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# 'We Just Have to Learn to Deal with It': Young Workers' Experiences of Workplace Violence

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## Abstract

We report on two studies that examined how young people (aged 16 to 24 years) working in public-facing jobs report experiences of workplace violence from dealing with the public. In Study 1, 65% (n=227) of respondents (N=349) reported experiencing violence in the preceding year, with verbal abuse being significantly higher for call centre workers and assaults higher among public sector workers. Psychological symptoms following violence were higher among participants aged 18 years or over than younger workers. Study 2 identified five themes relevant to participants' (N=20) experiences, namely (1) violence is part of the job; (2) front line employees are targets; (3) power favours the customer; (4) any customer can be violent, and (5) need for personal experience. These findings demonstrate the need for employers to address all aspects of their practices in order to address risks in the workplace and to promote the psychological well-being of their employees.

## Keywords

Workplace Violence, Young Workers, Employment, Risk, Workplace Safety

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## 1. Introduction

Many writers have drawn attention to the risks of injury that young people routinely face in the workplace. Evidence from studies across North America and Europe consistently indicates that young workers (commonly taken to refer to workers aged between 15 and 24 years) are at greater risk and experience more injuries than their older counterparts (Breslin & Smith, 2005; Dupre, 2000; Sudhinaraset & Blum, 2010). Although a range of explanations have been proposed for this increased incidence of injury (see Kelloway, Yue & Hessian, 2008 for a discussion), a major focus of recent work has been on how young workers experience and make sense of the potential risks and hazards in the work environment. For example, in a study of how Canadian teenagers (aged 16 to 18 years) understood the health risks associated with various

occupations, Breslin and colleagues (Breslin, Polzer MacEachen, Morrongiello & Shannon, 2007) found that teenagers tended to dismiss minor injuries as simply being 'part of the job' that had to be accepted and tolerated. These participants also suppressed any complaints about workplace safety (WS), due to complaints being ignored or delegitimized by managers and co-workers and as a means of attempting to prove themselves to be capable and mature workers. On a similar note, Kelloway, Yue and Hessian (2008) found that young people working in service and manufacturing industries received little or no safety training and did not regard issues of safety as being especially relevant to their work. These young people also accepted risk of injury as being a routine part of employment, and attributed workplace injuries to carelessness on the part of the victims rather than to hazardous workplace practices. More recently, a similar pattern emerged in Tucker and Turner's (2013) study of teenage Canadian workers'

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experiences of WS. There again, issues of safety were found to take second place to workers' expectations that hazards and injuries were simply part of the job, to a reluctance to voice complaints that would indicate inexperience and possibly lead to termination of employment, and to feelings of powerlessness to bring about any changes in WS.

These findings offer a consistent, albeit depressing, picture of how young workers make sense of general concerns over safety at work. As yet, however, less attention has been given to one specific element of young people's experiences of safety (or lack of safety) at work, namely abuse and violence encountered in dealings with members of the public. Although workplace violence and workplace aggression can take many forms (Neuman & Baron, 1998), studies that have examined more generally workers' experiences of such abuse and/or violence have pointed to the increased risks associated with occupations that involve direct contact with members of the public. For example, studies have identified the risks faced by individuals employed in nursing (Arnetz, Arnetz & Petterson, 1996; Spector, Coulter, Stockwell & Matz, 2007) and by hospital staff generally (Winstanley & Whittington, 2002), especially those employed in psychiatric settings (Chen, Hwu & Wang, 2009; Lawoko, Soares & Nolan, 2004; Magnavita, 2011). Other studies have pointed to the risks of violence encountered in occupations such as in-home health care professionals (Barling, Rogers & Kelloway, 2001), police officers (Perrott & Kelloway, 2006; Santos, Leather, Dunn & Zarola, 2009), public house licensees (Leather, Beale, Lawrence & Dickson, 1997; Leather, Lawrence, Beale, Cox & Dickson, 1998) and security guards (Leino, Selin, Summala & Virtanen, 2011). Such findings point to the widespread risks of violence across occupations that involve direct contact with the public (LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Wynne & Clarkin, 1995). Of particular relevance here, evidence suggests that while employment within identifiable occupational settings in itself increases an individual's risk of being subjected to violence, being young in these settings increases the risk still further.

