypassing.

*Correcting strategies* are used when customers presented incorrect information to the FE. In our context this took the form of historical inaccuracy or factually incorrect information. Invariably the FE felt responsible for ensuring that the customer leaves the encounter with more accurate information and would employ correcting strategies to rectify customers' error.

*Bypassing strategies* are used when customers were more dogmatic regarding their resource sets, while FEs are aware that such information is incorrect or that the phenomena is subjective and customers simply hold different opinions. Here the FE has to tread a fine line between retaining integrity whilst ensuring a satisfactory

encounter. Bypassing was more common in encounters where specialist knowledge was involved.

**Table 1 - Coping strategies in asymmetric resource integration**

Types of coping strategies	Illustrative incident examples
<b>Customer resource superiority</b>	
<i>Co-delivery</i>	“I would say to the person, away from the group, ‘look, you’re from this area, you know more than me, that’s a fact. Do you want to help me out?’ And they would almost always [...] They feel kind of almost in charge, they’re passing their experiences on [...] And I would always, -‘This is tour-guide number two’, you know, give them a title.” (P1)
<i>Adaptation</i>	“We used to have WWF representatives visit and talk to us about their conservationist message which we could then take forward into our presentations. So it would work both ways as much as we could communicate with them we could certainly absorb it as well.” (P3)
<b>Customer resource inferiority</b>	
<i>Correcting</i>	“After going through the Scottish history and how the James’s follow and the Mary’s follow, and then once a guest said, -‘oh and that would be Bloody Mary then?’ [laughs] -‘Eh, no’. -‘I thought she fitted in there as well?’ -‘Well, she fits in but not there!’ [...] So I would just, explain, -‘well no, I can understand where the mix up comes from but that’s not...’ So you just correct them.” (P2)

<i>By-passing</i>	“Yes, everybody has their own opinion, palate, their own memories about aromas. [...] So I have got to be mindful of that, I can’t let someone hijack the tour. So I might say, -‘I accept what you say but please appreciate that there are people here that may not share your opinion. So I’m willing to discuss it but can we just put it aside at the moment and we can have a chat when we’re finished.” (P4)
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These strategies had the potential to cause conflict for FEs, as despite a desire to ensure the integrity of the encounter, FEs were aware of upsetting or reprovving customers. Correcting strategies therefore appeared associated with more passive customers, while bypassing was employed when encountering particular types of ‘know it all’ customers.

## 5. Conclusion

The role of FE is influenced by the rise of proactive customers and technology but remains relevant in many service settings. Our exploratory research contributes to understanding some of the strategies used by FEs when managing different forms of interdependencies with customers in service encounters (Ostrom et al., 2015). The ubiquity and accessibility of information on an unlimited range of subjects that customers are exposed to means that FEs increasingly face customers who possess specific configurations of cultural operant resources (Arnould et al., 2006). Our research shows that the relative inferiority or superiority of these configurations results in resource asymmetry between the customer and the FE, which may lead to resource conflict (Edvardsson et al., 2011) and so requires specific coping strategies by FEs. Additionally we contribute to recent work by Bowen (n.d.) by operationalising the coordinator role adopted by employees in contemporary encounters.

Our work is at an early stage and future research in this area will take cognisance of additional factors which may affect encounter interdependencies, including the level of FE's experience and the social context of the encounter (Edvardsson et al., 2011). Consideration of specific outcomes from asymmetrical encounters for FE is also needed. Our data hints at new forms of 'resource conflict' but these need further exploration with a larger data set and a wider range of service settings.

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