Thus, for example in psychiatric care provision, a setting particularly associated with risks of violence, young workers are subject to higher risks than are older co-workers. (Lawoko *et al.*, 2004; Soares *et al.*, 2000). While these findings suggest that age is a risk factor in itself (Tucker & Loughlin, 2006), there remains a need for better understanding of how young workers make sense of their own experiences.

Noting the relative paucity of research on this topic, Rauscher (2008) reported the findings from a survey of 1171 United States adolescents aged between 14 and 17 years. Rauscher found that nearly one third of her total sample reported having experienced some form of workplace violence (WV), most commonly in the form of verbal threats (25%), physical attacks (10%), or sexual harassment (10%), with members of the public being the most frequent perpetrators in the first two categories.

## 2. Research Significance

Previous findings add to our understanding of the incidence of WV against young workers but, as Rauscher (2008) noted, leave unexamined issues of differences in experience by sector of employment. They also tell us little about how young workers make sense of these risks in relation to their work experiences. In the present paper, therefore, we seek to develop further understandings of young workers' experiences of WV by reporting the outcomes of two studies that examined these experiences. Study 1 examined young workers' experiences of WV and its effects by sector of employment. Study 2 examined how young workers made sense of these experiences in the context of the workplace.

## 3. Study 1

### 3.1. Method

#### 3.1.1. Participants and Procedures

**Table 1.** Participants by sector of employment and gender

Sector of employment	Female	Male	Total
Fast food industry	18 (6.2%)	5 (8.2%)	23 (6.6%)
Convenience store	15 (5.2%)	3 (4.9%)	18 (5.2%)
Contact centre / Call centre	20 (6.9%)	1 (1.6%)	21 (6.0%)
Pub / licensed club	28 (9.7%)	6 (9.8%)	34 (9.7%)
Hotel / accommodation provider	17 (5.9%)	2 (3.3%)	19 (5.4%)
Restaurant	46 (16.0%)	7 (11.5%)	53 (15.2%)
Retail premises	95 (33.0%)	30 (49.2%)	125 (35.8%)
Public service (e.g. fire service, school, health service)	49 (17.0%)	7 (11.5%)	56 (16.0%)
Total	288 (100%)	61 (100%)	349 (100%)

We conducted this study in Scotland, UK. Participants were recruited by means of flyers and advertisements posted on

social media sites that invited people aged between 16 and 24 years and working in public-facing jobs to take part in a

study of their workplace experiences. Respondents were 349 individuals, 288 female and 61 male, working in full-time or part-time employment that involved them in interactions with members of the public. The participants worked in both rural and urban and were employed across a diversity of occupational sectors, with the most common sectors being retail (n=125), public service (n=56) and restaurants (n=53). Numbers of participants by sector of employment and gender are shown in Table 1.

Participants completed, either face-to-face or via an internet-based survey site, a questionnaire seeking details of their working lives and experiences. Institutional ethical approval was received for this study.

### 3.1.2. Measures

The questionnaire comprised 18 items. Twelve fixed-choice items collected details of the background of the participant, his/her current employment and employer, training received (if any), and awareness of issues relating to violence at work. Five items sought details of participants' workplace experiences, including frequencies of different forms of WV, actions taken, availability of support, impact upon health and well-being, and impact on attitudes towards work. A final open-ended item allowed participants to express any views not covered elsewhere. In the questionnaire, we adopted a fivefold typology of forms of violence derived from Wynne, Clarkin, Cox, & Griffiths' (1997) definition of WV as comprising 'any incident where persons are abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work, involving an explicit or implicit challenge to their safety, well-being or health'. Participants were accordingly invited to report all instances occurring within the previous year of being verbally abused/sworn at; verbally threatened; spat at; physically assaulted, and physically assaulted with an object.

## 3.2. Results

### 3.2.1. WV by Type and Sector of Employment

227 participants (65%) reported that they had experienced at

Table 2. WV by type and sector of employment

	Verbally abused/ sworn at	Verbally threatened	Spat at	Physically assaulted	Physically assaulted with object
Call centres/marketing	76%	71%*	5%	0%	5%
Pub/restaurant/fast-food/cafe	60%	40%	3%	9%	8%
Retail/convenience	59%	45%	3%	3%	6%
Public sector	50%	37%	14%**	18%**	18%**
Total	5%	59%	43%	7%	8%

\*p < .05; \*\*p < .01

We conducted inferential analysis using cross-tabulations. Analysis showed no significant relationships among the

least one incident of WV in the preceding year. For analysis, we collapsed participants' sectors of employment into 4 main categories, as follows: (i) call centre/marketing (n=21), (ii) pub/ restaurant/fast food/café/hotel (n=129), (iii) retail/convenience store (n=143), and (iv) public sector (n=56). Figure 1 shows the percentages of participants in each category that reported having experienced or not having experienced WV in the preceding year.

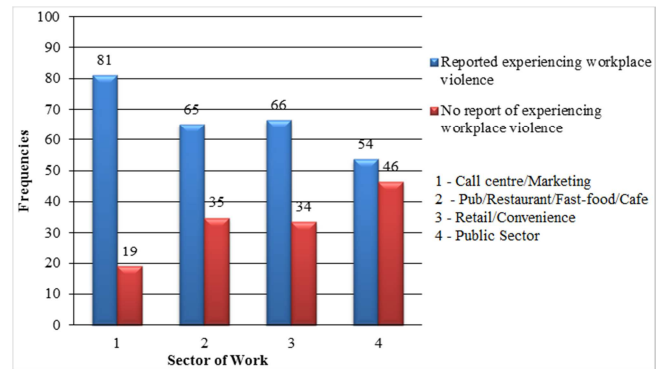


Figure 1. Frequencies of WV by sector of employment

Figure 1 indicates that the majority of participants across all sectors reported having experienced WV in the previous year. Unpleasant interactions within the previous 12 months were most common among those employed in call centre/marketing (81%, n=17); the second most common sector being retail/convenience store (66%, n=95). The most common form of violence was verbal abuse, comprising being 'sworn at or called unpleasant names' with 59% of respondents reporting experience of at least one such incident. 43% of respondents reported at least one incident of being 'verbally threatened'. Physical violence in the workplace was less prevalent: 5% of respondents reported being 'spat at'; 7% reported being 'physically assaulted (e.g. pushed, kicked or punched)' and 8% reported being 'physically assaulted with an object' over the last twelve months. These categories were not mutually exclusive, with some respondents reporting experiences of more than one form of violence.

frequencies of different forms of violence, age, gender and ethnic background. Nor were there significant differences between frequencies of violent incidents reported by the

respondents and setting of employment (urban/rural). Analysis however showed significant relationships between sectors of employment and the forms of violence experienced. Table 2 shows the frequencies of different forms of violence by sector.

Verbal abuse was high within all sectors of employment and reported frequencies of being sworn at or called unpleasant names did not vary significantly. Instances of verbal threats were also high across all sectors of employment. 71% of respondents working in call centres or marketing reporting at least one incidence of verbal abuse in the last year. As is also evident from Table 2, 14% of those working in the public sector reported being spat at during the 12 month period, a figure that is significantly higher ( $\chi^2(3, N=349)=14.6, p<.01$ ) than the figures for all other sectors, and more than double the next highest figure of 5% (call centre/marketing). A clear pattern emerges for physical violence. The frequencies of physical assault (with or without an object) reported by respondents working in the public sector are more than double the frequencies reported for the next highest sector. These differences are highly significant (for assault without an object ( $\chi^2(3, N=349)=15.6, p<.01$ ); and for assault with an object ( $\chi^2(3, N=349)=8.4, p<.05$ ), pointing to the clear incidence of physical violence experienced by young workers employed in the public sector in comparison to others sectors of employment. The reported frequency is similar for both forms of violence, 18% for physical assault without an object and 18% for physical assault with an object. These figures suggest that incidents of physical violence might often be reported in both categories, reflecting physical attacks that involve objects as well as other forms of physical force, such as being kicked, punched or pushed.

### 3.2.2. Psychological Sequelae of WV

Interestingly, although unrelated to experiences of violence, age was significantly related to the consequences of violence for individual health and well-being. Frequencies of reporting psychological symptoms by age are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Age and reporting psychological symptoms among those who experienced WV

	Reported symptoms	No reported symptoms
Under 18 years	16 (70%)	7 (30%)
18 years and over	171 (84%)	32 (16%)
Total	187 (83%)	39 (17%)

Investigation of age differences using hierarchical log-linear analysis by simple deletion resulted in a model with two second-order effects: age of the participants by reporting psychological symptoms, and experiencing WV in the preceding 12 months by reporting symptoms. This likelihood ratio for this model was  $\chi^2(2) = 2.004, p = 0.367$ .

Participants aged 18 years and over were significantly more likely than younger participants to report suffering negative psychological symptoms following experiencing violence,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.136, p < 0.05, OR=2$ . The likelihood of reporting symptoms increased only slightly among those who had experienced violence in the preceding 12 months,  $\chi^2(1) = 4.023, p < 0.05, OR=2.6$ . These findings suggest that participants aged 18 years and over report more instances of experiencing distressing symptoms irrespective of personal exposure to WV.

### 3.3. Discussion

The levels of WV reported in the present study are worryingly high, markedly higher even than those reported by Rauscher (2008). Rauscher's study included participants within sectors which did not involve interaction with the public. Here, the higher figures reflect restriction of the sample to participants who deal with the general public as part of their employment. We also adopted a wide typology of forms of WV, allowing participants to report any instances of verbal abuse instead of restricting these to verbal threats. Even allowing however for resulting differences in reporting, the present finding that almost two-thirds (65%) of respondents experienced at least one instance of violence in their working lives over a twelve month period gives much cause for concern.

The present findings also point to the patterns of violence found within different sectors. It is concerning, but perhaps unsurprising, that violence taking the form of verbal abuse or swearing at employees is common across all sectors of employment and does not vary significantly from one public-facing job to another. Other forms of violence by contrast can be seen as more specifically associated with particular types of employment. The finding that public sector employees are significantly more likely than other workers to experience being spat at or assaulted with or without a weapon is a depressingly familiar one. Not only is this consistent with the risks and instances of violence identified in previous studies of those in specific public sector occupations, such as nursing and hospital work (e.g. Arnetz *et al.*, 1996; Lawoko *et al.*, 2004; Winstanley & Whittington, 2002) and the police (Perrott & Kelloway, 2006; Santos *et al.*, 2009), but it also bears out findings that young age in itself appears to be a risk factor that makes workers more prone to experiences of violence in such occupations (Lawoko *et al.*, 2004; Soares *et al.*, 2000). Previously however, so far as we can tell, no research has specifically examined experiences of WV of those employed in call centre and marketing occupations. Here, the levels of verbal threats found in relation to all sectors are high, with the lowest figure of 38% for public sector employees still being somewhat higher than



Rauscher's (2008) reported level of 25% across young employees in general. Even against figures for other sectors, however, the finding that a significant majority (71%) of those working within call centres and marketing occupations report being verbally threatened within the previous year is deeply disturbing. This finding points to a highly specific risk for those occupations that warrants further attention.

With regards to the psychological symptoms reported by the participants, it is of interest that young people over the age of 18 years are significantly more likely to report psychological symptoms than those under the age of 18 years. A tentative explanation may be that increased incidence of symptoms in the 18-years and above groups may be due to an accumulation of negative experiences of dealing with the public. Alternatively, those aged 16-18 years may have access to differing support mechanisms, for example they may be still living with parents. A further possibility is that experience gained over these years might increase workers' awareness of risks but be offset by inability to identify specific sources of risk. Such possibilities require further investigation.

Study 1 used a self-report, cross-sectional design. Reliance on self-report measures is common in studies of WV, in large part due to many instances of WV going unreported and unrecorded (Beale, Cox, & Leather, 1996). Moreover, as it has been noted previously (Spector, 1994; 2006), the risks of associations between variables being overinflated through common method variance have potentially been overstated in much of the literature. Similarly to previous writers (e.g. Bishop, Cassell, & Hoel, 2009; Santos et al., 2009), therefore, we acknowledge the limitations of self-reported measures but treat them as the most accessible means of examining these experiences. The cross-sectional nature of the study rules out any causal claims in relation to the matters being examined. In order to consider in greater detail the meanings of these experiences, we conducted a detailed qualitative examination of young workers' understandings, reported here as Study 2.

## 4. Study 2

### 4.1. Participants and Procedures

Participants who completed the survey in Study 1 were invited to leave an email address to be contacted for future studies. 20 participants were selected at random and were given access to an online secure discussion board which comprised nine discussion threads that covered topics ranging from general issues such as 'Have you experienced any form of abuse in your workplace?', to more specific issues such as 'Who are your least favourite customers?'. Participants could post to as many of these threads as they

chose and as often as they wished to contribute. Following preliminary analysis of postings, a further sub-sample (n=9) of participants took part in in-depth semi-structured interviews. These participants were selected as being 'information-rich' (Patton, 1990) based on comments they had made in the course of the online discussions. Interviews focused in detail on issues previously raised in the discussions to broaden the range of data and so to allow further data saturation in subsequent analysis. Institutional ethical approval was received for this study.

### 4.2. Analysis

We analysed the data in accordance with recognized principles of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). We examined in detail, on a case-by-case basis and across different responses, the indicators of experience that appeared of greatest relevance to the participants themselves. Thereafter these indicators were grouped into themes, which accounted for wider areas of experience while still being of demonstrable relevance within the data. These themes were refined and further developed as new data were analysed. Finally, the resulting themes were checked for fit across all responses to ensure that they reasonably accounted for the participants' own views of WV.

### 4.3. Results

Five main themes emerged from data analysis, as follows: (1) violence is part of the job; (2) front line employees are targets; (3) power favours the customer; (4) any customer can be violent, and (5) need for personal experience. We consider these themes in turn below.

#### 4.3.1. Violence is Part of the Job

Most participants viewed violence from members of the public as commonplace, with verbal abuse in particular being regarded as routine. As, for example, one respondent reported, 'I learned to expect it as part and parcel of the job.' Furthermore, respondents reported that, at least to a certain extent, organizations tolerated such behavior. They therefore believed that the incidence of verbal abuse was unlikely to change:

'In my industry, the hospitality sector, verbal abuse is more common than one would expect and we just have to learn to deal with it – we can't change people.' (P8)

In this way, WV became normalized. Tolerance of violence extended also to workers' perceptions that managers took little account of incidents reported to them and did little or nothing to address their concerns.

'Most often [reports of incidents] are just being ignored, probably because they are perceived as usual, normal and

there's not much that can be done about it. In fact, many of the times when the Police intervened, the problem was only resolved temporarily e.g. the groups of youth were coming back and abusing facilities or verbally abusing staff the day after. Therefore there is a general perception of these sorts of events as just typical and that there's not much that could be done.' (P14)

Respondents also noted that employees who reported violent occurrences were viewed as weak or complaining. Any such reports would be met with apathetic responses and, at worst, would reflect badly on the employees themselves.

'It was seen as part of the job to experience violence and aggression. I was told to 'man up' and get on with it.' (P3)

As seen above, males who reported experiencing WV often had their masculinity questioned. For example one male stated that on reporting an incident he was told to 'stop being a pussy'. Thus WV came in many respects to be treated as part of the job, and employees who tolerated it without complaint more employable.

#### 4.3.2. Front Line Employees are Targets

As employees in public-serving jobs are often the only point of contact for members of the public, they were often required to deal with people's frustrations with organizational services. Often employees had no control over the factors that had led to such frustration:

'There was one particular occasion where I told the customer that their card had declined. They began to shout and swear at me and did not allow for me to explain that the card machines had been experiencing difficulty.' (P10)

On licensed premises aggression was common from individuals who had consumed too much alcohol and who behaved inappropriately, especially if refused service:

'It was from a woman because I had refused her partner due to him being loud and drunk, she said if she ever saw me on the street I'd better run before she gets me & stabs me senseless.' (P6)

Customer frustrations frequently arose in relation to organizational policies relating to complaints or return of goods. In these instances, employees were responsible for trying to defuse the situation but were not permitted by their employers to be flexible in their approach. The resulting tension increased the risk of becoming a target of violence:

'When we refused the refund, the man got very agitated and angry. My colleague kept telling him it was unfortunately company policy and since the item had been used there was no way we could offer him a refund. This went on for about 10 minutes until the man finally picked up a catalogue and threw it directly at my colleague.' (P11)

Any support from management tended to be reactive and short-term. Employees were in effect expected to encounter violence in the course of their work and to be able to recover quickly. Indeed, workers often had to use personal time to recover from any such incidents:

'Members of staff regularly had customers who would shout and swear at them and I would often see other members of staff running out of the room in tears. If you were brought to tears you had to use your 8 minutes of extra personal time to recover.' (P2)

In these ways, expectations of violence, the lack of possibility of addressing factors that precede violence, and ineffective management responses, all served to normalize the incidence of violence in the workplace: young workers became targets for the frustrations and actions of members of the public who dealt with the organizations.

#### 4.3.3. Power Favours the Customer

Expectations of WV were related to a perceived imbalance in power between customers and employees: employees saw customers as being more powerful than them, and the notion of 'good customer service' required non-reaction to abusive behavior:

'They even started insulting me and stated that they knew more than me (which was obviously wrong, but how can I tell a guest/customer this, especially in front of other people??). Very depressing and frustrating!' (P1)

Thus toleration of WV was often self-imposed by employees themselves. In situations where customers were openly and recurrently abusive, and this was known to management, this presented an added element of stress as employees felt unfairly treated by both customers and managers:

'One guest has complained so much in the past that everyone, including our manager just does whatever the guy wants. The guest likes to complain but also leaves nasty or naughty comments, especially with the female staff. Nobody likes him but they all want to keep him happy so he doesn't complain. I think this is a very wrong behavior from our management – letting this happens shows that business goes over people!

I was scared as I didn't want to be at my post in case he came in, and whenever he did I felt uneasy. I was also annoyed at my boss as I knew he was just too scared.' (P5)

Respondents also reported that some policies for dealing with abusive customers further exacerbated customers or led to situations where the employee was at higher risk of being subjected to violence than if there had been no policy in place:

'[The managers] just told us to write in the annotations

that the customer had an aggressive manner so that if anyone dealt with the same customer in future they could see this and be prepared for it. That never really worked because you cannot access the annotations on the accounts until the customer phones up, gets connected to you, clears the Data protection questions gives you their account number for you to access the account and then you can look in the annotations. By that time the customer is already irate and is angry at having to verify themselves.’ (P15)

Thus respondents felt that managers and policies appealed more to pleasing the customer than they did to protecting the employee. They therefore viewed themselves as powerless in their dealings with customers and unable to change this situation.

#### 4.3.4. Any Customer can be Violent

Whilst aggression was a common feature amongst members of the public who had consumed alcohol, verbal abuse was not limited to such customers, or indeed to particular customers or sectors. Participants described instances of verbal abuse that involved a wide range of customers. For example, one participant commented that ‘the abuse was mostly from middle class, middle aged women’. This theme was found also in other comments:

‘I was answering the order line for a well-known high street store but 90% of calls were complaints and they were almost always rude, arrogant and posh!’ (P9)

Respondents also noted that perpetrators displayed abusive behaviors in front of younger family members. Such situations occurred particularly in relation to the sale of restricted goods when younger customers who did not have proof of age then passed goods onto older family members to purchase for them, or when the incident occurred as part of a family shopping trip. This is particularly striking in demonstrating how adults modelled such violence for the next generation, implicitly perpetuating the notion that it is acceptable:

‘If a parent lets their child scan through an age-restricted product (as many do because they are ‘just helping Mum’) I have to refuse the sale and put the product back on the shelf. That is when I get sworn at the most.’ (P1)

Furthermore, respondents drew attention to a layer of behavior which was below what might be termed violence but what comprised treating employees without dignity. This behavior manifested as questioning the competence or intelligence of employees or as making derogatory remarks:

‘Many times customers have come in and looked down on me for working in a supermarket without knowing anything about my background, but on this occasion the

man gave me a very weird amount of money...and said ‘Will you be able to count that? Working behind the checkouts and all, most of the girls here can’t count!’ This not only left me very angry but also very embarrassed.’ (P16)

Thus, abuse or violence was not restricted to any one group of customers who could be readily identified by gender, socio-economic class or other attribute. Nor did the presence of other people, including family members of the customer, necessarily have a moderating effect on customer behavior. Rather, the participants viewed any customers as being capable of violence, especially in the form of low-level abuse that potentially could lead to them feeling attacked and that undermined their competence in the workplace.

#### 4.3.5. Need for Personal Experience

Respondents often learned to deal with more difficult and abusive customers, but, rarely was this a direct result of training. More often than not, learning to identify potentially abusive customers and how to handle situations came from previous personal experience:

‘Because I have now been in a few jobs where I am in direct contact with the public, you get to know different types of people so in a way I was able to handle them to a certain extent but only through experience not through direct training.’ (P3)

The vast majority of those who participated in Study 1, 87% of respondents, stated that they had received some training prior to starting their jobs. That question, of course, asked about training in general terms. Workers’ own descriptions of training, including that above, suggested that what employers provided did not incorporate any element of training designed to equip them for dealing with abusive customers. Even employees in jobs that involved responding to complaints from the general public had received no specific training:

‘We received no training on how to deal with abusive calls; you just picked it up from the other employees as you worked. Considering the amount of abusive calls we received there should have been training. Also, I was put onto Direct Escalations after 5 weeks on the phone and they were all irate customers and there was no training.’ (P9)

Given this lack of training, many respondents reported pride in having learnt to deal with unpleasant customers and viewed the experience as having a positive outcome:

‘Despite incidents witnessed when working for that particular company the experience gained in managing complex situations, the importance of professional codes of conduct (based on what happens when there are no professional codes of conduct) and realising the



importance of safe working environment for all has been invaluable.' (P6)

Respondents therefore reported a lack of training, even in jobs associated with high risks of violence. Although respondents reported that experience could, to some extent, compensate for lack of training, the implication is that those who lacked experience had a high chance of exposure to WV without compensatory strategies in place.

#### 4.4. Discussion

The present finding that violence is simply seen as part of the job is consistent with much previous research that has found that young people perceive risk of injury as an inherent element of their working experience (Breslin *et al.*, 2007; Kelloway *et al.*, 2008; Tucker & Turner, 2013). The finding that front line employees are treated as targets, with ineffective or non-existent management responses to incidents that are reported to them, also reflects previous findings that suggest that employees see little to be gained by complaining about safety-related matters (Breslin *et al.*, 2007; Tucker & Turner, 2013). Similarly, perceptions that training fails to address important issues of safety and that workers have to rely on (potentially limited) personal experience is consistent with previous research that has identified the absence of relevant training in these respects (Kelloway *et al.*, 2008).

To this extent, then, the current findings closely resemble those of previous studies. Here, however, other findings are tied more closely to the specific setting of having direct contact with members of the public and their role as potential perpetrators of WV and injury. Although aspects of violence from the public are in some respects perceived similarly to other possible forms of injury, the findings associated with the public as the source add to what is already a gloomy picture. Suggestions that the imbalance of power in workplace interactions and that any customer might perpetrate violence make it difficult, if not impossible, for workers to challenge the practices that normalize violence at work or indeed to identify from where and when that violence might originate. Thus, again, workers themselves have to develop the resources to cope with and survive in settings where such practices and incidents become tolerated as part of everyday working experience.

### 5. General Discussion

The present findings point to the risks that young workers commonly face in their interactions with members of the public. The levels of violence reported here reflect the specific focus of this study on young people in public-facing occupational settings. Alongside these, specific forms of risk appear to be associated with particular occupations: the high

risk of verbal abuse for those working in call centres and marketing, and the significantly higher risks for young people in public sector employment of being subject to violence in various forms, such as being spat at, or being assaulted with or without a weapon. The incidence of all such forms of violence gives serious cause for concern and suggests that little has changed over the twenty years since Wynne and Clarkin's (1995, p.377) finding that violence at work was 'widespread amongst those occupations that involve dealing directly with the public'. Normalization of violence as part of the job, of young front-line employees being targets, and of lack of relevant training are all parts of a depressingly familiar picture. The perceived power imbalance in organizational interactions, and perceptions that any member of the public might perpetrate violence, suggest that these understandings will not change quickly:

### 6. Summary and Conclusions

The consequences of violence against young workers require immediate attention. One potentially positive note comes in the finding that, regardless of employers' lack of attention to safety issues and concerns, young people themselves can gain the experience and develop the resources to cope with the difficult situations that they are required to address. Yet, as the present findings also demonstrate, such experience comes at a price. Irrespective of previous personal exposure to WV, workers aged 18 years and over are significantly more likely to report experiencing psychological symptoms than their younger counterparts. Thus, for young workers, being subject to WV is not a straightforward time-limited experience. Rather, experiences ranging from being undermined by customers to being physically assaulted can all take their toll, the more so on those who have not fully developed means of surviving such experiences. More research is needed into the experiences of young workers, in particular, to examine not just their experiences to date however difficult but also the longer-term effects of these experiences as today's younger workers come to be the workforce of tomorrow.

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